Senior Centers: What We Have Now and What We Need
San Diego’s Newest Challenge

SUMMARY REPORT • SUMMER 2019
The Coming Wave

The graying of San Diego is coming. It’s not a crisis now, but very soon we will all be confronted with the hard reality that one out of every four San Diegans will be over the age of 60. Start looking around—one out of four!

And guess what, we are not ready to deal with this unprecedented demographic shift.

To help our region better prepare, we launched a community foundation dedicated to seniors called the San Diego Seniors Community Foundation. One of our core beliefs is that robust community-based senior centers will be a vital element in the comprehensive management of our aging population. Up until now, this has been a neglected and underfunded part of senior care.

That belief is the impetus behind this assessment. Among its many findings, the report illustrates the lack of infrastructure in place to care for our seniors. In the past, senior centers have relied on a recreational model that predicates an often unflattering image of older adults. The new model, which we are advocating for, will cater to the modern generation of dynamic seniors and focus on their total well-being, including the three most important aspects of their life—their physical, mental and financial health.

Currently, for-profit companies in the senior space are thriving, which is great for people who can afford it. There is no shortage of inner capital to support them, and therefore they are able to grow and serve their paying customers.

Conversely, not-for-profit organizations in the senior space are underfunded and struggle to meet the demand from older adults who can’t afford the costs. Less than 2% of charitable dollars in the U.S. go toward senior causes and programs.

It’s time to change this situation.

At the San Diego Seniors Community Foundation, we are leading an effort to do just that. Our goals include bold new ideas and initiatives. We are actively working to spread awareness about the coming silver tsunami, and to increase charitable giving to senior programs and projects across the region, with a special emphasis on supporting senior centers and senior orphans (older adults who may be living alone and are socially isolated) through the power of philanthropy.

This report is just the beginning, to show us where we are now, so we know where we need to go. We are not just a senior foundation. We are a community foundation working to improve the lives of our aging population, now and forever. If we pay attention to this report and take action, we can ensure that every senior has someone they can turn to and trust.

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Read the full senior center assessment report at sdscf.org
### North Coastal
1. Country Club Senior Center
2. El Corazon Senior Center
3. Carlsbad Senior Center
4. Encinitas Community & Senior Center
5. Rancho Santa Fe Senior Center

### North Inland
6. Fallbrook Senior Center
7. Gloria McClellan Senior Center
8. San Marcos Senior Center
9. Escondido Senior Center
10. Ed Brown Center for Active Adults
11. Ramona Senior Center
12. Poway Senior Center
13. Borrego Springs Senior Center

### Central
14. Mira Mesa Senior Center
15. La Jolla Community Center
16. Cathy Hopper Friendship Center
17. College Avenue Center
18. Balboa Park Senior Lounge
19. Serving Seniors Gary and Mary West Senior Wellness Center
20. Neighborhood House Senior Center
21. Fourth District Senior Resource Center

### East
22. La Mesa Adult Enrichment Center
23. Lemon Grove Senior Center

### South
24. John D. Spreckels Center
25. Kimball Ave. Senior Center
26. Norman Park Senior Center
27. Imperial Beach Senior Center
28. San Ysidro Senior Center

### Senior Service Providers & Community Centers
A. Solana Beach Community Senior Center
B. Del Mar Community Connections
C. Lawrence Family Jewish Community Center
D. Bayside Community Center
E. Peninsula Shepherd Center
F. Alpine Community Center
G. Casa Familiar Senior Services

**San Diego County Senior Centers**

**North Coastal**
- Carlsbad
- Encinitas
- North Coastal Senior Center
- Rancho Santa Fe

**North Inland**
- Fallbrook
- Gloria McClellan Senior Center
- Rancho Santa Fe

**Central**
- Escondido
- Mira Mesa
- La Jolla Community Center

**East**
- La Mesa

**South**
- Imperial Beach
- National City
- Imperial Beach Senior Center

**Adults age 60+ per square mile**

Source: 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

**Map Legend**
- Senior Center
- Senior Service Providers & Community Centers

Summer 2019 San Diego Seniors Community Foundation
KEY FINDINGS

The State of Our Senior Centers
We surveyed San Diego’s facilities and here’s what we found

Physical Buildings
- Most senior centers are dated and in need of repair or renovation.
- 21 of the county’s 28 senior centers were built over 30 years ago.
- 11 are more than 40 years old.

