


# Summit focuses on health benefits of arts programming

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Mashantucket — Since 2005, the Judy Dworin Performance Project has been using dance, song and storytelling to help incarcerated women at York Correctional Institution develop self-concept and communication.

Speaking on the state of prisons nationwide, Dworin said, "We see in prison identities that have been stripped away, and in the worst-case scenarios, they're living in environments that are sterile and punitive."

According to a **2016 report from the Vera Institute of Justice** ([https://storage.googleapis.com/vera-web-assets/downloads/Publications/overlooked-women-and-jails-report/legacy\\_downloads/overlooked-women-and-jails-report-updated.pdf](https://storage.googleapis.com/vera-web-assets/downloads/Publications/overlooked-women-and-jails-report/legacy_downloads/overlooked-women-and-jails-report-updated.pdf)), 86 percent of women in U.S. jails report having experienced sexual violence at some point, 82 percent report a history of alcohol or drug dependency and 32 percent are affected by mental illness.

Dworin was the keynote speaker at Arts & Health InterSECT: Creating Health and Wellness Through the Arts in Southeastern CT, a summit the **Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition** (<http://culturesect.org/>) hosted at the Mashantucket Pequot Museum & Research Center on Friday morning.

Wendy Bury, executive director of the cultural coalition, said the goal was to "capture the inventory" of area programs and help facilitate conversations, which could lead to collaboration.

The event drew representatives from Connecticut College, United Community and Family Services, Emerson Theater Collaborative, La Grua Center, Pfizer, Norwich Free Academy, the Boys & Girls Club of Southeastern Connecticut, local libraries and more.

Speaking to the impact of the arts on health, Bill Stanley said the event reflects the "hope that the benefits will become more apparent to those cynics and those doubters." Stanley, vice president of development and community relations at Lawrence + Memorial Hospital, was another presenter.

He spoke of paintings hanging in the inpatient rehab unit, done by a man who recovered from a debilitating stroke and painted as part of his rehab. He spoke of the importance of the large CD collection at the cancer center, allowing patients to listen to everything from hip-hop to classical to big band music.

Sen. Heather Somers, R-Groton, spoke of the importance of art therapy, especially for people dealing with mental health issues or opioid addiction.

"It gives them an idea of expressing or developing or learning about their emotions ... in a way that doesn't have to be spoken," she said. Somers added that such programming reduces shame, anxiety, stress and anger, and that art therapy is invaluable for PTSD.

She co-chairs the Public Health Committee in the General Assembly, and she would like to see licensing for music and art therapists. The legislature could not get an agreement on what the credentials would be in the last session, Somers said, but she thinks it will come up again.

The event on Friday also included presentations about the collaborative work behind Common Thread Project, Raising Voices Against Domestic Violence, "Always Picked Last" and Artreach.

Common Thread Project allowed UCFS, Reliance Health, Horses Healing Humans and The Light House to work with artist Jerry Wagner to incorporate fabric art into the therapeutic process.

Raising Voices Against Domestic Violence, a collaboration between Writer's Block Ink and Safe Futures, has allowed survivors of domestic violence to participate in paint nights, make zines and paint T-shirts with encouraging messages, said Kia Baird, interim director of programming at Writer's Block.

"Always Picked Last" is an anti-bullying play that Lisa Giordano of the Emerson Theater Collaborative wrote based on a book by Kevin Kearns. The play was a collaboration with The Light House, allowing involvement of students on the autism spectrum.

The mental health and arts agency Artreach has collaborated with comedian David Granirer, Sea Tea Improv and playwright Kato McNickle.

Artreach Executive Director Becca Atkins said that participants "come in and dis-identify with their diagnosis, identify as an artist and work on their craft."

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