Fall Prevention for an Aging Community Summary

A BASIC NEEDS GIVING PARTNERSHIP FUNDED PROJECT

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Personal Statement

It was an honor to work on this project and facilitate the community conversations where people were willing to share their good and bad experiences, fears, struggles, and hopes. While the report is long, it highlights themes of gaps and opportunities that our community needs to address to impact the number of people who fall. The report also offers many details that I heard in the community that represent an entire generation of people who are a valued part of our society.

I don’t want to lose sight of the woman who hadn’t left her facility in seven years because she was afraid to try the residential bus in fears of looking stupid if she fell. Or the woman who brought her cane to show off her ice pick so that she doesn’t slip in winter, or the husband who serves as a caregiver to his dying wife constrained to a wheelchair whose own health has begun to fail as he takes care of her. There was the group of women after an exercise class emphasizing positive attitude and exercise, as well as the cancer survivors who shared how their support group was the way that they stayed healthy. It was blueberries as the cure for good aging, or the entire facility that receives grippy socks to decrease resident falls. It was the service providers that emphasized teaching people how to fall so that our bodies create muscle memory, and the first responders that are overburdened by the number of calls they get for falls, including multiple calls that occurred during our two, service provider listening sessions.

While some of the comments outlined may not seem directly related to falls, I can’t emphasize enough that they are. A lot of what was shared is echoed in the research for why people fall and what they can do to stay healthy. As a community, if we want to impact the number of falls we need to not only address fall prevention programming, but we need to address the general health of our community members, the resources available for people no matter their age, ability, or income, as well as the systems that are overburdened with falls. We need to have a culture shift that offers sensitivity training to our service providers, creates more intergenerational opportunities, and addresses the stigma of aging.

The following pages outline the voices from the many who participated in rooms, online, and by paper. I’m grateful for their willingness to share, and hope that our community will respond with action around what is recommended.

Jennifer Skolaski
Partners

Thanks to the following partners who helped with strategy, note taking, data analysis, organization and logistics, sharing perspectives, and leadership of this project.

- Anne Schaefer, Marketing and Fund Development Coordinator, Oshkosh Seniors Center
- Beth Roberts, Long Term Support Division Manager, Winnebago County Human Services – Aging and Disability Resource Center
- Chip Wood, Executive Director, Rebuilding Together Fox Valley
- Dave Merkley, Administrator, Miravida Living
- Ericka Dawydko, Health & Wellness Director, Oshkosh Community YMCA
- Erin Roberts, Registered Nurse, Winnebago County Health Department and Finding Balance Together
- Fran Garb, Retired, Community Member
- Jane Wells, Program Supervisor, Oshkosh Seniors Center
- Jean Wollerman, Senior Services Manager, Oshkosh Seniors Center
- Jennifer Skolaski, Facilitator, Community & Nonprofit Leadership Consulting, LLC
- Joanne Murphy Spice, Wellness Plus Programs Coordinator, Winnebago County Health Department
- Kathi Hegranes, Injury Prevention & Outreach Coordinator, ThedaCare, Finding Balance Together and the Fox Valley Regional Trauma Advisory Council
- Ken Arneson, President & CEO, Evergreen Retirement Community
- Lester Millette, Downtown Branch Director, Oshkosh Community YMCA
- Mark Rohloff, City Manager, City of Oshkosh
- Michael Ford, Associate Professor of Public Administration, University of Wisconsin Oshkosh
- Michael Stanley, Chief, Oshkosh Fire Department
- Sue Panek, Retired, Community Member
- Su van Houwelingen, Executive Director, Oshkosh/Winnebago County Housing Authority

To help our readers understand some of the acronyms used in the report, here is a key:
- ADRC = Aging and Disability Resource Center
- EMS = Emergency Medical Services
- FBT = Finding Balance Together
- FVRTAC = Fox Valley Regional Trauma Advisory Council
- OFD = Oshkosh Fire Department
- RTFV = Rebuilding Together Fox Valley
- WCHD = Winnebago County Health Department
Executive Summary

Background

This Basic Needs Giving Partnership funded opportunity was a community collaborative effort that aimed to understand how older adult falls in the Oshkosh area could be prevented. Our steering team of multidisciplinary partners, included: Evergreen Retirement Community, City of Oshkosh Fire Department, Rebuilding Together Fox Valley, Oshkosh Seniors Center, Winnebago County Health Department, Oshkosh Community YMCA, City of Oshkosh, Oshkosh/Winnebago County Housing Authority, Aging and Disability Resource Center of Winnebago County (ADRC), Miravida Living, ThedaCare, Winnebago Wellness Plus, and Finding Balance Together. Together we conducted 18 community conversations that 181 people attended. There were also three types of surveys that were used to gain insight from Oshkosh residents, older adults, services providers, and community change agents. We received a total of 469 responses from all of our surveys. The three overarching questions for our community conversations included: what do older adults do to stay physically and emotionally healthy, why do older adults fall, and what can our community do to help prevent falls. After analyzing the data, the following themes emerged.

