

**PROMISING  
PRACTICE  
AWARDS  
2023**

**7 Organizations That Are Reshaping  
the Aging Services Industry**



Each year, Mather Institute recognizes organizations that have moved away from conventional practices to design and develop innovative approaches to support those they serve. All share the same outcome: in some unique way, each enhances the lives of older adults.

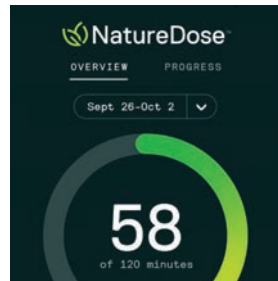
We are pleased to honor seven organizations in 2023.

Submissions were strong this past year, coming from nearly 40 organizations. So many of the submissions described powerful ideas that would benefit others. We hope they find the spotlight they deserve! Some examples include:

- ▶ **Inspir Senior Living's** theater program, which reintroduces older adults to backstage theatrical arts, and connects residents with the leading voices on Broadway, as well as universities, community theater, and high schools.
- ▶ Compassionate Touch®—Elevating Human Connections, an evidence-informed approach from **AGE-u-cate Training Institute**, which combines skilled touch and specialized communication shown to provide professional and family care partners with a practical, easy-to-learn tool that is at the heart of person-centered care practice.
- ▶ **Westminster Canterbury Richmond's** Wellness: Brains & Balance workshops that take a playful approach, combining physical and cognitive skill challenges to improve physical balance.
- ▶ Our Family, Our Way (OFOW) from **Miami University's Scripps Gerontology Center** is a communication and care coordination resource that uses highly structured and scripted materials to address challenges and inequitable care and support arrangements that evolve in some caregiving families.

Sharing these promising practices reinforces Mather Institute's commitment to encouraging innovation and creating Ways to Age Well.<sup>SM</sup> By serving as an innovation incubator, the Institute strives to shine a light on ideas that will benefit the industry, as other organizations adapt the concepts and transform them into best practices. 🌱

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## USING TECHNOLOGY TO INCREASE HEALTHFUL TIME SPENT IN NATURE

NATUREQUANT | EUGENE, OREGON | NATUREQUANT.COM

Numerous studies have shown that spending time in nature can have profound effects on your health, from boosting your immune system to reducing anxiety, adding up to a longer, happier, and healthier life. In fact, exposure to green spaces is on par with good diet, exercise, and sleep habits when it comes to lifestyle choices that support health.

