AARP Well-Being Champions℠: Building a Culture of Health
INTRODUCTION

When it comes to catalyzing a Culture of Health in America’s communities, creative solutions are emerging to promote well-being. As a means of fostering that trend, the AARP Public Policy Institute has launched a **Culture of Health** initiative to champion change across America in the areas of health and well-being.

Meet the AARP **Well-Being Champions**: a group of 10 leaders, **all of whom are 50+**, who saw a challenge before them—literally close to home, in their own communities—and responded. We highlight these Champions and their solutions to help spread good ideas, and to inspire you to generate new solutions for your community.
Libraries without Walls

Today’s libraries are hardly the self-contained structures of yesteryear, solely housing books. And we’re not talking about the mere addition of technology either. Libraries have increasingly become a central and interactive part of the community, a hub of information, activity, and engagement. Sari Feldman has taken that dynamic to a whole new place. Literally.

Inspired by the trend of libraries forging partnerships with other community institutions, Feldman, executive director of Cuyahoga County (Ohio) Public Library and a former president of the American Library Association, reached out to one of the county’s most respected institutions with the idea of placing “a real library service in the county hospital.”

The appeal of the idea was multifaceted, for it would tap a true city asset—that is, the county’s prized hospital—to greater benefit by enabling it to connect more closely with a much broader range of county residents. On the one hand, the county’s hospital boasted top-notch medical facilities; on the other, Cuyohoga ranked in the bottom third on overall health outcomes, with behavioral and socio-economic measures being the primary culprits for dragging down its rankings.

Translation: a key to improving the health of residents lay within the community just as much as it did inside the walls of any state-of-the-art hospital. So Feldman went to work.

With the support from the Mount Sinai Foundation, she teamed with the hospital to repurpose a flower shop—which was ideally located near a bustling cafeteria—into a “hospital branch” of the library. The branch opened in 2010 and “right from the minute [it] opened, it was a complete success,” Feldman recounts. “Having staff engaged with the library helped ... engage patients and their families.”

In a county where socio-economic factors negatively impact health and well-being, doctors and nurses immediately started referring patients and family members to the library for health information specific to them on topics such as diet, care, and treatment. Longer-term patients readying to reenter the community now had computer access for tasks such as job search. Doctors and other staff even came by for information, while family members used the space for both information gathering and respite. And today new mothers, many of whom come from the most disadvantaged areas of the county, get a special library delivery, presented by volunteers: a gift pack that includes children’s books and a wealth of parenting information.

Opportunities to build on the concept and continue fostering well-being, meanwhile, seem almost endless. Further underscoring the concept of the library as a community hub for all—including employees—the hospital is considering an on-site GED program for staff who don’t have high-school diplomas. Further, the partnership between hospital and library flows in both directions—that is, from hospital to other library branches. The hospital, for example, has become a valuable partner in developing library health programming, such as a heroin addiction series.

Cuyohoga Library’s position as a dynamic community hub fuels Feldman with energy to do even more. Naturally, she feeds that energy right back into the library system.

“‘There’s never been a day that I couldn’t wait to go to work,’” she says, “‘because I really believe in what I’m doing.’"
Finding Solutions in Overlooked Assets

When people pass a vacant property—office building, house, motel, whatever—they might dismiss it as being worthless. Others might think, perhaps with a certain level of futility, Wouldn’t it be nice if this could be used for productive purposes? Couldn’t these forgotten structures be used as a solution to a problem?

Paul Leon had that thought—and acted on it.

Well, sort of. Leon actually saw the problem first, and that led him to the property assets most people saw as junk—but that he saw as treasure.

It all started when Leon was working as a public health nurse in Orange County, California and pursuing an MBA at the same time. That unique combination of interests should have been a tip-off to anyone who knew Leon that he just might be one to come up with some creative solutions.

