



Creative Aging in the Healthy Aging Ecosystem Convo

Audio Transcript

Speakers:

Heather Ikemire, Executive Director

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Liza Cucco | Lifetime Arts: Hello, thank you for joining us today for our LinkedIn Live, Diving into Lifetime Arts Policy Brief. What if access to creative expression was treated as a public health right, not a luxury?

Liza Cucco | Lifetime Arts: If we're serious about building a healthy aging ecosystem, creativity cannot be on the sidelines. And that is why Lifetime Arts has invested the last year in producing this policy brief, Creative Aging and the Healthy Aging Ecosystem.

Liza Cucco | Lifetime Arts: My name is Liza Cucco. I'm the Director of External Affairs here at Lifetime Arts, and I'm joined by Heather Ikemire.

Heather Ikemire, Lifetime Arts: Hi everyone, I'm Heather Ikemire, I'm the Executive Director of Lifetime Arts. And just for those of you who might not know, Lifetime Arts is about an 18-year-old nonprofit organization, and really a leading national training and advocacy organization for creative aging.

Liza Cucco | Lifetime Arts: So, the purpose of our conversation here today is to just share with you a little bit about this policy brief, what's in it, how it came to be, and what we hope that it will help to accomplish.

Liza Cucco | Lifetime Arts: To get started, I think the first thing for us to be on the same page about is what is creative aging?

Liza Cucco | Lifetime Arts: So, at Lifetime Arts, we define creative aging as the practice of intentional, artistic, and creative engagement throughout our lives to support our health, our connection, and our purpose as we age. Creative aging recognizes that creativity is lifelong.

Liza Cucco | Lifetime Arts: It also recognizes that older adults are essential cultural contributors across all art forms, skill levels, and communities.

Liza Cucco | Lifetime Arts: We believe that we all continue to learn and grow throughout the full duration of our lives, and that no matter your age, you are a really valuable contributor to society. Creative aging programs really help to

Liza Cucco | Lifetime Arts: Establish that in a visible way, both for people in their own lives and for the communities around that engage with them.

Liza Cucco | Lifetime Arts: Heather, I want to hand it over to you to talk about why Lifetime Arts, what drove us to want to produce this policy brief to begin with.

Heather Ikemire, Lifetime Arts: Sure, of course. So, as I mentioned, Lifetime Arts, for almost two decades, has been working with artists, with a range of community organizations, from housing communities, libraries, veterans' homes, and arts organizations.

And really a variety of state agencies and regional organizations across the country. And we've been doing work to really train artists to work in all of those settings with older adults, adapting what they do well to older adult learners. And we've also been really supporting organizations, including many organizations who may not already be integrating arts into their work, to really understand the benefits of arts engagement and creativity, throughout older adult programming services and care.

And as we've been doing this work, we always talk about sustainability. How can an organization keep doing this work, make it part of their core mission, part of their strategic plan, or their budgets?

But, over almost two decades of doing this work, there's sort of resounding questions of, okay, this is great, but beyond sort of doing programs, how do we get this to stick?

Heather Ikemire, Lifetime Arts: How do we think about, you know, creativity as part of healthy aging across our lifespans, and what does that look like from a systems level? Right? And so we really sat with that question, and also sat with, like, well then, also, how do we support people in really making the case for this work? Not only within the arts, but across aging and public health?

So our vision at Lifetime Arts is what is a future where creativity and arts engagement is woven into the fabric of community, right? And one of our colleagues and friends, Dr. Jill Sonke, out of the University of Florida Arts and Medicine Project, has this wonderful phrase when she's thinking about the future of arts and health of the seatbelt moment. Right?

I am 49 years old, I grew up climbing into my parents' oldsmobile station wagon with my two brothers with no seatbelts, often in the back, you know, looking out. And now, when I get in my car and my family gets in our car, we click those seatbelts without even thinking it's muscle memory, right? How do we get to a future when we think about aging.

Heather Ikemire, Lifetime Arts: Creativity is like that seatbelt moment. When we think about it, we know it's important to go to the gym and get exercise or take a walk, we know nutrition is important to aging, that we think that we have a future, right? And that we're building a future where creativity and arts engagement is just as important as part of a holistic approach to aging as nutrition, exercise, and medical health as well.

