

# White paper

ICAA Career  
Path for  
Wellness  
Professionals

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## Background

The concept of active aging, meaning full participation in all areas of life, has been embraced by the professionals who work with older adults and by the organizations where they work. Active aging merges with the philosophy of wellness, which assumes that individuals can consciously take positive steps toward optimal health and well-being. The dimensions of wellness interlace the areas of life: cognitive/intellectual, emotional, environmental, physical, professional/vocational, social and spiritual.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

In a wellness culture, all aspects of a person's life are recognized. Every person providing services believes it is in her or his role to support quality of life among older adults, and in working in unison with others to achieve this aim.

The International Council on Active Aging® (ICAA) has conducted focus groups, surveyed its members, and facilitated think tanks and work groups on staffing issues. The need for a career framework for the new "wellness workforce" evolved from discussions centered on the contrast between the needs of organizations pursuing a wellness culture and the traditional job descriptions and disciplines of staff members.

Several key points emerged:

- There is no consistent usage of the term "wellness" for departments or job descriptions. The title of Wellness Director can apply to a person responsible only for fitness, or for healthcare services/nursing, or to a person responsible for fitness, activities, recreation and cultural programs.
- The career path for wellness professionals is individual and often reaches an end with the title Wellness Director.
- Leadership in organizations is challenged to recruit staff or train staff in the

concepts of a wellness culture as well as in the cultural, social and physical issues experienced by people through the life course.

- For active aging/wellness to become a priority service, there must be a defined blend of formal and informal activities that integrate wellness concepts, and the appropriate staffing to deliver them.
- For professionals who deliver active-aging/wellness programs for older adults to be recognized as the valuable organizers of wellness opportunities, there must be a responsibility framework that is flexible for individual organizations yet consistent across the industry.
- Professionals who have a defined career path are more likely to receive appropriate recognition and compensation.
- When students and people seeking careers see a career path along with the knowledge and skills that support careers, they will be more likely to consider working with older adults.

The sense is that without a more consistently defined role and career progression, the wellness function is not likely to be considered an organizational priority or the base for a wellness culture, which ultimately reduces opportunities for older adults to live as well as possible. In addition, for medical and allied health professionals to be motivated to recommend preventive/wellness services, there needs to be more consistency and clarity in the industry so older adults can move more easily along the continuum.

Based on recommendations made by the ICAA Advisory Board, the ICAA Visioning Board and thought leaders in the ICAA Strategy Session (now Forum) meetings, the association undertook the development of a career path for active-aging wellness professionals. The work was undertaken in five phases:



- Phase 1: Collect qualitative information through salary and benefit surveys and example job descriptions. Gather anecdotal information during Forum meetings and personal interviews.
- Phase 2: Convene a work group to determine if a wellness professional requires a defined set of qualifications and skills. Confirm the outcomes of this group by members of an ICAA advisory board.
- Phase 3: Draft a model of a career path and knowledge needs for wellness professionals based on industry input and existing resources provided by multiple organizations.
- Phase 4: Convene an advisory group to develop and refine the draft framework. Invite industry reviewers to comment on and further refine the path.
- Phase 5: Outline an educational curriculum and delivery mechanism to prepare a wellness professional.

The ICAA Career Path for Wellness Professionals, with the accompanying list of the knowledge and skills that support an individual along the path, is the outcome of this work.

### **Purpose of the ICAA Career Path for Wellness Professionals**

The ICAA Career Path for Wellness Professionals is a guide for organizations, educators and individuals. The Career Path is not intended to replace the excellent work done in universities, by professional organizations or within companies. Instead, it is a high-level document to help clarify that, following education in a core discipline, there is a career path for wellness professionals working with older adults. And, it identifies in a broad sense the professional education and skills that help professionals to succeed.

The goals are to enable many organizations to build their job descriptions around this path and framework, and to guide the industry toward a more consistent use of terminology and job requirements.

## CAREER PATH FOR WELLNESS PROFESSIONALS

The active-aging/wellness philosophy promotes the vision of all individuals—regardless of age, socioeconomic status or health—fully engaging in life within the dimensions of wellness: emotional, environmental, intellectual/cognitive, physical, professional/vocational, social and spiritual.<sup>3</sup> Organizations that provide services for older adults are translating that philosophy into programs led by wellness professionals.

As the functional area of active aging/wellness has emerged among providers serving older adults, the need to structure roles for the professionals who deliver wellness programs and services also has emerged.