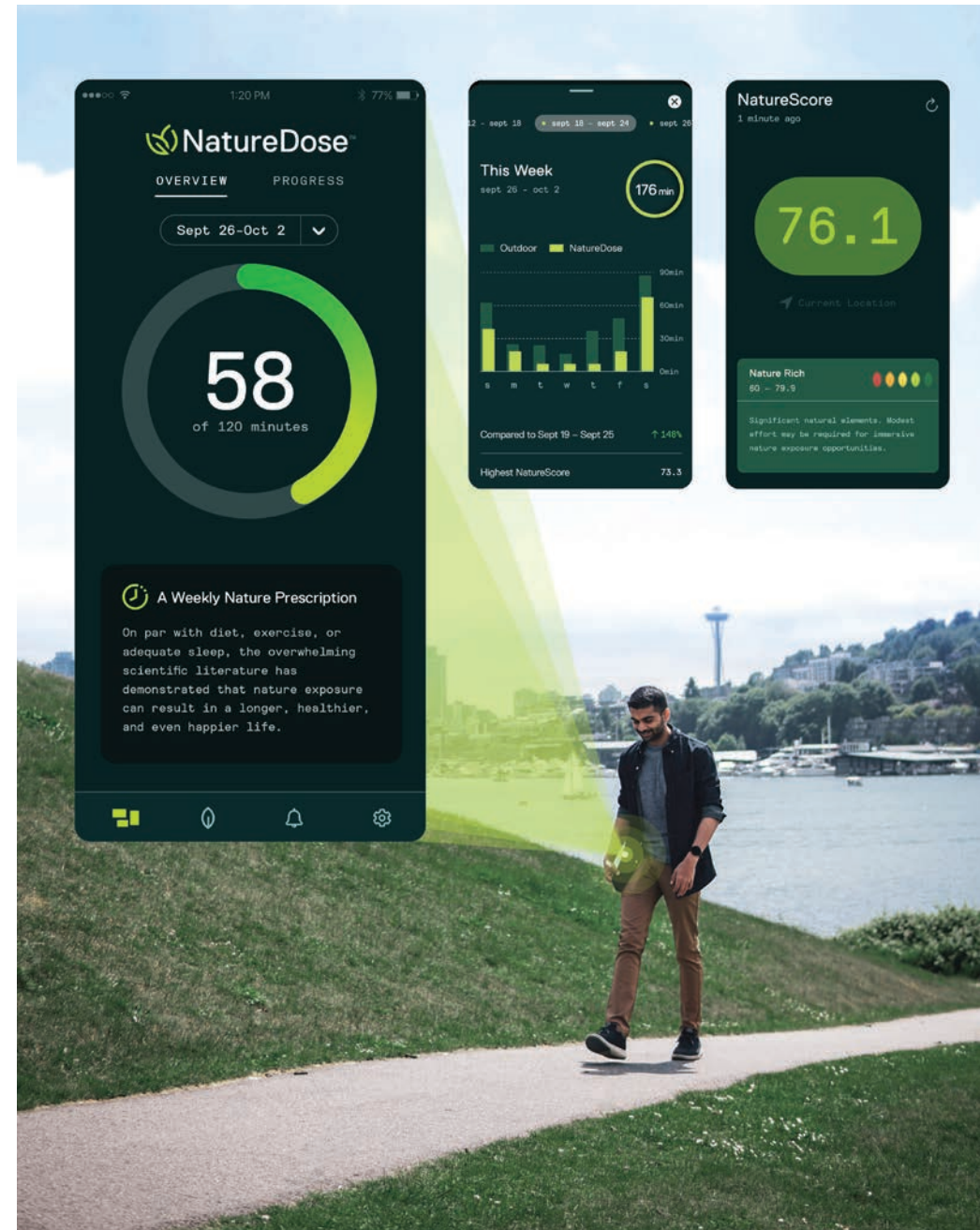
Technology startup NatureQuant has a simple solution for people who want to improve their health by increasing their time outdoors: the NatureDose mobile app motivates users to monitor their minutes spent in nature, much the way that Fitbit encourages meeting a daily step goal.

“This is a nonintrusive way for health-conscious people of all ages to boost the amount of time they spend in green spaces and blue spaces, whether it’s sitting on a bench in an urban park or watching the clouds at a beach,” says Jared Hanley, CEO and cofounder of NatureQuant. “The NatureDose app recommends a goal of 120 minutes in nature per week—regardless of whether you’re walking, jogging, or sitting—but of course that goal can be customized for each user’s situation and location.”

The app scores different environments with “time credits,” so users will earn more in a true green space than in a suburban neighborhood. “Credits and data are delivered after the fact, because we don’t want people checking their data during their nature break,” explains Jared. “The goal is to put your phone away and engage with your surroundings.”

The app is involved in six clinical trials right now, but surveys and smartwatch data already show consistent improvement in users’ sleep, mood, and activity levels.

NatureDose is available as a free download for Apple and Android devices.



## TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

You don’t have to ask each older adult you serve to download NatureDose; you can use the data yourself to give individuals “nature prescriptions”—a targeted amount of time (generally per week) to spend exposed to nature.

Plan walks and outings around nature to help people fill their nature prescriptions. You can visit nearby parks and forest preserves—keeping in mind that time in nature does not have to be spent exercising. Plan a picnic, lead a meditation class, or simply offer free time.

Try NatureDose yourself to see how the app scores different areas. The app’s technology includes a proprietary measure based on the amount and quality of natural elements in a specific location, taking into account tree canopies; air, noise, and light pollution; and more. You’ll find that the farther you get into nature (a large forest preserve versus a corner playground), the higher the score—and the more beneficial for people spending time there.

