Leveraging Arts and Cultural Assets to Address Urgent Health Challenges
How Cross-sector Collaboration can Advance County and City Health Goals

Many of the most pressing health challenges being faced by communities in the U.S. are linked to social determinants of health. In response, the national *Creating Health Communities: Arts + Public Health in America* initiative documents how communities can leverage existing resources—including arts and cultural assets—to address complex health concerns such as substance abuse, gun violence, health care access, chronic disease, and social cohesion. The initiative's resources provide examples and recommendations for how arts and cultural assets can be leveraged to advance health and health equity in communities.

The Challenge

Over the last few decades, public health has shifted its focus toward social determinants of health—recognizing that health outcomes are determined substantially by varied social and environmental contexts. Rather than merely the absence of disease, health is understood to include the presence of the opportunity to live healthy lives. Differences in access and opportunity across racial, socioeconomic, and geographic lines have led to a growing awareness of health inequities and their upstream causes. While important, individual-level interventions cannot alter the upstream systems and policies that produce poor and inequitable health outcomes. The need for new upstream solutions is urgent, and the nation is hungry for solutions and strategies that work. Generating these will require cross-sector efforts that are responsive to community cultures, values, and lived experiences.

What Arts and Culture Can Do

Recent evidence affirms the effects of arts and cultural participation on population health. Large-cohort longitudinal studies that carefully control for socioeconomics and other factors have found that arts and cultural participation is associated with:

- 49% lower risk of maladjustment in children;
- 48% lower risk of depression in adults over 50;
- 44% lower odds of developing dementia; and
- lower risks of chronic pain, frailty, age-related disability, and premature mortality.[1]

How do arts and culture drive these outcomes? They increase immune response and social cohesion; elevate underrepresented voices; boost engagement with local social, civic, and health programs; improve communication; and shift collective behaviors.

What Local Leaders and Actors Can Do

Because arts and cultural assets are prevalent and available in communities, they offer immediate opportunities for leveraging local assets to advance health. By strategically collaborating with the arts and culture sector, and by engaging arts and cultural resources in communties, public health professionals can improve local quality of life while also honoring diverse cultural values, reducing stigma, and supporting community-led action.

Get to know local arts and cultural assets. Identify and connect with local arts and cultural resources by collaborating with local arts councils, arts organizations, artists, and community culture bearers to map existing local assets. Then:

Form strategic partnerships by linking local arts agencies with local health and public service taskforces, boards, and agencies. For example, appointing artists and arts agencies to health-related planning teams, task forces, and government research initiatives can help innovate solutions, build community relationships, improve communications, and increase inclusivity.

Ensure reliable funding for diverse arts and culture programs, agencies, and initiatives. Investment in arts and culture can generate particularly high health returns on investment.

Co-locate health and social services with arts and cultural activities. Doing so increases awareness, access, and engagement with services, while increasing social cohesion. It can also help customize services for a specific community, culture, or region.

Click here to read the full *Creating Healthy Communities Through Cross-sector Collaboration* White Paper

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ARTPLACE

Model Programs

This brief highlights five priority health challenges faced by cities and counties: **gun violence, substance abuse and mental health, health care access, chronic disease, and social cohesion.**[2] The programs described below demonstrate how cross-sector collaborations are addressing these issues in creative, cost-effective, and community-sustaining ways.[3]

Gun Violence. The BE-IMAGINATIVE initiative in Oakland, California embraces arts and culture practices to address trauma and build community among survivors of gun violence. The program recreates cultural ceremonies and memorializes lost loved ones through visual and performing arts. It also offers storytelling retreats, often with a focus on mothers who have lost children to gun violence. These practices advance positive narratives designed to shift the local culture around gun violence. BE-IMAGINATIVE has increased local survivors' support networks while anchoring anti-violence efforts in community culture, history, and artistic practices.

Takeaway: Arts and cultural initiatives can build social support and community action networks while offering trauma-informed, culturally-responsive means of addressing grief and loss.

Substance Abuse, Mental Health. In Hindman, Kentucky, the Appalachian Artisan Center launched its Culture of Recovery initiative to address high rates of addiction and substance abuse in the area—which have led to major regional health and employment challenges. This program partners local substance abuse and health care agencies with an arts organization to offer recovering individuals options for supporting their health. These options tap into the unique music and craftsmanship heritage of Appalachia, including long-term apprenticeships in a tradecraft; "art slams" that engage people in local art forms; and workshops focused on blacksmithing, luthiery, and ceramics. The Culture of Recovery's cross-sector strategy co-advances health care, community development, and local cultural assets.

Takeaway: Arts and cultural assets can be leveraged in cross-sector partnerships to improve mental and behavioral health. Partnerships across sectors can ensure that care options are both safe and attuned to the places in which they are provided.

Health Care Access. The Jackson Medical Mall in Jackson, Mississippi transformed an abandoned shopping mall into a medical, wellness, arts, and retail center. Alongside traditional health services, the Mall features arts and cultural programs that engage community members, celebrate local cultures and traditions, and promote healthy lifestyles. By drawing community members to the Mall, these programs increase access to health services while driving economic development and social cohesion. The Mall models how collaboration between the community development, public health, and arts and culture sectors can increase care access while sustaining valued local cultural practices.

Takeaway: Co-location of health services with arts and culture can improve access by increasing awareness, comfort, and social cohesion. It can also help ensure that care options are attuned to the local places and cultures in which they are provided.

Chronic Disease. With a mobile school-bus-turned-dance-studio, Amiya's Mobile Dance Academy makes dance accessible to underserved communities and families in Detroit to help prevent obesity and related chronic diseases. Created by a 10-year-old artist, Amiya Alexander (now 20), the program has addressed the prevalence and dangers of childhood obesity while filling a gap in equitable access to local dance classes. It further aims to unite people of different backgrounds through Black heritage and dance.

Takeaway: Practices rooted in arts and culture can generate community-driven innovations that increase equity and access, improve social cohesion, and reduce the incidence of obesity and chronic disease.

Social Cohesion. In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the Islands of Milwaukee initiative embedded artists within local systems (such as meal delivery programs) to address social isolation among aging residents. Through arts-based research methods, the program discovered that several dangerous intersections in the city had created "islands" that cut off aging residents from the rest of the community. After these findings were publicly shared through arts performances, the timing of some Milwaukee traffic stops was changed within days. Islands of Milwaukee not only shifted the built environment to improve social cohesion; it also inspired ongoing in-home visits from artists, dance and painting sessions, and enduring connections that supported social cohesion long after the initiative ended.

Takeaway: Local arts and cultural assets provide innovative ways to develop sustainable social connections, even among traditionally-isolated populations. They can also generate data—and call attention to that data—in order to impact systems and policies.

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[1] Find citations here; [2] Find citations and further research in the 2019 **Creating Healthy Communities Through Cross-sector Collaboration** white paper; [3] These issues have recently been prioritized by **USCM**, **NLC**, **NACCHO**, and **Healthy People 2020**.