When Older Americans Month was established in 1963, only 17 million living Americans had reached their 65th birthdays. About a third of older Americans lived in poverty and there were few programs to meet their needs. Interest in older Americans and their concerns was growing, however. In April of 1963, President John F. Kennedy's meeting with the National Council of Senior Citizens served as a prelude to designating May as "Senior Citizens Month."

Thanks to President Jimmy Carter’s 1980 designation, what was once called Senior Citizens Month, is now called "Older Americans Month," and has become a tradition.

Historically, Older Americans Month has been a time to acknowledge the contributions of past and current elders to our country, in particular, those who defended our country. Every president since JFK, has issued a formal proclamation during or before the month of May, asking the entire nation to acknowledge the contributions of these individuals and pay tribute in some way to the older persons in their communities. Older Americans Month is celebrated across the country with ceremonies, events, fairs and other activities.

Each year, the Administration on Aging (AoA) develops the theme for Older Americans Month. This theme assists the National Aging Services Network of State Area Agencies on Aging and community services providers, plan celebrations and activities not only in May, but throughout the year. The theme of this year’s celebration – **Unleash the Power of Age** – pays homage to the many ways in which elders bring inspiration and continuity to the fabric of our communities. It also highlights the many ways technology is helping older Americans live longer, healthier and more engaged lives.

Since 1967, National Nursing Home Week has been incorporated into the celebration of Older Americans Month. National Nursing Home Week spotlights nursing home residents and staff and encourages everyone to celebrate the elders who make a positive difference in the lives of every American. A supportive and caring environment, such as a nursing home, provides enrichment for residents and families to continue growing, learning and teaching through various ways. The week also provides an opportunity to honor everyone who contributes to our nation’s nursing homes – residents, family members, employees and volunteers.

National Nursing Home Week begins on Mother’s Day, May 12, and continues through May 18. This year’s theme is, **Unleash the Power of Age**. This year, think about what your organization can do to help Unleash the Power of Age. Giving our elders opportunities to volunteer their time to support those who are less fortunate, to teach others the skills they’ve honed over the years, or to become involved in civic matters are just a few ways you can Unleash the Power of Age. Help our older Americans stay positive, active and looking forward.

As caregivers, we strive to assist the elders in living life to its fullest and we need to celebrate this, especially during this special week.
We also need to celebrate the staff. This is an intimate community, where acts of kindness, caring, and respect are the norm. It is the interdisciplinary team that provides comfort to a resident experiencing a difficult day, a smile in the midst of sadness, a gentle hug to an elder whose spirit is sagging, friendship to a new resident who is feeling overwhelmed and lost, and companionship to those who are lonely.

Involving the community in your celebration provides an opportunity to introduce your neighbors to the possibility of volunteering in your home. This will give the community the chance to discover that today’s nursing homes are filled with elders enjoying life and enriching the lives of others. These elders may need some assistance because of their physical limitations, but they still have a lot to give!

Meet with the interdisciplinary team to plan your celebration. Be sure to include a few residents and family members and incorporate some of their ideas. The following are some ideas for making this year’s celebration very special:

**Celebrating Family and Friends**

Technology provides many ways of keeping in touch with loved ones and reconnecting with individuals with whom you’ve lost touch. Help the residents establish Facebook accounts. This is where students from your local high school can play an important role. These teens are very good with social networking sites, technology and the Internet. This activity can also help the teen learn about life before the explosion of technical advances, when life was simpler and people got to know their neighbors. The elder will benefit from being able to communicate with his or her family and friends across the country. They may also reconnect with a childhood playmate or school chum.

**Note:** Before using Social Media and the Internet to post stories and pictures of the residents, you must obtain written permission from the resident or the legal guardian. Because of the almost unlimited exposure the Internet provides, the permission needs to go beyond the general photo consent they signed upon admission.

**Share Stories through the Veterans History Project**

Do you have veterans in your facility? Set aside time this week to honor the veterans and encourage them to tell their story to the rest of the world! The Veterans History Project of the American Folklife Center collects, preserves and makes accessible the personal accounts of American war veterans so that future generations may hear directly from veterans and better understand the realities of war.

The veterans’ stories can be told through personal narratives, letters, photos and other ways. Everything submitted to the Veterans History Project will be archived and housed within the Library of Congress online database and available to Congress and researchers who visit the Library of Congress. For more information about the project, how to register and tips for hosting a community event for your veterans, visit: [http://www.loc.gov/vets/about.html](http://www.loc.gov/vets/about.html).

