Building a Culture of Health: Disruptive Community Leaders in Action

America’s communities face a number of challenges as they work to foster a Culture of Health. Yet creative solutions are emerging. Meet a group of inspirational leaders, identified as part of the AARP Public Policy Institute’s Culture of Health initiative, who are disrupting the health landscape in their communities. Each of these nine leaders (all of whom are 50+, incidentally) saw a challenge before them—literally close to home, in their own communities—and responded. They developed sound solutions by thinking creatively. Such ideas and solutions should be shared—so here’s a look at some successful initiatives and the people behind them.

Paul Leon, Illumination Foundation: Finding value in overlooked assets. Struck by the magnitude of the homelessness problem in California’s Orange County when a friend took him to a shelter, Leon decided to put his unique background—MBA, public health, and nursing—to use. Seeing a resource in rundown motels, Leon started the Illumination Foundation, which converts such motels into clean rooms and recovery facilities for homeless people recently discharged from hospitals. The initiative has proved so successful that Leon is now sharing the idea with other communities around the country.

Gloria McNeal, National University health services outreach: Bringing health services straight to the people. Connecting health services to the people who need them most is a challenge for many communities. Gloria McNeal, dean of the School of Health and Human Services at Los Angeles’s National University, has established nurse-managed clinics that open on certain days right onsite at churches, community centers, and the Salvation Army. She secured cost-effective staffing by employing the services of nursing students from her university; other health professionals also contribute hours. In addition, telehealth services allow for patient-provider interactions that do not require in-person visits.

Elizabeth OuYang, Plum Blossoms: From personal crisis to cultural solution. Liz OuYang’s bout with breast cancer caused her to see a greater need. As was the case with OuYang, cultural norms can prevent people from sharing their challenges and reaching out for support. Moreover, OuYang, who was raised with Chinese cultural values here in the U.S., felt the need to connect with other Asian American women experiencing the trials of breast cancer. From that experience came the idea for Plum Blossoms (www.plumblossoms.me), an online gathering place offering “a safe space to support and empower Asian American women living with breast cancer and their families through stories, poetry, and art.” As a testament to its relevance, the site received 3,000 views in its first month, and it’s grown from there.

Shireen Lewis, SisterMentors: Small seed grows to great tree of support. One day, as a doctoral student studying French literature, Shireen Lewis realized something was missing: she lacked a university support community made up of women of color. So, she formed a group of students, but that wasn’t the end of it. It grew. Then Lewis and her cohorts wanted to pay it forward, so they started mentoring younger students. That eventually led to the founding of Washington, D.C.–based SisterMentors, which provides support for students ranging from young girls to older women going back to school. Today, girls begin the program as young as first grade; meanwhile, women in their 60s, themselves defying age stereotypes by pursuing doctorates, are mentoring middle school and high school girls.

The client goal: 200 percent of the poverty line—or better.
Sari Feldman, Cuyahoga County Public Library’s Hospital Branch: Libraries without walls. Libraries have increasingly become a central and interactive part of the community. Sari Feldman has taken that dynamic to a whole new place—literally. Feldman, executive director of Cuyahoga County (Ohio) Public Library and a former president of the American Library Association, worked with the county hospital to create a mini-library branch right onsite, in a former flower shop. Today, doctors and nurses refer patients and family members there for health information on diet, care, and treatment. Patients readying to reenter the community go for computer access and to conduct job searches. Doctors and other staff come by for information. And new mothers, many from disadvantaged areas of the county, get a special library delivery: a gift pack of children’s books and parenting information.

Patricia McGinnis, California Advocates for Nursing Home Reform: Reforming nursing home practices. After witnessing the overuse of antipsychotic drugs while working in a hospital, McGinnis went to law school and then established the California Advocates for Nursing Home Reform (CANHR). Proving to be especially effective in taking its message to state government is the organization’s Campaign to Stop Chemical Restraints in Nursing Homes. And in addition to advocacy, the group uncovers new solutions: CANHR and McGinnis, its executive director, cohost symposiums at which palliative care experts share evidence-based alternative ways for practitioners to manage common Alzheimer’s-associated behaviors.

Kellen Kee McIntyre, Bihl Haus/GO! Arts Program: Art for the ages. Bihl Haus, a historic property in San Antonio, had fallen into disrepair and stood on land eyed by developers. Plans took shape for an affordable retirement community to go up, but the local neighborhood association resisted plans to tear down Bihl Haus. Art and architecture historian Kellen Kee McIntyre’s solution? Convert the building into a community arts space. Everyone agreed, so it became a gallery. Then enthusiastic volunteers from the new retirement community started asking where they could take art classes. McIntyre found an art teacher, and thus the GO! (Golden Opportunities) Arts Program was born. Today, Bihl Haus Arts Center offers retirement community residents classes in painting, crafts, creative writing, and yoga, and the program has expanded to 15 senior centers.

Siobhan Reardon, Culinary Literacy Center: Food for thought. An initiative developed by Siobhan Reardon, president and director of the Free Library of Philadelphia, tackles some big-city challenges—namely, literacy and food deserts. Reardon and her team took advantage of a library renovation to put in a kitchen, enabling the creation of the Culinary Literacy Center, which now hosts adult education programs focused on food and cooking. Through the fun that comes with cooking, the center teaches literacy and other skills associated with recipe execution, such as math, science, and critical thinking. At the same time, participants enjoy a delicious meal—and gain exposure to healthy eating habits. More than 15,000 patrons of all ages participated in programs at the center during its first two years alone. Reardon’s team is now expanding, creating toolkits to allow for modified programs at library branches that lack full kitchens.

Scott Miller, Circles USA: Breaking the poverty cycle. Scott Miller wants his clients to move out of poverty, not just subsist and survive. That’s what Circles USA, the organization he founded, is all about. The client goal: 200 percent of the poverty line—or better. The model emphasizes personal relationships over mere financial support, with participants building social capital by working with mentorship volunteers who commit to working with a family in distress for 18 months. Circles USA now has a presence in more than 70 communities across the United States and Canada. A recent report found that in 2016, more than 1,200 program participants increased their income by 63 percent.