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### **Arthritis Exercise Program for Seniors Wins Award**

An exercise and health education program for seniors with arthritis was chosen for one of six awards presented by the American Society on Aging at its annual meeting in Washington March 29.

The \$2,500 award recognized the program, called Fit and Strong!, for “innovation and quality in health care and aging.”

Fit and Strong! was developed by Sue Hughes, professor of community health sciences, co-director of the Center for Research on Health and Aging and principal investigator of the IPRC’s involvement in the Healthy Aging Network.

Hughes, a lifelong educator and researcher on aging issues, has seen several exercise programs come and go over the years. But she says few have been designed to reinforce long-term adherence to regular physical activity.

Fit and Strong! includes a 60-minute physical activity component three times a week into its eight-week regimen. But Hughes said what sets it apart from other programs is what happens next.

"The last 30 minutes are devoted to group discussion and problem-solving to enhance disease management and improve confidence that these seniors can maintain physical activity over time," Hughes said.

Approximately 20 million people over age 65 are affected by arthritis, and it is estimated that 40 million will suffer arthritis by 2030. Sufferers experience regular and often severe pain that restricts their movement and discourages exercise.

Painful lower extremity joints, in particular, can lead to a sedentary lifestyle that is associated with reduced aerobic capacity and muscle strength and increases the risk of coronary artery disease and stroke.

A randomized trial of Fit and Strong! funded by the National Institute on Aging found that participants experienced significant improvements in ability to maintain their

exercise program and lower extremity stiffness at two months, when the formal program ends, that were sustained at six and 12 months.

Hughes said Fit and Strong! has been recommended by the Administration on Aging of the Department of Health and Human Services and the National Council on the Aging as an effective program that senior centers can adopt nationally.

With funding from U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Hughes and her staff are now working with the National Arthritis Foundation to train instructors to conduct Fit and Strong! in five Arthritis Foundation chapters in the next two years. Hughes said she also received a grant from the CDC to bring Fit and Strong! to 1,200 participants in Illinois and North Carolina through a collaboration with local aging agencies and local service providers.

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