Ask the veterans for permission to write down their memories about serving in the armed forces. This is a great opportunity for students in a high school history class.
Work with the teacher to develop some open-ended questions to get the conversation started. Have the students transcribe the veterans’ stories as a small booklet. Invite the students to read these stories during a social in the veterans’ honor later in the week. Be sure to invite the families, the local post of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion to be part of the celebration and share their stories, too.

**Poetry Reading**

Poetry can result in deep reflection and comfort, inspire conversation, and enlighten the mind. Reading a favorite poem and sharing it with your peers can be very satisfying. Writing a group poem is also fun. Have an “open mic” event and invite the residents, family, staff, volunteers and community members to share their favorite poem about promises, community, enjoying life, the rewards of a long life, etc. Serve refreshments to make it special and encourage conversation about the poems and how it made the participants feel afterward.

**“Thank You” Note Scavenger Hunt**

Thank you notes are a very personal touch that can be treasured for years. In this busy world, we may not take the time to really express our appreciation for a job well done or acknowledge the extra time spent with a resident in the midst of a hectic day. This week, encourage the residents to write notes of thanks to their favorite staff person or fellow resident. Ask the residents to reflect on the characteristics that make that individual uniquely special and put it into words. Instruct the residents to post the notes all over the facility for the staff to find. Let the staff know about the scavenger hunt and instruct them to bring the *unopened* notes to the Staff Appreciation Lunch later in the week. At that time, the staff will be invited to open their thank you notes and read them out loud.

**Talent Show**

Have you ever stopped to listen to Eloise play the piano for her peers as they wait for dinner? Were you amazed when George’s son brought his violin during a recent visit and heard the beautiful music coming from his room? Did everyone get to enjoy Susan’s granddaughter’s ballet performance in the unit lounge following her dance recital? There is a lot of talent to be tapped at your facility. Organize a talent show as the entertainment for your Mother’s Day Tea. Invite the residents, families, volunteers and staff to “audition” so you have an idea about the timing, set up required, props, etc. that will be needed. You can ramp up the performance by inviting your local high school glee club or show choir to open the event with a performance.

**Senior Prom**

A good way to keep the momentum going is to have a “Senior Prom” and involve local high school students. Many of the elders grew up during the Depression and had to leave school to help support their family. As a result, they didn’t have the chance to participate in their own senior prom. Publicize the event; send written invitations to the families asking them to bring some fancy clothes for their loved one to wear. Encourage the teens to wear their prom dresses and suits. Involve the staff in helping the residents get ready – doing the ladies’ nails, applying makeup, styling their hair, and helping the
gentlemen with their suit coat and tie. Clear a large space for wheelchair dancing and don’t forget to provide a safe area for the ambulatory residents who wish to waltz with their spouse or child. Hire a small band or a DJ to play music from the residents’ era. Encouraging young and old to mix and mingle gives new meaning to the phrase “Senior Prom.” This event can create long-lasting memories that will be talked about long after graduation.

Photography Contest
A picture is worth a thousand words or so they say. As the activities continue throughout the week, encourage the residents and staff to make these memories last by taking pictures. Ask the families to provide disposable cameras for their loved ones to use to record the activities and special times they’ve experienced. Once the pictures are developed, here are some ways to use the photos:

- Post the photos in the resident rooms throughout the facility;
- Put together and display a facility-wide collage of all the pictures for everyone to enjoy;
- Make a slide show and display it in the activity room or main dining room for as long as you like;
- Show the pictures over the facility’s closed circuit televisions;
- Encourage the residents to share their favorite photo during a group activity; and/or
- Have a contest to turn the best 12 pictures into a yearly calendar.

Create a Quilt
Quilting is a timeless activity. This popular pastime allows participants to chat, reminisce, and learn more about each other while unleashing their creative ability through fabric. If you don’t have a quilting superstar in your midst, check with your local quilting club for assistance in getting started. Consider sending a 6” X 6” quilt square to each family and encourage them to work with their loved one to produce a unique block representing their family. Invite them to use the activity room to work on the quilt block. Provide decorations such as sequins, ribbon, lace, buttons, beads, yarn, scissors, fabric glue, etc. for the “quilters.” Ask volunteers to sew the quilt blocks together into a specific size quilt. You will most likely have enough blocks to make several quilts. Ask your local quilting club to help the residents finish the quilts. Add a fabric pocket on the back of the quilt so it can be hung on a rod. Hang the quilts in areas where residents and families gather. The finished quilts will be a topic of conversation for years to come and evoke treasured memories of residents and families that are no longer part of your unique “community.” For more information about quilting and directions to help you get started, visit: [http://www.wikihow.com/Make-a-Quilt](http://www.wikihow.com/Make-a-Quilt).

