



## Progress Report

## The National Falls Free™ Initiative, working collaboratively to affect change

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Since 2004 the National Council on Aging (NCOA) has been working in collaboration with a growing number of national, state, and local organizations through the Falls Free® Initiative to address the growing public health issue of falls and fall-related injuries among older adults. Through collaborative leadership, evidence-based interventions, practical lifestyle adjustments, and community partnerships we are working to reduce the number of older adult falls. **Impact on industry:** The many activities of the national and state coalitions have brought recognition to the issue of fall prevention, education, and training to providers and greater investment in programs and services resulting in tremendous momentum and community activism. While we have yet to realize an impact on rates of falls, this strategic investment in building the infrastructure needed to affect change is the first step toward reducing the growing number of falls among older adults.

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## 1. Introduction

Since 2004, the National Council on Aging (NCOA) has been leading the Falls Free® Initiative, working collaboratively with a mounting number of national, state and local organizations to address the growing public health issue of falls and fall-related injuries among older adults. This multifaceted work is predicated on the recognition that falling is NOT an inevitable result of aging. Through collaborative leadership, NCOA and its many partners have been working to disseminate and encourage implementation of effective evidence-based interventions to reduce the number of older adult falls. Falls Free® is particularly focused on facilitating collaboration and integration of efforts between health care providers and the aging services network; the vast aging services network can reach older adults in every community venue across the country (O'Shaughnessy, 2008).

## 2. Method: developing the National Action Plan

As a first step in developing a national fall prevention plan, NCOA proposed convening a summit to bring together and facilitate discussion and consensus among leading experts, researchers, and organizations involved in fall prevention. Working with a National Advisory Panel, NCOA conducted a national scan to identify these recognized leaders. In 2004, with funding from the Archstone Foundation and the Home Safety Council, NCOA brought together representatives of 58

national organizations, professional associations, and federal agencies to develop a blueprint for reducing the growing number of falls and fall-related injuries. The blueprint framework was designed to address the major fall risk factors including: mobility/physical inactivity; medications management; home safety; and environmental safety (Shekelle et al., 2003). Leading experts were commissioned to update and publish evidentiary summaries for each of the risk factors to serve as a pre-reading assignment for summit participants to ensure a common understanding of the evidence surrounding fall prevention for each of the risk factors. Reviews were compiled and published as *Research Review Papers* (National Council on Aging, 2005a).

Over the course of the two day summit, the diverse group of leading experts worked in small teams to review the evidence and to propose evidence-based, practical strategies and action steps mapped to the risk factors. Participants were asked to develop strategies to target both the older adult (and caregiver), and the appropriate health care or service provider. Strategies were put forward to advance predetermined goals for each risk factor, which were designed to heighten awareness, strengthen education and training efforts, and increase the accessibility of tools, resources, and services. Consensus was the key to the successful outcome.

## 3. Results

In March 2005, the landmark evidence-based report was released as the *National Action Plan* (National Council on Aging, 2005b). The *Plan*, which includes 36 strategies, continues to provide local, state, and national organizations with guidelines for implementing effective strategies to reduce the growing number of falls and fall-related injuries among older adults.

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#### 4. The Falls Free<sup>®</sup> Coalition

At the time the *National Action Plan* was released there was insufficient funding to mount a national campaign. Instead, in order to capture participants' enthusiasm and investment in this effort, NCOA organized a loose-knit association of summit attendees and organizations into the National Falls Free<sup>®</sup> Coalition. Coalition members were charged with advancing one or more of the fall prevention strategies that resonated with their organizations' missions. Since its inception in 2005 the Coalition has grown to include 70 national organizations and 31 states; NCOA, through ongoing external funding support, facilitates the activities of the coalition and provides direct technical assistance to states embarking on state and local coalition building efforts.

Since 2005, the *National Action Plan* and the activities of the Falls Free<sup>®</sup> Coalition have been resources and catalysts for action in the areas of policy, education, aging, research, health care, and training.

In 2007, NCOA evaluated the impact of the *National Action Plan* by reviewing progress over each of the 36 strategies. *Making a Difference: Progress Report on the Falls Free<sup>®</sup> National Action Plan* (National Council on Aging, 2007) examined achievements to date. It noted several important contributions but, more importantly, identified gaps that have served to inform subsequent initiatives. Contributions included the introduction and passage of the Safety of Seniors Act (PL 101–202), which included provisions taken directly from the *National Action Plan*; and professional education and training efforts undertaken by the American Physical Therapy Association and American Board of Internal Medicine. The National Advisory Panel met again in 2008 to consider the progress report, to deliberate on new opportunities, and to make recommendations for next steps to guide the Coalition's work. Group members engaged in a rich, broad-based exchange of ideas. They reached a consensus on five overarching, urgent recommendations that are being enfolded in the Coalition activities:

1. Build new partnerships and relationships to advance the Falls Free<sup>®</sup> Initiative
2. Develop effective messages to build awareness in a variety of stakeholder groups
3. Create compelling business cases for investing in fall prevention
4. Enhance data collection and evaluation efforts already underway
5. Obtain substantial new funding to take this work to a national scale

#### 5. Coalition Workgroups

One particularly effective approach for moving forward has been the creation of Coalition Workgroups. Three workgroups have been actively addressing specific *National Action Plan* strategies.