He did. One day a friend brought Leon to a local armory that served as a large homeless shelter. Leon was shocked. Here he was, in one of the wealthiest parts of the country, and vast numbers of people were struggling just to have their basic needs met. He also learned that while homeless individuals could get their urgent health care needs addressed at hospitals and through the traditional health care system, once discharged, they had no safe place to recover and get well.

After Leon finished his MBA, he went to work, tapping skills and talents from his unique business-health care background. One day he identified what turned out to be a goldmine of a resource: older, underused motels, often in undesirable neighborhoods.

Out of that untapped opportunity was born the Illumination Foundation, which turns run-down or abandoned motels into clean recovery facilities and rooms for homeless people recently discharged from the hospital. Today, the Illumination Foundation offers housing assistance, medical care, and mental health services for the homeless population in the Los Angeles County, Orange County, and Inland Empire areas. It serves more individuals every year, including a growing number of older adults.

In addition to addressing immediate health needs and recuperation, the Illumination Foundation helps make connections to social services in the community, including getting people into stable, affordable housing and connecting them to coverage and services. The foundation has served and made a critical difference in the lives of over 8,000 individuals.

Better still, the Illumination Foundation creates efficiencies for the health care system itself. In California, individual hospital stays last approximately four days longer than the national average. Each extra day costs the hospital approximately $3,000 per day of inpatient care. Illumination Foundation Recuperative Care greatly reduces this cost to hospitals by taking homeless clients out of hospital beds and into its care. This effective model of care shows outcomes with 50 percent fewer readmissions within 90 days of being discharged to recuperative care than patients who are discharged to their own care.

How do you create a Culture of Health? How do you generate the kind of impact of the Illumination Foundation, an $8 million organization that now partners with Fortune 500 companies?

According to Leon, “There are just two things you need: find a need in the community, and then just be passionate about it.”

Leon is doing his part to spread the word and spark impact elsewhere. He’s talking to other communities around the country and sharing his creative solution.
Contrary to common assumptions, innovation is seldom born of an idea fleshed out and crystallized from Day One. Oftentimes, ideas start small, and then they take on a life of their own, expanding in scope far beyond what the conceptualizer ever dreamed. It’s a matter of someone with the right intentions acting on a small impulse coming from deep inside.

That was the case with Shireen Lewis and her gem of a concept. One day as a doctorate student studying French Literature, Lewis realized something was missing from her experience. It hit her all at once.

"I got up from bed one morning and decided that I needed a community of women of color to support me during my pursuit of my doctorate," she says, recollecting the moment.

Surely others like her felt the same desire for like-minded support, so in starting a group that would meet an innate need of hers, maybe she could help a few other people as well. Thus, Lewis, who grew up in a small village in Trinidad and Tobago, set out to create her community. It didn’t take long to find a few people to help seed the idea, and before she knew it, Lewis had formed a group of students who could provide support for one another.

End of story? Hardly. The group kept growing—but that still wasn’t the end of it.

Members realized how nourishing the group was to them and how important it was to improving their well-being. They also saw a much greater need beyond the boundaries of a college concept. Inspired by their own experience and harnessing the energy generated by the group, they decided they wanted to pay it forward. Members started connecting with younger students to offer support. 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 can begin with SisterMentors—a program with origins in a graduate-student group on a university campus—as young as first grade. And at the other end of the age-diversity spectrum, women in their 60s, themselves defying age stereotypes by pursuing doctorates, at the same time are reaching back to mentor middle school and high school girls.

The result is a dynamic circle of empowerment—all started with one woman acting on an idea and allowing it to blossom.

“It is the deep hope that I have in my heart that fuels the work I am doing and have done with SisterMentors for close to 20 years," says Lewis, who cites a school-teacher mentor in her village when she was only eight years-old as both a key to her future success as well as an inspiration for the SisterMentors concept.

With this hope and drive, SisterMentors will soon enter their third decade in growth mode. They’re seeking to expand location sites within the District so that they can reach out and work with even more girls and women of color who are daring to dream of higher learning—and realizing those dreams.
Change Agent for Nursing Home Practices

Patricia McGinnis first learned of the issue that would become her life’s work well before she began her career, when she was only a college freshman.

