vital

Why healthy aging depends on the arts.



AZ COMMISSION ON THE ARTS

NASAA NATIONAL ASSEMBLY of STATE ARTS AGENCIES



10,000

people in the US turn 65 every day







America is aging, *fast.*

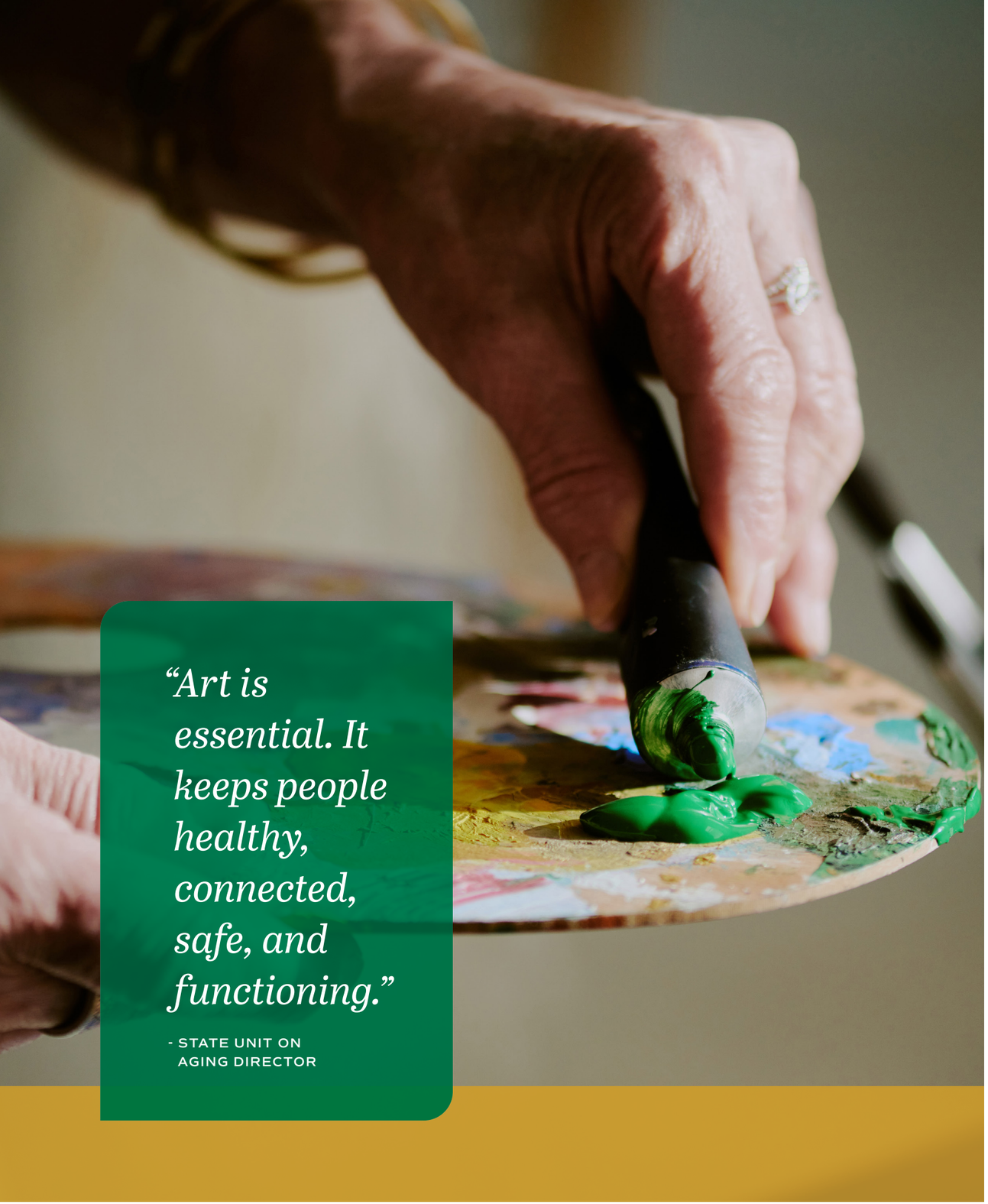
Within five years, one in five Americans will be over 65.[1] And this demographic shift will touch every community, family, and state system of care.

As a nation, we're recognizing the need to do more than just help people live longer. We're beholden to help them live better — more connected, creative, engaged lives. Yet today, one in three older adults experience isolation, declining health, and a loss of purpose.[2] The downstream data is clear: loneliness shortens lives, strains public health systems, and costs billions in preventable care.

But there's a better way. **Creative aging**.

Creative aging programs use the arts as a pathway to connection, confidence, and vitality in older adults. When people of all ages create, they don't just make art. They make friends. They make meaning. They make measurable gains in their health and well-being. This is the real power of the arts — healthier, more resilient individuals — and it transcends age.

