

# **BUILDING EXCELLENCE:**

## **National Council On Aging/National Institute of Senior Centers -*The National Senior Center Self-Assessment Process***

*"This manual is dedicated to all the senior centers that were first,  
To all the senior centers that are now,  
To all the senior centers that will be  
...And especially to all the creative people who make them work."*

### **National Council on Aging**

*Improving the health and economic security of 10 million older adults by 2020*

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## NCOA/NISC SELF-ASSESSMENT and ACCREDITATION MANUAL

### Preface

The National Institute of Senior Centers (NISC) celebrates senior centers, a tested and customer-focused service model for older people. Senior centers have grown from the first, established in New York in 1943, to an estimated 11,000 senior centers, serving 10 million older adults.

Senior centers, located in most of America, are rural and urban, public and private, and single or multiple sites. They serve a diverse and growing population of older adults with many new facilities developing annually. Each senior center is a unique operation with a direction and focus determined by its community, older people, and their families.

Senior centers are an accessible focal point and a gateway to an important system of home and community-based services. Senior centers serve people from those thinking ahead to retirement to those who are struggling with the vicissitudes of advanced years. They strengthen and support the integration of older people into community life by offering intergenerational activities, volunteer services, life-long learning and leadership opportunities. They invigorate the older person by encouraging healthy behaviors, and thereby, discouraging disability and disease. Senior centers also support the family and community by providing information and referral to a myriad of social service resources including caregiving and long-term support and services.

Although each is unique, NISC accredited senior centers operate effectively from a common philosophy and with adherence to established standards of excellence. This manual is an important tool, developed to help review and strengthen key operations and programs. Senior centers have benefited in many ways from the national accreditation process. Some report that it has leveraged needed funds for capital and programmatic improvements; some say that it propelled older adults into leadership roles and ownership. Others remark that the process gave visibility to the senior center in the community and provided a crucial road map for improvements.

The National Institute of Senior Centers (NISC) is to be congratulated on its initiatives with accreditation and senior center standards. Nationally accredited senior centers are demonstrating the vitality of this remarkable senior center model and creating a better future for all of us.

## NCOA/NISC SELF-ASSESSMENT and ACCREDITATION MANUAL

### WELCOME LETTER

Dear Colleague:

Congratulations! You, the senior center and community are embarking on an exciting path. The senior center self -assessment is the first step in becoming nationally accredited. This letter gives you an overview of the self-assessment and accreditation process and some helpful tips for successful completion.

You can find information and people to contact for help on the [NCOA website](#). You can also go to NCOA [Crossroads](#), our online community for senior center professionals to post questions and get answers from the experts. There are people who can help you – you just need to ask.

This Manual consists of:

1. General Information
2. Criteria for the Nine Standards
3. Accreditation Forms

The General Information section will provide background information and hints for carrying out the self-assessment process. The Standard section will spell out the criteria by which the senior center will evaluate itself. These criteria are the measuring sticks that the self-assessment committee will use in gauging whether the senior center meets the standard.

The Intent to Self-Assess form is completed when you begin the Self-Assessment Process. Other Accreditation Forms are completed when the senior center is ready to submit information to NCOA's NISC Program Manager.

Please know that there are many people who want to help make this a worthwhile experience for you and your community's senior center. The forthcoming pages will help you start down the road to examine your senior center and prepare to submit the information necessary for the accreditation process.

Good luck. You will be glad that you decided to take this journey.

