

2025 PROMISING PRACTICES AWARDS

4 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.

Sharing this year's promising practices reinforces Mather Institute's commitment to encouraging innovation and creating Ways to Age Well.SM 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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STAGING OLDER ADULTS FOR SUCCESS: PUTTING ON IN-HOUSE MUSICAL THEATER PERFORMANCES

MUSIC THEATRE INTERNATIONAL | NEW YORK, NY | MTISHOWS.COM

Let's put on a show! Research shows that older adults who participate in live theater enjoy improvements in mental health, well-being, and quality of life and even reap the same physical benefits as other forms of exercise.

That's why New York City-based Music Theatre International (MTI) developed their Broadway Senior™ offerings—to give older adults the chance to produce and perform in musical theater and enjoy opportunities for creative and social engagement.

MTI is the world's leading theatrical licensing agency, granting theaters the rights to perform the largest selection of musicals. They provide official scripts, musical materials, and dynamic theatrical resources to more than 100,000 professional, community, and school theaters in the US and in 150+ countries. With Broadway Senior, they've branched out to offer adaptations of popular musicals specifically developed for performers 55 and better.

Now older adult centers, assisted living communities, and other organizations can purchase everything they need to produce one of five popular musicals, each specially adapted with a run time of approximately 60 minutes. In addition to the license for a well-known musical, organizations receive the following:

- accessible actors' scripts
- a production guide
- production accompaniment tracks
- a piano vocal score

The only program of its kind, Broadway Senior launched in May 2025, after a seven-year pilot process where materials were adapted for older performers in collaboration with assisted living communities and older adult centers around the country.



“We know the program is successful based on feedback from program administrators and leaders in the assisted living space and from the participants themselves, as well as interest from new organizations seeking to produce these musicals in their communities,” says Jason Cocovinis, MTI's director of marketing.

MTI's development process included more than 100 pilot performances involving 2,000 older adult performers and staff members and seen by over 6,000 audience members across the US. The program has also expanded internationally.

“We believe that theater is for all people and that it should be accessible to all, regardless of age,” shares MTI Co-Chairman Freddie Gershon. “Broadway Senior enables MTI to grow participation in musical theater while enhancing the lives of older adults. Equally important, Broadway Senior has proven to be a joyful experience for the participants on the stage as well as the audience.”

TRY IT YOURSELF

Interested in offering older adults the opportunity to perform, direct, choreograph, or accompany a performance? Keep in mind that unless you're performing an original work, you'll need legal permissions.

Jason points out that the players (or people) are the key to the endeavor—you can choose a recreation room as your stage and skip the sound and lighting equipment. Some tips for success:

- ▶ Suggest the idea of putting on a play and see how many residents are interested and what “roles” they'd prefer to play. (Not everyone wants to act.)
- ▶ Build your production around the number of players you have.
- ▶ Assemble a production team of staff and/or residents to serve as the director, stage manager, accompanist, and choreographer. You may want to enlist a house manager as well.
- ▶ As you build your experience, focus on social interactions among participants, collaborative problem-solving, individual creativity, and, ideally, some memorization of lines so that residents can reap the health benefits.

For more information, contact Jason Cocovinis at jasonc@mtishows.com.

TRANSFORMING HEARTBEATS INTO MEMORY & SONG

BETHANY VILLAGE | DAYTON, OH | BETHANYLUTHERANVILLAGE.ORG

A faith-based Life Plan Community in Ohio has introduced a deeply personal and innovative initiative that blends hospice with music therapy to provide grieving families with a way to stay connected to their loved ones.

A Legacy of Heartbeats launched March 2025 at Bethany Village, one of Graceworks Lutheran Services' senior living communities. At its core, the program celebrates life and love. Using a digital stethoscope, a team member records the heartbeat of a hospice patient, and that sound serves as the anchor for a piece of music that is uniquely theirs. Families—sometimes including the hospice patient—collaborate with the music therapist to select a favorite song or cherished melody, or even create an original piece, that reflects the person's essence. Together, they transform these heartbeats into a tangible memory, a gift of sound that comforts, heals, and celebrates the unique life lived.



“This program offers families a positive and thoughtful way to process their grief and find solace,” says Devanne Hargis, LPMT, MT-BC, music therapist & music therapy internship director. “It transforms the intimate rhythm of a loved one’s heartbeat into a celebration of their life, creating a keepsake that bridges the emotional and physical connection between the present and the past.” Devanne estimates that A Legacy of Heartbeats will serve approximately 50 to 60 families annually.

Bethany Village funded the program with grants and contributions from the resident council. They stress that the program’s success relies on the expertise of a compassionate and skilled licensed music therapist.

TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

Bethany Village says one of their most important takeaways is the power of collaboration.

- ▶ Involve the patient’s family at every step of the process—from choosing the perfect song to sharing stories about their loved ones. These collaborations are not just about creating a recording; they are about honoring lives and building lasting memories together.
- ▶ Embed the program within interdisciplinary care teams to create a sustainable framework that honors the emotional and physical needs of families.
- ▶ To secure funding, start early and lean on the strength of your community. Ask your resident council to consider an ongoing contribution.

“We believe A Legacy of Heartbeats holds immense potential as a model for other senior living communities,” says Devanne. “It’s more than a program—it’s a promise to cherish, connect, and celebrate the rhythms of life.”

For more information, contact Devanne Hargis at dhargis@graceworks.org.