> Creative aging isn't just good for people, it's good policy. It's a positive redirection of system resources. It's prevention, participation, and purpose all in one. Creative aging is profoundly more than just beneficial; it's ***vital***.



“Art is essential. It keeps people healthy, connected, safe, and functioning.”

- STATE UNIT ON AGING DIRECTOR

Effective Preventive Care

Creative aging delivers what every community needs: healthier, more connected, more resilient older adults.

America is aging at a pace without precedent. While billions are spent treating the downstream effects of aging — like falls, hospitalizations, depression, and loneliness — far too little investment is made upstream, in preventive and cost-effective approaches that can keep older adults thriving.

Creative aging offers exactly that: an affordable, proven way to improve health, reduce social isolation, and enrich community well-being at a population level for older adults.[4] Increasingly, leaders across the aging network are exploring its potential to not only save the healthcare system millions in avoidable costs, but to forge a healthier population.

AVERAGE COSTS PER INDIVIDUAL

$1,110

MEDICARE ER VISIT[5]

$221

EIGHT- TO 12-WEEK CREATIVE AGING PROGRAM

Programs like creative aging that foster preventive care and wellness for older adults deliver significant downstream cost benefits, potentially even significant system savings for taxpayers.



PHYSICAL BENEFITS

Research shows that creative aging delivers tangible individual health benefits.

- **Fewer doctor visits and medications**. Studies showed that participants in art workshops averaged 30% fewer annual physician visits and used fewer prescription drugs than peers in comparison groups.[4]
- **Better overall health**. Research has shown that after one year, 60% of participants rated their health "good" or "excellent," compared to 45% in the control group.[4]
- **Fewer falls and greater mobility**. Dance and movement classes adapted for balance increase physical confidence, helping older adults stay active and independent.
- **Sharper minds**. Older adults who create and attend art classes score seven times higher on composite cognition measures than non-participants, with gains that persist for years.[6]

SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL BENEFITS

Loneliness affects one in four older adults and increases mortality risk as much as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.[7] Creative aging directly counters this crisis.

- **More social connection**. 97% of participants in Utah's statewide initiative reported feeling more socially connected.[8]
- **Stronger relationships**. Evaluations across multiple states show strong gains in friendships, belonging, and confidence.[9]
- **Less depression**. Older adults who engaged in creative activities are **20% less likely to experience depression**, immediately and two years later.[18]
- **More purpose**. Participants describe the programs as "life-giving," "a reason to get up in the morning," and "the place where I feel like myself again."

> By 2034, older adults will outnumber children under 18 in the US for the first time ever.[1] Every day through 2027, 10,000 Americans will turn 60, and by 2030, about 6,500 people a day will begin turning 80.[3]

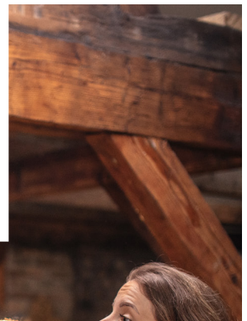






> Creative aging is far more than a casual hour of crafts. It's structured, sequential skill building designed specifically for older adults, led by professional teaching artists. Imagine a 10-week storytelling course that develops narrative technique step-by-step; a choral series culminating in a public performance; or a dance program adapted for mobility and balance. **When older adults learn, create, and share in community, the benefits are measurable and profound.**







An Affordable Equation

Creative aging programs are modest in cost, especially when compared to the downstream healthcare dollars associated with aging.

Older adults account for $1.4 trillion in annual US healthcare spending.[10] It's a figure that will rise rapidly as our population ages, and much of this spending is driven by conditions linked to the very conditions creative aging helps combat — isolation and inactivity, specifically falls, depression, cognitive decline, and chronic disease.

Creative aging offers a cost-effective path to improved health, typically $1,800–$3,500 for an eight- to 12-week series for up to 12 people. Even small shifts in health outcomes more than cover that investment.

- Seniors accounted for 19 million emergency department visits in 2021, which cost on average $1,100 healthcare dollars per visit.[5]
- Social prescribing studies, where patients are prescribed a community-based activity such as an art class, show a 2:1 return on investment.[11]
- The UK "Arts on Prescription" initiative showed participants had 37% fewer primary care visits and 27% fewer hospital admissions.[12] Applied at US scale, even half of that impact would cover most program delivery costs.

2:1

ROI WHEN SENIORS ARE PRESCRIBED COMMUNITY-BASED ACTIVITIES





“Creative aging could be the mechanism that keeps older adults in their community and out of skilled care.”

- STATE UNIT ON AGING DIRECTOR

Proven, Available, Collaborative

The good news — creative aging programs are already bringing together older adults with stakeholders interested in leveraging the arts for better health. Programs have moved from promising pilots into a national movement, demonstrating that it can:

- Improve health and well-being for older adults.
- Help cultural institutions reimagine their role as places of lifelong learning and social connection.
- Provide stakeholders with a cost-effective, evidence-based strategy aligned with statewide healthy aging goals.

