March 30th, 2012

Helen Lamonth, Ph.D
HHS Office for the Assistant Secretary
for Planning and Evaluation
Department of Health and Human Services
Room 424E, Humphrey Building
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

RE: Arts and Aging Research

Thank you for inviting the public to comment on the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services “Draft Framework for the National Plan to Address Alzheimer’s Disease.” As a pioneer in Art and Aging programming and recipient of the 2012 MetLife Foundation Creativity and Aging in America Leadership award in the category of Community, the Alzheimer’s Poetry Project welcomes the opportunity to provide recommendations for your consideration.

We believe that the five goals outlined in the plan which form the foundation of the National Plan is well formulated and seeks to offer a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach. In comparing the National Plan to the most recent work of the three Sub-Committees, we felt the need to underscore a role for arts and aging research.

While our ultimate goal is a world without Alzheimer's, we recognize those living with the disease today and tomorrow will require the best possible care we can offer. We are concerned that the ultimate research agenda will be too narrow in scope and leave research relative to care practices as a back-burner issue, instead of integrated as a significant component.

Among the areas in NAPA that arts programming could be especially effective include educating family and the public about the disease and under lessening the stigma of the disease. A number of arts groups including the Alzheimer’s Poetry Project have this effect when we hold workshops for family members and students. Our public arts events such as “Alzheimer’s Poetry Day” held at among other locations, the National Hispanic Cultural Center held in Albuquerque, New Mexico on November 5th 2011 in English and Spanish is one such example.

A few arts programs serving people living with Alzheimer’s disease and related dementia and their families, that have extensive experience in helping to educate caregivers and in demonstrating the role that creativity can play in the health of people navigating memory loss, that have show promise in research studies include:

- “Meet Me at MoMA,” The Museum of Modern Arts dementia program.
• “Time Slips,” a Storytelling project with people with Alzheimer’s disease and their caregivers.
• SONGWRITING WORKS™, which engages elders, older adults and families in hands-on songwriting and performance using an internationally recognized method proven to restore health and community.
• “The Dancing Heart,” Kairos Dance, which vitally engages those with mid-to-late stage Alzheimer’s, in a weekly dance and storytelling playshop that has shown to positively improve the health of participants.

One agency missing from the list of participating inter-agency departments and government agencies tasked to help support the development of the national plan is the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Recently, this agency partnered with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in creating the white paper “The Arts and Human Development: Learning across the Lifespan,” which frames a national research agenda for the arts, health and well-being. We recommend that the NEA have an opportunity to weigh in and support efforts in creating NAPA.

In the NEA, “Creativity and Aging Study The Impact of Professionally Conducted Cultural Programs on Older Adults,” 2006 they write, “…In conclusion, these results point to powerful positive intervention effects of these community-based art programs run by professional artists. They point to true health promotion and disease prevention effects.”

In addition, we would like to bring to your attention to two among many studies that show the impact of non-pharmaceutical interventions in improving the health and quality of life for people living with Alzheimer’s disease and related dementia including: “Singing while caring for persons with dementia,” and “Using poetry to improve the quality of life and care for people with dementia.”

We must ask our selves what immediate help can we provide to people living with Alzheimer’s disease and related dementias and how can we help them to continue to actively participate in the life of a community. Arts based dementia programming offers a chance to improve the quality of life of people living with dementia and their caregivers today. Thank you for the opportunity to share our thoughts and recommendations.

Sincerely,

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1 “Singing while caring for persons with dementia,” Lena Marmsta˚l Hammara,b*, Eva Gøtella,b and Gabriella Engstro˚m c aMa˚lardalen University, School of Health, Care and Social Welfare, Va˚sterås, Sweden; bKarolinska Institute, Department of Neurobiology, Care Science and Society, Division of Nursing, Stockholm, Sweden; cMa˚lardalen University, School of Health, Care and Social Welfare, Eskilstuna, Sweden Arts & Health Vol. 3, No. 1, March 2011, 39–50

2 “Using poetry to improve the quality of life and care for people with dementia,” Helen Gregory University of Gloucestershire, Natural and Social Sciences, Cheltenham, UK (Received 9 December 2010; final version received 20 March 2011), Arts & Health Vol. 3, No. 2, September 2011, 160–172