

***Executive Summary***

Many people with dementia become isolated and disconnected from the world around them because they are unable to take part in the activities most people take for granted. Studies show that art therapy can enhance communication, brain function and social interaction for dementia patients. In fact, visual art can trigger dormant memories and emotions, inspiring conversations among these patients who normally struggle to express themselves. Recognizing that seniors experiencing dementia are especially vulnerable to isolation, Montco SAAC started a program in 2016 designed for those with cognitive loss due to dementia called Art4Me. The program helps participants connect with each other over shared enjoyment of art and provides respite for caregivers, who participate with their loved ones. By offering activities designed with this population in mind, Montco SAAC is further avoiding isolation of those we serve by breaking down the barriers that separate groups and providing opportunities for shared experiences

***History***

Montco SAAC was founded in 1965 by a group of women who wanted to make sure seniors in the area had a hot meal each day. Since then, we’ve grown to two senior centers, the county’s largest Meals on Wheels program and an intergenerational art center.

In 2014, we received a bequest to ensure space for older adults to be creative through art. In 2016, Art4Me began as a pilot program, designed especially for older adults experiencing cognitive loss from dementia. In 2016 the Art Center at Ambler opened as a space for art classes offered in an intergenerational setting.

We know that social isolation and loneliness are as bad for our health as obesity and smoking. For persons living with dementia, the problem is even more compounded. Montco SAAC respectfully requests a grant in the amount of $5,000 from the Friends Foundation for the Aging to support our Art4Me program in 2020-2021.

***What problem are you addressing?***

Dementia is a general term for a group of brain disorders, of which Alzheimer's disease is the most common. Alzheimer's disease accounts for 50 to 70 percent of all dementia cases. Today more than five million people in the United States are living with Alzheimer's disease. That number has doubled since 1980 and is expected to be as high as sixteen million by 2050.

Many people with dementia become isolated and disconnected from the world around them because they are unable to take part in the activities most people take for granted. Social isolation refers to an actual lack of social support and meaningful contact, whereas loneliness refers to a person’s belief that they are lacking or have lost companionship, and the negative feelings that stem from this. Social isolation is linked with increased death, dementia, depression, and risk of elder abuse. The feeling of loneliness has many negative consequences as well. They include increased risk of depression, alcoholism, suicidal thoughts, aggressive behaviors, anxiety, and impulsivity. Some studies found that loneliness is also risk factor for cognitive decline and progression of Alzheimer’s disease, recurrent stroke, obesity, elevated blood pressure, and mortality.

***Evidence of need***

The cognitive function of [dementia](https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/nursing-and-health-professions/dementia) clients declines progressively, but timely and effective interventions can delay further deterioration with this disease. Art therapy is a complex, multi-dimensional and vital intervention, and during art therapy, the attention, verbal skills and orientation of clients can be improved because the clients immerse themselves into creating artwork.

The American Art Therapy Association (AATA) defines art therapy as a mental health profession in which clients, facilitated by the art therapist, use artistic media, the creative process and the resulting artwork to explore their feelings, reconcile emotional conflicts, foster [self-awareness](https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/nursing-and-health-professions/self-awareness), manage behavior and addictions, develop social skills, improve orientation in reality, reduce anxiety and increase self-esteem. The theoretical foundation of art therapy is mainly the theory of brain lateralization, which posits that the left brain is “the academic brain” and manages logic, language, writing and reasoning, while the right brain is “the art brain” and manages drawing, music, emotion, creativity, etc.; in processing sensory or emotional information, the right brain first creates an impression of imagery, processes the information and then transmits it to the left brain to generate verbalized thinking and memory.

***Why this solution chosen***

Creative activity has been shown to reduce depression and isolation, offering the power of choice and decisions. Towards the end of life, art and creativity offer a path of opening the windows to people's emotional interiors. With its relatively low costs and minimal risks, art as an enjoyable experience in the moment may be sufficient justification for its utilization for people with dementia. The arts can remain accessible despite memory loss because of their multi-sensory nature and the possibility of experiencing art in the moment irrespective of prior knowledge or associations.

