

vibrant

How to turn creative aging interest into action.

Creative aging is capturing imaginations across the country because it strengthens health, builds community and enriches lives. People and organizations serving older adults all see the same truth: we thrive when we are connected, expressive and engaged.



Our *Vital* report shows why healthy aging depends on the arts. This guide takes the next step. It shows you how to turn interest into action by implementing the partnerships, processes and programs that bring creative aging to life in your community.



PART 1



Guiding the Movement

Creative aging only reaches its full potential when organizations work together. What's often missing is a catalyst — the facilitator who convenes partners, unites their talents and guides the collective movement forward.

This is where state arts agencies (SAAs) can lead.

SAAs already understand the intersections of the arts, community needs and statewide systems. They are uniquely equipped to convene partners, translate across sectors and create connections that allow a network to function as a cohesive whole. With SAA guidance, partners can move from individual excitement to collective action, working together to build programs that are accessible, equitable, sustainable and grounded in community needs.



PART 2

Building Coalitions

The most effective creative aging programs emerge when stakeholders come together and contribute their distinct expertise. Because states differ in geography, demographics, resources and infrastructure, the mix of partners will vary. A rural region may lean heavily on libraries and senior centers; a city might find its strongest partners in museums, community colleges or hospital foundations.

The goal is not to assemble an exact, scripted combination of partners, but to identify the right collaborators for the community you serve. At its core, though, will be two essential groups: the **Ageing Network** and **cross-sector partners**.

The Ageing Network: Fundamental to Success

The Ageing Network is a partnership of federal, state, tribal and local agencies established by the Older Americans Act to support older adults and their families. The system's primary function is to plan and provide services that help seniors live independently in their homes and communities. Serving as the backbone of aging services in every state, the network relies on three components working together to support older adults' health, social connection and daily needs. For creative aging to take root, these partners need to be at the table.

STATE UNITS ON AGING (SUA)

SUAs set statewide priorities for older adult services by developing the State Plan on Aging, a four-year blueprint guiding everything from nutrition and transportation to health promotion and caregiver support. SUAs shape the vision, establish policy direction and ensure federal Older Americans Act funds are used effectively across the state.

AREA AGENCIES ON AGING (AAA)

AAAs bring that vision into local practice. There are more than 600 AAAs nationwide, each responsible for assessing community needs, coordinating services and contracting with providers. They understand local cultures, demographic realities and gaps in access. Their involvement will ensure that creative aging programs align with community needs and can be integrated into existing service structures.

SENIOR CENTERS

Senior centers are the front doors of the Aging Network — the daily gathering places where older adults receive meals, socialize, exercise, learn and build community. They provide the direct, personal touch that makes creative aging programs welcoming and accessible. Their staff understands older adults' lived experiences, interests and barriers to participation.



What the Aging Network Told Us

In developing this guide, NASAA conducted both a focus group and one-on-one interviews with leaders at all levels of the Aging Network. Across these conversations, the message was unanimous: creative aging is not a luxury; it's essential. Respondents described creative aging as rewarding, effective and deeply aligned with their mission. They clearly articulated the personal benefits to older adults, both the health and wellness gains and the positive impact on families and caregivers. Most importantly, they expressed enthusiasm and readiness to engage in dialogue.

Cross-Sector Partners: Expanding Reach and Impact

Alongside the Aging Network are cross-sector partners whose missions naturally align with creative aging and who bring additional assets, expertise and reach. These may include:

- » Public libraries
- » Museums
- » Community centers
- » Community foundations
- » Community colleges
- » Hospital foundations
- » Retirement communities
- » Arts organizations

These partners strengthen programs, deepen community ownership, and help sustain creative aging long-term through collaboration, shared resources and local visibility. They can connect state arts agencies and the Aging Network with classroom space, funding opportunities and program participants.





PART 3

Bringing People Together

Once the right partners are identified, the next step is convening them. This is when creative aging moves from individual interest to collective intention. It's where relationships deepen, shared purpose is established, and the foundation for collaboration is built.