### **Wellness professionals**

The term “wellness professional” is used in this model as a general term for staff members supporting the wellness function. The career path is based on the following beliefs:

- A wellness professional has considerable education and experience in at least one discipline, and is knowledgeable about all the dimensions of wellness.
- A wellness professional promotes a culture of wellness among participants and peers. This professional brings together the people in other disciplines and functional areas toward the common goal of supporting the quality of life of older adults.
- A wellness professional has the ability to apply the dimensions of wellness to individual and community programming.

The wellness professional is a coach, a point of contact that helps older adults to find the resources to achieve their lifestyle wants and needs, encourages them in their pursuits, and assists them by tracking progress.

## **Background and experience of wellness staffs**

The results of ICAA’s Salary & Benefits surveys, along with examples of job descriptions submitted by ICAA members, demonstrate that the word “wellness” is inconsistently and liberally used by organizations. In one organization, wellness means the medical staff; in another, it refers to all the lifestyle programs; and in another, fitness.<sup>4</sup> Some wellness staff members are responsible for multiple areas, including fitness, activities (social, games, computers, etc.), volunteers, and other services, such as dining or counseling.<sup>5</sup>

The diversity of titles and educational backgrounds is reflected in responses to the ICAA Salary & Benefits Survey 2011, which captured the responsibilities of 752 professionals. The respondents chose among a list of generic job titles. The most frequently selected titles were activities and wellness director, coordinator or assistant; executive director; other; program manager; fitness director; lifestyle or engagement director.<sup>6</sup>

The respondents reported a median 11 years of experience working with older adults. When asked about the field where they earned their highest level of education or degree, respondents selected: Other, not related to wellness/active aging (27%); health and wellness (11%); physical education, exercise science (11%); general education (9%); recreation and leisure (8%); gerontology (5%); kinesiology (5%); social work (4%); activities (3%); music, dance, art, recreation or similar therapies (3%); physical or occupational therapy (3%); psychology (3%); geriatrics (2%); health promotion (2%); and hospitality and tourism (2%).

This survey’s results show that staff members and managers working with older adults have a wide range of backgrounds that should be taken into account when identifying the knowledge and skills needed to perform their jobs successfully.

## **Responsibility framework**

The framework of responsibility levels can be broadly applied to many organizations. Each organization will individualize within the framework based on its needs.

The columns refer to functional areas, not to job titles. A business function is a process or operation performed regularly to fulfill the organization's mission. In Human Resources, a "function" refers to the actions performed by a person or department to produce a result. For example, the function of food services is to resource, prepare and deliver food. There are multiple job

descriptions and job titles that may support that function (e.g., dietitian, chef, cook, server, dishwasher).

Responsibility levels are used in Human Resources when developing job descriptions, recommending compensation levels and planning for future staffing needs.

The expectations for people in the function will be defined by each organization. In larger organizations, each of these responsibility levels may be used. In smaller organizations, they may combine into the job description of one or two people. This chart is provided solely as a reference point.

## **Responsibility framework**

	<b>Staff</b>	<b>Middle management</b>	<b>Senior management</b>
	Contributes to, implements, follows defined processes	Develops, implements, responsible for outcomes	Develops, creates, responsible for corporate strategy and outcomes
Develops strategies		X	X
Implements strategies	X	X	
Writes corporate goals			X
Writes department goals		X	
Contributes to and implements goals	X	X	
Budget development and accountability		X	X
Follows established budget	X	X	X
Manages and develops people, teams		X	X
Develops and manages programs		X	X
Implements programs	X	X	
Defines performance standards	X	X	X
Recommends performance standards	X	X	X
Follows performance standards	X	X	X