Demographics
- Senior centers are only serving a fraction of the seniors in their areas; the senior centers visited serve less than 8% of the total senior population in their regions.
- The estimated average age of participants is 74 years old.
- Attracting younger seniors (age 60–70) is a consistent challenge.

Staff
- The vast majority suffer from staff shortages and a lack of aging specialists.

San Diego senior centers serve less than 8% of the senior population

Budget
- Nearly three-quarters are managed by just 1 or 2 full-time employees.
- The financial resources of senior centers are very limited, with all managers expressing the need for more funding to hire additional staff, expand programming, upgrade equipment and implement new ideas.
- Regionally, total annual revenue received by San Diego senior centers is a fraction of what other organizations bring in:
  - San Diego County Boys and Girls Clubs receive 3 times the funding.
  - The YMCA receives 20 times the funding.

External Challenges
- External factors that constrain many senior centers include: transportation, affordable housing, parking, language barriers and cultural preferences.

Hours
- General operating hours for most senior centers are aligned with traditional business hours. Most experience noticeable downturns in attendance after 1 p.m.
- 5 senior centers offer limited weekend hours and/or limited evening hours.
- 2 senior centers offer access on Saturdays.
- No centers offer early morning hours.

Transportation
- Some local cities and communities with large populations and vast geographic sizes, such as Chula Vista and Escondido, have only one senior center, when they should easily have two or more to meet their area’s needs.
- Almost every director described varying levels of transportation hurdles for patrons, including limited or no access to public transit and inconvenience when the travel distance is too far. This is especially true for seniors who are not mobile enough to use public transportation and senior-oriented ride-share options.
  - 50% of senior centers are in communities with limited/poor access to public transportation.
  - 4 senior centers are in communities with no access to public transportation.
  - 11 senior centers offer one or more specialty transportation options for seniors in their communities.

Meals
- All senior center managers who operate meal programs expressed concern with a decrease in diners, despite a growing number of eligible individuals within their community. Conversely, these centers are experiencing an increased demand for meal delivery to older adults who are homebound.
- 18 senior centers offer congregate meal service.

22% of local senior centers have no full-time employees
Outreach

- Outreach programs to identify and help socially isolated seniors are scant, primarily due to limited staffing and funding. Many of these isolated adults are “Senior Orphans,” aging alone and without a support network. Senior centers have a unique ability to become a local hub for this particularly vulnerable group, but few, if any, are actively seeking them out.
- Only 8 (less than 30% of) senior centers have an established relationship with an unaffiliated provider to assist seniors with social work services.

Equipment & Programs

- Computer equipment is sparse or nonexistent, and high on the wish list for center managers.
- 6 senior centers have a dedicated classroom with multiple workstations.
- 18 senior centers have developed extensive partnerships within the community to supplement and deliver additional programming and services for older adults.

Physical Fitness

- 5 senior centers have an equipped fitness room.
- Only 1 local senior center has a gymnasium that provides space for multiple physical activities including basketball, pickleball, volleyball, and badminton.
- Only 1 local senior center has a dedicated, outdoor physical fitness space.

501(c)(3) vs. City-Owned

- About half the county’s senior centers operate under the direction of municipalities and the other half are under the direction of nonprofit organizations. Those owned by municipalities are often used by additional groups, which significantly restricts the usage and configuration of facility assets by the center’s staff.
- Revenue for a number of city-owned senior centers is constrained by the availability and amount of municipal funding and sometimes by city policies that limit fundraising options. One municipality requires any earned or donated revenues to be returned to the city treasury.