*For more information on how to use NatureDose with older adults, visit [naturequant.com](https://naturequant.com) or contact Jared Hanley at [jared.hanley@naturequant.com](mailto:jared.hanley@naturequant.com).* 🌿

## REAPING BENEFITS FROM A FARM-TO-TABLE PROGRAM FOR OLDER ADULTS

THRIVE 55+ ACTIVE LIVING CENTER | GROTON, CONNECTICUT | GROTON-CT.GOV



Thrive 55+ is a multiservice municipal health and wellness center with a focus on older adults, where they have successfully cultivated a unique program with multiple benefits: with the Just Picked program, they provide farm-fresh vegetables to local older adults (many of whom are food-insecure) and teach them how to grow and prepare the vegetables.

“We worked in collaboration with the Eastern Connecticut Community Garden Association, or ECCGA, which donated raised-bed gardens at our location,” says Mary Jo Riley, Thrive55+ supervisor. “Participants signed up to receive fresh vegetables, as well as to attend nutrition programs and cooking demonstrations.” In 2023, the program provided 50 older adults with regular deliveries of CSA- or farm share-style bags of seasonal produce.

Many customers served by Thrive 55+ are also its volunteers. Approximately 150 of them are divided into self-directed project groups, one of which plans and tends the raised-bed gardens of herbs and vegetables, and delivers the produce.

Anyone is welcome to attend the weekly cooking demonstrations at Thrive 55+, which typically draw about 70 participants. “The cooking demos are so important—a lot of people haven’t cooked and need to see it. And the chefs focus on making a single serving size, or maybe two,” says Mary Jo. Dishes include soups and casseroles, among other things. “The chefs donate their time as part of ECCGA’s volunteer program, which helps keep our costs low, and what is not donated is covered by grants. Our only out-of-pocket costs were for paper plates, cups, and napkins for the cooking demonstrations.”

Thrive55+ grew 550 pounds of fresh vegetables for the program, as well as for use by the cafe at the center. “Next year, I’d like to expand the program a bit,” says Mary Jo. “We might get other people involved, like the Connecticut Beekeepers Association and their honey . . . or local egg producers.”

### TRY IT YOURSELF

Just Picked is easily replicated with the help of a local community garden association. Thrive’s advice to organizations interested in planning their own program includes:

- ▶ Start small. Ease into the program by providing farm-fresh vegetables to a smaller group of individuals who would benefit from the program and are willing to try new foods and recipes.
- ▶ Encourage every participant to taste the vegetables, so they know if they’ll eat them. Not everyone is going to like every item offered. If they won’t use a particular food item, we encourage them to share with someone who will and provide the recipes that they received from the program.
- ▶ Adding raised bed gardens or a garden area to produce your own vegetables can come second. This can add to what is donated from local farms through a CGA or be used by your organization for your own meals.
- ▶ Use donations of natural fertilizer, seeds, and plants for the gardens.
- ▶ Finding a volunteer who loves to plan a vegetable garden is also a big plus in this whole project.

For more information, contact Mary Jo Riley at [mjriley@groton-ct.gov](mailto:mjriley@groton-ct.gov). 🌱

## REGIFTING ITEMS REENERGIZES RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT

CARROLL LUTHERAN VILLAGE | WESTMINSTER, MARYLAND | CLVILLAGE.ORG

A senior living community has taken the idea of reduce/reuse/recycle to heart, creating a huge (and hugely popular) “freecycle” event called Gifting the 3Rs . . . and So Much More. Twice a year, more than 50 residents, plus some employees, organize and host the event on campus.

“Residents and employees are encouraged to donate items smaller than clothing or furnishings, such as games, crafts, books, CDs, DVDs, home decor, holiday items, and art supplies,” explains Jordan Haegerich, resident life coordinator for Carroll Lutheran Village. “Each event takes just three days: item drop-off and setup is scheduled for one day—then over the next one and a half days, residents and employees can browse items and take what they want. The last half-day is spent on cleanup.”