And so that was really the vision behind this policy brief, is to work with experts across public health, arts, and aging, and really think about, how can we make the case for creative engagement, within the healthy aging agenda.

Liza Cucco | Lifetime Arts: Heather, I would love it if you could share with people a little bit more about how we, how we got from the point of thinking that this is something that we need to create. I remember our... some of our early conversations and just grappling with what is our best approach here? And I... yeah, I would love it if you could tell people a little bit more about how we decide to move forward.

Heather Ikemire, Lifetime Arts: Yeah, sure. Well, first I just want to shout out the Music Man Foundation, which funded this project. They have really invested in policy and advocacy work that is connected to sector change, and so I just, I think there was a funder that believed in the vision of the project, and I really want to applaud the Music Man Foundation for doing that. And we also engaged a national, aging policy expert, Gretchen Alchemia, to really work closely with us and bring her expertise to bear on this project. So she worked with us and a five-member advisory group that included experts nationally, across the fields of public health, arts, and aging to advise us on, both a landscape analysis.

We spent a lot of time looking at research across those three fields, and also some of the policy levers that we... We think, can really help to move creative aging forward, and spent about a year, looking at all of that, and then really co-authoring this, this incredible piece. We produced both a policy app, brief, which is available to everyone, free and open to the public, and more on that in a minute. And then we also actually started to sketch out an action plan framework, which will be available

Heather Ikemire, Lifetime Arts: Later this month, we'll talk about that, too. But through, really that landscape analysis and all of the expertise shared across, you know, Gretchen's work and our work and the work of the advisory group, we were able to really identify three trending issues, in the healthy aging agenda that had really strong and resonant links with creative aging and the evidence that supports, creative aging alignment in these three areas. And they are, as you can see from the slide, brain health. Right?

So there's so much attention, across communities, in the corporate sector, throughout research on the impact of creative learning on cognitive function, memory, and mental health. The other is social connectedness, and of course, there

was a lot of attention paid to this, during and just post-COVID, but really, this is something, especially those of us in the arts have known for a long time, right? The way that when we're engaging the arts, whether that's going to see a performance or attending an art class, that real community relationships can be formed that can lead to reductions in loneliness, and that can really strengthen our emotional resilience. And this is particularly true as we age.

Heather Ikemire, Lifetime Arts: So we may have to move away from where we live, as, you know, family moves away, as you may have children that move on to other parts of the country or the world. And so, really, how do we continue to strengthen that social fabric? And then finally, livable communities. And so, looking at the ways that engaging in the arts can foster new relationships, can provide opportunities for older adults to really contribute to community, community decision-making, events, and really create vital neighborhoods that are inclusive.

So we looked at those three trending issues, and then we also laid out three primary policy pathways, with a focus particularly on the state and local levels. And so, one of those policy pathways was Medicaid and Medicare waiver programs. We also looked at the Older Americans Act state plans, and, you know, where states can really decide how funds can flow to local services.

Heather Ikemire, Lifetime Arts: And then also multi-sector plans for aging. And for those of you who might not be as familiar with, what are called MPAs, these are really 10-year, multi-sector, state-specific blueprints for holistic aging that engage both community and, agencies across Health and Human Services, Veterans Affairs, libraries, aging, transportation, in a real process to think about how they can support communities and individuals, through... through aging.

So the brief is not only sort of a review of those policy pathways, but also, you know, presents a really growing body of evidence that supports the benefits of arts engagement in health and some of the policy recommendations that are noted. And I guess back to you, Liza, I know that you've been working really closely with our team to sort of make this body of research and evidence really accessible.

Heather Ikemire, Lifetime Arts: Not only, related to this policy brief, but in, you know, a lot of the work that we've been doing with training and some of our free resources online. And I wonder, if you could tell us a little bit more around, you know, what that research is indicating.

Liza Cucco | Lifetime Arts: Yeah, well, you know, if you've already looked at the full policy brief, PDF, you'll see that there's about 3 pages of references. So, this is... and this is not all, you know, this is not all the research, but some of the stuff that we found most impactful.

One thing that I just wanted to flag about the multi-sector plans for aging and the group of people that we brought together to work on this policy brief is that it is really important for us to be working across our different silos and sectors, and working together, and this really means that you know, people are coming together to collaborate on these creative aging initiatives that have never really... don't really speak... always speak the same language. They don't always look at the same references, and so something that is just so important to Lifetime Arts is doing everything that we can to support those relationships between and across sectors.