While emails and virtual conversations have their place, nothing replaces the impact of gathering in person when possible. Sitting around the same table builds trust, reduces misunderstandings and helps partners see one another's strengths firsthand. It creates space for honest conversation and collective problem-solving. And it signals that this work matters enough to merit time, attention and presence.

For state arts agencies, convening is a powerful leadership tool. It allows you to:

- » Introduce creative aging in a way that is inspiring, evidence-based, and grounded in community needs.
- » Frame the opportunity and articulate why collaboration is essential.
- » Build shared understanding across organizations that may not typically work side by side.
- » Identify strengths and gaps, helping partners see where their contributions fit.

Most importantly, convening helps partners begin to imagine what is possible together. It shifts mindsets from “What can we do individually?” to “What could we accomplish collectively?”

As you bring partners together, it is also important to include older adults in the process. Their lived experience offers insight that no organization can replicate. Inviting a small group of older adults to serve in an advisory capacity ensures that decisions are shaped with, not just for, the people these programs aim to support. Their presence signals respect and deepens understanding.

The meetings themselves don’t need to be complicated. What matters is consistency, clarity of purpose and the opportunity for every participant to contribute their voice. In the next section, we outline the key agenda components that help convenings move from conversation to action.





PART 4



Setting an Agenda to Build Coordinated Action

A successful convening gives every partner a shared understanding of what creative aging is, why it matters and what's possible when organizations work together. But what transforms that understanding into real progress is a thoughtful agenda. Depending on the number of participants and where they are located, this can take the form of a single, multi-hour meeting or a series of shorter sessions. The following components help convening move beyond ideas and into the groundwork for coordinated action.

1. Establish a Shared Vision

Every coalition needs a north star. Begin by inviting partners to articulate what creative aging could look like in your state or community. A shared vision helps partners:

- » See themselves in the work.
- » Recognize the value of collaboration.
- » Identify long-term aspirations, not just immediate tasks.
- » Build excitement and mutual ownership.

This vision does not need to be perfect or final. Its purpose is to create alignment.

2. Set a Common Agenda

Once the big-picture vision is clear, partners can define what they want to accomplish together in the near term. A common agenda includes collective goals such as:

- » Expanding access to high-quality creative aging programs.
- » Reaching underserved communities.
- » Increasing the number of trained teaching artists.
- » Strengthening links between the arts and aging networks.
- » Integrating creative aging into local or statewide planning processes.

A common agenda turns vision into direction.

3. Determine What You Will Measure

Measurement creates accountability and demonstrates value to funders, policymakers and partners. Invite organizations to identify the outcomes that matter most. These may include:

- » Participation and attendance.
- » Improvements in social connection.
- » Participant satisfaction.
- » Health or wellness indicators.
- » Expansion of partnerships.
- » Growth in statewide or regional programming.

Agreeing on shared indicators ensures that success is understood the same way across all partners and helps build a unified story of impact.

4. Clarify Roles and Responsibilities

Partners need to understand both their unique expertise and the contributions expected of them. During the convening, identify areas of expertise and input such as:

- » SUAs bring knowledge of statewide priorities and aging policy.
- » AAAs understand local needs and systems.
- » Senior centers offer daily, trusted programming environments.
- » Arts organizations train teaching artists and design curriculum appropriate for older adults.
- » Libraries, museums and foundations bring access, space and reach.

4. Clarify Roles and Responsibilities continued...

As partners come together, one of the most important steps is identifying how each organization can contribute. Creative aging thrives when every partner understands both their unique strengths and the role they can play in bringing programs to life. No single agency will do everything, and no two communities will organize their work in the same way. What matters is clarity about expertise, capacity, infrastructure and contribution.

Mapping these roles helps partners see where they fit, reduces overlap and ensures that responsibilities are shared in a way that is both efficient and sustainable. It also highlights gaps that may require additional support or partnership.

To guide this conversation, partners can begin by considering questions such as:

WHO WILL HELP RECRUIT PARTICIPANTS?

Likely contributors include:

- » Senior centers, that have daily contact with older adults.
- » AAAs, that manage regional outreach systems.
- » Libraries, that are trusted community hubs.
- » Local arts organizations, that have networks of adult learners.
- » Retirement communities, that can reach residents directly.