The learning experience came when McGinnis, who grew up in a small western Pennsylvania coal-mining town, took a job in a state hospital. It was there that she witnessed firsthand the perils of institutionalized care. She witnessed how many of the patients with Alzheimer’s (when it didn’t even have a name yet) and other dementia-causing conditions were given Thorazine, an anti-psychotic drug highly overused at the time.

Later, after moving to California, McGinnis worked in various residential care facilities. Disturbed by how freely these facilities would provide residents with psychotropic drugs, she reflected that there was no way the practice could be legal. And the occasions in which she witnessed the practice were not isolated incidents, she realized; widespread use of inappropriate drugging was pervasive, and she could see the detrimental physical and mental side effects on patients. Even more alarming to her was the lack of informed consent from patients and residents.

With such experiences under her belt, McGinnis was on her way to advocating for change. She finished law school in San Francisco, where in 1983 she started Bay Area Advocates for Nursing Home Reform (BANHR) to protect the rights of long-term care consumers. In 1990 BANHR expanded statewide, becoming California Advocates for Nursing Home Reform (CANHR) and signaling McGinnis’s move to take the long-term care reform fight to the state legislature.

Next came the CANHR-launched Campaign to Eliminate the Inappropriate Use of Psychotropic Drugs and Improve Dementia Care in Nursing Homes, which is dedicated to eliminating the “culture of drugging” by replacing it with a more person-centered approach. Since the inception of the Campaign in 2010, CANHR has co-hosted over 13 symposiums, where palliative care experts spoke on evidence-based alternatives to help practitioners manage commonly associated behaviors of those with Alzheimer’s (i.e. aggression, wandering, etc.). The Campaign has been widely acclaimed as a success, having documented a reduced use of “chemical restraints” by nearly 20 percent for nursing home residents with dementia.

McGinnis knows reform on this issue still has a long way to go. According to CANHR’s website, as many as 20,018 residents in California’s nursing homes are still being given antipsychotic drugs. Thus, CANHR will continue convening symposiums and redouble outreach efforts to educate consumers and legislators. McGinnis wants people to know that there are alternative methods to treat those with Alzheimer’s and dementia, and most of these options include adopting a more person-centered approach in care.

As progress continues at a slow but steady pace, McGinnis and CANHR continue to look at other areas to tackle and services it can provide to assist older individuals and their families. Meantime, much work remains in the advocacy arena.

“Everyone needs to be an advocate,” says McGinnis. “Staying quiet is not an option.”
Art for the Ages

A good idea takes on a life of its own—that's the story of Bihl Haus Arts Center and the GO! Arts Program.

The story starts in an all-too familiar setting: an historic structure—this one in San Antonio, Texas—that had fallen into disrepair. By the early 2000s, the home known as Bihl Haus, named after its first resident and dating back to 1920, was dilapidated and crumbling, literally a shell of its former self, for it resembled a bombed-out building, graffiti and all. Meanwhile, another threat loomed for the building that boasted both architectural and historical significance: it stood on land eyed by developers.

Plans took shape for what otherwise would be a welcome addition to the Deco District section of the city: an affordable retirement community. The local neighborhood association, while open to options for the sizable chunk of land surrounding Bihl Haus, resisted the notion of tearing down the historic structure.

Enter art and architecture historian Kellen Kee McIntyre, who proposed that the former home be converted to a community arts space. Both sides agreed.

The story, however, does not end with the building’s renovation and new use. Yes, at first the crisp new space hosted gallery events, adding a dynamic institution to both the neighborhood as well as the new affordable retirement community. But then came the next stage of the transformation, which began when a resident of the new Primrose at Monticello Park Senior Apartments volunteered as a docent. Then others volunteered, and still others. The space was becoming a true part of the community.

The building’s story was still not finished; next, it realized its full potential—its destiny, you might say. One day, a volunteer asked McIntyre, “Where can I take art classes around here?” That gave McIntyre another idea. She found an art teacher, and what became known as the GO! (Golden Opportunities) Arts Program was born.