Liza Cucco | Lifetime Arts: And so, to me, one thing that I felt like that I can do... I'm not a policy expert, or, you know, I don't have a PhD in gerontology, but I do know about talking to people, and so one thing that I felt like I could really contribute to is helping translate some of this evidence and research into terms that people can understand when they're not experts in the particular sector that research is coming from.

So, we've been releasing a few resources, and my colleague Jacqueline is gonna throw something into the LinkedIn chat that is one of our webpages that bundles up some of this stuff. But I just wanted to highlight a couple really interesting things that have come out.

So, one thing, you know, you...creative aging, or participating in the arts, helps us in all manner of ways, sometimes ways that aren't predictable. Like, you can take a painting class and fall less. Which, to me, when I heard that, it, you know, it made

sense to me that you could take a dance class and fall less, but take a painting class and fall less. Like, there's really interesting things happening in the brain.

Liza Cucco | Lifetime Arts: Older adults who engage in creative activities have been shown in studies to be 20% less likely to experience depression, both immediately when they're taking the class and years after the class happens. So, the impact isn't just in this one moment, it is something that is changing something in the way that our brains are wired. Older adults who engage in creative activities at a more frequent pace show better functioning across pretty much any spectrum, from fitness, sleep, and overall feelings of their health.

There's a study that's come out, I think, recently that's shown that both art making, so participating in making art, and enjoying the art that others are making for up to an hour a week, just one hour a week, leads to better executive function, right? So, we can reason better, speak better, and that research has shown that that participation can last up to 7... have an impact for up to 7 years.

And the last thing that I just wanted to flag is that the more people engage in social, cultural, and community activities, the less they go to the hospital, the less they stay in nursing homes, and the more they access routine healthcare. So...that's why when we talk about this, we're talking about this ecosystem, right? Like, creative aging and arts participation is... is plugging people into an ecosystem that's looking at the whole person's health, like, looking at our wellness at 360 degrees.

Liza Cucco | Lifetime Arts: And I just wanted to share, like, a couple stories. Something that, in an article that we recently published, links to some of those studies that I just mentioned the outcomes of. There's a quote from Dr. Daisy Fancourt, who is a researcher at University College London, my alma mater. And, Dr. Fancourt had referenced a person that she was working with, named Russell, who was participating in an arts on referral program in the UK and, she says that over a period of weeks, he started to see benefits, that he was no longer needing help with his sleep.

Liza Cucco | Lifetime Arts: He was able to reduce the medication he was on, and then until he was off it completely. And he discovered he had a talent for painting, and became commissioned to do exhibits of his work, right? That's incredible. I've also spoken personally to a number of people across the country, from here in North Carolina, where I live, all the way over in Wyoming who have really spoken about the way that participating in creative aging programs has helped them deal with loss, from being places... from having feelings of isolation from, like, multiple compounding losses, losing a spouse, and kind of... you don't know what to do with yourself, and participating in creative aging programs has really helped them to build a new community and find a new sense of purpose.

The last thing that I wanted to share is from a totally unstructured thing, right? Creative aging programs can be sequential classes where you learn, drop-in workshops, clubs, all sorts of things, and just this week.

Liza Cucco | Lifetime Arts: A gentleman in California sent us an email, and he wanted to just tell us about this group that he has been gathering for years playing music together on a beach. It's grown to, like, I think he said over 100 people. They're all mostly in their 80s, and they've been doing this for years. And he said to me, or he said to us in this email, like you know, one thing that we've started to notice is that while other people in our lives are developing, sort of, more extreme cognitive problems.

None of the people in this group in their 80s have experienced any serious cognitive loss, and I think someone should study us. And so that's, like, super anecdotal, a guy just sharing his story, but, seeing for himself the things that he's doing in his community, how it's impacting the quality of life of the folks that he lives and, you know, shares his life with.

That was a lot, so I really want to give you an opportunity, Heather, to talk a little bit more about the policy recommendations that we came up with in this brief.

Liza Cucco | Lifetime Arts: We know that the research and anecdotal evidence supports this, the role of the arts in healthy aging strategies, but we know that we also need really concrete recommendations to move things forward. So, could you just talk to everybody about that a little bit?