Themes

Exercise is how older adults report staying physically healthy. This is why spaces inside and out, individual and group activities, and opportunities that are low cost and easily accessible for people to exercise is important.

Group activities and one-on-one relationships are how older adults stay emotionally connected. Much of this activity occurs in faith-based and other membership organizations. While many older adults participate in mind sharpening or memory strengthening type games, activities, and programs, the overarching theme was socialization. This could be formal (e.g., faith communities, Learning In Retirement [LIR], Retired Old Men Eat Out [ROMEO]) or informal activities (e.g., on their own and getting together with friends). Programs and activities, once again group and individual, low cost, and easy accessibility is important.

When asked why people fall, falls are caused by both external physical factors, like a lack of handrails and uneven surfaces, and personal health factors. Specifically, participants noted:

- External physical conditions like uneven surfaces and grounds, as well as insufficient lighting. Indoor living conditions such as clutter, loose rugs, and inattentive to household obstacles. Many older adults also cited that there was an absence or lack of use of handrails in homes and facilities as reasons for falls.
- Winter weather conditions and the lack of adequate snow removal on outdoor surfaces.
- Personal physical issues such as chronic health problems and general aging.
- Overuse of alcohol or not knowing that alcohol metabolizes differently as we age was also mentioned in many conversations.
- A lack of accessible transportation options also came up for why people fall.
- Overconfidence, for example overestimating one’s ability to complete a physical task.
While not specifically why people fall, fear and stigma among older adults were noted as major barriers to fall prevention. The fear of losing one’s home and independence is a particularly strong barrier to fall prevention. In almost every session, stubbornness, pride, stigma, and fear were mentioned. Specifically, stubbornness and pride refer to older adults not wanting to admit they are struggling and/or not wanting to lose their homes, while stigma refers to being somehow classified or labeled as a fall-risk by a medical professional or retirement community staff member, as well as the stigma that the community has regarding older adults (i.e., stigma of aging). A related theme was fear, particularly fear of losing one’s independence or home if they were open about their struggles with falls.

Our respondents were also tasked with what the community could do to reduce the risk or how they could prevent falls. Education about fall prevention was cited by all groups in all sessions. The specifics of what education should look like, however, varied widely, including:

- A marketing campaign utilizing the local print media.
- Partnerships with local organizations such as the YMCA, Evergreen, Seniors Center, etc.
- One-on-one education between primary care providers and older adults.
- Guest speakers at residential facilities.
- Reassuring older adults that authorities do not intend to remove them from their homes.

In addition, intergenerational engagement in order to combat ageism was also commonly cited as a way to reduce falls. This included partnerships between residential facilities and schools, and more education within the schools about aging.

Finally, increasing trust between older adults and formal authorities was also a consistent theme across listening sessions. Some expressed concern about their independence from government, while others expressed distrust in the motives of those responding to falls. Many stated that they feared the interaction with authorities as a reason not to report a fall.

While the above themes were key to the community conversations, this is balanced with data that identifies the exact reasons why people fall and call EMS for assistance, or those that die from falls. Based on data from the Winnebago County Coroner’s Office and the Oshkosh Fire Department we know that our target audience is “Fiona Fall Down.” Someone who is aged 70 years and older, female, lives in a private residence, falls in her home, and struggles with general weakness. While there was data to support all types of falls, locations for falls, and all ages; the data supports that Fiona Fall Down is the common demographic for people who are especially at risk for falling.

Goals and Action Plan

Our overall objective is to prevent falls among older adults by taking action on community partner driven recommendations. Our team prioritized the following recommendations:

1. Reduce falls in the greater Oshkosh community.
2. Educate individuals, families, and the community on falls.
3. Build relationships and trust through community connections.
As a community we need to work together to **reduce falls in the greater Oshkosh community**. We can reduce these numbers by focusing on preventive measures that move the needle for our community (e.g., decrease number of fall related deaths, decrease in number of EMS calls related to falls, decrease in number of reported falls at residences, increase in fall prevention programs and projects). We will achieve this goal by having:

