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# Art Interventions for Seniors in New Milford, CT

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# **A Summary of Art Interventions for Seniors in New Milford, CT**

Lauren Gaffaney, Dec 2018-Jan 2019, with Dr. Peter Anderson

# Problem Identification and Description of Need

- With a growing elderly population comes an increased amount of citizens with memory impairments and dementia.
- There is a growing body of evidence that art therapy has been shown to improve sociability and mood, reduce the risk of dementia, decrease agitation, depression, isolation, and improve the overall quality of life.
- Recent research conducted in Burlington with the UVM LCOM Public Health Program suggested that art appreciation and history sessions can have similarly beneficial effects while requiring less volunteer/caregiver time, equipment, and with a lower cost.
- New Milford, CT has a senior center with some active art classes, but there are currently no art history or appreciation classes.
- Many of the seniors frequent the center multiple times a week, so it is important to have new and different options for them for education and entertainment.

# Public health cost and considerations in New Milford

- New Milford, CT, has an aging population, with the percentage of people 65 and older increasing from 9.5% in 2000 to 14.8% in 2010.
- New Milford is part of Litchfield County, which has the largest area and lowest population density in Connecticut, leading to an area where services for seniors and the memory impaired are limited.
- The senior center offers free classes to anyone over age 65 and can be an excellent resource for people with memory impairments who are still living at home.
- The senior center can also serve as respite for caregivers, by providing a place for seniors to go during the day.
- There are currently no art appreciation sessions in New Milford.
- Art intervention sessions only require a space to hold the session, someone to lead the session and copies of artwork, which can be obtained at the public library or online, whereas art classes or art therapy requires much more equipment and staff/volunteer involvement to set up, manage, and clean up.

# Community Perspective on Issue and Support for Project

- Interview with employee at Senior Center
  - "We partner with the Village Center for arts occasionally, and we just had a water color class, but no art history or discussion classes. I think there would be a lot of interest with our seniors in this sort of thing. We have a group of seniors who are very interested in art."
- Interview with Barbara Compher, community member and art enthusiast
  - "When my husband was in a nursing home for the last year of his life, the home had a large open common area with paintings by Norman Rockwell, depicting family life and the war. It was very helpful to my husband with those familiar scenes providing a dimension of encouragement, inspiration, and memory enhancement. I also felt it was helpful to me and my family when we would visit. I think everyone can appreciate art and we could use more of it here in New Milford"

# Intervention and Methodology

- Using the art appreciation session format developed by Ellen Meagher at the Converse Home in Burlington, VT.
- Appreciation sessions consist of the participants seated in a circle and began with the life story of the artist being told to the participants. The sessions continue with the leader of the program bringing replicas of artworks by the chosen artist around and directly asking the participants about their thoughts regarding the artwork.
- The goal is to get participants engaged through conversation or studying the artwork.
- I led an hour-long session of art history and appreciation about the artist Norman Rockwell at the New Milford Senior Center on Jan 16th, 2019. We first went through a brief overview of his life history and then discussed 17 different works of his art.

# Results

- 14 seniors were present at my session, 12 stayed until the end.
- Of the 14 present, 6 were actively engaged and participated in conversation without being prompted. 1 participant attempted to engage but was very confused due to her memory impairment. 1 participant fell asleep.
- I asked for feedback at the end of the presentation and participants noted that it was "informative," they learned a lot, and they enjoyed the conversation and different perspectives on different paintings.
- Overall, the response was very positive, and multiple participants expressed interest in additional sessions on different artists.
- The staff were pleased by turnout and impressed by how engaged the group was.

# Evaluation of effectiveness and limitations

- Survey participants satisfaction with art appreciation sessions at periodic intervals.
  - This would be limited because it would be self-reported data but could still be a useful measure of how many people are attending and whether it is subjectively improving mood.
  - This may also be limited due to memory issues in participants.
- Survey staff members running sessions at periodic intervals.
  - Staff members who know the participants well might have better sense of how participants are reacting and if there has been any improvements in mood and quality of life over time.
- One limitation of my presentation is that it was at the senior center only and not at the nursing homes in the area. However if the response at the senior center is positive, it can be brought to other sites.
- Another limitation is the short duration of my family medicine clerkship so I could not do multiple sessions or remain in New Milford to help make sure the sessions continue. However, the response to the first session was very positive and the staff seem excited about the idea of continuing.

# Recommendations for Future Projects

- Do a similar presentation at the two nursing homes in New Milford, Candlewood and Village Crest with the aim of adding art appreciation sessions to their activity schedule.
- A similar project could be implemented in other locations, such as Danbury Senior Center or other nursing homes and senior centers in Connecticut or Vermont.
- Do a follow up in 6 months to see if the classes have continued and how they are going, how engaged and satisfied members of the senior center are with the classes

# References

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