Senior Community Centers’ Gary and Mary West Senior Wellness Center Celebrates One Year of Saving Lives of At-Risk Seniors Through Creative Partnerships, Programs

After one year of service, organization increases capacity to serve more seniors than anticipated, filling great void in social service programs in urban core area

Story Highlights:
• Gary & Mary West Senior Wellness Center is national model in senior care.
• Prominent SDSU partnership ensures cost-effective care for at-risk seniors.
• More Asian seniors use the center, 25 percent of client population.

SAN DIEGO, CALIF. – May XX, 2011 – Senior Community Centers celebrates the one-year anniversary of the Gary and Mary West Senior Wellness Center in downtown San Diego (1525 4th Avenue). The comprehensive programs provided in the facility by the Senior Community Centers’ team has earned recognition nationally as leaders in improving the lives of at-risk seniors, providing wrap-around health, wellness and meals at little or no-cost.

“Senior Community Centers is a unique jewel and has been in the forefront in San Diego community in the provision of aging services,” says Dr. Jong Won Min, an Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at San Diego State University. “As a researcher and educator in the field of gerontology, I cannot think of any better agency in this growing field that provides the innovative array of comprehensive services to low-income seniors faced by multi-faceted challenges of hunger, chronic health and extreme poverty like those offered by Senior Community Centers.”

Testifying before the U.S. Senate, Assistant Secretary for Aging Kathy Greenlee called the Gary and Mary West Senior Wellness Center a “national model in senior care.” Elder care professionals from all over the world and throughout the United States interested in replicating the model have toured the facility and met with staff, as they are eager to learn about what’s working and how they can implement their programs and services in their communities.

“The Gary and Mary West Senior Wellness Center has allowed us to fully implement our vision of what healthy aging can be,” says Paul Downey, president and CEO, Senior Community Centers. “Blowing apart the negative senior stereotypes and fighting ageism at every turn is at the core of what we are achieving.”
Downey notes that since opening a year ago, the number of meals served daily at the center has increased 50 percent, to more than 750. It is one of the few facilities in the country where meals and clinical services are provided 365 days per year. More seniors are taking advantage of the services and programs the center provides, which demonstrates the need to build collaborative partnerships with community and educational organizations to extend and enhance the programs seniors need. National and state funding for health and human service organizations, such as Senior Community Centers, has not increased and in many cases funding has been cut completely, so collaborative partnerships help bridge budget gaps, save money and continue to provide a high level of service.

One such partnership is with SDSU’s College of Health and Human Services. Students completing their master’s degree work in tandem with center staff to provide regular health and wellness screenings at no charge for low-income seniors help prevent illness; thus, lowering the cost of emergency medical services to the state of California. The goal of the program is to help students better understand the importance of providing an integrated system of care for older adults to achieve optimal health and well-being while helping train the next generation of geriatric professionals. See attached fact sheet for specific details.

Partnerships are not just limited to college-level students. High school students from six area schools (Monarch, Hoover, Crawford, San Diego, Lincoln and High-Tech High) visit the Gary and Mary West Senior Wellness Center to teach seniors how to access health and social security benefits online and also assist with setting up email accounts and accessing government and social service resources online.

In the past year, more Asian seniors have come to the Gary and Mary West Senior Wellness Center seeking assistance. Currently this group represents 25 percent of the seniors served, and the largest increase is among Chinese seniors, who now represent 15 percent of the seniors they serve. In turn, Senior Community Centers has hired a social worker in partnership with Union of Pan-Asian Communities who is fluent in Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese dialects) to assist this group, which is predominantly female and between the ages of 70 and 79 years of age. See attached fact sheet for specific details.

A program Downey is particularly proud of is the center’s Civic Engagement program. This program assesses seniors’ abilities and interests and matches them with meaningful volunteer opportunities at the center and in the community. “It has empowered seniors to become very active members of the community and has boosted their self esteem,” says Downey. “Seniors are taking responsibility for outreach to their peers and have really taken ‘ownership’ of the center.”

ABOUT SENIOR COMMUNITY CENTERS
Founded in 1970, Senior Community Centers is a nonprofit agency transforming the aging experience for San Diego seniors through nutrition, health and wellness services,
advocacy and transitional and supportive housing that increase the quality of life for seniors living in poverty, allowing them to live independently for as long as possible. The organization has been skillfully led for more than 16 years by Chief Executive Officer and President Paul Downey, who is also the president of the National Association of Nutrition and Aging Services Programs and the California Nutrition Coalition. For a complete list of volunteer opportunities or more information, please visit www.servingseniors.org, Facebook or Twitter, or call (619) 487-0727.

NOTE TO EDITORS: For specific details on these programs, please see the attached Fact Sheet. To arrange interviews with Paul Downey or any of the seniors who participate in these programs, please contact (619) 232-0222.

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FACT SHEET

Who We Are
Celebrating their 40th anniversary in 2010, Senior Community Centers is the leading provider of services that meet the basic needs of low-income, at-risk seniors living in San Diego’s urban core and the only organization in San Diego and one of the few in the state and country, that provides such a broad base of vital services to this vulnerable senior population. They stand at the forefront of the next level of healthy aging for older adults and are considered a national model because of their innovative programs and commitment to building multi-disciplinary collaborations to enhance the services offered by their staff.

In April 2010, the flagship Gary and Mary West Senior Wellness Center opened and now serves more than 700 seniors 365 days each year with vital health, wellness and nutrition services. The center is located at 1520 4th Avenue in Downtown San Diego.

Programs
Senior Community Centers is transforming the aging experience with programs that are designed to help seniors live independently for as long as possible. Their core programs include nutrition services and homebound meal delivery; health and wellness; supportive housing; community education and civic engagement.

More About the SDSU Collaboration
Students from the School of Gerontology work with social service case managers to provide referrals for seniors and help with routine problems and concerns, and students from the School of Audiology provide regular hearing screenings and referrals. Additionally students in the nursing program provide on-site health assessments and education. The collaboration provides students with a rich learning experience working with older adults struggling to age in place while managing the many challenges that face them being low income with one or more chronic illness and physical disabilities. Students also see the benefits an interdisciplinary team approach offers seniors and provides them with insight into the roles of other team members.

More About the Union of Pan-Asian Communities Collaboration
Senior Community Centers has seen an increase in the number of Asian seniors seeking our services and they represent 25 percent of the seniors served. The largest increase is among seniors who speak Mandarin Chinese, who now represent 15 percent of the seniors served. The organization has partnered with the Union of Pan-Asian Communities and have a social worker providing case management in Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese dialects) at the Gary and Mary West Senior Wellness Center three days a week, since January 2011. According to Senior Community Centers, approximately 88 percent of this group lives below the poverty level.
To create an inclusive environment for this group, Senior Community Centers has started English as Second Language (ESL) classes and translated the lunch menu and activities calendar into Chinese. The team is also working closely with the seniors to develop other activities conducted in Chinese.

Additional statistics are available as needed.