

Move With Meaning: Empowering Native Women in Mississippi to Combat Physical Inactivity

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Defining The Problem

Physical inactivity has become a growing public health concern in the U.S., contributing to a host of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and even certain cancers. Nationwide, approximately 25% of adults fail to meet the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) physical activity recommendations, with the highest rates of inactivity in Southern states (America's Health Rankings, (n.d.-b)). Mississippi has the highest inactivity rate at 34% (America's Health Rankings, n.d.-b), disproportionately affecting Hispanic, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native women over the age of 65 (America's Health Rankings, n.d.-a).

Contributing factors to this pressing issue include limited access to safe spaces for physical activity, socioeconomic barriers, and various pre-existing health conditions. Physical inactivity-related healthcare costs exceed a whopping \$117 billion annually (America's Health Rankings, n.d.-b). In a country burdened with high healthcare spending, this figure accounts for over 11% of the country's total yearly health care expenditures (America's Health Rankings, n.d.-b). The CDC emphasizes that increasing physical activity is one of the most important things one can do for their health (CDC, n.d.). Thus, addressing this issue among the most affected demographic is an essential first step to improving nationwide health outcomes.

This intervention targets American Indian/Alaska Native women aged 65 and older in the state of Mississippi. This demographic disproportionately experiences some of the highest inactivity rates in the country. While American Indian/Alaska Native women comprise a small percentage of the state's population, they face significantly higher rates of chronic disease and premature mortality compared to other racial/ethnic groups (Indian Health Service [IHS], 2019).

Ultimately, by focusing on this high-risk group first, we could create an adaptable model to combat the issue of physical inactivity nationwide.

Choosing A Partner

Founded in 1844, the YMCA (Young Men’s Christian Association) is a well-established nonprofit dedicated to strengthening communities nationwide through healthy living, youth development, and social responsibility (YMCA, n.d.). The YMCA of Mississippi operates multiple locations across the state, offering fitness facilities, outreach programs, and various wellness initiatives (Metro YMCA MS, n.d.). With its strong commitment to improving community health outcomes, the YMCA is well-positioned to help us in our mission to combat physical inactivity among our target population.

Our partnership with the YMCA of Mississippi seeks to reduce physical inactivity among our target population by providing accessible, community-centered fitness programs. The YMCA’s expertise in creating these initiatives aligns with our goal of fostering sustainable habits to reduce chronic disease risks associated with physical inactivity (YMCA, n.d.).

SWOT Analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
Reputable nonprofit with strong presence in Mississippi (Metro YMCA MS, n.d.)	Uneven location distribution, limiting access for rural communities (Metro YMCA MS, n.d.)

<p>Safe, accessible exercise spaces and programs for seniors (YMCA, n.d.-b)</p> <p>Assistance programs to reduce socioeconomic barriers (Metropolitan YMCAs of Mississippi, n.d.)</p> <p>Proven track record in promoting health and wellness (YMCA, n.d.-b)</p>	<p>Membership fees may still be prohibitive, even with aid.</p>
<p>Opportunities</p> <p>Mobile YMCA programs or partnerships with tribal centers to expand access</p> <p>Development of culturally tailored fitness programs</p> <p>Grant funding and public health partnerships to increase outreach resources</p>	<p>Threats</p> <p>Transportation barriers may inhibit participation (YMCA, n.d.-b)</p> <p>Long-term sustainability concerns if funding is not maintained</p>

Community Assessment

To better understand the needs of our target population, we propose conducting a community assessment survey designed to help identify key health disparities including barriers to physical activity and gaps in available resources. The insights gleaned from the survey will

help to inform the development of targeted, culturally relevant interventions that support sustainable wellness outcomes to combat physical inactivity in our target population.

Demographics & Health Status

1. What is your age?
2. What is your tribal affiliation (if applicable)?
3. Do you currently experience any chronic health conditions?
4. On average, how many days per week do you engage in physical activity?
5. What are your primary sources of healthcare (tribal clinic, local hospital, no regular provider, etc.)?

Barriers to Physical Activity & Wellness

6. What prevents you from engaging in regular physical activity? (Select all that apply: transportation, cost, health issues, lack of motivation, etc.)
7. Do you feel as if your community provides accessible spaces for physical activity?
8. What types of exercise or wellness activities interest you the most? (Yoga, walking groups, strength training, water aerobics, cycling, etc.)
9. Have you participated in any YMCA or other community wellness programs in the past year? If no, why not?
10. Do you have access to reliable transportation to attend wellness programs?

Community Resources & Needs

11. What types of wellness programs or services do you feel are missing in your community?

12. Are there specific cultural or traditional activities that you would like to see incorporated into wellness programs?
13. In your opinion, what are the biggest health concerns in your community?
14. What support systems do you rely on for health and wellness (family, tribal organizations, healthcare providers, etc.)?
15. Would you be interested in a free or low-cost community-based fitness program designed for older AI/AN women?

These questions were crafted to address key areas including understanding health challenges of our target population, identifying the obstacles that prevent participation in fitness programs, and determining the gaps in available health services. For example, American Indian/Alaska Native women over 65 experience disproportionately high rates of diabetes and hypertension compared to white women in the same age group (Indian Health Service, 2019). Understanding these health statistics as well as barriers such as lack of transportation, safe spaces, or culturally relevant options is key to designing effective interventions. By capturing both health status and critical community perspectives through our survey, we can better tailor solutions to address the pressing issue of physical inactivity.