# White paper

## Career path for wellness professionals

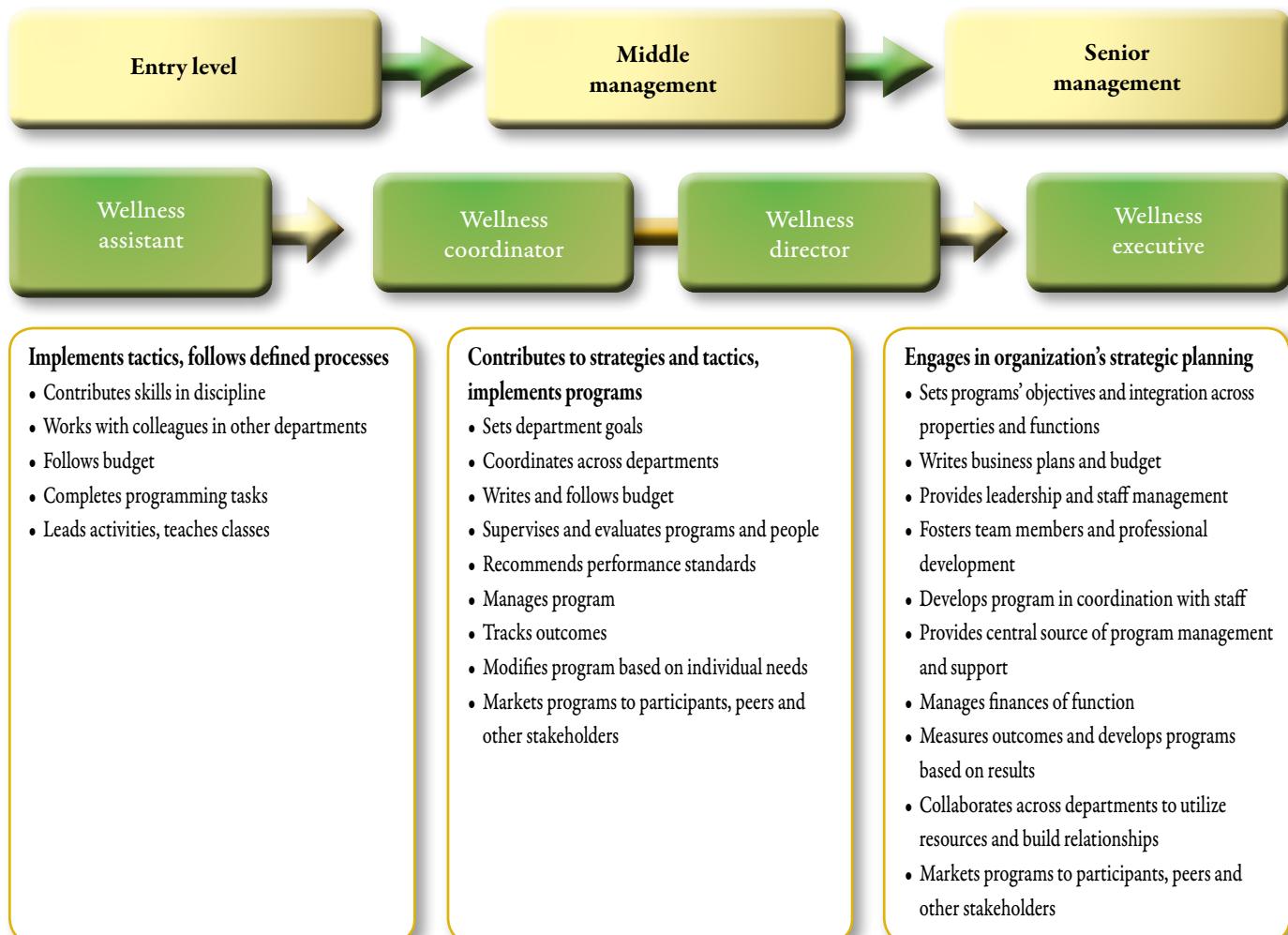
As organizations develop the wellness culture to create opportunities for the health and well-being of their participants, staffing needs can change depending on the number of clients being served and the scope and depth of a wellness program.

At the entry level, new staff members learn their roles and the ways to interact with

the older population. As they progress with skills in program development and management, levels of responsibility and authority also increase.

In this model, the terms “wellness assistant, coordinator, director and executive” are generic descriptions often used in Human Resources. These are not job titles, but are meant to indicate responsibility progression.

## Career path for wellness professionals



## **Professional development for wellness professionals**

Professionals applying for positions in wellness for older adults may be well-trained in their fields, but lack education or experience working with older adults. In addition to a relevant degree or credential, employers seek business skills in managing programs and people, purchasing and marketing, as well as skills in working across functions and forming partnerships.<sup>57</sup> Identifying areas that are important for