Sincerely,

NCOA's NISC Executive Committee

## NCOA/NISC SELF-ASSESSMENT and ACCREDITATION MANUAL

### Steps to Complete Self-Assessment and Accreditation

1. The senior center who is a member of NISC will be able to download a copy of *“Building Excellence”*, *The National Institute of Senior Center’s Self-Assessment and Accreditation Manual* from the NISC member library at [www.ncoacrossroads.org](http://www.ncoacrossroads.org). Non-members will need to purchase it from NCOA.
2. The senior center files the online [Intent to Self-Assess form](https://ncoa.tfaforms.net/371050). The link is: <https://ncoa.tfaforms.net/371050> - see page 11 for a copy of the online document. Upon completing the online form, you will be invoiced for the \$500 “Intent to Self-Assess” deposit that will be deducted from the total accreditation fee, found on page 12.
3. The senior center forms a committee and completes the self-assessment process.
4. The senior center evaluates its level of compliance to the national standards and completes any tasks to bring it into compliance.
5. The senior center prepares four (4) copies of the Document Review Notebook. (See pages 7-10.)
6. The senior center fills out an online profile based on the notebook document.
7. The senior center contacts NCOA’s NISC Program Manager prior to sending one (1) copy of the Document Review Notebook.
8. The senior center sends one (1) copy of the Document Review Notebook to the NISC Program Manager at NCOA headquarters.
9. The NISC Program Manager contacts the senior center letting them know that the Document Review Notebook has arrived and the approximate time it will be reviewed by the office.
10. The NISC Program Manager reviews the materials and lets the senior center know if additional materials are needed.
11. The NISC Program Manager recruits on-site and off-site peer reviewers.
12. When the peer reviewers have been secured, one (1) Document Review Notebook is sent to each peer reviewer.
13. The On-Site Peer Reviewer arranges the schedule for the visit with the senior center and the Off-Site Reviewer.
14. The Peer Review site visit takes place.
15. In consultation with the Off-Site Peer Reviewer, the On-Site Peer Reviewer writes the report and makes the recommendation relative to the accreditation status of the senior centers.
16. The Accreditation Board meets on a regular basis, reviews the reports and makes their recommendations. The senior center then receives official notification of its accreditation status.

## NCOA/NISC SELF-ASSESSMENT and ACCREDITATION MANUAL

### Self-Assessment Process

1. Submit online [Intent to Self-Assess form](#).
2. Become familiar with the parts of the Manual and the Self-Assessment Process.
3. The Senior Center Self-Assessment Manual contains the nine (9) Standards.
4. These Standards are used to evaluate the performance of a senior center and how prepared a center is to be accredited. These criteria will help you recognize the things the senior center is doing well and the areas that may need improvement.
5. Each standard lists items that are necessary to be accomplished in order to receive accreditation and information that needs to be collected and submitted as the *Document Review Notebook*.
6. A committee carries out the senior center self-assessment process.

### Self-Assessment Committee

**The NISC Council and Accreditation Board believe that one of the benefits of the Senior Center Accreditation process is a Self-Assessment Committee whose members represent many organizations and groups within the community. This committee will tap into the resources of the community and help the Senior Center develop and strengthen ties to the community. In order to be able to gauge how effectively this has been done, one of the measurements in the Community Connections Standard is the manner in which the process has been carried out.**

#### Self-Assessment Process

A senior center self-assessment committee shall be made up of a wide variety of community people. The committee should:

1. Represent the diversity of the community
2. Include community leaders
3. Include paid and unpaid staff and board of directors or advisory board members
4. Include people familiar with the Center as well as people who are not familiar with the center

The committee could include the following people or groups:

1. Elected officials
2. Town officials
3. Marketing professionals
4. Higher education personnel
5. Members of fire or police department
6. Nonprofits or for profits who serve the 50+ population
7. Housing authority and other housing options for those 50+
8. Religious organizations

9. Funding organizations
10. Medical professionals
11. Leaders in the business community
12. Staff, paid and unpaid
13. Board and Advisory Council members
14. Center participants/members/clients
15. Other

There should be an orientation meeting followed by meetings to review the individual standards.

The process ideally should be accomplished in 6 to 12 months.

Items needed for the Document Review Notebook should be gathered throughout the process so the Notebook can be completed when the process is completed.

## NCOA/NISC SELF-ASSESSMENT and ACCREDITATION MANUAL

### Accreditation Notebook Submission of information for accreditation

When the self-assessment committee has completed their review of the standards, it is time to decide if the center meets the standard criteria at a level acceptable to apply for accreditation.

During the self-assessment process noted information should have been gathered to make the process of putting together a *Document Review Notebook* easy at this point.

A total of four (4) *Document Review Notebooks* will need to be compiled. The materials should be put together in this manner:

#### Required Documentation for all Senior Centers

Each senior center submitting for accreditation must prepare four three-ring binders called *Document Review Notebooks*. Please read the following directions and process notes and then use the Document Checklist, found on pages 8 to 10, to organize your documents.

- The numbered sections for Senior Center Description and Accreditation Process and the section for each Standard, and items included in each Standard, should be tabbed/indexed in the order given on pages 8-10. Please do not rearrange the order.
- **Please do not use plastic sleeves.** Marketing material, such as brochures and newsletters, should be three-hole punched. Please do not use staples. Please refrain from adding material not requested.
- Send **one** *Document Review Notebook* to the NISC Program Manager. It will be reviewed to determine if it is complete. Additional items may be requested to complete the notebook.
- Once the notebook is determined to be complete, Peer Reviewers will be assigned for the accreditation visit. The senior center will be notified as to whom the Peer Reviewers are and will then forward a copy of the *Document Review Notebook* to the On-site and Off-site reviewers. The senior center will need to retain one (1) copy of the notebook for their reference. Please use the following list and information to insure that all required materials have been formatted, prepared and mailed as required.