Recruitment works best when multiple partners help spread the word through their own trusted channels.

WHO CAN HOST PROGRAMS?

Hosting often depends on space, accessibility and community reach. Common hosts include:

- » Senior centers, already equipped for older adult programming.
- » Libraries, with meeting rooms and high foot traffic.
- » Museums, which offer meaningful context for arts learning.
- » Community centers, with flexible multipurpose spaces.
- » Tribal or cultural centers, which provide culturally relevant environments.
- » Retirement communities, which reduce transportation barriers.

A mix of hosts ensures programs reach diverse geographies and communities.

WHO CAN PROVIDE TEACHING ARTISTS OR TRAINING?

The teaching artist pipeline is essential. Likely contributors include:

- » Local arts organizations, that employ or contract teaching artists.
- » Individual teaching artists, often trained by programs offered by Lifetime Arts or other creative aging experts.
- » Museums, which may provide artist-educators.
- » Community colleges or universities, with faculty or arts education students.

Professional teaching artists are central to program quality and participant outcomes.

WHO CAN ASSIST WITH EVALUATION?

Evaluation builds credibility and helps secure future support.

Likely partners include:

- » Area Agencies on Aging, experienced in outcome measurement.
- » Senior centers, that can collect participant feedback.
- » Libraries, museums and arts organizations, that may have evaluation staff.
- » Community foundations, often skilled in data and storytelling.
- » State arts agencies, that can set consistent measurement frameworks.
- » Universities, that have graduate students and faculty with aligned research interests.

Evaluation responsibilities can be light, shared and built into program design.

WHO CAN COORDINATE COMMUNICATION?

Communication ensures partners stay aligned and participants stay informed. Likely leads include:

- » AAAs, that manage regional networks and partner communication.
- » Libraries or museums, which often have strong communications teams.
- » Community foundations, experienced in convening and informing partners.

Clear communication keeps partners connected and programs running smoothly.

5. Identify Funding Opportunities

Creative aging is strengthened by braiding multiple funding sources. Use convening time to map out potential opportunities, such as:

- » Aligning with State Plans on Aging.
- » Applying for federal or state grants.
- » Leveraging community foundation or hospital foundation support.
- » Pursuing local philanthropic partnerships.
- » Using library or museum program funds.

When partners contribute something — be it space, staff time, volunteer support or program dollars — sustainability becomes shared rather than dependent on a single source. A coalition that values and recognizes the tangible and intangible contributions of each partner provides an even stronger backbone for statewide efforts.



A timely opportunity is available to help state arts agencies advance this work. With continued support from E.A. Michelson Philanthropy, NASAA has launched the Creative Aging, Creative Futures initiative, which builds on the success of the two prior initiatives, Leveraging State Investments in Creative Aging (2020–2022) and States Leading Creative Aging (2023–2025). This latest initiative includes a competitive grant program offering up to 28 state arts agencies multi-year awards from 2025 through 2028 to provide funding for more creative aging programs for more older adults. It also includes robust support for all state arts agencies in the form of a new professional learning community dedicated to creative aging. For SAAs ready to convene partners, deepen collaboration and put creative aging into practice, the Creative Aging, Creative Futures initiative offers a powerful opportunity to accelerate progress and ensure long-term impact.



PART 5

Leveraging Resources

As you begin guiding the movement, building coalitions and convening partners, you won't be doing this work alone. State arts agencies have a growing set of tools designed to support the development, communication and coordination of creative aging programs.

In addition to the wealth of information and experience that your fellow state arts agencies have garnered through participating in the Leveraging State Investments in Creative Aging and States Leading Creative Aging initiatives, the following resources can help you introduce the concept, build understanding, make the case to policymakers, run effective convenings, train teaching artists, and design high-quality programs.

Introducing the Concept, Building Understanding and Making the Case

1. Issue Awareness Support

Vital: Why Healthy Aging Depends on the Arts is the foundational resource for creative aging in your state. Developed as a companion to this guide, “Vital” explains in clear, compelling terms why creative aging matters for individuals, communities and aging networks.

