

SEPTEMBER IS NATIONAL SENIOR CENTER MONTH



Bob Paroski, author of Bob's Blog

Have Time on Your Hands? Want to Make New Friends? Check Out the O'Connor Center!

By Bob Paroski, Office on Aging Blogger

The National Council on Aging has designated September as National Senior Center month. In line with that, I would like to tell you about the Senior Centers right here in Knox County and one in particular, the John T. O'Connor Center.

Before I do that, let's look at . . .

. . . Older People and Loneliness

The isolation that occurred in America during the Covid pandemic affected people in many different ways. One major impact was the amount of loneliness many experienced. Most of us never want to have to experience such loneliness again.

On the other hand, loneliness is a normal part of the lives of many older Americans. When they retire, they no longer are going to that place or those places they worked their entire lives. They also lose many of the friends they had at work.

Suddenly they have all of this time on their hands and don't have anything to fill it with. Day after day, it's the same.

As they age, family members and some friends they had outside of work start to die. They have less and less people to talk to and spend time with. That increases their "alone" time and their loneliness grows.

Loneliness can lead to depression and cause many to die prematurely. They don't feel they have anything to live for. Over the years, steps have been taken to address this problem and reduce the loneliness older people feel.

One such step was taken almost one hundred years ago.

Community Centers

During the Great Depression, many people were out of work. They had nothing to do. Loneliness increased. President Roosevelt's Administration started the New Deal Program. One part of this program led to the creation of Community Centers which offered recreational and educational activities and where people could go to talk with and spend time with others.

Most of these Community Centers were open to everyone.

Senior Centers

In 1943, New York City did something different. In the Bronx, the William Hodson Community Center opened. This was the first center for older people. It promoted social interaction among older adults. Essential services, like health, food and counseling were provided to older adults.

This center was successful. Other cities noticed it. They started opening their own Senior Centers.

While these Senior Centers were successful, others were not being opened quickly. A change occurred with the passage of the Older Americans Act of 1965. In this Act the members of congress confirmed that older Americans had specific needs and advocated centers be opened across the country to provide essential services and activities for these people.

Knoxville's First – The John T. O'Connor Senior Center

The city of Knoxville acted prior to the passage of the Older Americans Act. The city leaders recognized the need for a Center here and opened its first one, the John T. O'Connor Center, in 1960.

The O'Connor Center was originally on 4th Street in the 4th and Gill Area. Within several years, a new building was constructed on Winona St. and the Center moved there.

Over the years, seven other Centers were opened in Knoxville and Knox County. These are:

Carter Senior Center
9036 Asheville Hwy, Knoxville, TN 37924

Corryton Senior Center
9331 Davis Drive, Corryton, TN 37721

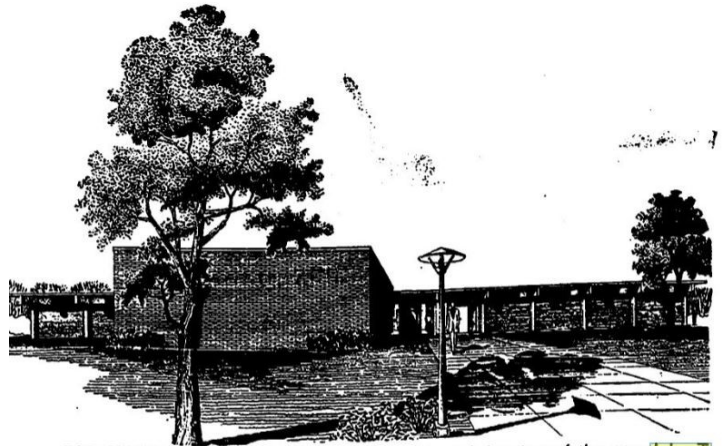
Halls Senior Center
4405 Crippen Rd, Knoxville, TN 37918

Karns Senior Center
8042 Oak Ridge Hwy, Knoxville, TN 37931

Larry Cox Senior Center
3109 Ocoee Trail, Knoxville, TN 37917

South Knoxville Senior Center
6729 Martel Ln, Knoxville, TN 37920

West Knox County Senior Center
239 Jamestowne Blvd Suite 101, Knoxville, TN 37934



FOR SENIOR CITIZENS—This is the architects' drawing of the new **John T. O'Connor Senior Citizens Center** which is proposed by Mayor John Duncan, subject to approval by City Council. The center would cost about \$140,000 and would be built on city property on Winona St. The 10,442-square-foot building would have a combination auditorium and games room, five craft rooms, woodwork shop, kitchen and concessions room. Outside would be shuffleboard and volleyball courts and a patio. Barber & McMurry are the architects.

