

BUILDING CONNECTIONS: ESTABLISHING SENIOR CENTERS AND SERVICES IN RURAL COMMUNITIES TO COMBAT SOCIAL ISOLATION

PRESENTED BY:

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The Gathering Place

A Community Center Model That Reduces Isolation, Strengthens Health, and Builds Local Capacity

Who we are

The Gathering Place 50 Plus Community Centers (Cobleskill & Oneonta) are mission-driven community hubs for adults 50+—built to combat social isolation, support healthy aging, and provide consistent, engaging opportunities for connection, learning, movement, and purpose. We operate as a **501(c)(3) not-for-profit** and are sustained through **donations, sponsorships, and grants.**

What we see in our communities

Rural and small-town residents face barriers that too often compound over time:

- Social isolation and loneliness
- Transportation challenges
- Limited access to wellness and prevention programs
- Gaps in digital skills and technology access
- Rising needs among older adults and veterans
- Increasing strain on families and service systems

Our approach is simple: create a welcoming “third place” where people belong—and where services, wellness, and community can connect under one roof.



What makes The Gathering Place work

1) We address the root cause: isolation

Isolation is not just emotional—it affects health outcomes, safety, and service utilization. A senior/community center isn't “extra.” It's a **protective factor**.

2) We turn prevention into something people will actually attend

We blend wellness, social connection, education, and fun—so participation is sustainable. People show up because it feels positive, not clinical.

3) We are designed for collaboration

Our model welcomes partner agencies, instructors, and community organizations—because no single organization can meet every need alone.

4) We operate as a “community platform”

The Gathering Place functions as a **hub** where programs can be hosted, referrals can be made, and agency outreach can happen—without each organization having to build and staff its own space.



WHERE FRIENDS BECOME FAMILY



BACKGROUND:

Rural communities face unique challenges in addressing the needs of their aging populations. Social isolation, limited access to resources, and transportation barriers often lead to negative impacts on seniors' physical, emotional, and mental well-being. This presentation aims to highlight effective strategies for establishing senior centers and services in rural areas to combat these challenges and promote social engagement.



INTRODUCTION TO THE GATHERING PLACE 50 PLUS COMMUNITY CENTER

- Our Mission is To Provide Healthy and Active Lifestyles for Individuals Who Are Age 50 Plus.
- Our Vision is to support the 50 Plus Community to inspire friendships, social engagement, and stimulating active living.
- "Where Friends Become Family"



BACKGROUND AND COMMUNITY NEEDS



- Our Cobleskill Center was established in **June 2021** as the first community center for seniors in the area
- **Senior Demographics:** 42% of Schoharie County residents are over 50, with high rates of social isolation.
- **Impact of COVID-19:** Social isolation concerns have escalated post-pandemic, increasing the need for supportive community spaces
- **Post-Pandemic Need:** Addressing loneliness and health challenges in a rural, underserved population.
- **Enrollment Growth:** Over 1,800 members currently at our Cobleskill Gathering Place Center.

OPENING OUR SECOND CENTER IN ONEONTA IN SEPTEMBER 2023

- The Gathering Place opened its second location in Oneonta in September 2023, serving seniors from Otsego, Delaware, and surrounding areas. This expansion comes in response to a 2022 survey by the Otsego County Office for the Aging, which revealed high demand for social activities such as live music, exercise programs, games, and holiday events—exactly the services we provide. The Oneonta center aims to offer a central hub for seniors in the region, enhancing their physical, social, and emotional well-being.
- Since opening, the Oneonta center has experienced tremendous success, enrolling over 1,600 members with an average of 12 new members joining every three days. This strong growth demonstrates the community's interest and the effectiveness of our outreach efforts.





















