## DOCUMENT CHECKLIST

Please submit one copy of the Document Review Notebook to:

**NISC Program Manager  
NCOA  
NISC National Accreditation  
251 18<sup>th</sup> Street South, Suite 500  
Arlington, VA 22202**

**DOCUMENTATION REVIEW NOTEBOOK** Each item must be tabbed and indexed.

### Senior Center Description and Process

1. Description of Parent Organization (multi-site only). See page 14.
2. *Senior Center Profile* - Provide one (1) completed form per senior center applicant. Please use the appropriate form provided in the application materials.
3. Senior Center Description - Provide a comprehensive written description of the senior center in terms of the following elements. Limit to two (2) pages.
  - Community Context (urban, rural, suburban)
  - Participant demographics
  - Size of membership, average daily attendance
  - Primary funding sources
  - Community partnerships
  - Administrative structure (private, non-profit, operated by municipality)
  - Number of years in operation
4. Description of Senior Center's Self-Assessment Process -provide a comprehensive description of the following: Limit to two (2) pages.
  - How the process was organized
  - List of individuals who participated in the process with their affiliations
  - Scope and frequency that various workgroup(s) met to accomplish their tasks
  - Interesting experiences related to the process
5. Insert the completed Self-Assessment Workbook sheets that correspond to each Standard at the beginning of each standard section in the Self-Assessment Notebooks.

Please note, BOTH the Standard and the Items under each Standard must be tabbed/indexed.

**STANDARD**

**ITEMS**

**PURPOSE and PLANNING**

- Senior center’s mission statement
- Senior center’s planning document with goals, objectives and action plan.
- Report on accomplishments and/or status of the planning document
- The senior center’s most recent annual report.

**COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS**

- List of collaborative community partners.
- Sample of a cooperative agreement between senior center and collaborative community partner.
- Explanation of how the Information and Referral process is made available to seniors and the community.
- Copy of marketing plan.
- Copy of marketing materials (No older than two [2] years).
- Copy of news releases and news articles.
- Research guidelines.

**GOVERNANCE**

- Documents or by-laws showing that nine (9) of the guidelines are met for the senior enter governing board or charitable arm or advisory board/council as listed under **Governing Structure C#1** (*These may either be placed in the book or ready for Peer Reviewer to peruse.*)
- Code of ethics
- Conflict of interest statement
- List of standing boards and/or committees – include the members’ names and their affiliation or profession
- List of activities or services that require certificates or inspections to be posted

**ADMINISTRATION and HUMAN RESOURCES**

- Current resume for main administrator of senior center
- Job descriptions for paid staff
- Organizational chart(s) showing structure and lines of authority
- Personnel policies for paid staff (If document is lengthy, include a copy of the table of contents and have a copy ready for the On-site Reviewer)

- Job descriptions for unpaid staff
- Volunteer Handbook for unpaid staff that includes policies

**PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT and IMPLEMENTATION**

- Description of programs and services that show senior center meets the standard criteria as outlined in Program Implementation #1, 5 and 6
- List of hours when program or services are available and where they are available

**EVALUATION**

- Senior center's evaluation plan
- Two (2) evaluations that show measuring different areas as identified in **B, Areas of Evaluation #1**. Include compilation of results and two (2) recommendations drawn from the results.
- Examples of two (2) types of evaluations from **C, Information Collection Methods #3**, with explanation as to why that type was chosen
- Two (2) examples of outcome based evaluations, explanation as to why they were done and how the information was used.

**FISCAL and ASSET RESPONSIBILITY**

- Senior center budget
- Sample of monthly financial statement
- Copy of current audit or financial review
- Written procedures for internal financial control
- Statement of insurance coverage
- Incident report
- Disaster recovery or business continuity plan

**RECORDS and REPORTS**

- Monthly or quarterly statistical report on programs and services
- Year-end statistical reports for two (2) separate years
- General participant record form
- Participant forms used for specific services or activities
- Confidentiality policy
- Policy and Procedures Manual (Table of Contents can be submitted)

**FACILITY and OPERATIONS**

- Picture of senior center that includes outside signage
- List of transportation options

- Drawing that shows layout of senior center
- Copy of safety procedures
- Preventive maintenance schedule
- Written procedure for rental to other groups or agreement for senior center to rent its space

# NCOA/NISC

## National Senior Center Accreditation Program

### *Intent to Self-Assess Form*

When the senior center is ready to begin the self-assessment process, it should submit the [online Intent to Self-Assess Form](#). This form is used as a planning tool by the National Accreditation Office.