[Source: The Knoxville News-Sentinel, April 7, 1963]

Eventually, management of the John T. O'Connor Center was turned over to the Office on Aging of the Knoxville Knox County Community Action Committee. All of the other centers are managed by Knox County Senior Services.

What Does a Senior Center Offer Older People?

Many older people have never visited a senior center and are unaware of the service offered or the activities people can participate in. They may not live close to one. Even if they do, they may drive by it frequently and have never stopped in.

Let me tell you about the John T O'Connor Center because that's the one I am most familiar with.

It is open to Knox County residents 50 years of age and older. The goal of the people working there is to help people coming to it have better health, increased social interaction and greater satisfaction in life.

The programs offered at the center provide recreation, educational information and social activities.

Here are some of the physical activity programs:

Exercise classes and classes in Tai Chi and Qigong

Hiking

Baseball teams

People with high blood pressure or diabetes can have their blood pressure and blood glucose levels checked.

A difficult time in anyone's life is when a family member or loved one dies. There is grief support group to help anyone who experiences a loss like this.

Dance classes are offered

French, German, Spanish and Italian classes are offered for anyone interested in learning one of these languages.

A Tech Smart Knox Seniors class is offered. Many older people have not kept up with computers and technology as it developed over the years. While they may have a smart phone, they may just have a fundamental knowledge of it. They don't know how to use all that it offers.

Many have computers. For some, all they know how to do is check email and play games. They may not know much else. This class is designed to help them get a deeper understanding of computer technology so they can use it when they need to.

AARP's Safe Driving course is offered at various times during the year. By attending this class, older people can get a discount on the cost of their car insurance by attending it.

There are also two other educational programs:

Every 2 weeks there is a lunch and learn program.

Once a month from September through June, the Council on Aging has a speaker come in to talk about a subject of interest to older people.

People don't have to struggle doing their income tax returns. Tax professionals are on site to help.

Movies are shown every Friday afternoon.

Those who play a musical instrument can join the classical or jazz band.

There is a choir always looking for people interested in singing.

For those who write or want to learn how to write, there is a creative writers' group.

A lawyer from Legal Aid of East Tennessee is onsite for 2 hours on the second Wednesday of each month to answer legal questions.



Chair Yoga at O'Connor Center

For those people who desire a little friendly competition, billiards, darts and pool are available. There is also the opportunity to play cards, other board games, and bingo.

Pancake Fest

A highlight for many people is Pancake Fest, an annual fundraiser for the Center. This is an “All You Can Eat” pancake breakfast held on a Friday morning in late March or early April.

Local TV newscasters, weather forecasters and celebrities as well as local, state and federal elected officials come out to make the pancakes for the people who attend. This is one event everyone should attend.

O’Connor Center Doesn’t Charge a Membership Fee

There is no membership fee at O’Connor. For some of the classes there may be a small fee. The staff at the center are very friendly and willing to help in any way they can.

Where Are You?

If you have never heard about the O’Connor Center or stopped by to see what they have to offer, what do you have to lose by doing so?

Are you feeling lonely? Participating in the various activities offered at the Center will help you get through that.

One Thing I Failed to Mention

In addition to getting involved in the activities at O’Connor, you have the opportunity to meet new people and make new friends. How might your life be different if you did that?

A Word from Bob

If you have any comments on what you have read in this post, I would love to know them. Please email them to me. Also, if you have any ideas about subjects you would like to see discussed in future posts, please send me an email and let me know. My email address is bob.ooablog@gmail.com.

Read more of Bob’s Blog posts on knoxseniors.org/blog.



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