Any unwanted items are donated to nonprofits. Visitors are also encouraged to donate to the community’s benevolent care fund—and they do so with gusto! Donations to the fund during the biannual event have exceeded \$10,000.

Over the past eight years, the freecycle event has grown in scope and in the number of residents involved. “Many residents put a lot of work into this,” says Jordan. “They take turns with marketing, setup, organizing, cleanup, and fundraising. Then it’s all hands on deck during the events, with more than 50 residents taking shifts as volunteers, greeters, and drivers.” The end result: residents get encouragement to downsize; younger employees who may be starting homes get some valuable free items; local nonprofits get a good donation for their own sales; the benevolent care fund also gets a boost; and everyone involved is socially engaged.



### TRY IT YOURSELF

Try holding your own freecycle event, with these lessons learned from Carroll Lutheran Village:

- ▶ Engage as many volunteers as possible and find meaningful roles for anyone interested.
- ▶ Limit accepted items to those that can be managed in the time and space available. For example, clothing and large furnishings demand a different level of commitment.
- ▶ Leave ample time for setup and organization; it’s key to group like items together on tables as you get them, and make all readily visible.
- ▶ Hold your event just prior to other planned charitable events by local nonprofits, who will pick up all remaining items.
- ▶ Advertise well to both residents and employees, with both print materials and electronically.
- ▶ Encourage freecycle attendees to consider a donation to a selected and popular charitable fund.
- ▶ Start small and build. The event is VERY popular, and coordinating and organizing well is essential.
- ▶ A few key and enthusiastic leaders are crucial.

For more information, contact Jordan Haegerich at [jhaegerich@clvillage.org](mailto:jhaegerich@clvillage.org). 🌿

## EMPOWERING OLDER ADULTS TO PLAN THEIR OWN PROGRAMS

UNITED CHURCH HOMES | MARION, OHIO | UNITEDCHURCHHOMES.ORG



approach to arrive at those ideas that offer the most promise for enhancing resident life. Participants are asked to choose final ideas that will benefit as many residents as possible, don't require staffing, and use a budget of \$1,000.

“The exercise was so successful that we immediately decided to invest further,” says Michael. “Now we have four employees available to do these workshops on-demand for any of our interested communities. So far, we've held two more. We find this is an effective way to keep up with the changing needs and wants of residents.”

Community-specific programs that have come out of the program include a “welcome wagon” program for new residents, an exercise and balance class, and creating pollinator gardens—an initiative that attracted more than \$30,000 in additional donations.

Older adults have a multitude of life experiences, creative ideas, and up-close understanding of what type of programs will enrich their lives—so why not empower them to design their own programming?

A multisite senior living provider did just that, and the results are remarkable. A pilot program involved about 24 residents in independent living and assisted living, who worked together to develop new ideas for programs. “We call this a human-centered design framework. Similar approaches have been used by organizations like Disney and Intel to develop new offerings, but we believe this is the first time it's been applied in senior living,” says Michael Hughes, chief transformation and innovation officer for United Church Homes.

All residents in one senior living community were invited to participate in a two-day workshop. The two dozen people who showed up went through carefully structured ideation sessions, followed by a reductive thinking

### TRY IT YOURSELF

Want to give the older adults you serve the freedom and funding to come up with their own programs? United Church Homes offers these guidelines:

- ▶ Start the exercise with icebreaker activities for the entire group, so they can get to know each other. “Often, people may say their ideas might not be right for each other—this helps get everyone in a mindset that the programming we'd like to do is community-wide,” explains Michael.
- ▶ To begin the ideation process, encourage crazy, wild ideas. “In the end, what we focus on is not the idea itself, but the intent behind the idea—is it to be more fun? More efficient?” says Michael.
- ▶ Then apply your parameters to fine-tune the ideas—limits on cost, staffing levels, etc. How can the initial ideas work within your constraints? “This is where things start to get really cool, as the ideas start to take shape,” says Michael.
- ▶ If the group can't decide on final idea(s) to implement, ask them to take the ideas to the greater community to arrive at a decision.

