



*People start to form impressions of a wellness facility, and the experience it offers, from first approach. Marketing messages of luxury, comfort and active lifestyles are reinforced by the entrance to this 14,000-sq.-ft. clubhouse at Southshore Falls, a Centex active-adult community in Apollo Beach, Florida*

# How to plan, design and deliver an optimal center for physical wellness

**When you're developing a facility to engage active adults in the physical dimension of wellness, your planning, design and delivery must be detailed and deliberate from the project's beginning**

*by Jennifer Jacobs, MS*

The Boomers are coming! "Every eight minutes, someone turns 50." "By 2020, the number of people in their 40s, 50s and 60s will triple." "Older adults hold

53% of the nation's wealth."<sup>1</sup> Over the last few years, the media has been drilling these and similar messages into our heads, but have we been listening? The fact remains that this market is heading toward us like a freight train, and we need to be prepared to maximize the opportunities it presents.

Planning, designing and delivering a wellness center that meets the needs of this growing population involves more than understanding the statistics. The first step is to define what wellness means to you.

According to the National Institute on Wellness,<sup>2</sup> there are six dimensions of wellness. These include:

- physical
- spiritual
- vocational
- intellectual
- social
- emotional

Capturing the essence of each dimension in your center takes careful consideration, as well as an understanding of the functional requirements of the spaces, places, people and programs that will deliver your wellness concept. This article focuses on the development of an optimal facility for fostering physical wellness, while enhancing use and retention.

### **Building the foundation**

The planning of a physical wellness facility begins with understanding the market and developing spaces that provide opportunities for both active and passive participation.

An AARP<sup>3</sup> study reveals that 30% of older adults use exercise and activity facilities in their communities. When planning to build a facility that will achieve or exceed that capture rate, it is critical not to rush the planning process. Allow yourself enough time to ask yourself and your stakeholders some critical questions early in the development stage.

Selecting your team of experts is one of the first steps in your planning process. You should identify internal team members, key decision-makers, and stakeholders. You may also want to select community members to contribute to the process through the directed efforts of a focus group. Once you've created your internal team, begin identifying and interviewing industry specialists. Your consulting team should consist of your architect, interior design firm, marketing

team, and the individuals who will run the daily operations of the facility. This team will ensure that you consider decisions from every angle. The end result will be a comprehensive road map for success.

Identifying and understanding your market is the next step. The active-adult market consists of individuals who fall within a broad range of physical capabilities—which can be your most difficult challenge to address. Some members of this population may be physically independent and active, but they seek the guidance and motivation that a wellness center can offer. On the other end of the spectrum, there are barely independent individuals who seek solutions to their physical challenges and may require special accommodations and individualized attention. Attempting to create a facility that is everything to everyone can be a recipe for disaster. And while you can develop a wellness center that successfully caters to both population segments, budget and space allocations may require you to focus on one group or the other.

Once you have identified the target market, it is recommended that you conduct an “envisioning session” with your team. This brainstorming session may include thoughts on programs, services, facilities and equipment that will define the wellness experience you want to offer. The goal is to create a wish list. You can then designate items on the list as those you “would like,” “must have” and “don't need.” (Space, time and financial resources will often serve as primary filters.) Your team of experts can use this list to select the most appropriate location, layout and size for your facility.

### **Focusing the plan**

When selecting the location for your wellness facility, consider what lies outside the building as much as what lies within it. Convenience, safety and accessibility are key criteria that should drive

your land acquisition and site planning. Locations that offer the opportunity for both indoor and outdoor physical activity can capture the best of both worlds. Walking and biking paths, amphitheaters, tennis and bocce courts, event lawns, and nature trails allow you to address the physical elements of wellness while also connecting with the environment.

The range of physical activities a wellness center can accommodate is broad, so it is critical that you understand what will resonate with your audience (see the programming sidebar on page 20 for ideas). The aging population is becoming more physically active to create quality of life. Your facility and the programs you offer need to maintain this focus. Your members or residents seek a sense of belonging, camaraderie, comfort, simplicity, socialization and enjoyment. These core qualities should drive the planning, design and delivery of a comprehensive program and a well-designed facility that provides meaningful opportunities for physical wellness.

