BRIEF OR NEW

OASIS: A New Concept for Promoting the Quality of Life for Older Adults

Marylen Mann, Dorothy Edwards, Carolyn Manville Baum

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The Older Adult Service and Information System (OASIS) is a program designed to respond to the deterioration in the quality of life faced by a majority of older adults. Many older people find that as the demanding responsibilities of job and family are gone or materially diminished, there is a loss of purpose, a sense of inadequacy, a lack of self-esteem, all fueled by a perceived and, in many cases, real sense of loneliness and boredom.

As a senior citizens' club and center located in a department store, the OASIS program provides a structured opportunity for older citizens to find new meaning in life, expand their horizons, renew old interests, and learn new talents and skills—all of which is directed toward the goal of maintaining a high quality of life to preserve one's sense of purpose and worth. Thus the program goes beyond the traditional basic offerings of food, clothing, and shelter provided by other programs.

The enhancement of the quality of life for the older adult has been a stated goal of health professionals and social service agencies in traditional medical programs and community programs like senior citizen and nutrition centers. However, many older adults have negative feelings about senior citizen and nutrition centers although they still want and need opportunities for socializing and enrichment. The OASIS program was designed with this realization in mind. When the program was proposed to the United States Administration on Aging, its officials perceived OASIS as an opportunity for the public and private sectors to collaborate on a demonstration project. Funding for OASIS began in 1982.

Program Description

The first OASIS centers opened in September 1982 in the Famous Barr stores of the May Department Stores Company in three areas of St. Louis. The stores provide auditorium facilities and a tastefully furnished area where older adults can congregate for rest, relaxation, and informal conversation over coffee and tea during shopping trips. In addition, the stores offer special shopping discounts, shopping hours on traditional holidays, meal discounts, and birthday specials to this population. The stores also contribute funds to maintain the staff of each OASIS center.

In addition to providing a location for socialization and shopping events, the OASIS centers provide education and information. Each OASIS area includes space to accommodate an art class of 20 or a lecture audience of 250. Classes are taught by area artists, historians, physicians, occupational therapists, psychologists, nurses, lawyers, and businessmen and women. A typical 9-week series includes classes in arts and humanities, finance, exercise, health, horticulture, and home repair.
Classes are organized with the assistance of an advisory committee, which includes a psychologist, an occupational therapist, and representatives from area agencies on aging, university faculties, volunteer organizations, retirement groups, and businesses. The committee assists in locating and securing instructors for the courses. Whenever possible, classes are taught by older adults. Program offerings are designed to stimulate and challenge and are evaluated by both presenters and participants.

The OASIS centers also provide information about and access to other educational and recreational activities as well as information about services available to older adults. For example, older adults can find out about a range of events, activities, and programs, seek information about energy assistance, obtain free tickets to local theater productions, and obtain entry guidelines for art shows.

Older Adult Volunteers

The OASIS center is operated predominantly by older volunteers. For many, this opportunity to take part in the organization of the OASIS center provides a sense of satisfaction and purpose that is an important aspect of enhancing the quality of their lives. For some, this involvement is an opportunity to use skills developed before retirement. For others, it provides a new opportunity to contribute and to work with others.

Many options of volunteer activities are available, ranging from operating the centers, coordinating holiday events, and providing information and referral services to actually leading classes. Volunteer activities that have been added recently are training as research interviewers and teaching health education classes in the community and at nursing homes. Training as research interviewers is a unique opportunity for older adults in the St. Louis community. Under a grant from the Burden Foundation, 28 OASIS members were trained by staff members from the Washington University Medical School, Department of Psychiatry, and by OASIS staff members to conduct interviews with 158 randomly selected OASIS members. This research project gathered preliminary data for a proposal submitted by the medical school to the National Institutes of Health. The older adult interviewers who were trained in this project will use their new knowledge to conduct research for other studies.

