



"I love this walking thing. I've been here every week that I could since I started.It made me enjoy walking so much that I don't mind going by myself."

-- Sound Steps walker

Healthy Aging Partnership Sound Steps

2003 Evaluation Executive Summary



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Executive Summary

In the summer of 2003, the Healthy Aging Partnership – with special contributions from AARP and Seattle Parks & Recreation – sponsored Sound Steps, a program designed to promote walking among older adults. Sound Steps was implemented on a pilot basis at seven Seattle Parks and Recreation Community Centers from June through August of 2003. To evaluate the effectiveness of the Sound Steps program, the University of Washington Health Promotion Research Center (HPRC) collected both qualitative and quantitative information from the participants.

Implementation of Sound Steps

Primary responsibility for implementing the program at each of the sites rested with Seattle Parks and Recreation Senior Adult Program staff, with details of implementation varying at each center. Key program elements included initial registration and “goody bags” (including an electronic pedometer), organized walks at least once a week at each community center, monthly walking logs, an educational brochure, incentive gifts to encourage continued walking, and a celebration at the end of the program at each participating site.

Benefits from Sound Steps

What was the impact of Sound Steps? Both qualitative and quantitative data point to increased walking, which was the primary goal of the program. Below are other ways that Sound Steps made a difference in participants’ lives.

Increasing physical activity. Many people reported that having some kind of organized program made a difference in getting them to walk more. Filling out the monthly walking logs also motivated many walkers, even if they did not turn them in. The monthly logs likely underestimated how much participants truly walked over the course of the summer, since many regular walkers reported they did not turn them in or fill them out completely. However, the results of the logs that were received did show an increase in activity as compared to baseline.

Health improvements. A number of walkers reported noticeable improvement in their health and stamina over the course of the summer. People found it much easier to walk a longer distance. They experienced fewer chest pains on inclines, decreased back pain, more energy, better sleep, and boosted spirits.

Community Building. People were very enthusiastic about having the program in their neighborhood. They did not want to drive (or drive far) for a walking program. They were also excited about getting to know their neighborhoods better, discovering new places to walk, and getting to know other people who live in the neighborhood. Many people connected with new walking partners, as well as making new friends to meet for lunch or to see a movie. They also expressed a great deal of pride in their own neighborhood.

Increased exposure to Parks & Recreation Programs. A theme heard from staff, organized walkers and people who walked on their own was one of learning about existing programs and seeing new faces at the community centers. Exposure to community programs not only enhances

the likelihood that these older adults will be more physically active; it also addresses the increased need in older age to avoid social isolation.

Recommendations

Volunteers. The original vision of Sound Steps was to be primarily led by volunteers, with minimal involvement by the Parks & Recreation staff. This worked very well at one community center. Based on that example, and other suggestions from walkers and staff, the following are suggestions to build a volunteer program:

- Start recruiting early from existing Parks & Recreation programs.
- Have a variety of concrete tasks for volunteers (e.g., registration, lead walks, welcome walkers, and check-in phone calls to walkers).
- Keep the program and job duties simple.
- Have a large pool of volunteers so no one person carries the entire burden of the program.
- Empower the older adults to make it their program.

Alleviating Parks & Recreation staff burden. Parks and Recreation Senior Adult Program staff were instrumental in implementing Sound Steps and in making this pilot program a success. However, Sound Steps was overwhelming, due in part to the short lead time. They all rose to the challenge and did an amazing job, given the short lead time. Bringing staff into the planning process early and using their wealth of knowledge about implementing programs would help to garner ownership of the program and provide sufficient notice to schedule Sound Steps and recruit volunteers.

Walking partners. Many people joined Sound Steps to walk with other people and find a partner with whom they could continue to walk outside of the organized walks. Suggestions from participants to improve this aspect included: 1) pairing people up with another walker or two with similar walking capabilities; 2) having a formal introduction period at the first meeting; and 3) creating a community center participant contact list to share people's names, phone numbers and days they would like to walk right at the beginning of the program.

Managing different ability levels. Another major concern raised was accommodating the different fitness levels Sound Steps participants. Slower walkers were intimidated by those who walked faster, and the faster walkers were not challenged enough to return. Sound Steppers suggested possible ways to meet the needs of slower walkers: 1) walks could be graded for fitness levels and maps indicating hills could be provided; and 2) formally breaking into smaller groups and letting people rank themselves as to which group would be appropriate.

Increasing participation. Recruitment for this pilot was a success with close to 500 participants signing up during the one-week registration period in May. Walkers suggested they could become ambassadors for the program to spread the word next year by talking to neighborhood councils, faith communities, and neighbors.