After you submit the online Intent to Self-Assess Form you will be invoiced a five hundred dollar (\$500) non-refundable "Intent to Self-Assess deposit". The application deposit will be credited towards the total accreditation fee you will be assessed. The time limit for completing the accreditation process is three years unless prior permission is granted. If after three years from the date of submitting your application, you do not complete the accreditation process the \$500 deposit will be forfeited.

Information requested on the online form includes the following plus contact information and your center's annual budget. You will also need credit card information if completing online or your center will be invoiced.

Page 1

Is this the first time that your organization(s) will be undergoing the NISC Accreditation process? \*

Yes, this is our first time with the process

No, our senior center has been accredited before

Please select the option below that best describes how this accreditation should be paid for: \*

One senior center paying alone

One senior center paid for by a parent organization

Multiple senior centers paid for by a parent organization

We will begin the self-assessment process on this date:

We anticipate completing the self-assessment process by this date:

Maximum of 3 years to complete

We expect to apply for National Accreditation on approximately this date:

Due upon submission of this form is a \$500 deposit. This deposit will be subtracted from the total accreditation base-fee for your center(s). Would you like to pay now with a credit card, or have NCOA send you an invoice? \*

Pay now online

Email me an invoice to pay later

## ACCREDITATION BASE FEE GUIDELINES

The Table below outlines the base fee costs for accreditation paid to NCOA by the senior center.

- When the NISC Program Manager receives your online **Intent to Self-Assess Form**, the Senior Center will be invoiced for a \$500 “Intent to Self-Assess” deposit that will be deducted from the Accreditation Base Fee.
- Upon the Accreditation Office receiving your **Document Review Notebook**, you will receive an invoice for the remainder of the Accreditation Base Fee.
- The fee does not include the National Accreditation Manual or peer review expenses. The cost of the Peer Reviewer visit (transportation, hotel and meals) will be billed after the on-site visit. Peer Reviewers travel as NCOA consultants and abide by the travel policies of NCOA. They do not follow the organizations’ travel policies of the senior center being accredited. The center will be billed by NCOA for these expenses after travel has been incurred.

### Costs related to Individual Senior Center Accreditation Base Fee:

Senior Center Annual Operations Budget	Accreditation Base Fee NCOA/NISC Centers	Accreditation Base Fee Non-Member Centers
\$0 - \$100,000	\$1,300	\$1,900
\$100,001 - \$250,000	\$1,500	\$2,100
\$250,001 - \$500,000	\$1,700	\$2,300
\$500,001 - \$1,000,000	\$1,900	\$2,500
\$1,000,001 - \$1,500,000	\$2,100	\$2,700
\$1,500,001 - \$2,000,000	\$2,300	\$2,900
\$2,000,001 - \$2,500,000	\$2,500	\$3,100
\$2,500,001 - \$3,000,000	\$2,700	\$3,300
Over \$3,000,000 *	\$2,900	\$3,500

### Costs related to Parent Organization & Multiple Senior Centers Accreditation Base Fee:

Parent Organization Annual Operations Budget + 1 Senior Center	Accreditation Base Fee NISC Member Centers	Accreditation Base Fee NISC Member Additional Centers	Accreditation Base Fee Non-Member Centers	Accreditation Base Additional Centers Non-Members FEE
Over \$3,000,000	\$2,900 includes 1 center	\$750 per each additional center	\$3,500	\$950 per each additional center
Over \$4,000,000	\$3,100 includes 1 center	\$750 per each additional center	\$3,700	\$950 per each additional center
Over \$5,000,000	\$3,300 includes 1 center	\$750 per each additional center	\$3,900	\$950 per each additional center
Over \$6,000,000	\$3,500 includes 1 center	\$750 per each additional center	\$4,000	\$950 per each additional center
Over \$7,000,000	\$3,700 includes 1 center	\$750 per each additional center	\$4,200	\$950 per each additional center
Over \$8,000,000	\$3,900 includes 1 center	\$750 per each additional center	\$4,400	\$950 per each additional center
\$ Over \$9,000,000	\$4,100 includes 1 center	\$750 per each additional center	\$4,600	\$950 per each additional center