In the late 1990s, art therapy as a psychosocial therapy that combines art and human elements was beginning to find application in the field of dementia research. In art therapy, through stimulating cognition with lines and colors, the clients are provided with a non-verbal channel of communication and can overcome inadequacies of self-expression due to impaired language ability and can vent negative emotions.

Engaging in art therapy challenges people to think creatively and boosts cognitive function. The process of learning something new, such as a new art skill, helps to stimulate healthy brain activity and keep our minds sharp. Some studies even suggest that art may reduce the rate of development of memory conditions such as Alzheimer’s disease.

Visual art can trigger dormant memories and emotions, inspiring conversations among clients who normally struggle to express themselves. Importantly, creativity is not dependent on memory. Creative processes can be used to evoke memories, enable people to communicate about their experience, to reinforce identity, and to strengthen relationships with their own family members, as well as with care personnel and others involved in the intervention process. Some of the proven benefits to art therapy include the following:

Gives a new means of expression - Sometimes Alzheimer’s makes verbal communication difficult. Art makes it possible to express in a new way and to tell stories again, through an intuitive graphical visual presentation, which helps the clients vent negative emotions and alleviate behavioral and psychological symptoms. Participants become artists and have freedom to explore different techniques or even create their own.

Decreases anxiety, depression and stress - Art therapy is known to lessen feelings of anxiety, depression, and stress, while elevating mood, in people of all ages. In one study, older adults who participated in arts activities experienced lower levels of loneliness, depression, and better morale. Participants found that the calming action of putting a paintbrush or pencil to paper helped them relax and focus on positive feelings. (Forbes, 2016)

Creates a feeling of accomplishment - In artistic activities, the negative emotions of the clients are significantly reduced when the clients have an increased interest and obtain a certain sense of accomplishment through completing artworks. Furthermore, the free-form creation strengthens the sense of self-control in the clients, meets their need to be respected and helps reduce the incidence of behavioral and psychological symptoms.

Reduces isolation - Typically, art therapy is done in a group setting which encourages participants to socialize and facilitate communication with those around them. This way, those with similarities can be together doing something fun and non-competitive.

Stimulates the brain - Learning something new, expressing yourself, and creating art all stimulate the brain. While the brain may never go back to how it was before the disease, art therapy has been shown to ease frustration and renew enjoyment and quality of life.

What is most interesting about art therapy for Alzheimer’s is that some who participate seem to paint memories they seemingly forgot. The therapy can help bring forward dormant memories. This can be encouraging and often helps family members, too, reminding them that their loved one is still the same person. While art therapy will not cure the disease, reclaiming old memories and revisiting who you are is empowering for those with Alzheimer’s and their families.

Recognizing that seniors experiencing dementia are especially vulnerable to isolation, Montco SAAC started a program in 2016 designed especially for those with cognitive loss due to dementia. Art4Me started as a pilot program through the Museum of Modern Art and provides a safe space for art viewing and art making in a group of peers. The program helps participants connect with each other over shared enjoyment of art and provides respite for caregivers, who participate with their loved ones. By offering activities designed with this population in mind, Montco SAAC is further avoiding isolation of those we serve by breaking down the barriers that separate groups and providing opportunities for shared experiences.

Art4Me is a free program to our members and is uniquely designed to increase communication, quality of life and support self-worth for people in early stages of dementia. Through Art4Me, people come together and build relationships, artistic talents and a greater appreciation for art through weekly sessions of Art-Viewing and Artmaking. Each week’s curriculum is prepared and presented by our Art Educator with a relatable theme, such as Family Depicted in Art, Perspective, or Politics.