For more information, contact Michael Hughes at [mhughes@uchinc.org](mailto:mhughes@uchinc.org). 🌱

## MAPPING OUT ACCESSIBILITY IN THE LARGER COMMUNITY

JSA DESIGN | PORTSMOUTH, NEW HAMPSHIRE | ACCESSNAVIGATORS.COM

Anyone who has ever tried to plan an outing to a new location for older adults has wondered, “How much walking is involved for this attraction?” “Is that walking trail accessible to people with mobility issues?” or “Where can I find an appropriate spot for outdoor dining for my group?”

Now there’s a source for this type of information—at least in part of the US. An architectural design organization specializing in senior living has created Access Navigators, a web-based guide to accessibility data for restaurants, attractions, and parks across New England. Web-based maps let people plan outings and choose easy destinations based on accessibility criteria. Information includes entryways, interior, restrooms, and parking.

The initiative has expanded to include accessibility on hiking trails, urban walking/rolling routes, and outdoor dining. All data is gathered and verified by a group of “fact-checkers” who are individuals living with a variety of disabilities.

“Our platform lets people with mobility issues remain connected to their larger communities as they age,” says Anne Weidman, director of community engagement at JSA Design. “Knowing what to expect before an outing, and the ability to plan in advance, lets individuals travel confidently. This improves their overall health and enhances their quality of life.”



### TRY IT YOURSELF

It’s possible to create a similar tool for your area. Here are some steps to get you started:

- ▶ Assemble a task force that includes people with a variety of disabilities and also people who have time to help assess the town.
- ▶ Look at all types of public spaces, including sidewalks, curb cuts, parking areas, parks, playgrounds, restaurants, etc.
- ▶ Think holistically, starting from parking the car (or public transport) to the travel path to your restaurant/attraction, looking for clear step-free entries, indoor maneuverability, and accessible restrooms.
- ▶ Enlist your local college or university to help. JSA Design uses occupational therapy graduate students to collect data. “We can train your team remotely via a virtual meeting,” offers Anne.
- ▶ Become a friend to your city—don’t just complain. Find small things to upgrade, ask nicely, ask the right person, and don’t call it out on social media. Give the city all the credit afterward.

*For more information to jump-start your city as a more age-friendly and accessible place and/or be included in the Access Navigators database, contact Anne Weidman at [info@accessnavigators.com](mailto:info@accessnavigators.com).* 🌱



## MAKING MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS THROUGH CONVERSATIONAL CARD-PLAYING

SOUVENERA | GLENCOE, ILLINOIS | SOUVENERA.COM



a powerful connection to memory and life story that is unexpected. “We’ve seen overwhelmingly positive response from participants,” says Randi. “Participants enjoy engaging in deeper conversations, making new friends, and learning more about old friends.”

Making friends as we age is not easy; older adults may be viewed as the sum of their infirmities, or identified as who they once were. With this in mind, an Illinois company developed an enlivening card game to stimulate generative conversations and meaningful social interactions between older adults, or among older adults and family members or senior living employees.

Souvenera Conversation Cards provide two different decks of cards with four themes per deck. Deck one includes Life Lessons, Influences, Sensory, and Memories. Deck two includes Rituals, Relationships, Secrets, and Time Machine.

The game was piloted in a Life Plan Community in Illinois, where it was used in independent living, assisted living, and memory care communities. “We find that the questions from the respective card decks elicit deeply reflective responses,” says Randi Fiat of Souvenera. “These responses, when respectfully witnessed by fellow players, engendered a feeling of being seen, heard, and understood. Many residents commented that it was the most intimate experience of connecting with other residents that they had ever had.”

The simple, card-based game is easy to implement, yet it elicits

### TRY IT YOURSELF

You can get the same effects without the Souvenera cards. Any program that offers older adults the opportunity to gather in small groups to reflect on parts of their life stories can be deeply connective and meaningful. “The goal is to stimulate past memories that are not normally thought about until someone asks,” explains Randi.