# National Senior Center Accreditation Program

## Multiple Site Accreditation Application Form-1

Applicant senior center(s) complete and file the *Intent to Self-Assess Form* with the NISC Program Manager. This form must be on file before national accreditation will be undertaken. This process serves to officially notify NCOA, NISC, and the National Accreditation Board that a senior center has entered (or is in the midst of) the self-assessment process and offers an approximate date the senior center anticipates applying for national accreditation. The submission of this form is not a formal agreement on the part of the applying senior center(s) to enter into national accreditation. It serves only to guide NISC to accurately anticipate future personnel needs and plan schedules six (6) to nine (9) months in advance.

Parent Organization: \_\_\_\_\_

Address (City, State, Zip): \_\_\_\_\_

Contact Person/Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Authorized Representative (if different from above): \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Fax: \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

Names of Senior Centers:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Authorized Representative

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Multiple Site Accreditation Application – 2

### ***Parent Organization***

- I. Parent Organization Description - Please provide a comprehensive written description of the parent organization in terms of the following elements. Limit to three (3) pages.
  - Official name of the parent organization
  - Full name, direct telephone number, fax, and e-mail of the CEO/Executive Director
  - Brief historical description of the parent organization
  - Parent organization's mission statement
  - Primary funding source
  - Parent organization's annual budget
  - Size and demographics of staff
  - Administrative structure (private, non-profit, operated by a municipality)
  - Community partnerships
  - Services and programs offered by the parent organization
  
- II. Multiple Site Directory - Please provide a comprehensive list of all senior center sites to be accredited (now or later). Include the following information for each site.
  - Senior center name and complete mailing address
  - Contact person's name and title
  - Telephone and fax numbers and e-mail address for contact person
  - Approximate date each senior center site will undertake national accreditation

## About the National Council on Aging (NCOA)

### About NCOA

The National Council on Aging (NCOA) is a respected national leader and trusted partner to help people aged 60+ meet the challenges of aging. Our mission is to improve the lives of millions of older adults, especially those who are struggling. Through innovative community programs and services, online help, and advocacy, NCOA is partnering with nonprofit organizations, government, and business to improve the health and economic security of 10 million older adults by 2020. Learn more at [ncoa.org](https://ncoa.org) and @NCOAging.

### About the National Institute of Senior Centers

NCOA's National Institute of Senior Centers (NISC) supports a national network of over 3,000 senior center professionals dedicated to helping older adults remain active, engaged, and independent in their communities. NISC is setting the standard for the future of senior centers by promoting research, promising practices, professional development, and advocacy. NISC also offers the nation's only National Senior Center Accreditation Program. Learn more at [ncoa.org/NISC](https://ncoa.org/NISC).

## National Institute of Senior Centers (NISC)

### About the National Institute of Senior Centers

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### History of the National Institute of Senior Centers

NCOA's National Institute of Senior Centers (NISC) was established in March 1970. NISC is a network of professionals dedicated to enhancing the lives of older adults through professional development, advocacy and promotion of national standards. They believe that Senior Centers create opportunities for successful aging in our communities.

Through the efforts of their volunteer leadership, the NISC Delegate Council, members receive these "robust" member benefits:**Benefits of Membership with the National Institute of Senior Centers**

- 
- **Newsletters** –Members receive our popular *Senior Center Voice* each month.
- **Online Community** - Share, learn, and problem-solve with other senior center professionals through our online community Crossroads. Senior centers have their own group on the site.
- **Webinars** - Get new ideas from the experts on what's hot in aging services.
- **Advocacy** - Join a grassroots movement to urge more funding and support for our nation's senior centers — and policies to improve the lives of older Americans.
- **Annual Conference** – Members get valuable discounts to the only National Senior Center Conference- just for senior center professionals.
- **National Accreditation** – Members receive a discount for NISC National Senior Center Accreditation.
- **Research** – Members gain access to cutting-edge research on senior centers. Use the findings to promote your center, gain funding, and market your services.
- **Best Practices & Programming Ideas** - Discover best practices to improve your programs and services — including the Programs of Excellence Awards booklet, *New Models for Senior Centers Final Report*. Every year, members' get a free kit to help celebrate Senior Center Month in September.
- **Partnership Opportunities** - Take part in NCOA/NISC partnership opportunities such as the USDA Food Safety program and more.
- **Fundraising** – Cellular Recycler fundraising available.
- **Discounts** - Receive money-saving deals on Licensing fees from the Motion Picture Licensing Corporation, allows your center to show movies legally.
- **Leadership Opportunities** - Advance your career by becoming active in the NISC Leadership Teams
- **Awards** Gain recognition for your work through NISC awards.