Jennifer Finch is the Art Educator for the Art4Me program and the Norristown Art Program and has been employed with Montco SAAC for over five years.  She holds a BFA from the School of Visual Arts and an MA with Creative Arts Therapies from New York University. She is a co-creator with the implementation and adaptation of the Meet Me at the MoMA’s monthly program to a weekly series at the Norristown and Ambler locations. Her focus is to engage seniors with communication, community and creativity, by utilizing art presentations of varied topics and art making classes.

The forms of art therapy are becoming increasingly diversified, not limited to traditional forms of art, such as painting, making collages and cutting shapes, but expanding to innovative interventions such as visual arts activities, appreciating the classic works of art in museums and art museum programs that combine art appreciation and the creation of art through recollection.

***Description of community and people to be served***

The population Montco SAAC serves includes those with disabilities, LGBTQ, veterans, and minorities. Because aging eventually affects all populations, it is inherently intersectional. Our staff and volunteers strive to care for these incredibly diverse populations while maintaining dignity and respect for all we serve. Taking a person-centered positive approach to care helps Montco SAAC staff focus on the abilities a person has rather than their deficits. Montco SAAC Annual membership cost is $30 but if a client is unable to pay, the cost is waived with no income documentation required to help ensure program membership is inclusive and equitable.

[Dementia](https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/nursing-and-health-professions/dementia) clients have impaired language abilities and are unable to verbalize thinking to express their feelings but retain basic visual and motor skills, which allow them to express emotions and gain comfort through lines, shapes and colors in art appreciation and creative activities. Engaging in meaningful activities can help a person feel safe and secure and provide a sense of purpose. The value placed on the person with dementia at least temporarily removes the stigma of Alzheimer’s disease.

There is a certain comfort to knowing that art and music appreciation does not go away from the brain in the same way cognition does. Skip, a longtime Montco SAAC member and musician by trade, became very concerned about not being able to create art anymore because he was losing his vision. Jennifer was able to modify the art assignments so Skip could fully participate in the assignments. Another client, Pat, started participating at center at a younger than normal (40s) age due to early onset Dementia diagnosis. When watching TV, she would often become agitated and stressed but was happy and calm when she was doing art projects. Interestingly, Pat would often recognize works of art she saw another time in her life.

Members already have sense of community and safe space at the senior center. Because Montco SAAC offers many on-site support and services, members are also able to be referred to a social worker if they have additional needs such as food security or caregiver respite. As Pat’s disease progressed, her family was overwhelmed and did not know what to do or how to access services. Jennifer was able to connect Pat with the Montco SAAC social worker who got her set up with in-home and out of home services to make her life better.

Caregivers also participate in the Art4Me program and are equal participants in the program. Caregivers get double benefit from arts interventions; their own enjoyment as participants, and that of seeing their charges enlivened or soothed.

***Demographics***

Since its inception over 219 individuals (28% M, 72% F) have participated in our Art4Me program, the majority of which are between the ages of 61-80 (58%). An additional 26% are 81 years of age and older. Of the 170 who responded, 12% were at the poverty level and 30% lived alone. The racial mix includes: 9% Asian, 28% Black, 5% White-Hispanic, 58% White-non Hispanic.

When looking at the elderly population as a whole, approximately one-quarter (24%) of community-dwelling Americans aged 65 and older are considered to be socially isolated, and a significant proportion of adults in the United States report feeling lonely (35% of adults aged 45 and older and 43% of adults aged 60 and older) (Blazer, 2020)

It has been shown that 70%–90% of clients with dementia manifest restlessness, anger, depression, anxiety, sadness and other behavioral and psychological symptoms as the disease progresses, resulting in reduced quality of life and an exacerbated burden for caregivers (C.R. Kovach, P.E. Noonan, A.M. Schlidt, T. Wells).