Heather Ikemire, Lifetime Arts: Yeah, absolutely. And Liza, thanks so much for sharing those examples, because I think, you know, when we talk about policy, sometimes it can feel way up here in the sky, right? And I think it's so important to remember we're talking about people, we're talking about every single one of us, and I think...it was really a wonderful opportunity to be working on this policy brief last year, because sometimes when things felt so uncertain, it kept, it was really important for us to remember, how do we create something that is flexible that can be evergreen, even in the face of uncertainty, and that is really achievable and actionable.

So I want to stress that I know there are so many different people on the call today, from individuals who might just love to create art in their own lives, to people who really are at policy tables as part of their professional lives, and there's something in this policy brief for every single one of us take hold of and think about. And so...the policy brief is really, centered around 3 actionable policy recommendations, and the first is...how do we just elevate awareness of creative aging and its linkage to healthy aging, as you underscored so beautifully, Liza, right? We need to think about, sort of, how can we take what you just distilled so beautifully and bring it into different conversations, right? Really tell these stories, take some of this model language, and think about, really elevating it so that we can have that seatbelt moment that I described earlier in the conversation. So this moves from individuals, you know, delivering programs to really a shifting culture to embrace creativity as part of healthy aging.

Heather Ikemire, Lifetime Arts: The second recommendation really centers on, possibility for embedding creative aging model language and concepts into federal and state, policy plans for healthy aging, as well as local age-friendly initiatives. What I love about this recommendation is that it's achievable. It really looks at some of the tactics and how we distill some model language around creative aging.

Heather Ikemire, Lifetime Arts: And embed that model language into things like the multi-sector plans for aging happening across the country, in our Older Americans Act state plans, and in some of our local plans for healthy aging within our own communities.

So, kind of some low-hanging fruit for really high impact in the long term, right? Because when that language is embedded into those blueprints, right, it can really help to justify, guide, and help to make the case for investment in this work.

And then finally, beyond policy, as Gretchen likes to say, with a big P when we're talking about state and federal policy plans, we also focused on the really important role that the private sector can play, right? Currently, there are 50 social prescribing for the arts pilots happening in the United States that are primarily being funded through private foundations, right? And some research universities in collaboration with community organizations, right?

Heather Ikemire, Lifetime Arts: The private sector has so much opportunity, I think, to really help to research, and guide, some of these really innovative models for creative aging in our communities. And then really help to bring them to scale, right?

Our community foundations and their donor-advised funds, what are the roles that each of us can play in really sitting down and educating our community foundations on the importance of creative aging to healthy aging, and unlocking, some more, investment at the local level that can really support some of these innovative projects? And help us understand and make them more visible.

So those are really the three pillars of the policy brief. And I want to stress that, you know, there is a really strong focus on what can happen in our states. And if we could go to the next slide, there's a... there's a map here, that is sort of a beautiful collage of what's already happening in our states across the country. So the... the blue squares, the light blue squares on this map, are states, where their Older Americans Act state plans already mention, in some of them, where they have the, the sort of the triangle or the square are already mentioning arts and creativity.

Heather Ikemire, Lifetime Arts: There are 20 states across the country that already have some mention of arts and music or creative aging in their Older Americans Act state plans, right? I would love to see all 50 states with those in their state plans. We also... There are 3 states, the, the little...pink squares are states that have multi-sector plans for aging that are already in an implementation phase, and then the orange ones are somewhere where there's some development or activity that is underway. Three states, including Utah and Pennsylvania, have creative aging named already in their multi-sector plans for aging, right? I would love to see all of the states that are developing MPAs with some mention of arts, music, and creative aging in those plans.

And Liza, I know that you are in North Carolina. North Carolina doesn't currently have Creative Aging named in its state plan, but I wonder, you know, for those who might be on the call who might not be as involved in their MPA process, or even really aware of how it works, if you could shed a little light on you know, where you even see opportunity now in the MPA process, for really making the case for creative aging, within North Carolina from your own personal experience.

Liza Cucco | Lifetime Arts: Yeah, and I wanted to add something, Heather, to what you had said earlier before I answer this, which is why it's so important for us to get creative aging into these, state-level plans in some... it can just be a single line, right? This is not, like, a big, giant policy add-on.

But, right now, there's a lot of access to creative aging opportunities for people who have retired in style, right? So, if you have money, you can do pretty much whatever you want.