Progress and funding have accelerated over the past eight years from exploratory efforts to increasingly widespread programming.



"We're getting older every day. It's not a bad thing."

- AREA AGENCY ON AGING DIRECTOR

PROGRAMS ALREADY IN PLAY

Since 2020, the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) has collaborated with state and jurisdictional arts councils and E.A. Michelson Philanthropy to advance creative aging across the US through a unique public-private partnership. This partnership has catalyzed new and expanded programming for older adults nationwide and elevated the issue of how, across public and private arts sectors, the arts support healthy aging in America.

2020
2021
2022
2023
2024
2025
2026
2027
2028
2029

Leveraging State Investments in Creative Aging (2020–2022)
The Leveraging State Investments in Creative Aging (LSICA) initiative provided funding for state arts agencies (SAAs) to pilot new or expand existing creative aging programs in 36 states. More than 7,600 older adults participated in arts learning programs totaling more than 45,700 instructional hours, despite serious setbacks related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Collectively, SAAs reached 285 counties and 604 distinct ZIP codes with LSICA activities. A majority (54%) of those locations were rural. A sizable number (19%) were high-poverty communities.

States Leading Creative Aging (2023–2025)
The States Leading Creative Aging (SLCA) initiative built on the successes and lessons SAAs learned from the LSICA initiative. Nine state arts agencies each received $95,000 grants to do more of what they do best: provide the public benefit of the arts and creativity to all. In aggregate, SAAs leveraged approximately $535,000 in additional state, federal and private funding to deliver programs. More than 5,600 older adults were served in 105 counties across the nine participating states. Fifty-two percent of those programs took place in rural counties and 17% took place in ZIP codes where poverty is high.

Creative Aging, Creative Futures (2025–2028)
The Creative Aging, Creative Futures (CACF) initiative launched in September 2025. In addition to grant awards designed to support up to 28 state arts agencies in providing creative aging programming for older adults, the CACF initiative extends professional development opportunities for SAAs and the arts and aging sector stakeholders through a national webinar series and ongoing issue awareness efforts.



Leveraging Our Collective Impact

Communities, families, and systems of care are already reshaping themselves and repositioning resources to fluidly accommodate these demographic shifts.

In each state, there is now an aging services network made up of State Units on Aging (SUAs), Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs), and senior centers, among other service providers. SUAs set the statewide priorities through a State Plan on Aging. AAAs translate those plans into local action. And senior centers provide direct services for older adults, including meals, fellowship, exercise, and educational opportunities. This interconnected system represents both the urgency and the opportunity of the moment: policies flow downward from the state, while community insights flow back upward, shaping the next cycle of plans and services.

Already, a growing number of state plans on aging are beginning to acknowledge the power of the arts. Some highlight creative engagement as a tool for reducing social isolation, others as a pathway to resilience and better health. This kind of systems-level recognition reinforces what some stakeholders, like state arts agencies, fundamentally know: creativity and the arts are not luxuries, but vital components of healthy aging.

At the same time, a growing number of partners beyond the traditional aging network are beginning to play an active role in expanding access to creative engagement for older adults. In some states, multi-sector plans on aging are bringing together a broader range of stakeholders committed to improving the well-being of older adults.



Positive Outcomes for Program Participants

Oklahoma Arts Council's signature program, **Stay Gold**, takes its name from classic film *The Outsiders* iconic line, "stay gold Ponyboy." The phrase encourages the protagonist to retain his youthful optimism. The program offers a variety of arts classes, from pottery to ballet. Participants have reported improved physical confidence and community connection.

92%

WOULD "ABSOLUTELY" RECOMMEND THE PROGRAM TO A FRIEND[17]

70%

EXPERIENCED A STRONGER SENSE OF BELONGING, EXPOSURE TO NEW PEOPLE, AND NEW CREATIVE SKILLS[17]

73%

WERE "VERY SATISFIED" WITH THE QUALITY OF INSTRUCTION[17]

83%

RATED FACILITIES AS VERY SAFE AND ACCESSIBLE[17]

Sustaining the Momentum

Strengthening connections among all stakeholders vested in the vitality of older adults is timely and a critical step on the path toward improved aging and better health.

As your state arts agency, we exist at the intersection of the arts, community needs, and statewide systems. We're eager to partner with the public and private sectors to align cultural assets with the aging network, furthering creative aging as a cost-effective, evidence-based practice rooted in the systems already serving millions of older adults. And state leaders have the opportunity now to embed creative aging into our state's plan, establishing it as a core component of the aging network's programming and leveraging a proven strategy to reduce isolation, promote health, and strengthen community vitality.

> By joining forces, sharing space and expertise, we can collectively expand access and impact. It's how we can ensure creative aging moves from pilot projects to permanent practice, transforming how our nation supports older adults and making every community a place where creativity, health, and belonging flourish across the lifespan.

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"Art builds community. It connects us, it releases us, it's what makes us human."

- STATE UNIT ON AGING DIRECTOR


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