The Advocacy Workgroup is the longest serving workgroup. It was largely responsible for the passage of the Safety of Seniors Act (PL 101–202) and has been advocating actively for appropriate levels of funding. In 2008 the Advocacy Workgroup successfully petitioned the U.S. Senate to designate the first day of fall as National Fall Prevention Awareness Day. Twelve states joined the initial effort, 22 states participated in 2009, with an astounding 43 states, DC and PR participating in 2011 (<http://www.ncoa.org/press-room/press-release/43-states-celebrate-4th.html>). The Workgroup also advocated successfully for additional funding support for CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, which doubled their funding level for fiscal years 2009 and 2010.

The Home Safety Workgroup was convened to conduct and report on best practices in community-based home safety practice. Over 60 applications were reviewed; 20 sites underwent lengthy interviews, and 10 were selected for publication in the highly popular *Creative Practices in Home Safety Assessment and Modification Study* (Beattie & Peterson, 2006).

The State Coalitions on Fall Prevention Workgroup was established in the fall of 2006. It is now comprised of state coalition

leaders representing 38 states who are working collaboratively to promote state-wide strategies to address falls. (<http://www.ncoa.org/improve-health/falls-prevention/falls-free-coalition/state-coalitions-map/state-coalitions-map.html>). NCOA provides technical assistance to states to strengthen coalition building and promotes the inclusion of a broad-based constituency that includes health care, the aging services network, and public health. With assistance from NCOA, the State Coalitions on Fall Prevention Workgroup has formed two active committees: The Awareness and Advocacy Committee is working to raise awareness and to share creative ideas and strategies for falls policy and legislative initiatives. Members supported by NCOA created a web page, press kit, and other materials to support state participation in the 2011 *Fall Prevention Awareness Day*. The Evaluation Committee is currently designing a core set of recommended evaluation strategies to more effectively measure impact and to facilitate state-to-state comparisons. The Committee first created a landmark logic model to serve as the basis of the evaluation recommendations; that model has been adopted by CDC in its National Evaluation Strategy.

#### 6. Products and resources

Over the past six years, NCOA has developed partnerships with a number of organizations including the Archstone Foundation, the U.S. Administration on Aging, and CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Working with partners, NCOA has produced a large number of reports and publications that address social marketing, state policy and regulatory opportunities, and a compendium of state coalition activities, all of which can be accessed on [www.healthyingagingprograms.org](http://www.healthyingagingprograms.org). In 2009, NCOA collaborated with NCIPC to demonstrate the positive returns on investment for three effective evidence-based fall prevention programs (publication pending). This body of work has stimulated momentum, brought greater visibility and recognition to the issue, encouraged partnerships and collaborations, and promoted the development of community infrastructure to support falls prevention.

#### 7. Discussion

But more work is needed: (a) to increase public awareness about falls; (b) to encourage discussion about fall prevention among older adults, their families and their health care providers; (c) to integrate fall prevention into clinical practice; and (d) to expand evidence-based fall prevention programs in community settings. The Falls Free<sup>®</sup> Initiative is built on the premise that everyone has a role to play in fall prevention; given appropriate knowledge and awareness everyone can make a difference within their own sphere of influence. The goal is to create integrated and collaborative fall prevention programs and services that are available in every community across the country and are recognized by older adults and their families as vital to seniors' health and independence.

#### 8. Future activities

Moving forward, NCOA is continuing to explore opportunities to leverage current accomplishments and to capitalize on the growing momentum. Through collaborations with NCIPC and AoA, NCOA is working to implement effective, evidence-based fall prevention programs in communities. NCOA is expanding its work with states and communities to promote sustainability of programs and services, to involve new partners, and to access new funding sources. And the organization is currently collaborating with a number of national organizations to leverage the opportunities offered by health care reform and the national focus on wellness and prevention. Additional future efforts will focus on expanding current activities as well as promoting professional competencies in fall prevention, bringing effective,

evidence-based programs and services to communities across the country. While infrastructure building is key, to make a real difference, the focus is truly on building effective, evidence-based community initiatives that bring attention to this growing issue.

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- Lynn Beattie**, Vice President for Injury Prevention, National Council on Aging is working on many national projects to reduce falls and fall related injuries in older adults. Most notably she is leading the Falls Free<sup>™</sup> Initiative and coordinating the activities of the National Falls Free<sup>®</sup> Coalition and its many working groups, including the 38 member State Coalitions on Fall Prevention Workgroup Learning Network. Lynn has her undergraduate degree in health and physical education, and masters degrees from Baylor University in both physical therapy and in health care administration. In 1998 she completed the master's level, gerontology certificate program at the University of Maryland.