Thus, through her guidance, a dilapidated home had morphed into a gallery, which then became an interactive, multifaceted arts center serving the community—and specifically older individuals, providing them with the opportunity to enhance their well-being by feeding their creative minds and connect socially. For art and architecture historian Kellen, the initiative has become a new passion.

“It’s like magic, what happens in those classes,” she says. “They come to their first class with closed body language and two months later they’re interacting with students around the classroom. At other times they’re so focused as they struggle to put thought on paper. Everyone has a story. I’m humbled by what they tell and do.”

The blossoming of facility and program have continued. Today, Bihl Haus Arts offers residents of Primrose classes in painting, crafts, creative writing, and yoga. Classes are taught by professional artists, several of whom live in the neighborhood, which historically has been an artist’s hub. Since Kellen kicked off GO! Arts in 2007, it has expanded to 15 senior centers across the city.
Bringing Health Services Straight to the People

First came the gritty Philadelphia neighborhood where she grew up. Then on to the tough areas of Newark, New Jersey, where she delved into her life’s work. And finally, to Los Angeles—where a gem of an idea blossomed.

Early life and professional experiences gave Gloria McNeal a passion for health care, and serving the underserved. And wherever her life path took her, she drew the same conclusion: Where you live, learn, work, and play determine not just your life course; these variables determine your very health.

All while gaining this wisdom, McNeal acquired an impressive resume of formal expertise, including a Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration and Master of Science in Nursing from the University of Pennsylvania as well as several pre- and post-doctoral fellowships.

Solutions to big issues, of course, don’t come easily. McNeal knew that to reach people in need, she would have to bring health care to the residents of a given community. She began those efforts with mobile health van initiatives in Philadelphia and Newark. That was a start (in fact, a highly innovative idea of another time), but delivering health services from inside a van is far from ideal.

“We had to coax people to come into the van,” McNeal says. “They didn’t trust us right away.”

In short, a “drive-by” mobile van did not enable the initiative to become a part of the community. Ideally, health services would be a destination within the community. They would provide care in places clients already frequent.

McNeal took those experiences and some percolating ideas to Los Angeles, home to many of the same urban health problems she knew so well. In the city’s Watts neighborhood, the average life expectancy is significantly lower than that of neighboring areas. It was there that McNeal came up with the idea that transcended the mobile health service challenges.

Working with community-based organizations willing to collaborate by providing space, McNeal, the dean of the School of Health and Human Services at Los Angeles’s National University, established nurse-managed clinics right on site at locations including churches, community centers, and the Salvation Army. A second phase of the initiative also reaches clients literally where they live—that is, via telehealth services for patient-provider interactions that do not require in-person visits.

The initiative even features an innovative means of staffing the clinics in a cost-effective way: National University nursing students provide the services. In addition, a multidisciplinary team of health professionals—including those in informatics, public health, and other allied health professions—contribute to the design and implementation of the initiative.

Thus, good ideas build on good ideas. And with thought leaders like McNeal at the helm, yesterday’s solutions are often set aside for something better still.

“The mobile clinic was great when we started 20 years ago,” she says, “but it was time to improve on the model and disrupt the way care was delivered.”
One day back in the 1980s, Scott Miller visited a homeless shelter. That’s not an uncommon thing to do; thankfully, many people volunteer their time every day at soup kitchens, shelters, and other facilities that serve the homeless.

In Miller’s case, the experience caused him to start asking questions. How, for instance, can people die of poverty in the United States, the richest country on the planet? The questions kept coming, even the hard ones that others might not think to ask: How is it that so much money can be poured into the fight against poverty without significantly moving the needle?

Thus, one day’s visit to a shelter—and the cascade of questions that subsequently cropped up in a mind that had started to obsess on the issue—set Miller on his life’s work. By the time he’d honed in on the specifics of how he would help, one key element had crystallized: Miller didn’t want to just help clients subsist and survive. He wanted to see them move out of poverty. For good.