Our partner, the YMCA of Mississippi, will provide support in the form of survey dissemination by using its network to distribute the survey to our target population, assisting with data collection and analysis for trend identification, and providing insights based on their extensive experience with implementing senior wellness programs to help us with next steps (YMCA, n.d.). Our collaboration with the YMCA leverages their established community presence to ensure high response rates and culturally informed interpretation of survey findings.

Through this survey, we hope to build on the findings of our preliminary research that indicates the key health disparities of high rates of diabetes and hypertension in our target population compared to the general population (Indian Health Service, n.d.) and limited access to healthcare facilities (America's Health Rankings, n.d.-a). This community assessment will provide a data-driven framework to address existing gaps in health services and help us develop sustainable, culturally tailored fitness programs that promote long-term health benefits.

Proposing An Intervention

To address the high rates of physical inactivity and its consequences among our target population of American Indian/Alaska Native women aged 65 and older in Mississippi, we propose the launch of “Move with Meaning,” a mobile, culturally tailored fitness program in collaboration with the YMCA of Mississippi.

As we have previously discussed, this population faces significant barriers to maintaining adequate physical activity, including lack of access to safe exercise spaces and transportation challenges. Our recent community needs assessment survey revealed that many participants expressed interest in group exercise, but felt that existing options were inaccessible or not designed with demographics such as their age or culture in mind.

Our proposed program, “Move with Meaning,” would deliver weekly, senior-friendly fitness classes directly to tribal communities and rural areas across Mississippi. These classes would take advantage of existing community spaces such as tribal centers, faith-based buildings, or school gyms. Each session would be led by a YMCA-trained instructor in collaboration with a tribal liaison to ensure that content is age-appropriate, respectful, and engaging for all.

Some of our proposed program components include weekly rotating fitness sessions, consisting of activities such as chair yoga, low-impact aerobics, stretching, and resistance training. Cultural integration will also be a huge component of the program, with classes incorporating traditional music, movement, and storytelling. This program will also include health education in the form of monthly wellness talks on the importance of physical activity and its benefits in managing diabetes, hypertension, and overall health while aging. Lastly, in order to make the program accessible to everyone, transportation such as shuttle services will be provided as needed, and participation will be free for individuals through grant funding and YMCA community sponsorship.

This intervention directly responds to the findings from our community assessment and leverages the YMCA's infrastructure and extensive history of community engagement. Rather than expecting our target populations to come to centralized fitness centers such as the YMCA, we are removing the access barrier entirely by bringing the wellness experience to them. Our partner, the YMCA of Mississippi, will promote the program through its statewide network, train instructors in senior-friendly and culturally competent delivery, collect participant data (with consent) to evaluate program impact, and finally help us to seek funding through partnerships with tribal health programs and public health agencies.

Through our proposed "Move With Meaning" program, we expect outcomes including improved physical activity levels amongst our target population, reduced risk of chronic disease complications, increased social engagement and community cohesion, and most importantly, empowered participants through accessible, culturally resonant wellness experiences.

Primary/Target Audience: Board of Directors at PAR (Public Access & Reach)		
Question: How will this intervention improve the health of American Indian/Alaska Native women aged 65+ in Mississippi?		
<p>Key Message 1:</p> <p>The mobile program removes access barriers and brings physical activity opportunities directly to rural and tribal communities.</p>	<p>Key Message 2:</p> <p>The intervention is culturally relevant and designed specifically for the needs of our target population.</p>	<p>Key Message 3:</p> <p>YMCA of Mississippi is an experienced, trusted partner that ensures high program quality and sustainability.</p>
<p>Supporting Fact 1:</p> <p>Many AI/AN women in Mississippi live in rural areas with no access to wellness facilities (America's Health Rankings, n.d.-a).</p>	<p>Supporting Fact 1:</p> <p>Classes will include traditional music, storytelling, and tribal involvement.</p>	<p>Supporting Fact 1:</p> <p>YMCA has existing experience in senior wellness and mobile outreach programs.</p>
<p>Supporting Fact 2:</p> <p>Transportation was one of the most frequently cited barriers in our community survey.</p>	<p>Supporting Fact 2:</p> <p>Mobile wellness interventions have been shown to significantly improve physical activity levels and chronic disease outcomes in underserved</p>	<p>Supporting Fact 2:</p> <p>Their network can support training, promotion, and evaluation of the program.</p>

	communities (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023).	
Supporting Fact 3: Using existing local spaces reduces cost and increases accessibility.	Supporting Fact 3: Our assessment showed strong interest in group fitness when programs reflect community identity.	Supporting Fact 3: The YMCA will help secure funding through grants and partnerships, keeping the program free for participants

Ultimately, “Move with Meaning” is a culturally grounded, accessible intervention rooted in evidence, community voice, and strategic partnership. By addressing the systemic barriers faced by our target population, particularly around transportation and cultural relevance, this program has the potential to significantly improve physical inactivity rates and overall health outcomes. Through our collaboration with the YMCA of Mississippi, we can deliver a sustainable, mobile wellness experience that not only empowers individuals but also strengthens community connection. Most importantly, this intervention serves as a model that could be replicated in other underserved communities nationwide. With the support of PAR’s leadership, “Move with Meaning” can help move us closer to a more equitable, healthier future for all.

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