Memory Garden
Springtime is a perfect time to commemorate the passing of loved ones or friends with a memory garden. Planting a memory garden is a beautiful exercise that can heal the heart. Engage the residents, staff and volunteers in this unique activity from the
beginning. Ask them to identify a sunny spot for the memory garden. It should be a spot where several people can gather. Personalize the flowers or plants you select by reflecting on those individuals to be remembered. You may select their favorite flowers or favorite scents. You can choose a plant that symbolizes them in a unique way. For example, a chrysanthemum expresses wonderful friendship while magnolias represent dignity. Forget-me-nots are beautiful flowers that can be planted throughout the garden. You can add small statues, plaques or objects that carry special meaning. Providing several park benches for people visiting the memory garden completes this soothing space.

**Resident Trivia**

Find out how much the front-line staff knows about the residents. Have your staff prepare a list of questions about little-known facts they have learned about the residents as they did their assessments. Organize the questions into a trivia quiz format:

- Which resident went on safari in Africa for his 70th birthday?
- Which resident made her living creating one-of-a-kind wedding dresses?
- Which resident served in the Peace Corps?
- Which resident went bungee-jumping to celebrate his retirement?

Include about 20-25 questions on each sheet and vary the questions so not all the quizzes are the same. Distribute the quizzes at the same time on each floor/unit so everyone has an equal chance. Offer a prize for the first three quizzes that are 100 percent correct. Be sure your staff provides the answers to each question they submit, so you can score the finished quizzes as they are turned in. This competition is a lot of fun and provides a lot of interaction between the residents and the staff as they search for the correct resident being described in the quiz!

**Staff Appreciation Day**

Make one day about staff. Honor those who strive to make a positive difference on the lives of the residents. Plan a catered lunch or order a variety of pizzas so everyone can serve themselves. Invite the families and residents to tell why their closest caregiver is important to them. You can reach out to the local media outlets and invite them to cover the event and profile the outstanding staff members during a newscast or in the newspaper.

**Publicity**

National Nursing Home Week is a great opportunity to garner positive publicity for your facility. Be sure to let your administrator know that you will be pursuing media coverage for the events you have planned. This will also be helpful in getting the word out to the community when you plan to invite them to some of the celebrations. Start at least a few weeks in advance to lay the groundwork.

- **Create a list of media outlets to target.** – Concentrate on the local television cable stations, radio stations, and daily and weekly newspapers distributed to the surrounding communities. Include the name of the outlet, phone, fax, and e-mail information.
• **Personalize the contact.** – Call the television station, radio station, newspaper, and weekly shopper to ascertain the name, direct phone number, and e-mail address for the specific individual most likely to cover your event. A week before the event, e-mail everyone on your media contact list. Then, follow up with phone calls to the reporters to gauge their interest. If you don’t have the correct person, you should get the information for another contact and make another call.

• **Follow up after the initial contact.** – The day before the event, send another e-mail and make another call to confirm and make sure the reporter has all the information. Confirm what the reporter has asked for and any last minute details.

• **Let people know what’s happening.** – Make sure you tell the facility leaders, front-line staff, residents, families, and volunteers that specific events during National Nursing Home Week are going to be covered by the media. Your contacts may have asked for specific interviews, so make sure those being interviewed are prepared. Let everyone know what to expect and how important positive media coverage is to the facility.

• **Meet and greet the reporter.** – Be prepared to greet the reporter personally. If the reporter has requested interviews, escort him or her to the individual(s) and stay with them during the interview(s). When cameras are involved, be sure to have signed consents from the residents – this is true for pictures and videotape. Answer the reporter’s questions honestly and accurately.

• **Follow up.** – Be sure to track local media outlets to find out if articles and photographs regarding your program, are published. Many media outlets have websites that contain search engines for looking up articles and news stories. Ask reporters and editors when they expect them to appear. However, do not depend on these media professionals to send them to you – many times, they promise to send them and later forget. The media contact person needs to keep a watchful eye to ensure that media placements are not overlooked.

Seeing your facility programs featured in your local media is very exciting. These media placements are very beneficial in enhancing your reputation in the community. Don’t keep these media placements a secret – make copies of these clippings and distribute them to your key audiences: owners, discharge planners, community agencies, church leaders, and so on. Consider framing an article and placing it in the lobby of your facility. Post articles on staff and resident bulletin boards. Make sure to get the “biggest bang for your buck” with media placements – they can go a long way in impressing people associated with your facility and strengthening your public image.

No matter how you plan to celebrate Older Americans Month and National Nursing Home Week, take time to enjoy the residents and their families. After all, this is why we do what we do. It’s up to us to tell the residents’ stories.