## SENIOR CENTERS

### HISTORY OF SENIOR CENTERS: A LONG AND PROUD HERITAGE

The legacy of senior centers and their roles across the nation represent more than 65 years of rich tradition. The industry started in 1943 with one senior center, the William Hodson Community Center, established by the New York City Department of Welfare. The senior center's primary function was to provide a place where older, isolated members of the community could come together for socialization. Within a few years, similar sites in San Francisco, Philadelphia, Menlo Park and Bridgeport followed Hodson. By 1961 there were an estimated 218 senior centers operating across the country.

Senior centers were initially small, private clubs established by local nonprofit groups or units of government such as recreation and social service departments. They experienced dramatic growth in the 1970s when the Older American Act (OAA) identified senior centers as "essential links in the service network for older adults." In 1972, amendments to OAA provided funding for acquisition, alteration, or renovation of senior center facilities, development and delivery of services and construction and operation of senior centers. The OAA defined a senior center as "a community facility for the organization and provision of a broad spectrum of services..." including health, social, educational and recreational services and to serve as a focal point for the delivery of services to older adults in the community.

### Definition of a Senior Center

No longer do senior centers provide only socialization opportunities. A senior center is a community focal point where older adults come together for services and activities that reflect their experience and interests, enhance their dignity, support their independence and encourage their involvement in and with the senior center and the community.

As part of a comprehensive community strategy to meet the needs of older adults, senior centers offer services and activities within the senior center, outside the center and link participants with resources offered by other agencies. Senior center programs consist of a variety of individual and group services and activities that include but are not limited:

- Health and wellness
- Arts and humanities programming
- Intergenerational activities
- Employment assistance
- Information and referral services
- Social and community action opportunities
- Transportation services
- Volunteer opportunities
- Educational opportunities
- Financial and benefits assistance
- Meal programs

Senior centers also serve as a resource for the entire community for information on aging, support for family caregivers, training professional, lay leaders and students and for developing innovative approaches to addressing aging issues.

### **The Senior Center Philosophy**

The philosophy of the senior center movement is based on these premises:

- Aging is a normal developmental process;
- Human beings need peers with whom they can interact
- Peers are a source of encouragement and support
- Older adults have the right to a voice in determining matters that impact them

In accordance with these premises, senior centers adhere to the following beliefs.

- Older adults, like all people, are individuals with ambitions, capabilities and creative capacities.
- They are capable of continued growth and development.
- They have certain basic needs, including the need for opportunities for relationships and for experiencing a sense of achievement.
- They need access to sources of information and help for personal and family problems and the opportunities to learn from individuals coping with similar experiences.
- They have a right to involvement and representation in a senior center's decision-making process.

Senior center staffs are obligated to create an atmosphere that acknowledges the value of human life, affirms the dignity and self-worth of the older adult participant and maintains a climate of respect, trust and support. Within this atmosphere, the staff creates opportunities for older adults to apply their wisdom, experience and insight and to learn new skills.

As an integral part of the aging network, a senior center serves community needs, assists other agencies in serving older adults and provides opportunities for older adults to develop their potential as individuals within the context of the entire community.

Today, there are an estimated 15,000 senior centers in the United States. The evolution and growth of the industry have mirrored society in many ways. As the nation's older population has increased, senior centers have grown, adapted and changed to function as viable participants in the community-based system of services for older persons. They provide social opportunities as well as education, nutrition, recreation, health programs and support services. Senior centers are unique because they focus on older adults as total persons, recognizing their diverse interests, needs, experience and skills.

## THE NATIONAL SENIOR CENTER SELF ASSESSMENT PROCESS

### HISTORY

Among NISC's many accomplishments were its development and publication of national standards for the industry in 1978. It was initially a reference tool for communities interested in developing senior centers and a guide for existing centers. The initial Senior Center Self-Assessment served as a guide for program development, assessment of program quality and identification of areas that needed improvement. Since 1978, NISC has completed revisions of the national standards in 1990, 1996, 1999 and 2010. The national standards function as a guide for developing and implementing programs and service as the core of NISC's long-held dream of accreditation. This is the fifth edition of NISC's Senior Center Self-Assessment and National Accreditation Manual. This manual would not have been possible without the advice, opinions and input from experts and professionals who served on advisory committees during the initial development and subsequent revisions.

