

# Advisory Brief for State Agencies and Organizations

## Leveraging Arts and Cultural Assets to Address Urgent Health Challenges

How Cross-sector Collaboration can Advance Local and State Health Goals

Many of the most pressing health challenges being faced at local and state levels are linked to social determinants of health. The national *Creating Health Communities: Arts + Public Health in America* initiative has documented how cross-sector collaborations leverage communities' existing resources—including arts and cultural assets—to address complex health concerns such as mental and rural health, health care access, and social cohesion. The initiative's research and resources offer examples and recommendations for how arts and cultural assets can be leveraged to advance health and health equity.

### The Challenge

Over the last few decades, public health has shifted its focus from individual behaviors to social determinants of health—the factors that shape health. Rather than merely the absence of disease, health is now understood to include the presence of such factors as access and opportunity. Differences in access and opportunity across racial, socioeconomic, and geographic lines have led to growing awareness of health inequities and their upstream causes. It has become clear that individual-level interventions cannot alter the upstream structures, systems, and policies that produce poor and inequitable health outcomes. The need for upstream solutions is urgent. Generating them will require cross-sector efforts that are responsive to a community's cultures, values, and lived experiences. This brief advises increased collaborative action toward health equity and a culture of health.

### What Arts and Culture Can Do

The arts and culture sector offers immediate opportunities for precisely this kind of collaboration. Why? Arts and cultural engagement have been shown to:

- Enhance immune response, longevity, and well-being, among other health outcomes<sup>1</sup>
- Increase social cohesion—a protective factor against a number of health challenges
- Enhance interest and participation in social, civic and health programs
- Bring communities together to support and sustain their own health goals
- Improve communications within and across groups
- Center underrepresented voices and concerns
- Help change narratives and shift collective behaviors

### What State Public Health Leaders and Actors Can Do

Arts and cultural assets are prevalent and available in all communities. Given urgent challenges and limited resources, it is imperative that policymakers, public health professionals, community leaders, and social agencies recognize and engage communities' existing assets. Health promotion strategies that engage arts and culture can improve regional quality of life while honoring cultural values, improving race relations, reducing stigma, and supporting community-led action.

**Recognize the arts and culture sector as a valuable, available resource and partner for addressing health.** Every community has arts and cultural assets that contribute to well-being. But these prevalent resources, which offer significant assets for reaching local and regional health goals, remain underutilized by public and social agencies.

**Map arts and cultural assets.** Identify and connect to local arts and cultural resources by mapping these assets in collaboration with local or regional arts councils, local arts organizations, artists, and community culture bearers.

**Link local/state arts agencies with health taskforces, boards, and agencies to form strategic partnerships.**<sup>2</sup> For example, appoint artists and arts agencies to health-related planning teams, task forces, state boards, and research initiatives.

**Co-locate health and social services with arts and cultural activities.** Co-locating health services, campaigns, and initiatives with arts and culture programs can increase awareness, access, engagement, comfort, and social cohesion. It can also help customize health services for a specific community, culture, or region.

[Click here to read the full \*Creating Healthy Communities through Cross-sector Collaboration\* White Paper](#)

## Model Programs

This brief highlights four priority health challenges for states: health care access, mental health and addiction, social cohesion, and rural health.<sup>3</sup> The programs described below demonstrate how cross-sector collaborations are addressing these issues in creative, cost-effective, and community-sustaining ways.

**Health Care Access.** In 2015, the [Jackson Medical Mall Foundation](#) in Jackson, MS, transformed an abandoned shopping mall into a medical, wellness, arts, and retail center. Alongside traditional health services, the Mall features an array of arts and cultural programs that engage community members, celebrate local cultures and traditions, and promote healthy and engaged lifestyles. These programs draw community members to the Mall, and in doing so, increase access to health services, drive economic development and build social cohesion. The National Governors Association (NGA) has recognized that many behavioral health and social needs are better served in community settings than in clinical or institutional settings. The Mall models this approach by collaborating with the community development, public health, and arts and culture sectors to advance access while sustaining valued community cultural practices.

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

**Mental Health and Addiction.** In 2017, the Appalachian Artisan Center in Hindman, Kentucky launched its [Culture of Recovery](#) initiative to address the high rates of addiction and substance abuse in the area that have led to major regional health and employment challenges. The program—which partners local substance abuse and health care agencies with an arts organization—offers recovering individuals additional options for supporting and sustaining their health. Tapping into the unique music and craftsmanship heritage of Appalachia, these options include long-term apprenticeships in a tradecraft; one-day “art slams” to learn about local art forms; and workshops focused on blacksmithing, luthiery, and ceramics. The Culture of Recovery’s cross-sector strategy co-advances cultural assets, health care, and community development.

**Takeaway: The arts and cultural assets of any region can be leveraged in cross-sector partnerships to safely improve mental and behavioral health care.**

**Social Cohesion.** The [Islands of Milwaukee](#) initiative in Milwaukee, Wisconsin embedded artists within community systems, such as meal delivery programs, to cultivate new connections with aging residents. Through arts interactions and arts-based research methods, the program discovered that several dangerous intersections in the city had created “islands” that prevented aging residents from accessing the rest of the community. When these initiative’s findings were shared through arts performances, the timing of some Milwaukee traffic stops was changed within days. In addition to shifting the built environment to reduce the seniors’ social isolation, Islands of Milwaukee also inspired ongoing in-home visits from artists, dance and painting sessions, and enduring relationships that supported social cohesion long after the initiative ended.

**Takeaway: A community’s arts and cultural assets provide innovative ways to cultivate sustainable social connections, even among traditionally-isolated populations. They can generate data—and call attention to that data—to impact policy.**

**Rural Health.** [The Farm Dinner Theatre](#) program (Tennessee, Virginia and Kentucky) responds to critical health issues among rural farmers, including high rates of suicide and fatal and non-fatal injury. The program provides safe environments in which, over meals and theater performances, local farm communities converse and learn about health and safety. The program has increased farmers’ capacity to discuss stress, depression, and suicide, and has improved access to local health care systems. In addition, a study found that program participants experienced significantly higher levels of health behavior change than non-participants. Farm Dinner Theater optimizes resources from university extension offices, local health services, and local arts and culture assets. For more on rural health, read the NGA’s “Rural Prosperity through the Creative Sector” [here](#).

**Takeaway: Arts and culture experiences can improve health care access in rural communities and facilitate education and behavior change.**

<sup>1</sup>Find citations and further research in the 2019 *Creating Healthy Communities Through Cross-sector Collaboration* white paper; <sup>2</sup>See [AFTA’s Arts Services Directory](#) and [NASAA’s State Arts Agencies Directory](#); <sup>3</sup>These issues have recently been prioritized by [NGA](#), [NASHP](#), [USCM](#), and [Healthy People 2020](#).