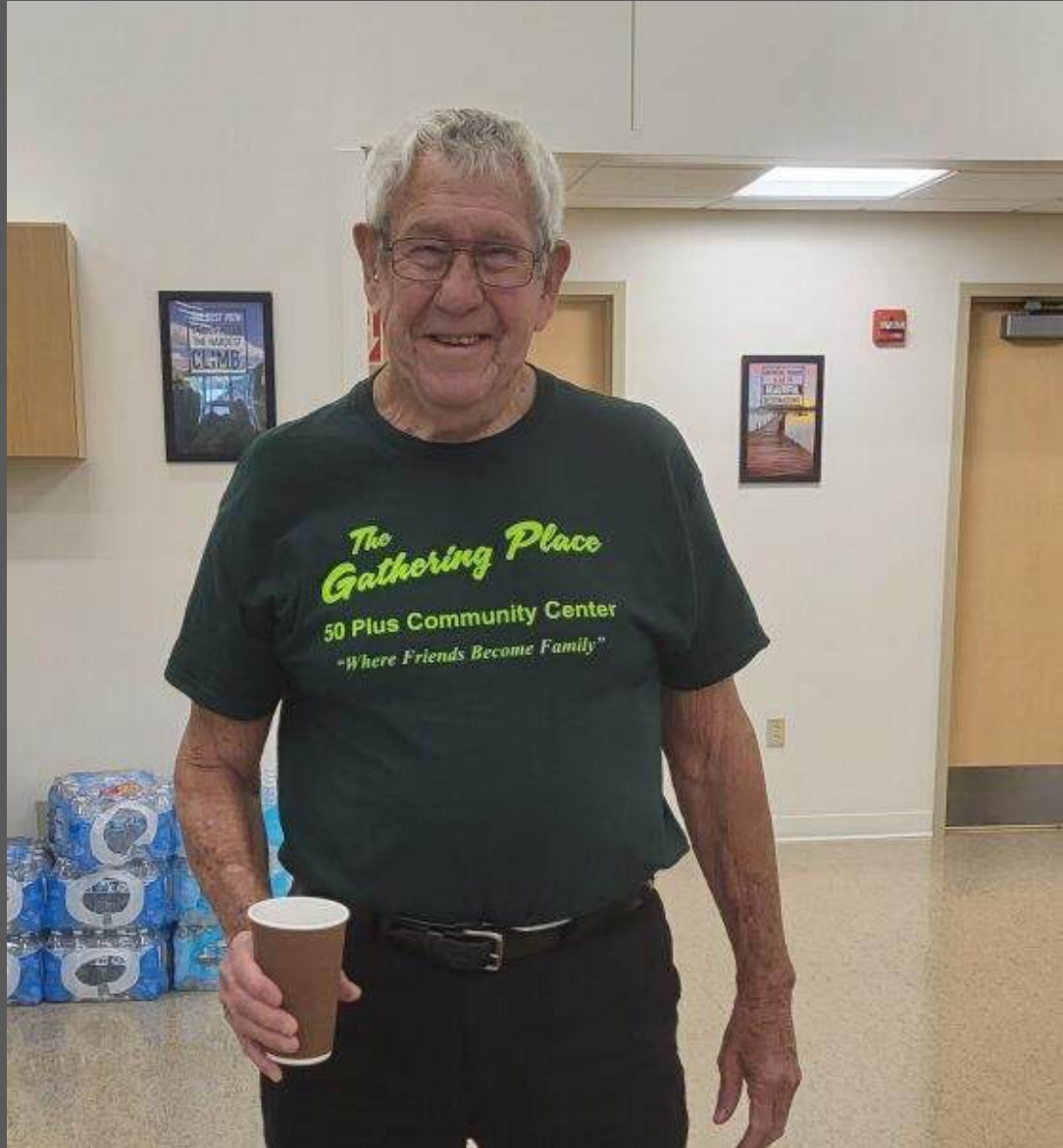












TARGET POPULATION & HEALTH IMPACT



- **High Social Isolation:** Over one-third of seniors in both Otsego and Schoharie Counties live alone
- **Health Risks:** Isolation is linked to physical and mental health issues, including heart disease, depression, and cognitive decline
- **Community Challenges:** Rural, low-income setting with limited transportation and broadband access

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES OFFERED CURRENTLY:

- **Wellness and Independence:** Tai Chi, Yoga, Silver Sneakers, Zumba, Chair One Fitness, Bingocize, Stability and Mobility Classes, blood pressure clinics, flu shots, and more
- **Socialization and Support:** Sewing groups, book clubs, arts & crafts, photography group, bus trips and travel opportunities, card games, Bingo, Computer Classes, Music Classes, Hair Salon, Massage Therapy and more
- **Member Services & Advocacy:** Computer workshops, smartphone classes, expanded evening hours, Office for the Aging Office Hours, Support Groups including Circle of Hope Grief Support, Mental Health, Addictions and Recovery, etc.



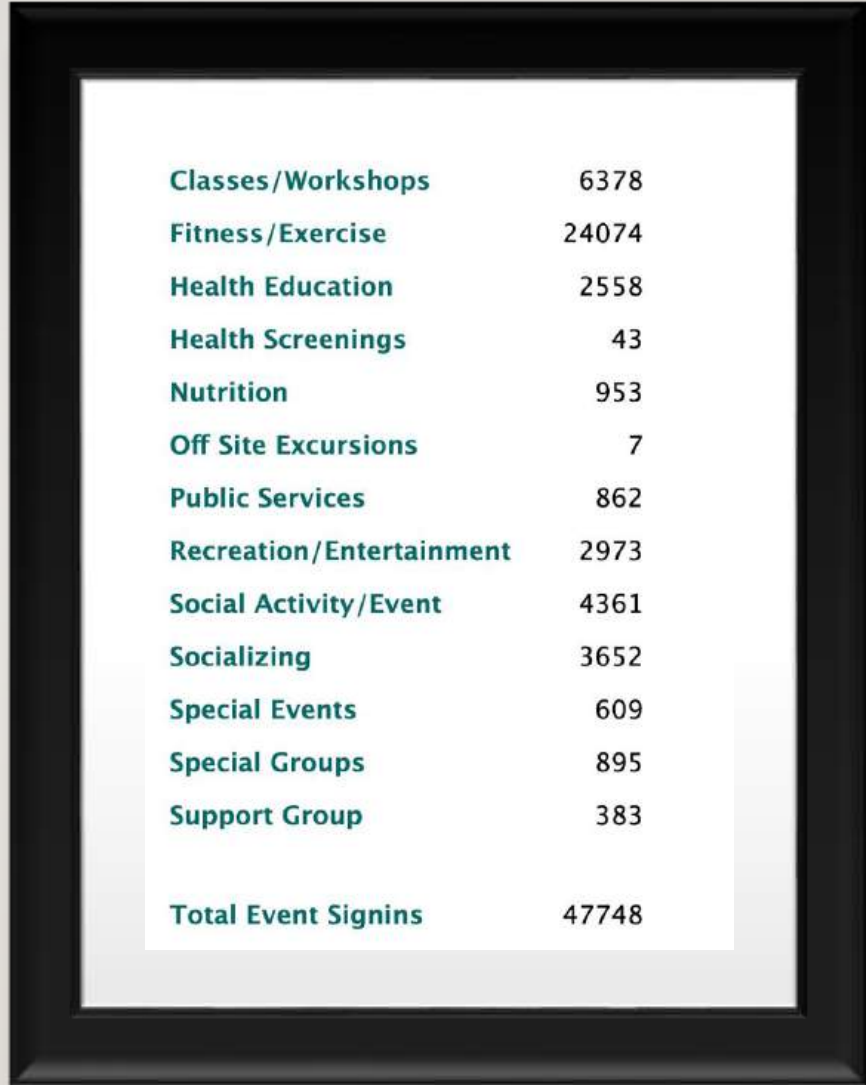
HEALTHY FOR LIFE WELLNESS PROGRAM



- **Focus Areas:** Physical, social, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, vocational, and environmental wellness
- **Goals:**
 - Increase physical activity and mental health support for members
 - Develop partnerships with healthcare providers
 - Grow participation in educational and social programs by up to 75% over two years
 - Improve physical, social, and mental health.