***What action(s) will you do?***

Art4Me classes are offered at both senior centers with art making in-person class size maximum of 12 participants (pre-Covid) and when centers reopen, with 6 participants maximum to allow for social distancing post-Covid. To account for the smaller class size, Montco SAAC will be offering a morning and afternoon class at both centers. We will also continue to offer ZOOM courses for those members who are unable to come to the center in person. Unfortunately, some are unable to ZOOM cognitively and others lack technology. Montco SAAC is exploring a way to make it possible for those lacking technology to participate (providing internet, etc.). For ZOOM participants, art supply kits are delivered to members on an as-needed basis. Art viewing classes can accommodate up to 30 people for the lesson and discussion.

Our Art Educator is well-versed in stages of dementia, so she can read the participant’s level of disease progression (regression) through their art. The art itself typically becomes more childlike as their dementia worsens and there is almost a reversal of milestones. For example, when drawing people, the drawn bodies do not touch the ground, or they become disembodied circles.

The coronavirus outbreak is creating both unprecedented demand for our services and unique challenges for our operations. In response to this challenge, we have managed to pivot our program into a virtual model via Zoom classes. This means we now need to gather all necessary supplies for the lesson and create special kits to deliver to each home. Classes are held weekly via Zoom with 10-15 participants, with our Art Educator leading art discussion. The group then paints or draws together, all via Zoom. These virtual classes are critical for our seniors as it allows them to socialize in a safe setting during the coronavirus crisis.

***What other organizations will you partner with on this project?***

Because of Covid-19, Montco SAAC is being operated independently but plan to partner with local museums in the future to take the participants on field trips. We also plan to connect with Artz Philadelphia after the pandemic and investigate opportunities for collaboration.

***What outputs (measurable, specific) do you expect? What outcomes do you expect—what change will occur, what impact will it have? How will you measure outputs and outcomes?***

Montco SAAC evaluates Art4Me each year with a participant experience survey. Questions cover everything from how supportive they feel the environment is, to if they learned new skills, what they would like to see in the future, and whether it is a positive experience. Participation is also tracked via our co-pilot software and data collected includes gender, location, veteran status, disability, food security, race/ethnic data. We expect participation in Art4Me to reduce isolation and increase self-worth for our clients and caregivers. Our Art Educator takes qualitative notes on each student’s participation and demeanor from each class and sends anonymized report to the Executive Director.

***How will you sustain the project after the grant period?***

Art4Me is prioritized in the Montco SAAC budget and funding is obtained from a variety of grant sources.

***How will your results be shared and replicated?***

We are currently investigating collaboration with similar programs. We have an active and engaged social media following where we often post the Art4Me participants finished artworks. We also have an opportunity to display our member’s art at local libraries.

***How does this project fit with Friends Foundation values?***

Everything we do at Montco SAAC strives to empower our members to help them live well rather than be pushed aside and ignored, infantilized and stripped of decision-making abilities.

Front line staff are directly involved in the Art4Me program. Our Art Educator communicates directly with food service workers and social workers to share specific information on each client. While the Executive Director has the final word on participation, she actively solicits input and advice from front line staff. Art4Me is something our members can still participate in even if they can’t do other programs any longer. This is a program that caregivers are more comfortable with attending as well.

Feedback from participants is integrated into the program through surveys and informal data. Our Art Educator is extremely close to the participants and regularly calls members and their family for additional feedback.

***Project budget and timeline, including other sources of support, budget narrative***

Budget:

Art Instructor $2,000

Art supplies $2,520

Presentation costs $ 480

Total $5,000

This budget will partially cover our costs through the end of the fiscal year ending June 30, 2021. Presentation costs are largely related to using a Zoom account to reach participants in their homes. Art supplies are being sent to participants in their homes as stated in the previous grant narrative. The Art4Me program is also supported through grants from the Cassett Foundation and PA Alliance for the Arts. We are continually pursuing additional grants to enrich the program, and the remaining cost of our art instructor’s salary and fringe benefits is covered through our annual senior center contract with Montgomery County’s Office of Senior Services.