

Gdynia Senior Activity Centre's virtual – and very real – impact during COVID-19



Gdynia, POLAND

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in Gdynia, Poland, older citizens were isolated from family, friends and the community, not least through the closure of their Senior Activity Centre (CAS). The CAS had traditionally engaged local older people through education, culture, sport, entertainment and intergenerational integration, so when its doors were forced to close, it decided to reach out to members by phone, eventually relaunching many of its services online. This enabled older people to remain mentally and physically active, pursue their interests, and avoid isolation and loneliness.

Calls, classes and creativity

From mid-March to July 2020, over 22 000 phone calls (averaging 200 calls per day), emails, text messages and Facebook posts were made by CAS's employees to the centre's 10 000 members, asking about their health and offering support with getting medicines, shopping, and other needs. CAS delivered Easter parcels 'to the door', provided food and hygiene packages, and drew on older people's creativity by encouraging them to become involved in sewing reusable protective masks for those in need. Older people in Gdynia made over 1000 masks. These activities helped maintain a positive daily routine for older people, and gave them a sense of belonging.

The centre reopened in July, offering an even bigger range of free workshops, online classes, lectures and exercises without having to leave home. Inspired by the concept of lifelong learning, the initiative was supported by local university professors and drew on technology and the openness and readiness of older people to overcome any barriers. Older people used computers and smartphones to take part, and hundreds joined a newly set up Facebook group.

Changing perceptions and upskilling for the future

The initiative showed that in the face of a changing environment, older people were able to adapt to a new situation, to learn to use new technology, and to take part in online activities. In drawing in those who had not taken part in such classes before, CAS's initiative (and the availability of Internet access, equipment and basic knowledge of how to use online tools, which are necessary for successful implementation and dissemination) may be a guide for other institutions that are similarly concerned with improving the quality of life in their own communities, including older people or people with disabilities who are unable to leave their homes.

"We know how important it is for the residents of Gdynia, especially older and lonely people, to maintain social contacts and to be active. The time of COVID-19 has shown that despite the obstacles to real meetings, we were able to find the way to cooperate and develop relationships and to offer activities with a new formula – and this is so important for the physical and mental health of our seniors. I am proud of the openness, courage and discipline of Gdynia's seniors to learn and actively use the educational and activity offer online." Michał Guć, Deputy Mayor of Gdynia

Centrum @ktywności Seniora

Wirtualny CAS