While you can accomplish a lot by looking at plans and reviewing industry studies, the hands-on experience of exploring existing spaces can be the most valuable step you and your team take in the planning process. Tour several wellness facilities to collect best practices and lessons learned from others in the industry. Develop a list of questions for the facility manager and fitness director at each location. This will ensure you ask the same questions on each visit and allow you to draw more accurate conclusions.

Identifying the programs you want to accommodate in your wellness center will help your architect create a space program for the facility. A space program is a planning tool that provides architects with:

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- square footage guidelines for each area;
- recommended adjacencies; and
- physical requirements of the space, to enhance functionality.

The space program helps architects to create “blocks” of space that can be placed for optimal use and traffic flow, while maintaining the right atmosphere within the facility.

Although the early planning phase involved in creating a wellness center is often the most difficult and time consuming, it is well worth the time invested when you are able to avoid costly mistakes and common pitfalls. Thoughtful and thorough planning also provides a solid foundation for the design and delivery phases that follow.

## Creating spaces and places

Once planning is complete, it is time for the formal launch of the facility design phase. Creating the spaces and places for people to comfortably enjoy their favorite physical activities will increase use and retention in your facility. But designing the right atmosphere to encourage and engage the active-adult population requires a vastly different approach than the one used in creating a hip, urban health club geared to younger people. That being said, the critical design components and focus on the sensory experience remain the same.

It takes a special skill and an eye for detail to develop facilities that are subtly accessible without being overtly clinical. While ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) requirements force compliance, the best designers seek opportunities to exceed these requirements and create a comfortable environment for participants of all capabilities. Remember, the physical needs of active adults have the potential to change quickly. This inclusive approach ensures a facility can serve individuals through each stage of their physical well-being.

The entrance to your facility will set the tone for the experience you offer, and that impression begins to take shape as early as the parking lot. Is your parking close enough to the facility? Is there a covered entrance with a turnaround that allows for drop off or even valet parking? Is the parking lot well lit? As you approach the building, is there a separate ramp for wheelchair access to the front doors? Why not do away with stairs altogether and create a gently sloped entrance? This will increase ease of access for everyone, while creating a welcoming environment.

What will members or residents see, hear and smell when they walk through the front doors? Reception is the first point of interaction. Staff should not be stuck behind a desk or a sliding glass window; rather, reception should encourage open engagement with the staff in a customer-friendly environment. Music should be upbeat and inviting, not blaring, but should not evoke images of *Sweating to the Oldies*. There should be quiet areas where the front desk or member services staff can consult with new participants. These areas can serve the dual function of creating a social space in the reception area, with small conversational groupings of furniture.

The first stop individuals typically make before beginning their workout is the locker room. People are still assessing “first impressions” when they enter the locker room, and this area in particular offers the opportunity to create a distinct sensory experience.

Today, more time and money is being spent on locker room areas than ever before. It is not uncommon for developers to include relaxation and whisper zones, wet amenities (e.g., steam rooms, hot tubs and cold plunges), and spa treatment rooms in this space. Small conveniences such as full-length lockers with digital locks, complimentary personal amenities such as mouthwash and

shaving creams, weight scales located in an inconspicuous area, towel service, dry cleaning, large benches to accommodate all sizes, and private changing areas are just a few of the special touches that can help you define this experience.

It is important to size your locker room areas to meet the needs of your programming. If your facility will feature large water-exercise classes, you should build a locker room area that can accommodate the 25-plus adults who will be using the locker room at the same time. While it may be difficult to plan for this peak use, it is something you should consider early in the design process.

Once people leave the locker room area, they are ready to begin the physical exercise routine. This may mean participation in a group exercise class, independent use of the cardiovascular or strength equipment, or an appointment with their personal trainer. Creating a comfortable and welcoming environment for members or residents to engage in these physical wellness opportunities can make the difference between success and failure.

## Designing specific spaces

Group exercise programming continues to increase in popularity with the active-adult market. It is no longer acceptable to have a portable wooden floor installed in the ballroom to accommodate group exercise classes. Active adults do their homework. The majority of them understand the benefits of a suspended wooden flooring system, and they are aware of the impact of anything less.

