Nutrition and Aging Resource Center

Participant Service Referrals Training

Identifying Participant Needs

Senior nutrition programs can improve participant access to services by enhancing staff training and developing consistent referral approaches. The tips and staff/volunteer training guide below can help you to get started by identifying participant needs.

- Educate staff and volunteers about the range of services available through your agency and community partners. This enables staff at any level to identify opportunities to connect participants with other available services.

- Use communication techniques like active listening, minimal encouragers, open-ended questions, and reflection. This allows staff/volunteers to engage participants and draw out issues that may not be shared directly.

- Encourage staff and volunteers to look for cues in discussion, appearance, and mobility that may help them identify additional needs that the participant may not be sharing. For example, a participant who has dropped off and communicates that they'd like to attend more frequently may need transportation assistance.

- Have a defined process for data collection and clearly communicate it to staff and volunteers. When participants understand why the data is needed and how it is used, they may share more readily.

- Use brief, validated screening tools, when possible, to ensure the collected data is necessary and does not overwhelm participants. Consider when data collection does not serve its intended purpose and adjust.

Action Steps

✓ Educate staff about services offered within your agency and by partner organizations through a referral.

✓ Embed active listening and other communication techniques in your regular training routine for staff and volunteers.

✓ Identify brief and valid screening tools that address broad health needs without overburdening staff and participants.

✓ Review your data collection processes to see if there are cases in which data collection can be minimized.

✓ Develop scripts or talking points for intake, screening staff, and volunteers to communicate data collection to participants effectively.

Staff/Volunteer Training Guide

When preparing for staff and volunteer training, consider which staff should lead and which should attend based on your organizational structure and expertise. Be prepared with the necessary equipment and supplies, such as internet access and a large screen for presentations or screen sharing, a whiteboard or large pads of paper for documenting brainstorming activities, and notecards for small group discussion and sharing. The suggested steps below can guide your training session.

- Review the content below and consider responses you would expect for each activity, so you can fill in any blanks during the discussion and ensure the intended messages are transmitted.

- Welcome staff and volunteers and share the day's topic. The language from the tip sheet may be used to set the scene.

- Verbally acknowledge that staff and volunteers:

  o Have a big role in identifying service needs but have a lot on their plates.
  o Are not care coordinators or resource specialists and are not expected to be.
  o Should come to you with any questions or concerns about identifying and acting on participant needs.

- Present the following case scenario to facilitate discussion on the topic.

  Ms. J. has attended the senior center regularly for a year and enjoys the aerobics class. The instructor noticed Ms. J. struggled through the weighted portion of the class one day and talked her through exercise modifications. The instructor wanted to mention a lower-intensity class afterward, but Ms. J. left quickly. The next time Ms. J. attended class, the instructor asked if she was feeling better today, and Ms. J. frowned and said yes, continued with the modifications, and left early. Since that class, she returned only twice in two months, was less steady on her feet, and left before class was completed.

- Discuss the following questions as a group or in small groups, with one representative sharing the group's findings.
  - What issues could Ms. J. be experiencing that could account for her reduced attendance?
  - What additional needs may be present based on your experience with similar participants?
  - What is the instructor's role in identifying and addressing Ms. J.'s needs?
  - What services may Ms. J. benefit from that are offered by our organization or a partner agency?
  - How could staff or volunteers effectively engage Ms. J. in conversation to discuss her needs and available services?
- Walk through the free online tutorial "Key Communication Techniques for Aging and Disability Professionals" from [Advancing States' IQ Online Learning Center](#) as a group.
- Remind participants of the scenario with Ms. J. and use it to practice role-playing. One staff/volunteer should take on the role of Ms. J., and one can play the center's intake coordinator, demonstrating what they have learned about communication techniques to engage her in the discussion.
- Thank the presenters and engage staff/volunteers in a follow-up discussion using the following prompts:
  - What communication techniques were used, and how did Ms. J. respond to them?
  - What additional communication techniques may have worked well in the discussion?
  - What next steps would you take to ensure Ms. J. can access services and stay engaged in the center's activities?
- If there are scripts, talking points, or screening tools that are relevant to this discussion, take time to walk through them with staff/volunteers, showing what they are, who completes them, and how they can direct participants that exhibit additional needs to the relevant staff person. Even if the team member will not be using the tools, this will give them insight into the organization's operations and help them to assist participants.
- Share selected resources from the tip sheet and allow staff time to review them during work hours.

Resources

- [Key Communication Techniques for Aging and Disability Professionals](#) — Advancing States IQ Online Learning

- [How to Be a Better Listener: Exploring 4 Types of Listening](#) — Maryville University

- [Links Between Food Insecurity, Nutrition, and Mental health: Impacts on Healthy Aging and Community-based Resources and Services That Can Help](#) — ICAA Webinar

- [Partnerships with Foodbanks and Other USDA Programs](#) — Nutrition & Aging Resource Center

- [How to Communicate with Older Adults about Food Insecurity and Hunger](#) — Baylor University

- [Essential Components of the Aging I&R/A Process](#) — Advancing States IQ Online Learning

- [Data Collection & Analysis 101](#) — Nutrition & Aging Resource Center

- [A Review of Tools to Screen for Social Determinants of Health in the United States: A Practice Brief](#) — Population Health Management