TACKLING RETENTION CHALLENGES WITH A DEDICATED SPECIALIST

SAINT THERESE | ST. LOUIS PARK, MN | SAINTTHERESE.ORG

Minnesota-based senior living provider Saint Therese is finding success with their strategic initiative designed to address long-standing challenges in team member orientation, onboarding, and retention within long-term care settings. Dubbed the OARS Program (for Onboarding and Retention Success), the initiative centers around a newly created position called the Onboarding and Retention Specialist (OARS), who acts as an on-site ambassador and dedicated resource for new team members. This individual works with all staff to improve overall retention.

The OARS ensures a seamless, supported onboarding experience through the following responsibilities:

- engaging with new hires early in the hiring process
- leading orientation efforts and deploying consistent onboarding tools
- gathering and disseminating team member feedback and retention data
- identifying and addressing root causes of staff turnover
- supporting workplace culture through relationship-building and employee advocacy

Two of the Saint Therese communities in Minnesota have their own OARS, supported through a collaborative partnership with Empira, a quality improvement organization. “This innovative practice didn’t rely on significant organizational investment, but rather reallocated existing human resources,” says Craig Abbott, president and CEO. “It is scalable and can be adapted across varied care settings with potential to positively impact staff stability and resident care.”

Funding for the program comes through the Minnesota Department of Human Services and is performance-based, reinforcing the value and accountability of the model. This funding allowed four member organizations—including Saint Therese—to pilot and refine this innovative model.

“OARS has yielded clear, measurable outcomes in its first year,” says Craig. “Across participating sites, nursing staff turnover improved by an average of 21% from baseline, compared to only 9% improvement in non-participating sites.” Nationally, average improvements have been just 3–4%, highlighting the significant impact of the OARS model.



TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

Saint Therese shared the following insights into their program:

- ▶ One key lesson is the value of dedicated, relational support during the onboarding process. New team members often decide whether to stay within their first 90 days. Having a go-to person whose sole focus is their experience makes a significant difference.
- ▶ Leadership buy-in is critical for successful implementation, as is clearly defining the OARS role to avoid overlap with HR or managerial functions.
- ▶ Sustainability is built into the model: OARS specialists leverage existing tools, are trained to collect actionable data, and help inform retention strategies that reduce future costly turnover. Even in resource-constrained settings, the program can be implemented by adjusting existing staffing structures.
- ▶ Performance-based funding (from the Minnesota Department of Human Services for Saint Therese) further supports sustainability and incentivizes continuous improvement. Investing in human-centered roles like OARS pays dividends in retention, morale, and continuity of care.

For more information, contact Barb Hemberger at barbarah@sainttherese.org.

SHIFTING FROM AGE LABELS TO FUNCTIONAL DESCRIPTIONS

AGENTS OF MOVEMENT | MONUMENT, CO | AGENTSOFMOVEMENT.COM

In well-meaning attempts to target an appropriate audience, providers of fitness programs are using ageist language and may be missing the mark on who is eligible to participate.

Erin Eleuterio, who started a network of professionals who work with older adults, offers a simple solution: “Ability-Based Physical Activity Programming replaces age-based class designations (such as Senior Fit and Silver Yoga) with descriptions that focus on the specific physical abilities needed to participate,” she says. The purpose is to dismantle ageist assumptions, promote inclusion, and empower older adults to self-select physical movement based on function rather than age. “By focusing on what people can do, not how old they are, this practice supports greater independence, dignity, and participation,” explains Erin.

One example: If a 70-year-old has practiced yoga for 30 years, will a class called “Senior Yoga” match their ability level and challenge them appropriately?

AGENTS of Movement* conducted an informal survey of older adults who participate in physical wellness classes, asking them if the programs or instructors made assumptions about their abilities. An overwhelming majority, 75%, said yes.

Survey participants shared what helped them feel more confident and willing to participate in classes:

- well-trained instructors with knowledge of injury prevention and adaptation
- clear class descriptions, including fitness level indicators (e.g., Levels 1–3), to set expectations
- programs tailored to fitness level and learning ability, not age alone

These responses reinforce the importance for community centers, gyms, and even senior centers of talking with participants, surveying them, and designing programs that reflect a continuum of ability levels—rather than following assumptions based solely on age.



TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

Senior living providers as well as community-based organizations can use evaluations to place individuals in appropriate fitness classes. Erin uses real examples from StrongerLife gym, which is marketed to people age 55 and older. The gym offers two levels of classes, 1.0 and 2.0. Each new member is assessed with the following questions to determine which class they should be in:

- ▶ Can you walk 30 minutes without stopping?
- ▶ Can you get to/from the ground without the use of furniture?
- ▶ Any medical issues, injuries, or aches/pains you want your coach to know about before class?

Also, classes need to be clearly named and described according to physical ability needed, which then creates a continuum of levels.

Targeting each older adult’s appropriate level of fitness that will challenge them to maintain and improve their physical health will have an impact on their longevity, health span, and ability to choose programs they need, want, and love to do.

For more information, contact Erin Eleuterio at erineleu@gmail.com.

*AGENTS of Movement comprises Erin Eleuterio; Holly Benson of Moving Strong Medical Exercise, LLC; Jojo McDuffie, strength coach; Patricia Linderman of FierceAfter45; Laura Dow of Stiff To Fit; Cheryl Whitelaw of Peace and Power Movement Services; and Jennifer Winters, a geriatric nurse practitioner and an educator.

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. The Institute conducts cutting-edge research, often in collaboration with leading universities, with the goal of informing, innovating, and inspiring. Mather Institute is part of Mather, an 80+-year-old not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating Ways to Age Well.SM

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