

## Why Senior Centers should be allowed to Charge

Facing a fourth year of reduced funding, in February, 2011, Durham Center for Senior Life (DCSL) began implementing a \$5.00 monthly activity at its main senior center. This fee is waived for anyone who states that this would be a hardship – no questions asked. Since we began this, seniors are excited to find out how little it costs to participate, and, in fact, participation in our Senior Center continues to grow.

Prior to implementing this activity – or membership fee as participants call it – we wanted to be sure we did our research. In an article by the National Council on Aging, it pointed out that in Older Americans Act Title III, it specifically states that agencies could not charge for information and case assistance, nutrition, or transportation programs. However, the document does not follow that same direction for Senior Center programs. Rather, it states that Senior Center programs must be “accessible.”

We looked at what other senior centers were doing. In Orange County, they currently charge for some classes. For example, their Yoga class – one of our most popular classes – they charge \$6 per class – or \$600 annually if you take the class twice a week as many of our participants do. We have many people from Chapel Hill coming to our Center for free classes.

In the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Senior Centers and Levin Senior Center, they charge \$52 and \$100, respectively, for a “discount card” and then provide classes at reduced rates. The average fee for these classes is \$4.00 per class at the discounted rates.

We were surprised when the Director of the North Carolina Division of Aging and Adult Services (NCDAAS), Dennis Streets, responded with an administrative letter stating our fees were not acceptable and ruled that the higher fees charged at other centers are acceptable because 1) they are not called “membership” fee and 2) it is voluntary. Mr. Streets does not believe that the fees charged by these two centers set up a barrier to participation while our small fees do.

Mr. Streets indicated that agencies can only charge for the parts of programs that are funded with funds other than Title III. We maintain that it is impossible to separate them. We use other funds to pay for instructors; we still use Title III funds to keep the lights on. Our exercise equipment may be paid by grants, but the custodian to keep the building clean is funded by Title III funds. The yoga instructor may be paid through other funds, but the senior center manager who creates the flyers is paid by Title III. Without placing an enormous burden on accounting staff, it is impossible to completely separate the two when 50% of funding comes from other sources.

To implement the type of system the State is outlining, we would face additional hardships to both our senior participants and our organization. Specifically:

1. Our flat \$5.00 monthly fee - *twenty-five cents a day* – allows seniors to participate in **all** classes, computer lab, exercise equipment, etc. This fee is simple to implement and helps offset funding cuts.

2. Charging per exercise class, as the state recommends, would require additional staffing to monitor. These additional costs would be passed on to seniors – further limiting access.

We believe that it is not the intent of the Older Americans Act to prevent acceptable community solutions that would allow communities to serve a greater number of seniors with more programs and services.

At this time when the government is being forced to make deep budget cuts, it is not reasonable for any State governmental agency to place additional restrictions on community alternatives to maintaining important programs and services. In today's economy, we all realize that we cannot rely on government alone, and we cannot make fees for programs so high that options for seniors become limited.

We have asked Mr. Streets to re-consider his administrative letter, to open a dialogue with the Administration on Aging, and to be an advocate for all seniors. With the looming budget cuts, we all need to work together to identify local solutions without impacting the services we provide to our seniors. We believed that our agency has identified a solution that would allow us to maintain our senior centers without cuts to services. We ask that everyone support us and other senior centers that are in similar financial situations.

Gail Souare, MPH  
Executive Director  
Durham Center for Senior Life