Participation and Growth

Since September 1982 when the first OASIS centers opened, 17,000 older adults from the St. Louis area have become members and have taken part in scheduled activities and classes. The OASIS program, affiliated with the Jewish Hospital of St. Louis and the Washington University School of Medicine, is headed by a director who is responsible for establishing programs, identifying community sponsors and advisory boards, and supervising all program components. Other central OASIS administrative staff members include an assistant director, a program coordinator, an assistant program coordinator, a half-time curriculum coordinator, and a half-time program assistant. They are responsible for providing technical assistance and maintaining regular communication between all cities in the OASIS network. The OASIS program has been replicated in the stores of the May Department Stores Company in 10 major cities across the country: Baltimore, Maryland; Cleveland, Akron, and Canton, Ohio; Los Angeles, California; Portland, Oregon; Denver, Colorado; the Washington, D.C. area; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Hartford, Connecticut. The OASIS membership nationwide is well over 30,000 and growing daily.

The development of the OASIS program in these different geographical areas has promoted an exciting exchange of ideas, since each program has created different projects. For example, the Baltimore OASIS includes a segment on preparing for retirement. This program was formed by a group of corporate professionals who either were about to retire or had recently retired. The program presents ways of adjusting to retirement.

The OASIS center in Los Angeles emphasizes that city’s rich cultural heritage by providing multicultural programming opportunities. In the fall of 1984, the organization held a holiday celebration featuring food and entertainment from the Korean, Filipino, Japanese, and Hispanic communities. The event and the cultural mixing that occurred were so successful that similar programs are being planned for the future. An OASIS acting company, made up of retired performers and other interested people, is producing and performing original plays.

In December of 1984, the Cleveland OASIS members completed a year-long knitting project by making a large donation of mufflers, mittens, and hats to the city’s needy. They decorated two huge trees in the department store with the handmade goods before delivering them to a distribution center.

The St. Louis OASIS completed its first citywide cultural project, “St. Louis’s Living Treasures: Preserving Our Ethnic Heritage.” Older adults who still practice ethnic arts and crafts such as Russian egg painting, Japanese ikebana, and Czech embroidery were visited by OASIS staff members and volunteers to record and photograph their art. The project was funded by a grant from the St. Louis Arts and Humanities Commission with support from Famous Barr and the May Department Stores Company. The goal was to preserve these legacies. The project concluded with a 3-day show at the St. Louis Art Museum where the community could enjoy and learn from the artisans.
The St. Louis OASIS recently developed a segment that focuses on developing healthy individual habits and training OASIS members to become group leaders for health support groups. The program is also included in several research projects on Alzheimer’s disease and the prevention of hip fractures. Future interests include developing transitional programs to support community reintegration for hospitalized or institutionalized elderly.

The overall goal of the OASIS program is to help older adults in finding ways to contribute to society in productive and fulfilling ways. The program has been effective in achieving this goal.

Occupational Therapy Involvement

Occupational therapists from the Irene Walter Johnson Institute of Rehabilitation have played an important role in designing and implementing the OASIS program. They serve on the advisory committee, assist in the selection of programs, and regularly present programs to educate the elderly about healthy lifestyles, the importance of activity, caring for elderly friends and family, and the changing health care system. Although the institute does not receive direct payment for its efforts in the OASIS program, its involvement has promoted visibility for both the institute and its occupational therapy staff. The staff has been included in numerous public relations activities and in two grant proposals (with funds) and has made many political and community contacts.

Many occupational therapy patients completing their rehabilitation program at the institute are encouraged to participate in OASIS to become involved in community activities. The program is not oriented toward rehabilitation, but the trained OASIS staff helps people who want to become involved in community activities.

Conclusion

The OASIS program is based on the commitment of professionals and community leaders furthering the potential of older adults. The cooperation, shared ideas, and creativity that have gone into this project have facilitated a healthful model that incorporates the goals and objectives of the individual and is supported by the knowledge and skills of many. Failure to respond to this potential may result in accelerated physical and mental deterioration in the elderly with correspondingly heavier demands upon the traditional social and medical service sectors of our society.

Note. Occupational therapists who are working in areas where the stores of the May Department Stores Company are located and who are interested in being included in an OASIS program should contact the senior author.