Job Training & Civic Engagement

- While many senior centers encourage volunteerism within the center itself, few promoted opportunities for meaningful civic engagement.
- No senior centers comprising this report had implemented a robust social enterprise that would actively employ seniors and spin off income to the center (e.g., catering business, crafts store, in-house salon, etc.), although one facility operates a thrift store generating a modest income back to the center.
- While referrals and resources are provided to those interested, no senior center has developed a consistent job-training program for older adults.

Philanthropy

- The power and potential of philanthropy is generally not recognized. When fundraising efforts are made, they are most often in the form of class fees, bingo, rentals or other fundraising events.
- Only a few senior centers had developed a planned giving strategy that would create a pipeline of future estate gifts or raise permanent endowments that would cover operational costs in perpetuity.
- Few senior centers have been fortunate enough to attract major donors, unlike other community centers, libraries and facilities that are named after their benefactors.
OUR VISION

The Senior Center of the Future

In the future, senior centers will become as an essential piece of the infrastructure that supports our aging population. These state-of-the-art facilities will be attractive, welcoming and staffed by specialists with expertise in the field of aging. A community’s senior center will be the hub for its 60-and-over residents—a place where older adults can access programs and vital resources that address the three most important areas of their lives: their physical, mental and financial health.

Ideally, a typical senior would have:

- Trained community navigators to help seniors access benefits and services, and to utilize vetted resources such as financial advisors, attorneys, and care providers
- An on-site dining room and commercial kitchen offering nutritious daily meal service, along with a meal delivery program for homebound seniors
- Outreach programs to identify socially isolated seniors and elder orphans, connect them with services, visit them regularly, provide needed socialization and monitor their condition
- Medical and dental clinics on-site to provide basic services and health screenings
- Extended operating hours (7 a.m.-9 p.m.) to align with active senior lifestyles
- Programming centered around the unique cultures and identities of senior center users in a given community. Examples include special events, social or religious groups, and celebrations specifically for Asian, Hispanic or LGBTQ seniors.
- A computer lab with tutoring and classes to help seniors stay current on new technology, software applications and social media platforms
- A gymnasium, pool and fitness facilities with classes and equipment geared toward a new generation of active seniors, including dedicated outdoor space for exercise
- A social enterprise (e.g. thrift store, catering business, beauty parlor, etc.) to provide employment opportunities for seniors and spin off income to the senior center
- Recreational facilities like a game room or theater with organized events to provide opportunities for socializing
- Job training to support the growing population of seniors who are still in the workforce and can’t yet afford to retire, or those who have retired and need supplemental income
- Easy access to public transit and/or dedicated transportation services for seniors who are unable to drive themselves
- A classroom where educational programming such as art, music, writing, cooking, Spanish, and other courses will give seniors the chance to learn new skills or hone existing ones
- Programming designed to increase the civic participation of seniors for the good of society. Examples include intergenerational mentorship programs, volunteering, voter registration drives and other opportunities for seniors to use their skills and experience to engage with their communities

Read the full senior center assessment report at sdscf.org
The senior center of the future model on the previous page reimagines the purpose these vital community entities play in the lives of local seniors. We are not suggesting that this model is “one-size-fits-all” — senior center directors must tailor their facilities to be the best fit for the communities they serve, while responding to environmental and financial realities.

Today’s leadership is already doing that to an extent. In a landscape of scarce resources and limited capacity, senior centers are finding new ways to deliver innovative programming and expanded services. Building upon the traditional recreational model, many centers are broadening the range, depth and impact of their programs by embracing a holistic approach focused on overall wellness.

Here we highlight some local senior centers with promising programs, amenities and community engagement practices. These examples can serve as building blocks on the road to more dynamic and responsive entities that evolve from a “senior center” to a “community wellness home” for San Diego older adults and the communities they serve.

