



Dementia Friendly Community and Recreation Centers



Community and recreation centers help people stay active, healthy and connected. This Dementia Friendly America Sector Guide outlines practical actions that staff, volunteers and program leaders can take to provide supportive and accessible experiences for people living with dementia and their care partners, with simple steps to strengthen communication, improve the environment and adapt programs for participation.

UNDERSTANDING DEMENTIA

Dementia is a general term used to describe a group of symptoms that affect memory, thinking, communication and decision-making in ways that interfere with daily life. It is not a normal part of aging. Common symptoms include memory loss, confusion, trouble finding words, difficulty planning or solving problems and changes in mood or behavior. Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of dementia. Other types include Vascular Dementia, Lewy Body Dementia and Frontotemporal Dementia.

In activity spaces, dementia may make it harder to follow fast-paced instructions or navigate large and busy rooms.

BUILD DEMENTIA AWARENESS

Provide dementia-awareness training for all staff and volunteers through programs like Dementia Friends or sessions led by local experts. Include hands-on practice using real-life scenarios—such as assisting someone who is disoriented or unsure where to go—so team members feel confident responding in calm, respectful ways.

Integrate dementia education into staff onboarding and annual refreshers.

Support employees who are providing care to someone with dementia by offering flexible scheduling, access to employee assistance programs or referrals to resources like the Eldercare Locator and the Alzheimer's Association Helpline.

COMMUNICATE CLEARLY AND RESPECTFULLY

Engage the person before speaking. Make eye contact, face the person directly and use a friendly greeting or their name if you know it, so they know you're speaking to them.

Speak slowly and clearly. Use short sentences and share one idea at a time—especially during group instructions or casual conversations.

Ask one question at a time. Keep options simple—for example, "Would you like to sit here or over there?" rather than open-ended choices.

Give the person extra time to respond. Pause and wait patiently—avoid rushing or finishing sentences.

Repeat or rephrase if something is not understood. Use simple words or shorter phrases to support understanding.

Minimize distractions. Lower background noise (TVs, music, announcements) to support focus, especially during group activities.

Watch for non-verbal cues. Notice if someone looks confused, tired or uneasy—and respond with calm, supportive guidance.

Use visual cues to reinforce your message. Point to the activity schedule, room signs, materials or demonstration examples to help with understanding.

IMPROVE THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Provide large-print, high-contrast signs. Use simple words and familiar icons (e.g., exits, restrooms and activity rooms) placed at eye level to guide people.

Keep floors safe and dry. Avoid shiny or patterned floors that can cause glare or confusion and mark stairs or ramps with bright, high-contrast tape or paint.

Keep lighting bright and even in all areas, especially hallways and restrooms. Reduce glare and shadows to help people see clearly and feel safe moving around.

Provide comfortable, stable seating that is easy to get in and out of. Place sturdy chairs with armrests in common areas, activity rooms and near exits. Offer quiet seating areas with soft lighting and low music to reduce overstimulation.

Make restrooms easy to find and safe to use. Post clear signs and maintain bright, even lighting. Install grab bars and offer single-use or family restrooms when possible.

Consider an orientation board. Some centers use a large display near the entrance with the day's date, weather and a schedule of activities to help participants feel oriented when they arrive.

Simplify layout and keep pathways clear. Maintain wide, uncluttered walkways between furniture and activity areas. Keep room layouts consistent to reduce confusion.

Offer wayfinding support at events and programs. Welcome participants as they arrive and guide them to the right space. Assign a greeter or "wayfinder" during busier programs or events.

ADAPT PROGRAMS TO SUPPORT MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT

Encourage participation in everyday programs. Welcome people with memory loss into existing activities like exercise, crafts or discussion groups. Let them join in at their own pace—whether moving, creating or socializing.

Make activities easy to follow. Use clear instructions, visual examples and consistent routines. Keep language simple and make small adjustments—like using larger print, familiar music or fewer steps.

Offer flexible participation options. Allow participants to take breaks or step away without drawing attention. Arrange seating to support easy movement and quiet reentry.

Provide choices to match different comfort levels. Offer variations within the same activity—for example, seated or standing options or quieter vs. group-based participation.

Offer memory-friendly programs. Include regular programs designed with people with memory loss and care partners in mind—such as music and movement, art-making, TimeSlips or a Memory Cafe.

Involve participants in planning. Ask what they enjoy and what could improve. Invite them to help shape future offerings so programs reflect their interests and strengths.

FOR ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



Become a Dementia Friend
dfamerica.org/become-a-dementia-friend/

Alzheimer's Association Helpline
800-272-3900 | www.alz.org



Find or Start a Memory Cafe
dfamerica.org/

Eldercare Locator
800-677-1116 | eldercare.acl.gov



Scan or visit
dfamerica.org/resource-listing



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