

Building Community-Clinical Linkages: Testing an Approach to Increase Enhance®Fitness Reach

Results from the PT-REFER study

The Issue

Physical activity can help older adults maintain their bone, muscle, and joint strength, improve mood and social support, and reduce the risk of falling, heart disease, and diabetes.¹ It is recommended that older adults get at least 150 minutes of moderate physical activity (for example, brisk walking) each week.² However, less than half of older adults meet this recommendation.³ On the other hand, one in ten older adults see a physical therapist each year. Physical therapists work closely with patients to improve mobility and function due to acute injury, surgical procedure, or other issues, and could encourage older adults to be more active.

The Program

Enhance®Fitness is an evidence-based group physical activity program designed for older adults. Recognized as both a falls prevention and a chronic disease self-management program, Enhance®Fitness is offered throughout the United States in a variety of settings including the YMCA. Enhance®Fitness has demonstrated improvements in physical function and quality of life in older adults^{4,5} and aligns well with the goals of physical therapists: to help maintain and improve physical function, increase mobility, and prevent additional injury. For more information about Enhance®Fitness, visit the Project Enhance website at projectenhance.org.



The Study: Physical Therapists Recommending Enhance®Fitness to Increase Reach (PT-REFER)

We partnered with Y-USA and Sound Generations to develop and test an intervention to increase the capacity of YMCAs to reach out to physical therapy clinics about referring their older adult patients to Enhance®Fitness.

The intervention had two components:

- A toolkit containing tasks and resources to build YMCA capacity to reach out to physical therapy clinics, and
- Group technical assistance calls with an advisor from Y-USA

We expected that the intervention would increase the number of older adults enrolled in Enhance®Fitness, as a result of an increase in the number of hours that YMCAs spent doing outreach to physical therapists. To evaluate whether the intervention worked, we compared the number of people who enrolled in Enhance®Fitness for the first time during the study at 10 YMCA associations that received the intervention (intervention group) and 10 YMCAs that did not receive the intervention (control group).

FINDINGS & LESSONS LEARNED

We did not see a statistically significant increase in new Enhance®Fitness enrollment in the intervention group, compared to the control group

We expected that the intervention would increase YMCAs' capacity for outreach, and that this increased capacity would lead to greater enrollment, but YMCAs faced several barriers that limited their ability to build their outreach capacity

On the other hand, we learned that there were several characteristics that facilitated YMCAs' outreach activities:

- A strategic focus on older adult health and on growing Enhance®Fitness
- Perceiving outreach as a way to increase program reach and sustainability
- Budget support for outreach
- Leveraging existing relationships (e.g., board members) to build new partnerships
- Dedicated staff time for outreach and partnership development
- Having a secure information-sharing system (e.g., secure fax or Electronic Medical Record connection)

Ensuring that the characteristics listed above are in place may improve the capacity of YMCAs to reach out to physical therapy clinics, and ultimately increase the number of older adults who enroll in Enhance®Fitness

“Carving out the time to actually do [outreach] and setting that up as one of your objectives I think is important... association-wide we just need some leadership around these things and some emphasis on the importance of building these programs and relationships.”

- YMCA Staff Member

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Implications

The formative research conducted for this study created a clear case for deepening relationships between the YMCA and physical therapists.

Interest in toolkit use and barriers to outreach expressed by the YMCAs in this study were consistent over time and across multiple YMCAs. This information has helped Y-USA understand that there is an appetite for the type of in-depth support provided in the toolkit and allows the organization to create action plans for overcoming reported barriers.

Knowing the barriers to outreach has also helped Y-USA understand the characteristics of a YMCA that may be in a good place to utilize this resource and prioritize toolkit activities, which helps to target dissemination of the toolkit and enhance meaningful uptake.

Connecting with both senior leaders and program delivery staff of participating YMCAs elucidated the gap that exists between the common definition of “leadership support” at Y-USA, and the specific actions that senior leaders would need to take to help remove barriers to outreach.

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