Purpose

The purpose of this project was to assess the potential for sustainability in a newly developed arts in healthcare program model for rural communities. While there are many effective models in place for arts in healthcare programs in urban and suburban healthcare settings, a literature review indicated that no models have yet been published for such programs in rural areas, and that these programs have the potential to contribute to improved health outcomes in rural communities.

Methods

Using a strong theoretical framework, a qualitative Appreciative Inquiry study was undertaken to identify the presence of meaning and self-transcendence among program stakeholders (people actively involved in the program) as an indication of the potential for sustainability of the Weems Arts in Medicine program in Franklin County, Florida. The nineteen subjects represented 5 population groups: five organizational partners, four staff planners, three paid artists, three volunteer artists, and four program participants. Each subject had been actively participating in the program for between 1-16 months.

To complete the study, all nineteen subjects participated in a structured interview including 11 questions and lasting approximately 30 minutes each. Each interview was transcribed in real-time during the interview and crosschecked for accuracy using audio recordings after the interview was complete. The transcriptions were then analyzed using a constant comparison/grounded theory methodology.

Results

To analyze the interviews, several coding processes were used, resulting in the formation of a set of categories that represented the data. The process of coding and categorizing the data included several stages: 1) initial coding (line by line); 2) focused coding (comparing data to determine codes); 3) axial coding (creating sub-categories); and 4) theoretical coding (discovering how multiple codes relate to each other that result in hypotheses for forming a theory).

During the coding process, four primary comparisons of each of the interviews were made: a) responses within a single interview, b) responses between two or more interview, c) responses within a population group, and d) responses between population groups. These comparisons eventually resulted in more focused categories, and contributed to the emergence of a theory. Throughout the analysis process, the principle investigator wrote memos of her impressions and observations of the responses. This process also served as a basis for developing a theory that eventually became a conclusion.

According to the line-by-line coding and analyzing of each of the categories, the experience of ‘meaning’ was determined to be the most common occurrence for all study subjects, and a most-likely cause of the potential for sustainability in a rural arts in healthcare program. ‘Self-transcendence’ was also a common observation in over 50% of subject responses. While participation in the program in any capacity was found to encourage a significant sense of ‘meaning’, experiencing ‘self-transcendence’ within the program seemed to encourage higher levels of ‘meaning’.

Using the line-by-line coding allowed seven common themes of what participants experienced when actively working with the program. These seven themes include: a)
meaning; b) opportunities to help others; c) benefits to others; d) sense of community; e) recognition of health benefits; f) self-transcendence; and g) the gathering of diverse populations. Of these seven themes, 100% of the participants claimed to experience both ‘meaning’ and ‘self-transcendence’. Categories within the seven themes included enhanced self-esteem, fulfillment, and making a difference.

The foundational theories utilized in the study design were integrated with the study result’s to create a theoretical model for the relationship between program activities (including planning and administration), self-transcendence, meaning, and sustainability. The figure below is the visual model of the complete summary of the data and resulting theory.

Four common themes emerged:

1. Program stakeholders can have experiences that lead either to self-transcendence or directly to meaning;

2. Through enhanced self-understanding, purpose and insight, self-transcendence leads to meaning;

3. Meaning, with its seven identified facets, leads to sustainability by producing excitement, commitment, collaboration, and routinization; and

4) Enhanced conditions for sustainability lead to continued involvement in the program.

Below are examples of interview responses that represent some of the seven themes:

“The ability to do something to help other people… that is the benefit to me.” – Program Planner

“The ability to reach people who are otherwise isolated, to be able to bring our music skills to the community, healing and touching and being involved, being broadened myself - that is wonderful.”

– Artist

“Any time you can bring peace and serenity [to others], it increases the meaning in your life. As this program provides us the opportunity to provide helpful services, it increases the meaning in my life.”

– Organizational Partner

“I was kind of lonely with no friends and nothing to do in the community. Now I get together with others two nights a week and have fun. I feel a better connection with other people and myself… No one judges you. I’m really happy about it. I feel great and I love it. I can inspire other people to lose weight and eat better. I want to see it continue. There are even more people in the community who can benefit. It is important to inspire more [people].” – Program Participant

Across all group populations, an appreciation for being able to help others was commonly expressed. Additionally, a sense of community and the ability for the program to bring together diverse community populations were also widely noted as positive outcomes of the program and significantly related to the sense of meaning experienced by subjects across the groups. The study utilized several theoretical foundations that articulate the value of increased understanding of self, sense of well-being, purpose in life, and interconnectedness with others.
in achieving ongoing commitment and engagement in activities by planners, organizational partners, staff, and program participants.

**What We Learned**

Overall, building upon the identified foundational theories, the study data suggests that when stakeholders in a rural arts in healthcare program experience meaning in association with the program, with or without the presence of self-transcendent experiences, the potential for the sustainability of that program is enhanced. Thus, if a program can produce meaning, with or without self-transcendence, it has greater potential to be sustained over time.