**Gary and Mary West Senior Wellness Center**
**DOWNTOWN SAN DIEGO**

A defined and operationalized social work service model delivers a comprehensive platform to serve and support older adults downtown and in its collaring communities. Social workers, care navigators, nurses and an information and referral specialist create a multi-disciplinary team that goes far beyond traditional senior center services to support a diverse population of older adults, many of whom face significant socio-economic challenges.

**College Avenue Center**

This center in the Del Cerro community of San Diego operates under the guidance of Jewish Family Services, a large nonprofit dedicated to services along a broad spectrum for varied populations. This unique synergy provides access to JFS’ expansive menu of services for older adults who visit the center. Nutrition, transportation, social work case management and an array of other supportive services, particularly for those who present additional needs as they grow older, are primary benefits of this unique model.

**Kimball Avenue Senior Center**
**NATIONAL CITY**

The programs and services at this center represent an example of peer-driven programming and how seniors can develop an “ownership” of their senior center. Two grassroots senior-led groups provide the bulk of the activities, conduct regular advisory meetings and manage their own financials.

**Norman Park Senior Center**
**CHULA VISTA**

To provide for seniors who have difficulty accessing the NPSC, Chula Vista is piloting a “Mobile Senior Center” project that will travel to numerous city parks to deliver support services. This innovative approach could serve as a model for other San Diego locales that struggle to deliver programs and supports within a large geographic footprint.

**Gloria McClellan Senior Center**
**VISTA**

This center is home to the Culture Caravan program that provides four day-trip events a month. This program is self-sustained through participant fees and provides seniors with excursions throughout Southern California.

**Ed Brown Center for Active Adults**
**RANCHO BERNARDO**

Through a partnership with the Rancho Bernardo Community Foundation, this center is home to the People, Opportunities, and Participation (POP) seminar series. These educational workshops, held over the course of a few months, provide residents with a curriculum that encourages civic participation. The program is designed to teach essential civic knowledge and community organizing skills, so individuals can better engage with their community leaders.

**Escondido Senior Center**

The ESC has established a partnership with OASIS, a nonprofit dedicated to providing lifelong learning opportunities. An array of classes spanning a wide variety of educational disciplines are available to Escondido seniors.

**Encinitas Community & Senior Center**

A key design feature of this large complex is a dedicated entrance, lobby, offices, classrooms and a large multipurpose room for the older adult population. However, access to the...
large gymnasium and amenities is just a short walk across the compound. The ECSC is open to all individuals no matter their age, a key point in the effort to keep people connected to their communities. The large gymnasium features significant space for multiple recreational and fitness-oriented activities.

**El Corazon Senior Center**
**OCEANSIDE**
This center’s completion of a commercial kitchen space will help create a nutrition program for older adults and also serve as an education and job-training site to serve the needs of the entire community. In addition, the kitchen will be utilized as a “repurposing kitchen” where food that would ordinarily be discarded is salvaged and transformed into jams, sauces and more.

**Fallbrook Senior Center**
A unique element of FSC is a large and thriving thrift store located in the back of the property. While thrift stores exist in a couple of other local senior centers, the FSC store stands out in sheer size, selection and as a significant source of revenue for center operations. The two-story shop houses typical thrift store wares, and maintains a covered outdoor area and sheds to store large furniture. The thrift store has several volunteers who assist with day-to-day operations.

**A VISION IN THE DESERT**

**The Borrego Springs Senior Center Project**

**Borrego Springs** – a small town surrounded by the Anza-Borrego Desert State Park – is known for its scenic beauty and topnotch resorts. However, a significant number of Borrego residents lack access to vital services and experience high energy costs, unemployment and poverty. A large percentage of the population is age 60 or older.

San Diego Seniors Community Foundation observed that the existing Borrego Springs Senior Center was potentially inadequate to serve the aging population of the region, and appealed to the Borrego Valley Endowment Fund to provide grant funding for a two-phase project.