When possible, spaces should be dedicated to group exercise. In fact, it is preferable to have one studio that focuses on more active programs and another that may be specifically designed to house yoga or other mind/body programs. Group exercise rooms should be wide and shallow, offering the greatest oppor-

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EQUIPMENT	DESIRED FEATURES
<b>Treadmills</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Display—easy to read and understand</li> <li>• Easy to get on and off</li> <li>• Slow starting speed of ideally 0.5 mph</li> <li>• Shock absorbing deck</li> <li>• Emergency lanyard with clip</li> <li>• Low deck</li> <li>• Long handrails</li> <li>• Minimal preprogrammed workouts</li> </ul>
<b>Recumbent bikes/steppers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Easy to get on, off and adjust</li> <li>• Easy to set control panel</li> <li>• Wide seat with armrest</li> <li>• Display—easy to read and understand</li> <li>• Minimal preprogrammed workouts</li> <li>• Wide, comfortable footrest</li> <li>• Low impact</li> </ul>
<b>Elliptical machines</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Easy to get on, off and adjust</li> <li>• Easy to set control panel</li> <li>• Display—easy to read and understand</li> <li>• Keypad within easy reach</li> <li>• Minimal preprogrammed workouts</li> <li>• Wide, comfortable footrest</li> <li>• Low impact</li> </ul>
<b>Strength equipment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Easy and safe to operate</li> <li>• Low impact</li> <li>• Easily entered and exited by individuals of varying abilities and sizes</li> <li>• Easy to determine where to place hands and feet</li> <li>• Wider seats and benches</li> <li>• Adjustments that allow individuals of various body sizes and limitations to be in proper position without compromising the joints</li> <li>• Easily adjustable hand, seat and pad positions</li> <li>• Ability to change resistance from a seated position</li> <li>• Low starting resistance</li> <li>• Increase resistance in 1–2 lb. increments</li> <li>• Easy to read instructional placards</li> </ul>

**Table 1.** Attributes of age-friendly fitness equipment

*\*Adapted from Age-friendly equipment features, a checklist from the International Council on Active Aging® (ICAA). Available at [www.icaa.cc/welcomeback/equipment.pdf](http://www.icaa.cc/welcomeback/equipment.pdf).*

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*Among the things older adults seek are 'a sense of belonging, camaraderie, comfort, simplicity, socialization and enjoyment.' The swimming pool design at Venetian Falls includes a lounge area to encourage socialization among residents of this Centex active-adult community in Venice, Florida*

tunity for participants to see the instructor. Mirrors help individuals to maintain their form. These should be placed on the wall behind the instructor. In addition, sound dispersion is particularly important in group exercise studios, so consider a wireless microphone system for the instructor when specifying audiovisual equipment.

Since group exercise studios may be used for both high-energy classes and softer mind/body programs, lighting should be on dimmers. And with the growing variety of group exercise tools such as bands, balls and balance boards, access to enough storage space is the key to an uncluttered and presentable space.

Last but not least, it is highly recommended that developers avoid the fish-bowl group-exercise studio design. On the surface it seems like a great idea to feature and highlight the active nature of a group exercise class when touring prospective members or residents.

However, keep in mind that those same people might envision themselves in that class, with individuals on a facility tour staring into the room while participants are in the downward dog position. When someone's mind goes to that place, it almost immediately creates an intimidation factor. Frosted glass, when applied correctly, achieves the best of both worlds.

As active adults enter a fitness center, they may feel overwhelmed by the sight of the cardiovascular equipment with all the latest technology blinking on the console, and the massive strength equipment that in their minds may more closely resemble a torture device than a mechanism to improve well-being. So, how do you design a physical wellness facility to overcome these initial impressions?

Create opportunities for the staff to interact with members or residents.

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## Programming that resonates with active adults

What physical wellness programs should you offer to appeal to the active-aging market? A 2003 study by the International Health, Racquet and Sportsclub Association (IHRSA) in Boston offers some clues. IHRSA surveyed 1,208 health clubs for this study, and found that these clubs offered services and amenities to address the following member needs:

- nutritional counseling 67%
- weight management 65%
- health education programs 51%
- massage 50%
- physical therapy 23%
- lower back problems 18%
- stress reduction 15%
- chiropractic services 11%
- smoking cessation 9%

In addition, a study by AARP reveals which physical activity programs most interest active adults. According to this research, strength-training ranks among the most popular physical activity programs offered at most facilities, with group exercise a close second. Other programs such as walking, running, biking, basketball, golf, water activities, boating and gardening are also listed in the top physical activities enjoyed by this population.

