The issue

During 2006, more than 75 million American baby boomers will turn 60.1 Never has it been more important for park districts, forest preserves, conservation and recreation agencies to enhance programming for this growing senior population. Studies have proven that fit seniors live longer, remain in their homes longer and participate more fully in community life.

The Illinois Association of Park Districts (IAPD) urges all seniors to engage in active recreation three or more days a week to prevent heart disease, obesity, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis and mental health challenges such as depression. Further, the Illinois Association of Park Districts urges public policymakers to provide appropriate recreational opportunities in communities across Illinois at an affordable cost. All Illinois seniors must be given equal opportunities to participate in healthy activities without economic hardship. Such local government bodies as park districts, forest preserves, conservation and recreation agencies provide these opportunities and must prepare to increase their efforts.

Background

The United States is on the brink of a longevity revolution. By 2030, one in every five people in the United States will be a member of the senior population.2 While a large number of seniors currently use a significant portion of parks and recreation services, the number of such consumers will skyrocket during the next 25 years.3

Currently, the mature market represents more than 23 percent of all fitness memberships and 43 percent of all hospital wellness center memberships.4

The benefits of physical activity to seniors

Although the risk of disease and disability has been shown to increase with age, poor health is not an inevitable consequence of aging. Nearly 40 percent of deaths in America can be attributed to controllable factors including physical inactivity.5 Obesity among older adults has doubled since 1980.6 Seniors who are obese or overweight are at risk for chronic diseases. Much of the illness, disability, and death associated with chronic diseases are avoidable through known prevention measures, such as participating in regular physical activity.

Healthy lifestyles are more influential than genetic factors in avoiding the deterioration traditionally associated with aging. Regular physical activity greatly reduces a person’s risk from dying of heart disease and decreases the risk for colon cancer, diabetes and high blood pressure. Physical activity also controls weight; contributes to healthy bones, muscles and joints; relieves arthritis pain; reduces symptoms of anxiety and depression; and decreases the need for hospitalizations, physician visits and medications.7

Physical activity also benefits cognitive health. Cognitive health, or brain health, is an important part of healthy aging. Cognitive health refers to maintaining and improving mental skills such as learning, memory, decision-making and planning. Among Americans 65 years and older, approximately six to 10 percent have dementia, and two-thirds of people with dementia have Alzheimer’s disease. Although research has not found a way to prevent dementia or Alzheimer’s disease, cognitive decline may be preventable. Recent research suggests that being physically active and engaging in social activities may help maintain and improve cognitive health.8
**Economic impact of senior inactivity**

The growing number of older Americans places increasing demands on the public health system and on medical and social services. Currently, almost one-third of total U.S. health care expenditures are for older adults. These expenditures are largely due to treatment and care of chronic diseases, and the cost associated with many of these conditions could be reduced through regular physical activity.9

**Public park agencies as providers**

Most doctors, scientific and public health organizations recommend regular physical activity and exercise for seniors. Even with these recommendations, people still tend to be less active as they age. More than 50 percent of American adults do not get enough physical activity. By age 75, about one in three men and one in two women do not engage in any physical activity.10

Illinois park districts, forest preserves, conservation and recreation agencies can reverse this trend. Nearly all public park agencies provide recreational programming, organized activities and other fitness programs for seniors. And because public agencies are committed to providing services to their residents at affordable rates, these programs are tremendous resources to promote community-wide physical fitness and good health.

**Conclusion**

The Illinois Association of Park Districts supports senior exercise and physical activity as deterrents to chronic illness and premature death. A person’s chronological age and functional age can be very different. Park districts, forest preserves, conservation districts and recreation agencies must continue to provide easily attainable health, fitness and recreational programs for the seniors in their communities at an affordable cost.

It is never too late to develop a healthy lifestyle. It is indeed true that exercise can add life to a person’s years and years to a person’s life. The IAPD supports park districts, forest preserves, conservation districts and recreation agencies as they work to introduce healthy lifestyles through physical activity to the growing population of Illinois seniors.

**ACTIONS**

The Illinois Association of Park Districts encourages our membership to seek formalized partnerships with hospitals, senior centers and community organizations to promote structured health, recreation and fitness programs.

The Association will monitor trends and needs of the growing senior population in Illinois by maintaining a close relationship with the Illinois Department on Aging and conducting research through the IAPD Research Advisory Council.

Approved by the IAPD Board of Trustees on August 18, 2006.

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2 Healthy Aging for Older Adults, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, www.cdc.gov/aging.
3 Active Aging 101, Sarah Burnett-Wolle, MS, CTRS and Geoffrey Godbey.
5 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Healthy Aging for Older Adults, “Health-Related Behaviors.”
6 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Healthy Aging for Older Adults, “Health-Related Behaviors.”
8 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Healthy Aging for Older Adults, “Health-Related Behaviors.”
10 Department of Health and Human Services, Physical Activity and Health; A Report of the Surgeon General, Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1996.