Phase I would consist of assessing the needs of Borrego seniors and examining the existing center’s ability to meet them. Phase II would develop a business plan that supports capital and/or operational costs of either a revitalized center, or a new, modern facility with expanded amenities and services.

The Phase I Assessment has been completed. Some of the key findings include:

- Borrego residents have the lowest mean household income in San Diego County, with over half the population living at or below 200% of the federal poverty level.
- Approximately one-third of residents are age 65+. Roughly one-third of those live alone, indicating a potentially large number of senior orphans in the region.
- Borrego public transportation options are essentially non-existent, and health-care options are meager.
- The current Borrego senior center is small, with limited equipment and facilities, and a budget that enables only minimal programming.
- Hispanic residents do not visit the Borrego senior center, indicating a cultural barrier to overcome.

After a thorough analysis, the assessment concluded that a new senior center is required. Phase II is now underway, and will consist of:

- Recommending an optimal configuration for the new center
- Developing a fundraising plan and revenue model
- Proposing optimal staffing
- Determining operational costs, and
- Presenting a financial feasibility pro forma analysis.

The final product will be a full business plan providing a road map to implement the project and achieve financial sustainability of the new operation.

Contemplated amenities for the new senior center include multiple rooms, an in-house commercial kitchen, a game room, a 20-25 seat theater for movies and instructional activities, and a small in-house pet kennel. Additional structures being considered include a gymnasium/fitness center and an aquatics center, which would be available to both seniors and the general public, including seasonal visitors.

We believe this project will provide a superior facility and more robust services and programs that will be of tremendous benefit to Borrego’s older adults.
Each day, senior center leaders are faced with the daunting challenge of delivering a maximum level of services to accommodate senior needs within a minimal budgetary structure. Most senior centers rely on a mix of funding streams such as municipal general funds, grants, contracts, federal and state grants, membership dues, fees for selected programming and donations to sustain operations.

Centers create appeals campaigns, unique donor engagement practices and fundraising events to complement the larger revenue streams. However, the donations typically support a relatively small portion of the budget.

In the philanthropy space, funding for issues and causes pertaining to older adults have received limited attention. Nationally, only 2% of institutional philanthropy is provided to the aging network, and despite the current demographic shift, this percentage has not changed over the last 20 years.

Like YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, and the public library system, senior centers represent a community resource committed to the public good. Yet, unlike these entities, senior centers have not been the beneficiaries of large-scale philanthropy, and in almost all cases do not have buildings named after major donors.

How do leaders in the older adult network alter this landscape, and inform and inspire charitable entities and individuals with the capacity for significant investment about the emerging needs of older adults and the community infrastructure that supports them? To capture the attention of philanthropic entities, stakeholders dedicated to serving older adults must find answers to the following questions:

- Why has the older adult space been excluded from significant philanthropic investment?
- Do perceptions and attitudes toward aging contribute to philanthropic indifference?
- Do organizations clearly articulate the impact of the demographic shift on all levels of society?
- Are outcomes and impacts of senior programs and projects too vague to generate interest?
- Have senior centers been able to demonstrate the impact of their work as a complementary component in the reduction of rising health care costs?
- Large-scale philanthropy has provided massive financial support to public entities such as universities, hospitals, libraries and community centers. Why have senior centers been unable to gain equal status?
- Are senior center managers supported by their board of directors or municipal managers to think strategically about long-term sustainable funding and deferred giving, and if not, what can be done to change that paradigm?
- Philanthropy is grounded in the principle of empowerment, i.e. a resource is provided for a disadvantaged individual, so that they may acquire the capacity to thrive in the world. How do older adult providers create new narratives and strategies that can demonstrate the impact of empowerment of seniors to funders?

Senior center stakeholders need to promote strategies that engage the philanthropic community to invest in the empowerment of local seniors.

Nationally, only 2% of institutional philanthropy is provided to the aging network.