With emphasis on evidence-based programs in community-based services, NISC's Senior Center Self-Assessment and Accreditation helps those in the field meet this need. Centers who participate in the accreditation process show that they are able to meet new challenges of an aging population, measure their compliance to national standards and demonstrate excellence in accomplishing their mission.

- The NISC Program Manager and NCOA staff work diligently to ensure that senior centers pursuing accreditation receive necessary information and materials. Please call the **NISC Office at**
- **1-800-373-4906** if you have any question or concerns when reviewing the manual or during the self-assessment process. NISC Membership can also be contacted by email at [membership@ncoa.org](mailto:membership@ncoa.org). All accreditation documentation must be sent to:

**NCOA**  
**NISC Program Manager**  
**251 18<sup>th</sup> Street South, Suite 500**  
**Arlington, VA 22202**

## WHO'S WHO

**Accreditation Business office** is led by the NISC Program Manager. She can quickly answer questions via phone calls or emails.

**Accreditation Coaches** are senior center professionals who have been extensively trained in the accreditation process as Peer Reviewers and have personally participated in the process. They are available to assist your senior center during the self-assessment and accreditation process. These professionals are current peer reviewers who can be independently hired to provide assistance in the process. The business office can query current reviewers as to their interest and availability.

**Peer Reviewers** are senior center professionals who are trained to review the information provided to them by the senior center. They are assigned by the business office. To prevent conflicts of interest, the peer reviewer assigned to your senior center cannot work in your state. After reviewing your notebook they conduct an on-site visit, write a report that indicates the accomplishments of a senior center and the items that need improvement. The Peer Reviewer recommends to the Accreditation Board whether the senior center should receive accreditation, provisional accreditation or not accredited.

**NISC Accreditation Board** consists of senior center professionals who are trained and certified to review the recommendations from the Peer Reviewers. With this information they vote on the recommendation of the Peer Reviewer. The Accreditation Board generally meets once a month.

Standards and Accreditation Work Group (SAWG) the mission of this committee is to provide quality assurance with the accreditation process by reviewing and defining the implementation processes, address concerns and issues related to the accreditation process, and to align with NCOA systems. Tasks include review and define policies of accreditation; address issues and concerns of accreditation process; schedule and develop webinars(s) to promote accreditation planned in cooperation with the Best Practices Committee; market the accreditation program; integrate the accreditation program information in NCOA's data system; develop process for on-going relationship with accredited senior centers.

## BENEFITS OF SELF-ASSESSMENT PROCESS AND ACCREDITATION

The Senior Center Self-Assessment is the first step in the two-tiered accreditation process. When best practices are used to carry out the process, several accomplishments can be realized:

- It establishes a community-wide process that increases awareness of the senior center's contribution in the lives of older adults and their families.
- It creates a forum in which the community and a center's participants can ask questions, raise concerns and advocate for their needs.
- It serves as a catalyst for opening a dialogue between community leaders and service providers to better understand senior centers' significant role in the aging population and the local

community.

- Working together with community leaders in a structured evaluation often leads to a clearer understanding of why additional resources are needed to expand facility, programming and staffing.
- It documents the senior center as an accountable, reliable and fundable program with capacity to provide services that lead to substantive outcomes.
- It leads to a sense of pride and empowerment for senior center staff, participants, volunteers and members of the community.

### **PURPOSE OF THE SELF-ASSESSMENT PROCESS**

The self-assessment is the first step in the accreditation process. The purpose of the self-assessment is to evaluate how well the senior center meets the standard criteria as indicated within each of the nine (9) standards. The senior center measures itself against the information contained in the standards section of the manual. The standard criteria are used to examine the senior center's total operation in relation to the expectation set out in each standard. The senior center will recognize what it is doing well. It will identify ways in which the program and services can be expanded or strengthened. Many times a senior center is able to strengthen its collaborative role with other community agencies. The standards provide an excellent review of management and operating procedures and policies. The ability of the senior center to evaluate its programs and services is examined. It scrutinizes procedures regarding financial and facility management. The programs and the needs of the community are examined to see if the senior center is meeting those needs. A schedule is developed for any work that needs to be done to meet the criteria as set forth in the standards. Finally, the decision is made to submit the information to the accreditation office.