- ADRC respond to referrals from the Oshkosh Fire Department through the FVRTAC program, engage with Public Health for follow-up, and address fall risks with all referrals.
- Oshkosh Seniors Center highlight their evidence-based strength/fall programs as “reducing falls classes,” that exist in the community for any older adults.
- Rebuilding Together Fox Valley install grab bars in homes of people who are at risk and in need of support, in collaboration with the Winnebago County Health Department who will provide Stay Active, Be Confident assessments, community fall prevention materials, and follow-up referrals.
- Winnebago County Health Department provide complete Stay Active, Be Confident assessments and fall prevention materials.
- Wellness Plus train leaders for and host Stepping On, Strong Bodies, and Tai Chi classes in Oshkosh.
- The City of Oshkosh start a Grippy Socks Campaign that builds on socialization, exercise, social connectedness, and addresses the need for good footwear and fall prevention awareness.
- The City of Oshkosh and Oshkosh Fire Department create a Fall Prevention Team to identify people at risk for falls, and promote services through a PSA to “call before you fall.”
- The Oshkosh Fire Department propose earmarking fees for fall responses towards fall prevention programs, and work with local restaurants on a “Mugs for Rugs” initiative.

**By educating individuals, families, and the community on falls we can prevent falls from happening.** As a community we need to have more education about fall prevention (e.g., what constitutes a fall, how to walk, how to fall, risks and injuries associated with falls, current statistics of who falls, and what programs, classes, and resources are available), and in many formats (e.g., social media, newspaper campaign, one-on-one communication between health care and individuals), with a focus on independence, activity, and community support. This fall prevention education should be targeted at all community members since falls happen at any age and prevention should start early. We will achieve this goal by having:

- ADRC promote evidence-based classes, distribute brochures, and connect with consumers to provide information on options to prevent falls.
- Finding Balance Together hold their annual community event, and share data about fall prevention and what community members can do about it.
- Winnebago County Health Department create a communications plan to promote falls prevention services in Winnebago County.
- The Oshkosh Seniors Center address individual motivation by incorporating measurement tests and equipment so older adults can see results improving their strength and balance through evidence-based programs; as well as develop personal training classes to reduce the risk of falling.
• Oshkosh YMCA educate the community about their programs targeted at this population, promote scholarship programs to make the community aware of eligibility, and work with the ADRC to be including in their resource guide.
• The City of Oshkosh increase education on fall prevention by providing training for City employees, especially public transportation services.

To address the stigma of aging and falling; challenge individual stubbornness, pride, and overconfidence; and identify the fear of losing one’s independence or their home; we need to build relationships and trust through community connections. To help older adults be more proactive and preventive with their health, we need to build this trust so that people feel comfortable reporting falls and getting the help they need. It’s working with primary care providers to help people with personal physical issues, general aging, and talking about fall prevention; teaching them to trust community support (e.g., ADRC, Public Health Nurses, etc.); or even prescribing community programs to help at-risk individuals. The idea of losing one’s independence or their home was a huge reason why people do not admit that they have fallen, or do not tell the full story. The community needs to educate and address this fear as many of the people that come into older adult homes (e.g., public health nurses, home healthcare workers) are trying to keep people in their homes longer, rather than trying to move them into a nursing home. Building trust between older adults and community resources is one way that this narrative can be challenged and addressed. We will achieve this goal by having:

- Wellness Plus partner with ADVOCAP and ADRC to provide transportation to classes.
- Winnebago County Health Department search and connect with new partners that are already entering homes (similar to Rebuilding Together Fox Valley).
- The Oshkosh Seniors Center build relationships and trust with older adults through their Helen Bader Foundation grant designed to impact socially isolated adults through the use of technology.
- The Oshkosh Seniors Center create a community board at the center of shared experiences of falls and what people did to prevent it from happening again. This will specifically help address stigma, stubbornness, and fear and connect members with additional community resources.
- Rebuilding Together Fox Valley serve as the community partner to help build relationships between Oshkosh Fire Department first responders and Winnebago County Health Department staff through their installation work.
- YMCA develop a senior ambassador program.
- Finding Balance Together create a PSA newspaper campaign to share personal stories on how multiple agencies helped them.
- ADRC Intake and Assessment workers connect individuals with community resources, providing more warm hand offs.

Conclusion

This research allowed us to bring together community partners that are working on the issue of falls; identify the root causes of falls; acknowledge the resources that currently exist as well as gaps that need to be addressed; support the piloting of community efforts to address falls and current efficiencies; and create an action plan to move forward with addressing this issue beyond this grant. Our goals are succinct, and our team knows that by taking the actions outlined in this
summary, we’ll be able to reduce falls, educate our community on falls, and build trust through community connections to address the stigma and fear that many in our community have related to losing their independence, homes, and with authorities.

Our action plan is only a sample of the work that will be completed by a small representation of partners that are making fall prevention for our aging population a priority. To truly address fall prevention in the City of Oshkosh we need to come together as a multi-disciplinary team to focus on these priorities and create a community-wide collaborative response. By doing this we will create a safer community for all members, and become the community of choice for those who want to live long, healthy lives.