

Bringing Together Expertise on Aging Issues in Extension: A Progress Report from the North Central Region Aging Network

Situation

As America's population ages, there are increasing demands on aging professionals within the Cooperative Extension Service (CES), housed in United States Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (USDA-NIFA). While the importance of [Adult Development and Aging Programs](#) is recognized by USDA-NIFA, many gerontology-focused Extension specialists and field staff work in isolation as they address the challenges and opportunities unique to the older adult population. Unlike CES initiatives like the Dining with Diabetes Work Group or North Central Region Water Network, a collaborative network of Extension professionals focused on aging did not exist. To fill this void, North Central Region Extension Professionals have coalesced with the goal of bringing together expertise on aging-related issues, reducing the duplication of program development efforts, and increasing the ability to demonstrate multi-state impacts.

Response

The North Central Region Aging Network (NCRAN) was formed in 2016. NCRAN is a cohort of gerontologists and Extension professionals from 11 states that has united to influence attitudes, enhance skills, and increase knowledge of Extension educators on various aging-related topics. The primary mission of NCRAN is to promote, support, and encourage activities that strengthen and advance evidence-informed practice. By pooling resources and coordinating activities, the network strategically tackles aging-related topics and efficiently produces resources for Extension educators across the North Central Region. Collectively, the collaboration enhances connectivity and learning by developing and implementing outreach and education efforts and coordinating initiatives with measurable impacts.



The North Central Region Aging Network actively works to increase knowledge and visibility of aging as a critical issue for families, communities, and states to ensure stakeholders are using accurate, fact-based information about aging and older adults. By working collectively, the group seeks to improve health and wellness among older adults and strengthen communities across the North Central Region

Since its formation, NCRAN has engaged in collaborative efforts to support healthy aging across the North Central Region:

- Received **\$24,655** in grant funding from the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development to support the development of an NCRAN website and toolkit of aging-related programs in the North Central Region
- Developed an NCRAN **website** (ncran.org) as a hub for Extension programs and aging-related resources that have cross-state value
- Collected **needs assessment** data from approximately **1,010** Extension educators across 12 states to identify the status of aging-related Extension programming and community-needs identified by Extension educators
- Taught or hosted **44 webinars** on timely and critical topics spanning content areas related to aging and professional development



- Published 32 blog posts to complement and supplement the webinar topics
- Facilitated at least 26 multi-state collaborative projects related to the development and dissemination of research, curriculum development and delivery, and capacity building of Extension professionals
- Developed a **business plan** to guide NCRAN's next 5 years of collaboration, with subcommittees dedicated to maintaining the **website**; implementing and tracking **marketing and outreach** initiatives; and tracking **evaluation and outcomes**

Impacts

- Collaborative efforts across NCRAN members have resulted in:
 - 7 articles published in scholarly journals. Topics include the development of the TeachSD curriculum, which trains youth volunteers to promote technology use among older adults; a reconceptualization of policy, systems, and environmental change in the family context; and an analysis of aging-related needs and programming across the Extension North Central Region, among others.

- 9 presentations at professional conferences, including the National Health Outreach Conference, the National Council on Family Relations, and regional conferences. Topics have included an exploration of aging in the National Framework for Health and Wellness; consciousness raising about age and ageism; a summary and introduction to Extension and how Extension uses its structure to enhance health and wellness outcomes; and NCRAN's experiences and lessons learned from forming a multi-state network, among others.
- 4 published products, including (1) an infographic summary of the findings from the multi-state needs assessment; (2) a report on housing across the lifespan stemming from research conducted in North and South Dakota; (3) an infographic on supporting social connection during COVID-19; and (4) a social isolation resource guide template to facilitate Extension's capacity to connect partners and participants with social connection and support.
- 2 curriculum development initiatives: (1) Conversations that Matter: Advance care planning for rural families; and (2) The TeachSD Toolkit: an intergenerational technology training program.
- Award for Excellence in Multi-State Collaboration from the National Extension Association of Family & Consumer Sciences in 2019 (3rd Place, regionally & nationally)
- Growth in cross-state collaborations from five in 2017 to 12 in 2020, with a goal among NCRAN members to engage in at least four collaborative projects annually.
- The NCRAN webinar series has reached more than 1,900 viewers
- Approximately 97% of webinar participants responding to the evaluation agreed they learned new information and planned to use the information as a result of attending the webinar. Based on open-ended comments, webinar participants leave with a clear plan for concrete actions they will take as a result of the what they learned during the webinar. The broad range of resources and expertise shared during NCRAN webinars has had a positive impact overall.
 - NCRAN has engaged in deliberate monitoring and improvement to increase the quality of webinar production and delivery, including 1) implementing several approaches (e.g., EventBrite, Calendar Invites) to manage participant registration and tracking and 2) enhancing webinar marketing and promotion in Fall 2020 that resulted in measurable increases documented in subsequent webinar participation.
- Website traffic has generated hundreds of viewers annually: 415 views occurred in November 2020 alone (66% new visitors; 34% returning users)

Next Steps: NCRAN's 5-Year Strategic Plan to Enhance Impact and Sustainability

NCRAN has collaboratively developed a five-year strategic plan to guide future efforts and engagement. Key ongoing efforts will include:

- Monitoring emerging gerontological research and keeping stakeholders apprised of research findings relevant to their Extension outreach efforts.
- Monitoring social and economic conditions that affect older adults (e.g., Covid-19)

- Identifying opportunities to expand collaboration with Extension colleagues in other focus areas (e.g., agriculture and natural resources, community vitality, etc.).
- Strengthening peer support and resource sharing among members of NCRAN.

For professionals isolated geographically or programmatically, NCRAN has provided the opportunity to pool expertise and resources, increase professional capacity and productivity, and strengthen the quality and reach of programming efforts. NCRAN serves as a model of an Extension-based network for other program areas and demonstrates that Extension professionals can work together across state lines to meet the educational needs of their constituents.

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