TECHNOLOGY AND IMPACT TRACKING

- **BetterAge Assessment Software:** New York State Pilot site for personalized member health assessments Integrated with MySeniorCenter for enhanced data tracking
- **Outcomes:** Program effectiveness, member satisfaction, and community impact data



Classes/Workshops	6378
Fitness/Exercise	24074
Health Education	2558
Health Screenings	43
Nutrition	953
Off Site Excursions	7
Public Services	862
Recreation/Entertainment	2973
Social Activity/Event	4361
Socializing	3652
Special Events	609
Special Groups	895
Support Group	383
Total Event Signins	47748

Hours Summary of Participation in our Programs

THE IMPORTANCE OF SENIOR CENTERS: WHY THE GATHERING PLACE AND CONNECTIONS MATTER

- **Program Expansion:** Rising membership drives the need for expanded services
- **Impact on Community Health:** Supports long-term wellness initiatives in a rural setting, with benefits lasting for years
- **Uniqueness of our Programs and Services:** There are no other programs or facilities that serve our aging population like The Gathering Place 50 Plus Community Center Does. Without our Gathering Place, what would our aging population do?



THE IMPORTANCE OF SENIOR CENTERS: WHY THE GATHERING PLACE AND CONNECTIONS MATTER



Household Impact: Considering that many of our members represent individual households, it's likely that **over 1,500 households** in the region are directly benefiting from the center's services.

Program Attendance: Regularly scheduled activities—such as social events, exercise classes, and holiday gatherings—draw **an average attendance of 50-100 members per event**. This recurring engagement shows that seniors are not only joining but actively participating in the programs.

What we offer

Connection & belonging

- Social activities, gatherings, interest groups, peer-to-peer connection

Movement & wellness

- Exercise and evidence-informed wellness programming designed to support balance, mobility, strength, and confidence

Learning & enrichment

- Classes, creative arts, and educational presentations that foster purpose and community engagement

Digital inclusion

- Digital literacy and device support (tablets/Chromebooks), basic troubleshooting, and confidence-building

Special populations

- Programs that strengthen belonging and support for veterans and other community groups

Our impact, in one sentence

We reduce isolation and build healthier, more connected communities—while expanding the reach of partner organizations who serve the same people.



SUMMARY

Holistic Support for Seniors' Health and Well-being

Providing **personalized care** that addresses both physical and mental health is crucial. This includes tailored wellness plans, ongoing health assessments, and a focus on **social and emotional support**. Combating loneliness and isolation is just as vital as physical health improvements.

Engaging and Inclusive Programming

Seniors need **engagement** through **social activities**, such as group exercises, interest-based clubs, and events, to foster community and reduce isolation. Offering diverse and **accessible programming** is key to ensuring active participation and improving overall quality of life.

Caregiver Support

Offering **training, resources**, and **peer support** for caregivers is essential. Caregivers need to be empowered and supported to ensure they can provide effective care without facing burnout.



SUMMARY CONTINUED

Technology Integration for Health and Wellness

The integration of **technology**—such as health tracking, wellness apps, and telehealth services—will improve health outcomes, bridge gaps in care, and offer convenience. Providing **user-friendly digital tools**, like BetterAge Health Assessments, encourages seniors to take control of their health while facilitating continuous monitoring and progress tracking.

Focus on Long-Term Sustainability and Community Partnerships

Sustainability is crucial for long-term impact. Building **strategic partnerships**, leveraging data-driven insights, and ensuring continual funding will help maintain and grow the programs to meet evolving community needs.

In summary, focusing on **personalized health support**, engaging programming, **caregiver support**, **technology integration** (especially tools like BetterAge), and **long-term sustainability** are key to improving seniors' overall well-being and ensuring lasting impact.



CONTACT INFORMATION



- **Invitation:** Visit our centers and experience the community impact firsthand.
- **Contact Details:** Kimberly Witkowski, 518-788-4068, kim@gatheringplace50plus.org

Thank You!

THE GATHERING PLACE



WHERE FRIENDS BECOME FAMILY