This report was intentionally designed for state arts agencies to share with prospective partners and funders. It helps:

- » Introduce the concept of creative aging.
- » Explain the personal, community and health benefits.
- » Shift the narrative away from older adults as a “challenge” toward older adulthood as a period of possibility.
- » Create excitement among partners who may be new to this work.
- » Open doors for conversations with lawmakers and community leaders.

2. Messaging Support

Lifetime Arts, national leader in creative aging training and advocacy, has developed a policy strategy and issue awareness program that helps state arts agencies communicate with lawmakers, funders and other decision-makers about the importance of creative aging. These tools can help you:

- » Articulate the value of creative aging in clear, compelling terms.
- » Prepare for conversations with legislators.
- » Strengthen your case for state or local funding.

Connect directly with Lifetime Arts to explore ways its team can help you expand creative aging access across your state.

Additionally, NASAA has developed a **Messaging Matrix** to support your communications with partners, funders and policymakers. This resource outlines the most compelling messages for each audience within the creative aging ecosystem, from senior centers and AAAs to libraries, museums and community foundations. It can be useful in tailoring your outreach to what resonates most with each group.

3. Research Support

To arm you with additional research, data and support points should you need them while building your coalition and further defining your state's creative aging narrative, we put together a compendium of relevant sources and findings, which can be found in your creative aging toolkit. Similarly, NASAA offers a wealth of research resources on its [Creative Aging](#) web page, under Evaluation and Research.

Also decidedly relevant and worth your exploration is the Indiana Arts Commission's recent [Lifelong Arts Indiana Research](#) project, whose rigorous evaluation process resulted in some of the most robust research findings on creative aging programming in the country.

Running Effective Convenings

1. Video Support

Lifetime Arts' short video on creative aging is a potent, accessible way to introduce partners to the concept. Sharing the video at the beginning of your convening, or sending it in advance, can help ground participants in a shared understanding of what creative aging looks like and why it matters.

Find the video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y3-xwfv-V40&t=11s>.

2. PowerPoint Presentation Support

To support your convening efforts, we also developed a **customizable PowerPoint presentation** you can use to walk partners through the benefits of creative aging, the opportunities in your state and the steps involved in building collaborative programs. This presentation is designed to:

- » Set a common foundation for learning.
- » Spark discussion.
- » Outline coalition-building steps.
- » Help partners visualize what they can accomplish together.

It can be used in a single in-person meeting or across a series of shorter sessions, depending on your needs and the availability of partners.

Training Teaching Artists and Designing High-Quality Programs

1. Teaching Artist Training

There are several effective and experienced organizations that provide teaching artist training across the country, and local organizations already in your network might be a resource, too. Lifetime Arts is a national leader in the training space, offering high-quality, research-based professional development for teaching artists, cultural organizations and community partners. Their trainings help ensure programs are grounded in the best practices of sequential, skill-based arts instruction for older adults. Other excellent training organizations include [Creative Aging Solutions](#), [Arts for the Aging](#) and [SilverKite](#).

Several state arts agencies have also developed creative aging training models, including Pennsylvania Creative Industries' [Academic for Creative Aging](#) and Arizona Commission on the Arts' [AZ Creative Aging Teaching Artist Institute](#).

As your coalition develops, connecting teaching artists to training that allows them to develop specialized skills for working with older adults is one of the most effective ways to establish program quality and consistency across your state.

2. Program Design

Many of the organizations noted above also offer guidance on program design, helping partners structure creative aging classes that follow best practices in sequential, skill-building arts learning. Their frameworks support teaching artists and organizations in shaping programs that are appropriately paced, socially engaging and accessible to older adults with a range of abilities. This expertise can help your coalition develop offerings that are high-quality, consistent and aligned with the principles that make creative aging so effective.



The creation and publication of **Vital & Vibrant: A Creative Aging Toolkit** was made possible by a generous grant from E.A. Michelson Philanthropy.



Thank you for considering creative aging as part of your work. Should you choose to join this movement, you will be helping older adults live more connected, expressive and healthy lives. The programs you build, the partnerships you form and the conversations you spark have the power to make communities stronger and more vibrant for everyone. We're grateful for all you do.