- ▶ Prepare your own specific questions—either on cards, or simply read them from a list. As you do so, consider questions that can help older adults organize their life stories.
- ▶ Invite everyone to respond to each question, including any employees or family members present.
- ▶ Ensure that everyone listens respectfully to each answer without interruption. This makes participants feel truly listened to and valued, in a way that casual conversation can’t provide.
- ▶ If your event is well received, consider making it a regular program, or expanding it to include others.

*You can purchase Souvenera card decks online at [souvenera.com/cards](https://souvenera.com/cards). For more information, contact Randi Fiat at [randi@souvenera.com](mailto:randi@souvenera.com).* 🌿

## FORMING CLOSER BONDS THROUGH PERSON-CENTERED INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAMMING

KENDAL AT OBERLIN EARLY LEARNING CENTER | OBERLIN, OHIO | [KAO.KENDAL.ORG/ABOUT/EARLY-LEARNING-CENTER](https://kao.kendal.org/about/early-learning-center)

The benefits of intergenerational programming for older adults are well-known. One organization has taken this concept far beyond the usual to not only enrich the lives of senior living residents and preschoolers, but to establish long-lasting connections between participants.

“We intentionally planned events that would foster long-lasting relationships between ‘grandfriends’ (older adults) and the children,” says Jeni Hoover, ELC director. The Early Learning Center partnered with the on-site independent living/assisted living, inviting all interested residents to join activities that interest them. “Each meetup typically included five to seven grandfriends and the same number of children.” Examples of programs include:

- Yoga – grandfriends and children do yoga together.
- Art Club – pairs of grandfriends and children create a picture, project, or pottery together.
- Cooking Club – grandfriends and children cook together, including baking cookies, cakes, or bread.
- Pen Pals – grandfriends and children write or draw pictures back and forth with one another.
- Book Reading – children visit grandfriends in their home to read a story together. Some grandfriends also visit our classroom to read to the class as a whole.
- Visits – we come to the home or room of the grandfriend and spend a short time “visiting” and learning about their interests. We would bring along children with similar interests or experiences to the grandfriend.
- Postcards – grandfriends get a postcard with a picture drawn by a child when they move in and on their birthday.

Students from Oberlin College also participate in Kendal’s intergenerational programming.



### TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

To replicate this program, of course you’ll need to partner with a local preschool or similar organization. Beyond the logistics of that, Jeni advises, the value for older adults lies in person-centric programming. “You need to really get to know your participants in the program, so you can better plan things that they’re interested in and will enjoy,” she says.

- ▶ Have each of your older-adult participants submit a biography to you before starting the program. Ask for their hobbies and interests, skills, and favorite foods (to potentially include in a cooking program).
- ▶ Participants can not only enjoy programs that interest them, but they can also, when appropriate, be matched with children with the same interests.
- ▶ You can include older adults who aren’t able to attend in person through programs like a pen-pal pair-up or arrange for children to visit their older-adult coparticipants.

This person-centered approach makes the program more meaningful for the grandfriends, and can help guide selection of books, foods, etc. as well as overall focus of programs.

For more advice, contact Jeni Hoover at [jehoover@kao.kendal.org](mailto:jehoover@kao.kendal.org). 🌱

## INTERESTED IN SUBMITTING FOR THE 2024 PROMISING PRACTICES AWARDS?

Nominations will open in April, with a submission deadline in May 2024. For details, visit [matherinstitute.com/senior-living-professionals/promising-practices-awards](https://matherinstitute.com/senior-living-professionals/promising-practices-awards).

Staffed by a multidisciplinary team of researchers, Mather Institute is an award-winning resource for research and information about wellness, aging, trends in senior living, and successful industry innovations. In order to support senior living communities and others that serve older adults, the Institute shares its cutting-edge research in areas including effective approaches to brain health, ways to enhance resilience, and successful employee wellness programs. Mather Institute is part of Mather, an 80+-year-old not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating Ways to Age Well.<sup>SM</sup>

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