



# Participant Service Referrals Training

## Creating Connections and Inspiring Trust

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 plan how to get started by making participants feel comfortable and connected in your service setting.

- Train staff to understand and apply effective communication techniques in their interactions with participants. This will create a welcoming environment and improve the identification of participant needs that can be addressed by other services.
  - Learning communication techniques such as active listening, paraphrasing, open-ended questions, and demonstrating empathy will help team members communicate more effectively with participants.
- Make sure participants see themselves reflected in the organization. This may mean having bilingual staff, interpreters, or signage available, removing gender-specific language from intake questions, and making culturally inclusive meal options available.
- Create social connections between participants to help new participants feel welcome and increase the likelihood that they will return. Teach volunteers to look for cues of commonalities between participants to break the ice when making introductions.
- Engage potential participants as volunteers to create greater buy-in to services. Offer a range of volunteer opportunities for people with different abilities and levels of commitment to become engaged in your organization.

### Action Steps

- ✓ Adopt or develop training resources for onboarding and professional development for new and existing staff and volunteers. Train staff at regular intervals to provide a refresher on important topics.

- ✓ Engage staff and volunteers to practice communication techniques with participants.
- ✓ Identify opportunities to improve cultural competency based on community makeup. Survey participants to understand what a welcoming environment means to them.
- ✓ Engage volunteers or participant ambassadors to welcome and introduce new participants to their peers to jumpstart relationships.
- ✓ Acknowledge the limitations of staff roles in identifying participant needs and making service referrals, understanding the intense training and time needed to provide full information, referral, and assistance services.

## 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:
  - Have a big role to play in creating a welcoming environment but have a lot to do already.
  - Are not care coordinators and are not expected to be.
  - Should come to you with questions or concerns about setting the right tone for participants.
- Walk through the free online tutorial "Key Communication Techniques for Aging and Disability Professionals" from [Advancing States' IQ Online Learning Center](#) as a group.
- Present the following case scenario, which will be used to facilitate discussion around the training topic.

*Mr. S lives down the street from a senior center but has never visited. He attends the center one day at the urging of his daughter, whom he speaks with once a week on the phone. She suggested he visit and ask about low-cost meals after discussing how the increased cost of food and utilities has tightened his monthly budget. Mr. S visits the center on a Tuesday afternoon but is told the day's meal has concluded. He is asked if he wants to sign up for the following day. He is disappointed and though he signs up, he does not feel up to returning the next day.*

- Discuss the following questions as a group or in small groups, with one representative sharing the group's findings.
  - What similar real-life scenarios have you encountered and how were you able to set the tone for participation?
  - What barriers may Mr. S. have encountered that kept him from returning?
  - What may have made Mr. S. feel welcomed and encouraged to stay or return?
  - How could intake staff or a volunteer have engaged Mr. S. in activities that day?
  - What services besides meals does our organization have that may have met Mr. S.'s needs?
  - Are there other participants that Mr. S. may have been able to connect to at our center? How would you make an introduction?
  - Are there volunteer opportunities that may be of interest to Mr. S.?
- Practice role-playing, with one staff/volunteer taking on the role of Mr. S. and one as the center's intake, using what they have learned about communication techniques to engage him in a 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 Mr. S. respond to them?
  - What additional communication techniques may have worked well in the discussion?
- As a group or in small groups, brainstorm opportunities to create a more welcoming environment within your organization. The following topics may be helpful to discuss:
  - What visual cues exist within our center/organization that may make participants feel welcome or unwelcome?
  - What changes might make our participants feel more at home?

- Are there members of our community that we don't seem to be serving? What in-house changes would be beneficial as we engage those populations?
- What icebreakers may be successful when connecting a new participant and an existing one?
- Share selected resources from the tip sheet and allow staff time to review them during work hours.

## Resources

- [Creating a Welcoming Culture from Top to Bottom](#) – NY State Office for the Aging training webinar
- [Key Communication Techniques for Aging and Disability Professionals](#) – ADvancing States IQ Online Learning
- [Essential Components of the Aging I&R/A Process](#) – ADvancing States IQ Online Learning
- [Training Considerations for Congregate Meal Staff](#) – Nutrition & Aging Resource Center
- [Activities](#) – Conversation Starters from GWAAR
- [Enhancing Socialization through Meaningful Volunteer Connections](#) – Nutrition & Aging Resource Center
- [How to Communicate with Older Adults about Food Insecurity and Hunger](#) – Baylor University
- [Cultural Competency Information and Resources](#) – Administration for Community Living
- [Cultural Competency for Senior Nutrition Programs](#) – Nutrition & Aging Resource Center