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Liberal Senior Center Director Susan Roberts, left, and activity director Michele Stoddard make noodles Tuesday afternoon. The noodles will be sold at the senior center's booth at the SPBH Folk Art Festival on Dec. 7 and 8. L&T photos/Robert Pierce

By ROBERT PIERCE

• Leader & Times

The Southwest Kansas Area Agency on Aging introduced its Community Focal Point Award for senior centers that are highly visible facilities where anyone can obtain information and access to services for elderly individuals.

The Liberal Senior Center's name is nearly synonymous with the award, having taken away a plaque in all but one year that the award has been given.

The senior center has been awarded again this year as a Community Focal Point, and director Susan Roberts said the idea behind the award originally was to help senior centers improve the services they offer, while creating a little competition.

"There's different criteria that have to be met, and you get so many points for the criteria," she said. "You get so many points, and you're a focal point senior center. We have had that award for every year since 1987, except for the one year when we didn't apply."



There are nine categories SWKAAA officials look at, including center management. The criteria for that section includes how well a senior center uses items such as informational posters and if it is in compliance with the American Disabilities Act.

"They check all of that. Supportive services, that would be things like legal aid and transportation," Roberts said.

The director said the award keeps her and other senior center employees on their toes.

"It's something to strive for," she said.

Focal Point senior centers are ones where “all, or as many services as possible, are centralized at one place to make it more accessible for seniors for their various needs.”

“That can go from a place for activities or to get their blood pressure checked or legal aid or meals or transportation – all the different services that we provide,” Roberts said.

To get an award, senior centers only have to get 99 points on the inspection from SWKAAA. Liberal Senior Center far exceeded that number this year with 840, up from 710 in 2012. Roberts said increasing the number of points has been the standard for the facility even before she hired a full-time activity director Michele Stoddard.

Roberts explained the process gone through to determine how many points a senior center receives.

“They do this once a year,” she said. “This happens in October, November every year. Someone from the area agency comes down. They look through our minute books, our bylaws, everything we have on the walls. They look at accessibility factors, just about everything. A lot of the emphasis is on activities.”

Roberts said having a good activity director such as Stoddard in place is an important part of the equation.

“There’s nine main categories,” Roberts said. “We just have to list under those the things that we do. A lot of it depends on the activities and programs the activity director does.”

Roberts said senior centers in all of Southwest Kansas take part in the competition, and many others get an award as well.

“What’s really neat is a lot of the little centers, little tiny ones, they’ve been able to come up with enough points to be a focal point center,” she said.

Roberts summed up what makes it possible for the Liberal Senior Center to continue to take home a Community Focal Point Award year after year and serving the needs of the local senior community beyond what is necessary.

“What this all boils down to is a whole lot of cooperation with myself and interactions with all the employees and the board, all these different pieces to the puzzle that have to fit together,” she said. “We really work well here together. That really helps us present a good program for the community.”

Roberts said having a highly visible senior center attracts the attention of organizations such as Education for Kansans, which recently awarded the center \$20,000, much of which was used to help purchase a new vehicle for the facility’s Meals on Wheels program.

“When they see what we do, they say that’s a good place to deposit some money,” she said. “I think that’s probably why we did get that grant from (Education for Kansans).”

Roberts said the center may have to start looking at grants to fund its operation costs. She added Seward County, the entity that funds the center, cut \$14,000 out of the center’s budget for this fiscal year, but she did not fault the county for doing so.

“It’s just the way the mill is this year,” she said.

Roberts said since its beginnings, the process of applying for the Community Focal Point Award has been simplified.

“They’ve made it streamlined, and it makes it much easier to understand what they want,” she said.

With 2013's award already obtained, Stoddard said she is still eager to get another one.

"I've already started next year's," she said. "Oct. 1 starts a new year, so I already have where I go in and add at the end of each month, and sometimes, by the day, where hopefully, we can keep that up to where we're not scrambling at the end or miss anything."

Stoddard said keeping what the center needs for the award is also simple and can be kept up to date on the facility's computers.

"If something happens, we can have a backup copy and make sure we don't forget things," she said.

Roberts said another goal for the upcoming year is to win the SWKAA's Best Practice Award.

"Only three centers receive that for outstanding, innovative and creative projects that have long range impacts on seniors in their community, projects that attract seniors to the senior center, unusual and successful fundraising projects," she said.

Stoddard, who came on board with the senior center within the last three years, said the center has a lot to offer for everyone.

"It's really taken me a year in here to show people we have a lot to offer to our seniors," she said. "It's kind of nice when somebody recognizes that we do a lot for the seniors."

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