ARTS ALLIANCE FOR HEALTH

Eugene S. Farley, Jr. Health Policy Center
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO ANSCHUTZ MEDICAL CAMPUS

Cleo PARKER ROBINSON DANCE

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# The power of the arts to impact health, equity and social justice

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**The arts have a natural and essential role to play in advancing health and social justice. Artists and arts organizations are deeply embedded within their communities, positioning them as ambassadors of a representative experience, able to express a narrative with unique voices and approaches to communication. Historically, the arts have effectively supported well-being, created social connection, inspired movements, communicated across differences, and transformed systems and cultures — addressing the very challenges that public health and health care struggle to overcome.[1] Intentional collaboration between the arts and health sectors unlocks powerful potential to improve health outcomes, and strengthen social and emotional wellbeing across communities.**



## Policy Background

Structural barriers and systemic racism perpetuate health disparities in the United States.[1] The differences in access to health care and resources to support social connectivity across socioeconomic status and geographies impact health, wellbeing, and productivity. Social and political determinants of health shape our public health systems, and artists and artistic expression are uniquely positioned to highlight inequities and present perspectives and solutions through community-driven civic engagement. Creating space for multi-sector collaboration, we amplify the arts' ability to build stronger, healthier, and more equitable communities.[1]

## Arts, Health and Community Engagement

The arts have been proven to have powerful and lasting effects on health. Research has shown that engagement in artistic expression can address health equity challenges at both individual and community levels. Health is not simply the absence of disease — it is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being.[2] Artistic engagement contributes meaningfully to health, yet the arts are not easily accessible in all health care environments and communities.

All art forms (performing, visual, literary, and expressive) have been proven to play a crucial role in promoting healthy lives and fostering well-being.[3] Participation in the performing arts has been shown to improve physical mobility, cognitive function, psychological resilience, and overall quality of life.[4] Visual arts, literature, and other expressive forms offer safe spaces for individuals to process trauma, share personal stories, and build emotional resilience. Expressive arts therapy, in particular, has demonstrated effectiveness in treating depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions, helping individuals navigate personal, intergenerational, and collective trauma.[2,5] According to research from the World Health Organization (WHO), the arts influence social determinants of health, support child development, reduce stress, and help prevent or slow the progression of chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease.[5]

Beyond individual health, the arts serve as a powerful tool for community health promotion. The arts can engage communities in meaningful dialogue, encourage healthy behaviors, and make health messaging more accessible and culturally relevant. WHO has found that the arts are particularly effective in reaching at-risk populations, helping them understand disease risks and encouraging health-promoting behaviors.[5] To fully harness the potential of the arts in advancing health equity, it is essential to ensure that artistic opportunities are accessible to all populations. When integrated intentionally into public health strategies, artistic expression becomes a bridge — connecting people, amplifying underrepresented voices, and inspiring collective action toward healthier, more equitable communities.

> *"The positive potential impact arts interventions can have on the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities is not being fully realized, because opportunities for collaboration between the arts and health sectors are not being properly developed."*
>
> **- World Health Organization**

## Colorado's Arts Alliance for Health

Recognizing the transformative power of the arts, Cleo Parker Robinson Dance (CPRD) and the Farley Health Policy Center (FHPC) joined forces to bring to life the Colorado Arts Alliance for Health (AAH). Founded on the conviction that the arts are fundamental to health and healing, together we champion artists as powerful community health advocates and dynamic cultural ambassadors to mobilize action toward healing and social justice.

The AAH exemplifies how cross-sector collaboration can mobilize communities bringing artists and arts stakeholders to the table with other leaders and decision makers. The AAH includes over 70 members from diverse sectors and multi-cultural organizations, agencies, and councils representing the arts, public health, policy, education, law, business, medicine, and media/communications.

Convening across the state, roundtable discussions were hosted in Denver, Pueblo, Durango/Four Corners, San Luis Valley, Fort Collins, Colorado Springs, and Trinidad. Conversations revealed priority health and equity issues with unique and culturally specific challenges, as well as proposed community-driven solutions.

Key themes that emerged from these discussions included:

- **Youth development:** mental health, education and workforce pipelines, financial literacy, and juvenile justice.
- **Community health:** access to care, food insecurity, housing, and voting.

## Arts & Health Policy Spotlights:

To address these pressing issues, the AAH is leveraging the power of artistic expression to foster dialogue and inspire action. Through performance and arts events, the AAH creates space to explore community health issues by bringing together and elevating community voices. Artists and partner organizations present theater, music, visual installations, dance, and film that represent and illustrate priority health and equity concerns. With each event, audiences engage in socially-driven and solution-focused conversations through "talk-backs" with the artists or panel discussions for open dialogue exploring challenging topics that encourage shared civic engagement to shape real solutions. Examples of such events include:

- **"Diagnosed" by Iyona Blake:** A mental health play created by women for women of color to eradicate stigma on mental health, followed by a community dialogue with the artists that encouraged civic engagement through shared storytelling, advocacy, and collective action.
- **Juneteenth Panels hosted by Cleo Parker Robinson Dance:** Panel discussions brought together cultural and civic leaders to explore health, wealth, and justice using storytelling as a tool for civic empowerment and community-driven advocacy.
- **Pueblo Film Festival:** Documentaries highlighting food insecurity and local farming challenges and the connection between roots, heritage, history, and land, and their impact on survival and environmental health.
- **Your Voice, Your Vote Event:** This interactive voter engagement event promoted civic participation through registration support, ballot education, and creative activities that empowered individuals to reclaim their voice in democracy.
- **Youth Suicide Awareness Documentaries:** Youth-written and directed films on suicide and resilience were followed by an artist-audience talk-back that emphasized the importance of amplifying youth voices and sparking community-driven conversations around mental health advocacy and systemic support.

**AAH Partners Pledge:** *"We believe that artists and stakeholders of the arts bring forward unique and authentic voices to represent our communities; have the ability to connect and strengthen communities; are positioned to express challenges related to health inequities and inform solutions creatively with community leaders and decision makers. We commit to advocating for our community and representing the artists' voice and perspective to advance efforts toward health of body, mind and spirit."*

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The Colorado Health Foundation™

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