

# Supports and Barriers to Participant Recruitment: Lessons from a Rural Older Adult Exercise Intervention

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## The Research

This study's goal was to understand the impact of a community-based exercise intervention on rural older adults' mobility and social interaction. The exercise intervention was an existing program for seniors called *Forever ... in motion*, which is comprised of low intensity exercises led by trained peer volunteer leaders. The intervention lasted for 12 weeks and included daily in home and bi-weekly group exercises. The rural communities of Young, Watrous, and Wolseley, Saskatchewan took part in this mixed methods community based study, which utilized mobility measures in its pre/post-test design as well as questions about participants' social interaction with family, friends and the community. Special attention was given to the recruitment process since existing literature identifies recruitment barriers with rural seniors, including transportation challenges, low literacy rates, chronic illness, and distrust of researchers (Dibartolo & McCrone, 2003).

This research builds on a previous study, *Healthy in Aging Place*, which identified issues of mobility and social isolation among rural older adults (Jeffery et al., 2013). Previous studies on seniors' mobility have frequently used urban populations (Mahoney et al., 2007). However, existing research suggests that exercise programs can be an effective approach for improving rural and urban seniors' functional capacity (American Geriatrics Society, 2001; Pahor et al., 2014), reducing falls (Health Canada, 2001) and supporting social interaction (McAuley et al., 2000).



## Recruitment

Of the 61 participants who were recruited for the study 47 completed the project; the majority of participants who dropped out of the study did so for medical reasons. A multi-method approach was used for recruiting participants in all three rural locations:

- ☞ Information sessions with demonstrations of the home exercises, group exercises, and mobility measures
- ☞ Advertising (e.g., newspaper, electronic billboards, and television advertisement)
- ☞ Posters which were visible in frequented areas such as banks and grocery stores
- ☞ Community interaction (researchers with the general public)
- ☞ Word of mouth by participants
- ☞ Phone calls



## Lessons Learned

- ☞ Word of mouth by participants was the most powerful form of recruitment. Participant recruitment doubled and resulted in increased engagement and retention.
- ☞ An extended period of time for recruitment allowed for a true snowball sample.
- ☞ Traditional methods of recruitment, such as phone calls and posters, were not as successful in recruiting participants. Potential participants needed access to face to face interaction and conversation.
- ☞ Holding information sessions at local gathering places with high patronage allowed for higher turnout and greater chances of recruitment.
- ☞ A physical demonstration of the group exercises and testing instruments allowed potential participants to better understand the study. This translated into better understanding and higher likeliness to participate.
- ☞ Fostering relationships with community members were key to accessing potential participants. Researcher presence at "coffee row" and community events allowed researchers to be perceived as approachable by local people, which created openness in considering participation in the study.
- ☞ Community partners can have a strong influence in recruiting participants. They may act as recruiters, advocates and allies to the research. In addition, community partnerships must be nurtured in order to support participant recruitment.



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