But, you know, most people in our country have strains on their financial resources, and so creative aging opportunities can be really, really limited for people that can't afford to enroll in their local art college's program.

Liza Cucco | Lifetime Arts: And so getting... getting some language into these, like, state and local plans really helps open up opportunities for affordable programming that... that... that's more widely available. So I just wanted to mention that.

The... so, yes, North Carolina. North Carolina, I was not involved at all in the development of our Master Plan for Aging, which is called All Ages, All Stages here, but when I heard that, the state was looking for people to join implementation working groups, I jumped on the chance to join, and I think that one thing that anyone on this call can do

If you see that your state has a multi-sector plan for aging, or one that's being developed, or one where there's a governor's order, you can try and do some research to see who is in charge of that plan, and, like, what inputs are available. Sometimes I think it can feel, especially if you're not, like, a government worker as, like, your background.

Liza Cucco | Lifetime Arts: It can feel a little bit intimidating to put yourself up for signing up for something like this. You might think, oh, well, somebody with a PhD, again, is gonna do that, or whatever. But a lot of... I think most of these states are really looking for input from folks that are participating in all parts of aging, because these are plans that are meant to look at everything.

So, I, you know, I think that being a part of those conversations means that even when the, you know, creative aging or arts isn't really explicitly spelled out as a strategy in your state's plan. You can align arts programming to the strategies that are in your state's plan, and we really hope that the policy brief and the... especially the action plan framework that we're gonna be released will help people to really say, okay, your strategy here is that you want less social isolation amongst your older adults, and so you're gonna invest in activities that decrease social isolation and improve connectedness. Here's how creative aging does that, and, like, how this program fits into your strategy. And, it could become a tactic that's being used. So I would... That's my number one top advice, if you care about this.

Liza Cucco | Lifetime Arts: Look and see what's happening and try to get involved. Just because things aren't specifically called out doesn't mean there's not a lot of interest. And I've definitely found it in the conversations that I've had with people a lot of interest in creative aging. There's, like, tons of wonderful things happening in North Carolina, right now regarding creative aging, even though it's not specifically called out in the plan.

Heather Ikemire, Lifetime Arts: And Liza, I will just add, too, that, you know, those state plans, and even if it's not in your own state, I live in New Hampshire, we do not have an MPA process underway, but we have many, many communities that are interested in local, age-friendly plans.

And so, even bringing some of the plans from other states that mention arts and music or creative aging to your local community if they're undergoing an age-friendly, community, you know, local plan or healthy aging, planning process.

Pointing to examples, where other plans really align creative aging to a healthy aging agenda, can open up a different kind of conversation, often, in those local planning efforts as well.

Liza Cucco | Lifetime Arts: Heather, we're coming up to the end of our time here, and I just wonder if you could clue people in on what's coming next.

Heather Ikemire, Lifetime Arts: Absolutely. So we're just getting started. I think the main thing that we want to encourage everyone on this call to do is, if you haven't already, in this first square on the left here is a QR code to access and download the policy brief. There's a PDF version, there's also a web version. Share it widely, it's free, it's open to the public. Get it out there, have conversations about and let us know what you think. So that's the first. action step, and that's ready to go, and you'll find the QR code there on the left.

Heather Ikemire, Lifetime Arts: We are also encouraging everyone on this call to please join us for our deep dive conversation on March 25th. This will be a webinar format, and I will be talking with our aging policy expert and the author of the policy brief, Gretchen Alkema, during that conversation. And that is really a chance to dig deeper, right? We gave you kind of a top-level overview of the three policy recommendations, and then, we're gonna kind of peel back those layers of the onion and get into more specifics around, okay, so how do... how do we move those recommendations forward, and what your role in that can look like?

And then finally, stay in the loop with policy updates. As Liza and I mentioned, later this month after the webinar on the 25th. We will be releasing our action plan framework, and that's really a more practical, tactical guide, to moving forward these recommendations into action over the next 2 or 3 years. And it's really developed, for all of you, and as a way for you to engage others in this, in this process, in collaboration with us.

And so...lots to come, and reach out! We're really interested to know what you think. If you have questions, and, we're happy to come speak at your meetings and to keep the conversation going. We really want this framework and the recommendations to be something that everyone can access and use in their work and in their lives.

Liza Cucco | Lifetime Arts: Thank you all so much for joining us.