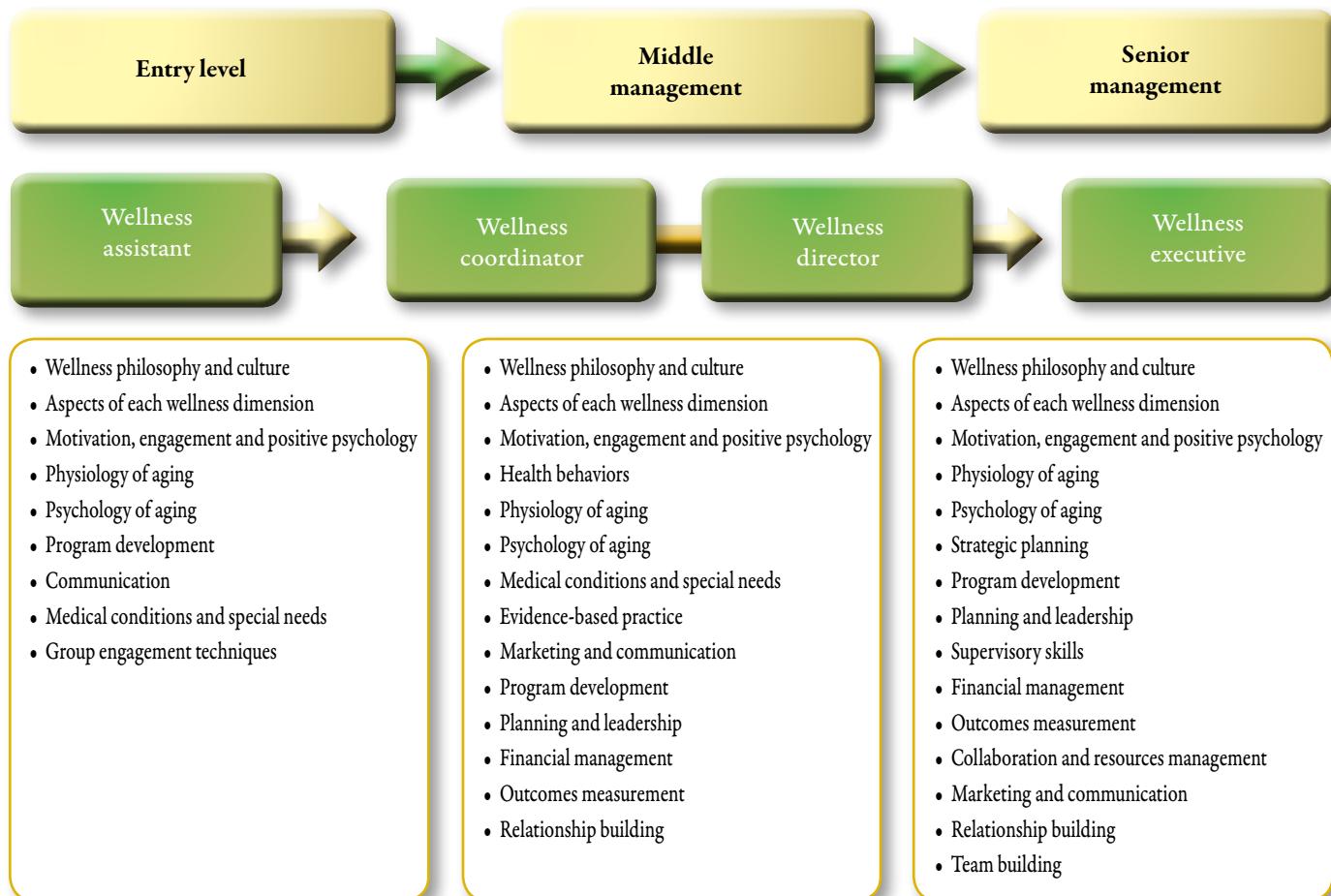
successfully working with older adults can help guide individuals along the career path, and guide organizations in planning professional development.

The education and knowledge areas in this framework are not intended as job description requirements, which individual organizations will write based on the needs of the position. For example, if the job description centers on physical activity and fitness, then additional education in functional abilities, working with people with

cognitive impairment or nutrition may be appropriate. A position responsible for multiple services, such as activities, fitness and therapy, is more likely to need development in business skills, supervision and cross-functional partnerships.

The terms “wellness assistant, coordinator, director and executive” are generic descriptions familiar to Human Resources staff. These are not job titles, but do indicate career and responsibility progression.

## **Recommendations for education and skills**



# White paper

## Resources

Key elements for developing a wellness program for older adults. White paper from ICAA. Available at <http://www.icaa.cc/business/whitepapers.htm>

ICAA/ProMatura Wellness Benchmarks. Available at <http://www.icaa.cc/business/benchmarks.htm>

ICAA Salary & Benefits Surveys. Available at <http://www.icaa.cc/business/research.htm>

## INTEGRATION WITH STRATEGIC PLANNING

Organizations look to the future with their visions and strategic plans. What services and products will be offered? What will their customers need and want in five years, or 10 years? All departments and services align with the strategic vision. Staff recruitment and retention are key to an organization's future. Appropriate talent management builds value for a company, while succession planning identifies staff members who can become the next leaders.

Along with the needs of the organization, the career options for staff within the wellness function also develop. A defined career path for wellness professionals allows employees to grow within the organization. The organization can benefit from reduced turnover, increased commitment and improved performance from staff who bring experience and knowledge of the population to the program.

