

City of Indio, California**Location:** Riverside County**Population:** 71,297 (2008)**Ethnic composition:** 75% Hispanic or Latino, 19% White**Median age:** 27.3 years**Adults ages 45 to 64:** 12,397**Adults ages 64 and older:** 9,476**Percentage of adults ages 45 and older compared with total population:** 27%**Median household income:** \$56,039 (2007)**Other key information:** Indio is one of the fastest-growing cities in the United States. From 2000 – 2007, the city's population grew nearly 60%, according to census data. In the winter, the city's population often sees an increase of 8,000 part-time residents known as "snowbirds."

INTERGENERATIONAL LIFELONG LEARNING

Industry: Local Government Agency**CHALLENGE**

Children and young adults have fewer opportunities to spend time with older adults than they did just a couple of generations ago. In the past, families lived in multigenerational households where young people and older people interacted frequently. Although people are living longer, families have become more mobile, so older adults are less likely to live close to younger family members. Many young people spend little or no time with their grandparents. Research has shown that children and adolescents who are more familiar with older adults, such as grandparents, tend to develop more positive attitudes toward aging as they themselves grow older. Without opportunities to spend time with older people, children and teens are vulnerable to the pervasive negative myths about aging and develop negative attitudes toward older adults, as well as toward their own aging. The importance of intergenerational relationships cannot be overstated. The life experience shared and the support extended from older adults to children and young adults are invaluable. And for many families, older adults also provide nurturing and guidance during challenging economic times. In turn, working with young people offers a way for older people to give back to their communities while enhancing their feelings of self-worth and well-being.

Very often, cities fail to capitalize on potential opportunities to meet the needs of both younger and older community members—programming for these groups does not include activities that offer both learning and constructive social interaction. Typical senior center events do not attract younger people and are rarely publicized to those outside the inner circle of active senior center participants. Younger people may attend an ice cream social at a senior center or care facility and enjoy the free sweet treats, but not engage with older people in a meaningful way. Conversely, programming for teens and younger children generally focuses on activities that do not hold much interest for older people and are not conducive to building relationships or promoting communication.

SOLUTION

Indio's teen center, high school, senior center, and library are all within half a block of each other. Yet older adults and young people weren't naturally spending time together or sharing experiences, despite their proximity. In an effort to encourage interaction among these groups, Indio's city manager asked human services staff directors from the senior and teen centers to organize an "Intergenerational Trip Program."

The first activity for young people and older adults was a bus trip to a nearby theatrical production. But this trip did not turn out to be as successful as hoped. Says Human Services Supervisor/Seniors Michael Moreland, “They didn’t interact. The kids went to the back of the bus, and the older adults sat in the front. They segregated themselves. No one talked to each other.”

Despite a disappointing first attempt, the city continued to explore ways to bring the two generations together. Prior to the next outing—an educational rafting trip to the Colorado River—Moreland and his staff looked for ways to ensure interaction among participants. In separate meetings, staff members spoke with participants about the special opportunity the event offered for forging connections between the two groups. Rather than letting participants choose where to sit on the bus, staff members decided to assign seats, placing younger people next to older participants. During the one-and-a-half-hour trip to the rafting location, they led icebreaker activities designed to fuel interaction and make shy, reserved participants (from both groups) more comfortable. This event was much more successful. “Everyone sat together and enjoyed each other’s company,” says Moreland.

City staff also arranged another intergenerational activity: Older adults and city staff carpooled to the local elementary school to participate in a program called, “Are You Smarter Than an ‘Indio’ 5th Grader?” modeled after the popular television program. Both the children and older adults participated as audience members and contestants. A staff member from the senior center served as master of ceremonies, asking questions of the contestants and awarding prizes to the winners. After the game was over, the city furnished pizza and drinks.

RESULTS

Indio’s strategies and approaches for encouraging interaction and learning among the generations proved highly successful. At the end of each event, it was clear that all participants—young and old—valued their time together. In fact, the events became so popular that city staff had to resort to sign-up sheets and a drawing to select participants. Moreland also says that among the predominately white older adults and younger Hispanic and Latino youth, the program “made for a better understanding and tolerance of each other’s background and cultural history.” Young and older community members continue to request more joint activities and events.

As demand increased, so did costs. To keep the events going, staff sought outside support and received funding from local Native American tribes and the Rotary Club.

Meanwhile, Indio plans to continue creating an intergenerational campus with facilities all located within walking distance of each other. City Manager Glenn Southard points to great similarities between the teens and older adults. During the planning process, he says, “Both groups expressed interest in center-sponsored educational events and outings. We took the time to think it through and involved everyone in the community in the process. Most importantly, we didn’t let costs be our guide; we forged ahead and weren’t afraid to experiment along the way.”





Looking ahead, city staff see more possibilities for unique lifelong educational programs. For example, one intergenerational program under development would leverage the state-of-the-art computer lab in the new senior center. Under this program, teens would help older adults gain a better working knowledge of web-based resources and navigation tools. Another program would focus on various mobile devices, such as cell phones, multifunctional smart phones, and media players, and the use of texting as a means of communication.

AGING WELL BENEFITS—INTERGENERATIONAL LIFELONG LEARNING

Incorporating lifelong learning opportunities into intergenerational settings is a winning combination for all involved. It offers yet another avenue for helping older people stay intellectually active and socially engaged.

Very often, intergenerational activities are one way in nature—the older adult is the “teacher” or “mentor,” or the young person is the “friendly visitor.” The City of Indio’s program balances the relationships between the age groups. Studies on intergenerational programs such as Indio’s show that “in the best programs, the lines between those served and those serving are blurred to the point of irrelevance.” In the case of Indio, everyone is a student and a teacher, regardless of age, so everyone benefits from the learning environment.

Cities can enhance educational opportunities across the lifespan by sponsoring intergenerational learning activities on school campuses or at senior/community centers operated by parks and recreation departments. By using existing facilities and pooling resources, cities can stretch dollars and improve program efficiency.

PROMISING PRACTICES—LESSONS LEARNED

- Create an environment for comfortable interaction through structured games and icebreakers.
- Provide a level playing field among participants to encourage shared learning and experience.
- Seek financial support from community groups that traditionally fund youth-oriented events. Don’t let cost impede forward motion.
- Look for ways to bridge facilities, such as senior centers and youth centers, to create opportunities for intergenerational activities.
- Promote cohesiveness among city departments and other agencies through collective projects and action.
- Experiment and try different strategies; intergenerational programming often requires creative approaches.
- Don’t give up after poor results. Continuously fine-tune programs to achieve success.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

This case study is part of [Aging Well in Communities: A Toolkit for Planning, Engagement & Action](#). This toolkit includes a community planning overview; guides for resident surveys, public forums, and focus groups; case studies; and a list of aging-related resources. For the complete toolkit, visit <http://www.civicpartnerships.org/docs/services/CHCC/aging-well.htm>.

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