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*An 'envisioning session' and resulting wish list can help define a facility's desired wellness experience, including programs, services, equipment and facilities. This indoor swimming pool was a 'must have' feature for a Centex community in New Jersey*

Personal training stations on the fitness floor can create the appearance of a personal wellness "help desk." Most people will not feel comfortable going back to the reception area to ask for assistance once they are on the fitness floor, so you need to find ways to bring that level of service to them.

While a younger crowd may seek opportunities to showcase their hard bodies, the active adult is often looking for a more casual environment where they are not in the spotlight. A center that provides for privacy creates an intimate and more personalized experience. While this can be accomplished through the use of curved walls and alcoves rather than one large open space, some centers are going to the next level by dedicating space to private training studios. These studios can be used for individual or partner training with a certified instructor, which can appeal to people who require special accommodations or individualized instruction, or who simply want to gain a greater level of comfort before stepping onto the fitness floor.

The cardiovascular and strength equipment you select for that fitness floor must encourage use by residents or members. When choosing equipment, evaluate it for the age-friendly attributes described in Table 1 (see page 19). Just as important as the equipment you choose, however, is placing it to provide a safe environment, with optimal traffic flow and utilization. Be sure to allow enough space for someone with a wheelchair or walking aide to maneuver easily around equipment.

One of the most frequently neglected spaces is a dedicated stretching area. Stretching and flexibility are essential elements of an exercise program for older adults, and it is important to dedicate space to meet this need. While it may not have the pop and sizzle of the latest piece of cardio equipment, a stretching zone will enhance the overall experience you offer.

Increasing numbers of fitness and wellness facilities are also creating opportunities for spa services to be integrated into

the overall wellness regimen. Spa services include massage, skin care, body treatments, and nail and hair services. While spa treatments have been labeled as anti-aging, more and more people recognize the long-term benefits of spa services for active aging. Spas are no longer considered locations of luxury for the occasional pampering. Instead, regular massages are quickly becoming part of a wellness routine enjoyed by active adults, who see spa experiences primarily as a way to relax and relieve stress.<sup>4</sup> Having a few treatment rooms in your facility will allow you to include these services as part of physical wellness.

In addition to the traditional spaces that accommodate the physical dimension, facilities today are including signature spaces such as water therapy pools, tai chi lawns, meditation gardens, labyrinths, climbing walls and indoor tracks. Yes, the possibilities are limitless, but be cautious when trying to accommodate many options in your facility design.

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*A wellness facility for aging adults should feature age-friendly fitness equipment, placed to ensure safety and promote maximum traffic flow and utilization. At Centex's Venetian Falls active-adult community in Venice, Florida, the 16,000-sq.-ft. clubhouse provides a bright, spacious fitness area that invites resident use*

## Bringing the center to life

With the planning and design done, the delivery of an exceptional program rests in the hands of your operators. For this reason, you should include your operators throughout the planning and design process. Boomers define experiences by the service they receive, and they are typically willing to pay for the best. While a lot of time and money is dedicated to the planning and design phases, it is your people and programs that will attract new participants and engender the loyalty of existing ones.

Your marketing should be ageless and promote interests and skill levels, rather than target individuals by their generation. Boomers do not want to be reminded of their age. They look and feel younger than they are, and they will do what it takes to keep it that way. While active adults want to know they will be exercising among peers, they do not want to be labeled—the days of programs named Fit Over Fifty or Senior-cize are over.

Program diversity helps create a well-rounded menu of services. Boomers like to have the flexibility to make their own choices, and you need to consistently provide options that reflect the latest trends. Keep in mind that many of these active adults still work, so programming the afternoons may be a lost cause. One key to success? Soliciting feedback from members or residents through a programming survey, so you better understand their needs and interests. This should not be an annual occurrence, though. Ask for feedback when people join the facility and continuously reinforce efforts in this area. People who are engaged in helping to develop the program menu will stay involved and become your “rainmakers,” leading their peers into activities by their personal enthusiasm.

Finally, instructors can make or break your programs. Hiring individuals who have experience with—and, more importantly, the passion for—working with active adults will have the largest impact

on retention. Your instructors must understand how to customize a class to meet the varying abilities of participants. This can be one of the most challenging, yet rewarding, elements of working with this population. But the relationships your instructors form with members or residents will create those memorable moments you envisioned during the early days of planning.

In the end, the physical dimension of wellness has its own set of planning and design considerations. By carefully orchestrating these considerations, you can set the stage for optimal program delivery to the active-adult market. ☺

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Images courtesy of WTS International

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