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Convening Brings American Art to Communities as a Tool for Wellness

Loneliness Is a Growing Public Health Crisis — Five Selected Museums Will Bring Loaned Artworks and Evidence-Based Wellness Programming to Their Communities

BENTONVILLE, Ark. — A three-day convening drew museum professionals from across the country to Heartland Whole Health Institute April 29–May 1, 2026, to develop programs that will bring American art and evidence-based wellness practices to communities navigating loneliness and isolation while promoting social connection. The gathering brought together museum leaders, researchers, and clinicians to define how art experiences can reach the communities that need them most.

Titled *Works in Progress: Defining the Art of Wellness in Museums*, the convening built on Art Bridges Foundation's inaugural art and wellness gathering held in fall 2025. Five participating institutions were selected from nearly 200 applicants to receive a curated grouping of loaned artworks from the Art Bridges Partner Loan Network at no cost, along with \$50,000 each in program funding — a package designed to put original art-based wellness programming within reach of museums of many sizes.

The 2026 cohort includes Memorial Art Gallery in Rochester, New York; Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco, California; The Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C.; Sarasota Art Museum in Sarasota, Florida; and Tucson Museum of Art and Historic Block in Tucson, Arizona.

"Loneliness is not a sign of inadequacy or a flaw. It's a signal, just like thirst is a signal that we need hydration. We need connection to survive," said Dr. Jeremy Nobel, founder and president of The Foundation for Art & Healing, in his opening keynote. "Embrace art museums as community connection hubs as part of your identity, confirming the arts as having a place in health and well-being."

The Challenge

Loneliness is now recognized as an emerging global public health crisis, eroding health and well-being across communities. A growing body of peer-reviewed research has begun to establish what museums have long sensed: that art experiences are associated with improved mood, reduced cortisol, lower blood pressure, expanded perspective-taking, and stronger feelings of social connection.

What has been missing is access. Most museums lack the budget, staff capacity, and specialized expertise required to launch original wellness programming, particularly the smaller and mid-size institutions that serve the communities where art-based interventions could matter most. Without dedicated funding, validated measurement tools, and curated artworks designed for outcomes, there is a risk that the evidence base stays on the shelf instead of reaching the public.

“We are eager to explore the intersection of art and wellness and the role art museums can play in fostering well-being within their communities,” said Anne Kraybill, CEO of Art Bridges, in her welcome remarks. “The field is clearly ready to demonstrate how art museums can help improve well-being in the communities they serve, and we plan to host these convenings for years to come.”

Art Bridges has long worked to expand access to American art, particularly through its Partner Loan Network, which now connects nearly 400 museums nationwide. The wellness initiative extends that mission by pairing access to art with the documented well-being benefits, including emotional, social, cognitive, and physical, that sustained engagement with art produces. The selected museums will refine and launch their programs over the next two years with continuing support from Art Bridges’ teams.

The Convening

The program opened on the morning of April 29 with welcome remarks from Anne Kraybill, CEO of Art Bridges, and Amanda Driver, Director of Fellows, Internships, and Wellness Initiatives at Art Bridges. The day’s keynote and creative activation set the framework for the rest of the convening.

A full program of presentations, workshops, and case studies followed across the three days:

- **“Loneliness, Art Museums, and Health: Opportunities for Immediate Action”** — Dr. Jeremy Nobel, founder and president of The Foundation for Art & Healing and a longtime faculty member at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, opened the convening with a keynote tracing loneliness as a public health crisis and identifying creative engagement as a path to connection. Drawing on the foundation’s signature initiative, Project UnLonely, Dr. Nobel reframed loneliness as a biological signal of unmet connection rather than a personal failing and called on museums to position themselves as community connection hubs. The foundation’s executive director, Chris Doucette, led an arts-enabled activation that gave participants direct experience of the practices Dr. Nobel’s work describes.
- **“Integrating Partner Loan Network Groupings: Curation to Logistics”** — Sarah Martin and Dr. Javier Rivero Ramos of Art Bridges presented the curatorial groupings available through the Partner Loan Network and walked attendees through the loan logistics and care requirements that make broad collection sharing feasible for museums of every size.

- **“Museum Case Studies”** — Abigail Simmons and Margie Makowski of the Allentown Art Museum (Pennsylvania), Josie Jimarez-Howard of the El Paso Museum of Art (Texas), and Annie Saldaña and Dileyca Liz Cepeda Arias of the Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico shared wellness programming developed after attending Art Bridges’ inaugural art and wellness convening in fall 2025. Their projects illustrated how museums can address social, emotional, physical, and cognitive well-being outcomes across distinct community contexts.
- **“Designing for Flourishing: Understanding and Evaluating Flourishing in Your Museum”** — Dr. Katherine Cotter, director of research with the Humanities and Human Flourishing Project at the University of Pennsylvania, led a workshop introducing the Core Art Museum Survey for Well-Being and other validated measurement tools, with guided discussion on mission-centered evaluation.
- **“Applying Evaluation to Your Art Bridges Project”** — Max Fey of the Art Bridges Research & Evaluation team led a working session in which attendees translated wellness goals into specific program designs, audience definitions, and measurement plans.

Days two and three combined structured planning time with peer feedback. Each participating museum delivered a short presentation outlining how it intends to deploy the loaned artworks and program funding within its own community. Closing remarks from Driver outlined the next steps and program deadlines that will shape the cohort’s work over the coming two years.

Art Bridges plans to continue the convening series annually, expanding the number of museums and communities that can access art-based wellness programming. Applications for the next art and wellness convening can be found [here](#). Resources developed for the field — including the Art + Wellness Toolkit, a guide to peer-reviewed well-being measurement scales adapted for museum settings — will be made available to museums beyond the cohort.

About Art Bridges Foundation

Art Bridges Foundation, the vision of philanthropist and arts patron Alice Walton, creates and supports projects that share works of American art with communities across the United States and its territories. Since 2017, Art Bridges has partnered with a growing network of nearly 400 museums of many sizes — impacting 25 million people nationwide — to provide financial and strategic support for exhibitions, collection loans, and programs designed to educate, inspire, and deepen engagement with local communities. The Art Bridges Collection represents an expanding vision of American art from the 19th century to present day and encompasses multiple media and voices. For more information, visit artbridgesfoundation.org.

About The Foundation for Art & Healing

The Foundation for Art & Healing (FAH) is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to explore, promote, and facilitate creative expression to improve health and well-being for individuals and

communities. Through its signature initiative, Project UnLonely, FAH raises awareness about loneliness and its risks to health, reduces the stigma that surrounds it, and helps people connect through research-based creative activities. For more information, visit artandhealing.org.

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