Read the full senior center assessment report at sdscf.org
**A Regional Focus**

**Now that we have a vision for the future, how do we get there?**

First, we must build regional consensus and solutions that gain countywide participation.

**Consensus**

It is critical that regional leaders understand the essential role senior centers play in serving seniors. They must gain an informed perspective on the actual state of senior centers in our region, and reach an agreement that something needs to be done to improve them.

We are just starting to feel the impact of a decades-long demographic shift. Consider this: According to the U.S. Census, in 2014, there were 27 million more people under the age of 18 than those over the age of 65. By 2030, that difference will shrink to just over 2 million. By 2033, older adults will outnumber children in the United States.

What this numerical reality portends is still an unknown, but statistics like this and many others are warning signs and remind us that, before solutions can be crafted, consensus must be established. Politicians; policy specialists; researchers; and city, county and state agencies need to join advocates and older adult professionals to recognize the potential in senior centers and their capacity to evolve into more dynamic localized solutions of community-based support.

**Solutions**

The seniors of today and tomorrow are unique. People are entering their retirement years with a variety of attitudes, perceptions and expectations that differ from any previous generation. Any attempts by leaders in the older adult network to create solutions must include clearer insight into the priorities of those who they aspire to serve.

Long-term regional and community plans need to be developed that incorporate input from numerous perspectives. In the senior center space, leaders need to come together and develop a countywide strategic plan to ensure that every community has a modern, innovative and well-financed senior center with the capacity to handle the needs of a region whose population of 60-plus adults will swell to nearly 1 million by 2030.

**Philanthropy**

Philanthropy must be an integral part of any plan. Leadership needs to evaluate why philanthropic investment has eluded the older adult space, identify the perceptions and attitudes that contribute to philanthropic indifference, and cultivate a new mindset and fundraising strategies.

**Opportunities**

Out of this assessment, a few unique opportunities arose that exemplify what the region and its communities can do to help seniors.

1) **Initial Projects**

   Based on this report’s key findings, input from local senior centers administrators and our examination of national senior center models of excellence, we have identified three initial projects for revitalization and/or new construction: Otay Ranch/Chula Vista, Escondido and Carlsbad. Respectively they represent the second-, fourth- and fifth-largest municipalities in the county. Their selection as potential opportunities is based on a number of factors, including the area’s density of seniors compared to the area’s availability and location of existing senior centers.

   A fourth project, the assessment and business plan for the Borrego Springs Senior Center described on page 8, is currently underway.

   For more information on all of these projects, visit sdscf.org.

2) **Advocacy**

   A united voice is needed throughout the San Diego region to advocate on behalf of seniors for more favorable governmental policies and participation in the needs and future of senior centers. A conference bringing together senior center leaders and experts from various disciplines should be convened to create a strategy that produces a local response to a statewide master plan.

3) **Promoting Innovation and Sustainability**

   Through coordinated efforts, local senior centers can produce a platform to approach previously untapped entities, including healthcare foundations, health insurance plans and hospital systems, as a means of funding. Emphasizing innovation in programs and services and demonstrating outcomes will be paramount in the development of these potential relationships.

   Additionally, a new paradigm is needed to provide perspective on modernization, entrepreneurialism and innovation of senior centers and a path to understand and implement enhancements that are feasible, achievable and sustainable. This would require relationships and partnerships with key community leaders and stakeholders that enable each senior center to implement positive and cutting-edge advances in its mission, program offerings, facilities and equipment, and funding strategies to achieve long-term sustainability.
San Diego Seniors Community Foundation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Our mission is to transition older adults in our region from vulnerable to vibrant so that every senior in San Diego County has the resources to thrive.

We envision a world where local seniors are nurtured into a healthy, dynamic way of life; where they are socially connected, physically active and a vital element of our community.

Through the power of philanthropy and partnerships, we are working to ensure that every San Diego senior has someone they can turn to and trust.

Learn more about us at sdscf.org.