“When you have a system of organizations that are in the business of managing poverty rather than getting people out,” he says, “you just get more poverty.”

That point of view is what drove Miller to eventually found Circles USA. And it’s also why the goal for every one of Circles USA clients is both tangible and aggressive. No, the program is not simply about finding employment or an apartment. Circles USA is centered on a simple math calculation that, if achieved, can catapult a person to stability: 200 percent of the poverty line. At least. That’s because Miller would never want to put limitations on an individual.

Emblematic of Circles USA’s philosophy of empowerment, the organization enables client success via the same means all people achieve it: through relationships. Participants build social capital by engaging with volunteer mentors, connecting with peers who are on the same journey, and linking up with the existing system of social support—all components that enhance well-being.

The approach is yielding results and enabling new starts for an ever-growing number of people, with Circles USA having established a presence in more than 70 communities across the U.S. and Canada. A recent report found that in 2016, over 1,200 program participants increased their income by 63 percent and that for those participating in Circles USA’s 18-month program, unemployment was reduced by an impressive 44 percent.
ELIZABETH OUYANG
PLUM BLOSSOMS

From Personal Crisis to Cultural Solution

When Liz OuYang received a breast cancer diagnosis, for once the outspoken civil rights lawyer found herself at a loss for words.

OuYang was raised with Chinese values here in the U.S.; in many Asian cultures commiserating or reaching out for emotional support outside the family can be seen as a sign of weakness. Moreover, in times of crisis, the expectation for women is to project outward harmony, often at the expense of the healthy expression of emotion.

“Asian women are expected to sacrifice their true emotions to maintain this outward harmony and to demonstrate instead, inner stamina and strength to tolerate crisis,” says OuYang.

As a result, many women suffer silently and experience feelings of isolation and hopelessness.

Liz had witnessed this cultural barrier firsthand when her mother quietly suffered through her own battle with cancer, eventually losing that battle. She also encountered Asian-American women in her own community confronting health challenges who were reluctant to share their experiences for the same reasons.

And then there was the identity she’d embraced and valued as an adult. OuYang had always linked her identity with her work. Now, however, she feared others would identify her first as someone with cancer. Confronted with deeply engrained cultural norms and this new fear, OuYang dug through the internal swirl of emotion and mental shifts and arrived at a realization: She longed to speak with other Asians in her position. But to whom could she reach out? She was unable to find the resources she sought.

Throughout the course of her cancer journey, OuYang would experience the lack of psychosocial support services available to Asian and Asian American women. Finally, after reaching her five-year milestone for cancer survival, she decided to do something about it—for others like her who would have to travel her path.

Out of OuYang’s experience and A/P/A Institute at New York University came Plum Blossoms, an online space geared toward Asian women and their families who have found themselves in situations similar to OuYang’s. The website describes itself as “a safe space to support and empower Asian American women living with breast cancer and their families through stories, poetry, and art.” Among other offerings, the site includes oral histories featuring Asian American women that can empower others facing breast cancer within the Asian American community. Later, with financial support from Susan G. Komen Foundation, OuYang was able to tell stories of Asian immigrant women living with breast cancer in Korean, Bangla, and Chinese.

According to OuYang, research has shown that breast cancer resources and support services tailored to Asian women are lacking. Plum Blossoms confirmed that reality, illuminating a pent-up demand that rivaled the quelled feelings of those Asian American women living with breast cancer: the site received 3,000 views in its first month, and it’s grown from there.
An American Rural Transit Mastermind

It’s no doubt startling to passers-by to see Robin Phillips whip off her skirt right there on the sidewalk, leaving her standing in black spandex shorts, a white oxford, and a colorful abstract floral scarf around her neck.

From there, she continues her transformation from DC office worker to urban bike commuter, pulling a helmet from her faded yellow cargo carrier hitched to her bike and replacing it with her rolled-up office attire. She unlocks her bike. She unlocks her carrier. Now, she is ready for what obviously is a well-practiced ritual of getting around the city without a car.

