

CREATIVE AGING

Research Summary & Analysis

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Creative aging has emerged as a powerful, evidence-backed approach to supporting health, well-being and lifelong learning for seniors. Reports and peer-reviewed studies show that arts participation produces measurable improvements in physical health, mental well-being, social connectedness and cognitive functioning among older adults. Programs are most effective when skill-based, sequential and led by trained teaching artists, and when supported by diverse funding models and cross-sector partnerships. Challenges include recruitment, accessibility and sustainability, but there are models offering replicable solutions. Creative aging is increasingly recognized as a core component of healthy aging policies in the US, with significant opportunities for state arts agencies and partners.

PROGRAM DESIGN AND DELIVERY MODELS

Evidence-Based Program Elements

Research shows that the most effective creative aging programs share the following characteristics:

» **Skill-Building and Mastery**

Unlike recreational activities, programs emphasize learning and strengthening skills in arts disciplines such as painting, music, storytelling, theater and dance. For instance, a national meta-analysis of group arts interventions highlighted that mastery-focused approaches led to higher levels of satisfaction and engagement (Zurawik et al., 2019).

» **Sequential Structure**

Programs delivered over a series (usually four–12 weeks) are strongly favored. A foundational NEA-funded study (Cohen et al., 2006) demonstrated that ongoing, weekly engagement produced continued improvements in health and quality of life, whereas isolated events had fleeting or negligible effects.

» **Trained Teaching Artists**

Facilitators should have dual expertise in both their creative field and strategies for engaging older adults safely and effectively. Teaching artist professionalization has emerged as a crucial standard across well-documented programs (Lifetime Arts Model, 2020).

» **Accessible and Diverse Formats**

Universal design principles and multiple access points (in-person, virtual, hybrid) ensure programming reaches seniors of all abilities and backgrounds. Flexibility has proven critical, particularly in response to challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic (WHO Review, 2019; Denver Art Museum Toolkit).

Delivery Settings

Programs are most commonly hosted through:

- » Senior and community centers
- » Public libraries
- » Museums and galleries
- » Residential care and health facilities
- » Virtual or hybrid platforms

Case Example

The Denver Art Museum’s “Creative Aging Toolkit” supports both in-person and remote learning, enabling physical and cognitive engagement for seniors across needs and geographies.



PARTICIPANT OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

Quantitative and qualitative studies consistently demonstrate the following outcomes for older adults in creative aging programs.



Health Improvements

» Physical Health

Lower rates of falls, fewer medications, and improvements in balance and mobility are consistently reported. The NEA's Creativity and Aging Study (Cohen et al., 2006) found program participants had fewer doctor visits and reported better overall health than control groups.

» Sustained Well-being

Benefits are not short-lived: Follow-up assessments up to a year after program completion found health improvements were maintained (Cohen et al., 2006).



Social Benefits

» Decreased Isolation and Depression

Social isolation, a major risk factor for morbidity among seniors, is powerfully addressed by arts participation. Meta-analyses reveal moderate to large reductions in depression and anxiety (Zurawik et al., 2019).

» Enhanced Sense of Belonging

Public sharing of artwork, collaborative projects and group performances increase participants' sense of community and self-worth (Cohen et al., 2006).



Cognitive Enhancements

» Memory and Executive Function

Programs that include memory exercises, creative writing or music show statistically significant improvements in cognitive test scores and daily functioning, with effects that can last six months or longer (Canadian RCT, Saint John, NB; WHO Review, 2019).

» Delayed Cognitive Decline

Participation in regular arts activity is correlated with a lower risk of cognitive decline compared to inactivity and is a better predictor of brain health in late life than education level alone (Petrovsky et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

The evidence is clear: Creative aging is not just a promising field but a proven pathway to healthier, more connected and fulfilled lives for older adults.

Programs built on mastery, community, inclusivity and partnership consistently deliver measurable benefits and provide positive return on investment for funders, policymakers and participants alike. NASAA's membership has an extraordinary opportunity to lead in fostering creative aging as a key policy and practice lever for state healthy aging strategies.

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