### **WHO DOES THE SELF-ASSESSMENT?**

A committee representative of the community should be appointed to conduct the self-assessment. The committee should be composed of senior center participants, staff, volunteers, individuals from the governing structure, community, corporate and government leaders, other organizations who serve the older population, institutions of higher education and other interested individuals. The perspectives and ideas offered by a diverse committee are essential for a complete assessment and for recognizing what the senior center is doing well and what needs to be done to strengthen its operations and programs. A committee may have 20 to 30 members that break down into smaller work groups.

Senior center participants and those not participating but eligible are important to be included. Their view of how the senior center meets the needs and interests of older people in the community is a critical measure of its responsiveness. It is important to look at what might be missing in the program and service offerings.

### **HOW IS IT DONE?**

After the committee is chosen, it needs to receive orientation. Information contained in the previous pages can be used for an orientation. Each standard is divided into four (4) parts. The *Principle* is a statement about what the standard accomplishes. The *Rationale* gives a discussion as to why and

sometimes how the standard should be met. The *Standard Criteria* spells out in more detail what is expected in each standard. The *Workbook* section uses questions to help the committee examine how well the senior center satisfies the criteria.

The committee decides its schedule of work, who and how it will accomplish its review. The leader of the process can be the director of the senior center, another staff person, someone from the governing body, or an interested community leader. In many instances the staff is involved in gathering the information needed to evaluate each standard.

After the standards are read and understood, the Workbook section can provide guidance in evaluating whether the senior center meets the criteria in that standard. Notice needs to be given to the proper staff in instances where the senior center does not meet the criteria. The appropriate staff person and, if needed, committee members can plan what needs to be done to meet the criteria. A report for each standard indicating good practices and areas for improvement would be helpful to the senior center.

#### **SUBMITTING FOR ACCREDITATION**

When the committees are analyzing and reviewing the standards by using the Workbook section, two (2) types of statements are found. One statement says, "Required for accreditation..." These criteria must be met in order for a senior center to be accredited. A senior center should not submit for accreditation until these requirements are met. The other statement says, "Place in the Document Review Notebook..." and then an item is listed. These items need to be collected and submitted as explained earlier in this manual. If the item is not available, information needs to be given as to why it is not available. The Peer Reviewer will consider this information in the review of the senior center. When the senior center feels it has met the requirements, it should contact the National Accreditation Office and then submit the Document Review Notebook. Instructions for assembling this were explained earlier in this introduction.

#### **ON-SITE PEER REVIEW**

The visit by the Peer Reviewer can be an extremely rewarding, although sometimes seemingly stressful, experience. The Peer Reviewer may be able to advocate for something badly needed by the senior center. It is a new pair of eyes, very experienced in the professional world of senior centers. The Peer Reviewer will use the Document Review Notebook to become familiar with your center. (S)he may request additional information to be sent or be available at their visit. The Peer Reviewers have experience with the Senior Center Self-Assessment Process in their own professional context and have been certified in conducting comprehensive on-site peer review visits. The on-site visit enables the peer reviewer to put the printed materials received before the visit into a physical, community and relational context. The visit provides an opportunity for the reviewer to observe first-hand the programs and persons referred to in the documentation. The Peer Reviewer will want to meet with people involved in the Self-Assessment process as well as staff, board and committee members and key volunteers or participants. The visit will probably take a day and a half. The senior center pays the Peer Reviewer's travel, housing and meal expenses as part of the accreditation costs.

At the end of the review visit the Peer Reviewer holds an exit interview. This provides an opportunity for the peer Reviewer to discuss his/her findings with the appropriate individuals from the senior

center and to share the strengths of the senior center as well as the areas that may need improvement. The Peer Reviewer informs the senior center what the recommendation will be to the Accreditation Board. However, the Accreditation Board has the final decision as to whether a senior center receives full accreditation, provisional accreditation or does not receive accreditation.

**MEMBER OF A SPECIAL GROUP**

An important and valuable by-product of the accreditation process is the recognition of best practice models in the field. It provides an opportunity to identify programs, exemplary policies and unique components of senior center operations worthy of broader dissemination. By working together we will demonstrate that senior centers are the gateway to a broad array of services and opportunities for senior adults of all ages, needs and abilities.

Senior center professionals and governing bodies will find the Self –Assessment Process to be the most important step they will take in analyzing the structure of their organization. Achieving national accreditation will bring much-deserved recognition to a senior center and assure the community that they are competently prepared to provide services and opportunities to their older residents and their families.