Her transportation of choice—and career of choice—are engrained in her. “My multi-modal approach to mobility evolved as I grew up,” she explains. “I was seven in 1968 when I took my first city bus trip alone in the north end of Chicago to my after-school program. I moved to Portland, Oregon for college without a car. While a regional transit program manager, I lived in highly rural, eastern Oregon for a year and a half without a car. That may seem really wild but the fact is, there is an existing network of transportation services that residents can tap.”

Given such resourcefulness and creativity, her accomplishments aren’t much of a surprise. Among them: This office worker-turned-urban biker is the mastermind behind the rebirth of rural, intercity bus service in America. And her mission continues.

In spite of her urban lifestyle these days, in fact, rural transportation remains her passion. For a long time, rural intercity bus service has been in need of rejuvenation. Since the late 1960s various industry disruptions led to millions of rural residents losing access to scheduled, intercity bus service as Greyhound and other operators closed depots in towns across America. Between 1997 and 2007, while serving as a transit program manager in Oregon and later Washington, Robin helped these Pacific Northwest states find a way to reverse that trend. She negotiated agreements among Greyhound and local private operators, and the state Department of Transportation. Greyhound came to the table as a true partner with the public sector to reinvest in rural America.

A landmark brainchild of Robin’s: an accounting method that made it easier for states to access federal funding by tapping into private sector investment in intercity bus service. Robin’s concept was approved by the Federal Transit Administration with the help of other industry experts, first as a pilot initiative. In 2012, the US Congress formalized the program by statute, opening up the opportunity for all states to set up these public-private partnerships with Greyhound and other companies. Today 29 states, have programs in place. Consequently, they have restored intercity bus service to more than 600 rural communities along 80 routes, enabling greater access to jobs, health-care services, and other resources supporting well-being. An AARP Public Policy Institute video and publication has recounted one state’s success.¹
Food for Thought

No Food Allowed.

If you’ve been to a library, you likely know that edict. But at the Free Library of Philadelphia, the rule doesn’t apply. In fact, they serve up supper on platters.

In the process, through its creative ways, the Free Library is tackling two big-city challenges that on the surface might seem miles apart. And thanks to the innovation of Siobhan Reardon and her staff, it’s doing so all through a single initiative.

The first of the seemingly disparate challenges: illiteracy rates. The second: food. As in, food deserts, poor nutrition, and so on.

It all started when Reardon, president and director of the library system, and her team took advantage of a library renovation to put in a kitchen. That enabled the creation of the Culinary Literacy Center, where Reardon and her staff started a series of adult education programs built around cooking. Through the fun that comes with cooking (and eating!), the center teaches literacy—and so much more. A recipe, notes Reardon, “addresses nominal literacy skills, it addresses math skills, it addresses science, it gets at communications because you have to talk though your recipes, it gets at critical thinking, because you can change a recipe, it is health literacy.”

Not to mention that the multifaceted experience has cultural elements and fosters social engagement; in other words, the list goes on. Today patrons can register for such free or low-cost ($5) classes as Great Garbanzos!, CityLife Clinic: Adult Nutrition Workshop, or A Taste of African Heritage.

Such classes might, for example, shine the spotlight on an overlooked culinary tradition, and in most cases, they likely will offer healthy, inexpensive, and practical nutritional alternatives to the all-too-common fare that’s feeding high rates of diabetes, heart disease, and obesity rates in many urban areas including Philadelphia. Some offerings, meanwhile, provide an opportunity for new Americans to build their English language skills while sharing their culture with their new neighbors and building connections within their new community.

Community members love the program, says Reardon, and that sentiment is confirmed in the numbers. Over 15,000 patrons of all ages participated at the Center during its first two years alone. In response, Reardon and her team are now expanding, creating toolkits to allow for modified programs at other library branches that lack full kitchen resources.
Learn more.

www.aarp.org/cultureofhealth