The ICAA Career Path for Wellness Professionals is a roadmap that can be used by senior management, human resources, educators, agencies and individuals to focus on developing a wellness environment that supports quality of life among older adults.

### Advisory Group:

**Joey Arce**, Director of Human Resources, Westminster Communities of Florida

**Lisa Bloder**, Wellness Coordinator, Westminster Communities of Florida

**Maria Connolly**, Wellness Team Leader, Kisco Senior Living

**Kathie Garbe**, Associate Professor, Director, HWP Internships, University of North Carolina–Asheville

**Deborah Redder**, Network Advisor & Program Director, Exercise is Medicine Network

### Author:

**Patricia Ryan**, MS, Vice President, Education, International Council on Active Aging

## Reviewers:

**Brian D. Boekhout**, PT, Vice President, Wellness Services & EnerG by Aegis, Aegis Therapies–EnerG by Aegis

**Teal T. Busteed**, PT, GCS, Therapy Program Manager, Genesis Rehabilitation Services, Rehab and Wellness Pavilion @ The Davis Community

**Rebecca Chaplin**, LS, MA, Aging Program Specialist, Area Agency on Aging, Land-of-Sky Regional Council

**Wojtek J. Chodzko-Zajko**, PhD, Shahid and Ann Carlson Khan Professor and Head, Department of Kinesiology and Community Health, University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign, ICAA Advisory Board

**Terry Eckmann**, PhD, Professor, Teacher Education and Human Performance, Minot State University, ICAA Advisory Board

**Terry Fay**, Corporate Director of Resident Programs, Senior Lifestyle Corporation, ICAA Advisory Board

**Gina Formica**, DPT, Director of Wellness, Liberty Lutheran

**Brandan Hardie**, MBA, Executive Director, National Wellness Institute

**Jennie Henley-Jackson**, Director of Community Life Services, The Heritage at Brentwood

**Ken Kramer**, Wellness Director, Givens Estates

**Lauren Lutz**, Human Resources Director, Mercy Ridge

**Martha McClung**, Director of Vibrant Living, Brightview Senior Living

**Julie Milner**, Chief Operating Officer, International Council on Active Aging

**Jan Montague**, MGS, President, Whole-Person Wellness International, ICAA Advisory Board

**Ronda Watson**, RD, SVP Culinary and Engage Life, Atria Senior Living, ICAA Advisory Board

**Stephanie Wong**, Vice President, Field Operations, Healthways, Inc., ICAA Advisory Board

## **International Council on Active Aging**

The International Council on Active Aging® is the professional association that leads, connects and defines the active-aging industry. ICAA supports professionals who develop wellness facilities, programs and services for adults over 50. The association is focused on active aging—an approach to aging that helps older adults live as fully as possible within all dimensions of wellness—and provides its members with education, information, resources and tools.

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## **Career development**

People enter the field of wellness for older adults with diverse educational backgrounds and disciplines. While professionals may be certified or licensed appropriate to their fields, their education may not include specialized training or experience working with older adults.

The professional development framework assumes a person enters with the knowledge or experience required for a position. To succeed, the individual

requires orientation to the wellness culture and may need additional knowledge and training on working with older adults. In addition, depending on the person’s skills, adding experience to the progression is appropriate.

For example, a new graduate may pass a certification/licensure exam and learn about careers working with older adults during an internship. Through experience working with older adults and participating in the wellness culture, the individual

builds skills and knowledge. Additional education, or entrance into a mentorship program, may allow that person to continue to be motivated and move along the career path. Another example could be a person who is highly credentialed with years of practice experience, but who lacks experience working with older adults. That person might participate in continuing education specific to older adults and work with a mentor to develop skills along the career path.

### **Knowledge base**

Plus

### **Additional professional development**

Plus

### **Experience**

Formal education, training or experience

Education and training specific to working with older adults within a wellness culture

Credential if required to fulfill job function

Organization’s internal training program

Organization’s mentorship program

Internship  
Practicum  
Volunteering  
Prior work in wellness

## **How to use the career path and recommendations for professional development**

Adopting the recommendations of the career path has advantages for multiple users.

- Human Resources personnel can use the information when recommending organizational structures that support a wellness mission and strategy, writing job descriptions, and determining the placement of wellness positions within the organization's responsibility and compensation structures.
- Talent management and training staff can identify needs and build curriculums to develop staff.
- Succession planning for the organization and for individuals can be built on the career path.
- Professors and educators can use the framework when developing curriculums and internships.
- Individuals are able to look into the future when considering working with older adults as a career path, and immediately find the general areas of knowledge they need to be successful.

