

# Chronic diseases and prescribed arts & environment ticketing: a case study of the Kennedy Center for the performing arts, Washington, DC

## Abstract

The occurrence and prevalence of chronic diseases are a daily and growing threat to American lives, with fatality rates increasing yearly. These issues often stem from a lack of social interaction, physical exercise, and poor mental health, among other factors. In the Alexandria, Arlington, and DC region, the main chronic diseases are obesity, diabetes (pre and type 2), frequent mental distress (FMD), heart diseases (e.g., stroke), Alzheimer's, and cancer. These conditions result in an estimated \$6 billion per year in expenditures and affect some 600,000 people.

The causes are attributed to socioeconomic factors (40%), habits (30%), Medicare (20%), and environment (10%), all of which can be prevented and treated using arts and environment as allies. The Kennedy Center, Roosevelt Island, and Roosevelt Bridge are strategically located within the DC region to facilitate this. This paper proposes a Prescribed Arts & Environment Ticketing Program to reduce the number of new cases and treat existing ones.

Leaders in the arts, environment, health, and social care sectors could establish the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts as a strategic national center to advance good practices, promote collaboration, coordinate and disseminate research, and inform policy on this new approach. The main areas for intervention identified are:

- a) **Infrastructure:** A new bridge and Building (the Trump Building) connecting to Roosevelt Island, featuring the Charlie Kirk Theater to honor the recently deceased.
- b) **Programming:** Arts and environment initiatives.
- c) **Healthy Catering:** Improved food and beverage options.

Over a 10-year period, this program could prevent some 250,000 cases of chronic diseases, with expenditures reaching a maximum of \$240 million per year by the 10th year. This represents a fraction of the medical treatment costs for these same diseases in the region—an estimated \$4 billion per year over the same period. The total investment is roughly estimated at between \$307.3 million and \$511.3 million. Key risks have been identified and mitigation measures proposed. It's expected that a program focused on low-income, high-risk populations would increase audience attendance by 10-15% annually.

**Keywords:** environment ticketing, chronic diseases, arts, health, social care sectors, promote collaboration

Volume 10 Issue 5 - 2025

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**Received:** April 14, 2025 | **Published:** September 10, 2025

## Introduction

More than 74% of adults in the USA are overweight, over half the country suffers from at least one chronic disease, and more than 43% are obese. Among young people, 20% of children and 30% of youth (ages 17-24) are unable to serve in the military.<sup>1</sup> Some 30% of American adults feel lonely at least once a week, while 10% feel lonely every day.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, 16% of U.S. adults report frequent mental distress (FMD) due to stress, depression, or emotional problems.<sup>3</sup>

Almost all of the \$4.5 trillion per year spent on U.S. healthcare is attributed to managing and treating chronic diseases and mental health conditions, many of which are preventable and treatable.<sup>4</sup> The costs are staggering: heart disease costs \$254 billion and causes \$168 billion in lost productivity; diabetes costs \$413 billion; Alzheimer's costs \$360 billion; and obesity costs \$173 billion. Meanwhile, nearly 70% of Americans take a prescription medication.<sup>5</sup>

Risk factors for chronic diseases include cigarette smoking, physical inactivity (circa 25% of adults reported no leisure-time

physical activity), and excessive alcohol use.<sup>6</sup> Individuals with chronic diseases are impacted physically, mentally, and socially as they learn to cope and build resilience.<sup>7</sup>

The socioeconomic factors have a 40% weighting and include education, employment, income, and family and social support. Healthy living habits (30% responsibility) include diet, exercise, and avoiding smoking, alcohol, and drugs. Medicare factors have a 20% influence through access to quality treatment, and the environment accounts for 10% of a person's health, encompassing air quality, housing, transit, and food supply.

Fortunately, chronic diseases can be prevented, delayed, or alleviated. As much as 80% of heart disease, stroke, and type 2 diabetes cases and 40% of cancer cases could be prevented through lifestyle modifications.<sup>8</sup> Wellness visits, which include lifestyle assessments, are a key preventive measure,<sup>9</sup> offering significant health and economic benefits.<sup>6</sup> Healthcare costs could be reduced by improving healthy behaviors and offering comprehensive health programs.<sup>8</sup>

## Justification

Fostering healthy communities by promoting habits such as engaging in the arts is part of the solution to preventing chronic disease.<sup>1</sup> Evidence shows that quitting smoking, eating healthily, getting regular physical activity, limiting alcohol, getting enough sleep, and participating in some form of art all contribute to prevention.<sup>3,7</sup> Employers that improve workspaces often see reduced healthcare costs, absenteeism, and disability rates, along with higher productivity.<sup>10</sup> The physical environment also matters: hospitals that integrate arts into care report better patient outcomes, less staff stress, and lower burnout.<sup>11</sup> Prescribed arts already demonstrate strong results, with a 37% drop in physician consultations, 27% fewer hospital admissions, and \$300 saved per patient. Music therapy reduces dementia-related medication for agitated patients by 67% (Welch NHS, 2018), while social prescribing helps lower GP visits, addressing the 20% of consultations linked to social issues.<sup>12</sup> Therapists are also prescribing live performances and sports for their therapeutic benefits.<sup>2</sup>

Preventive screenings and behavior changes further demonstrate the scale of potential impact. Annual screenings at one U.S. clinic showed that among 10,000 un-screened people, 2,014 had chronic diseases—494 of which could be avoided each year with healthier lifestyles.<sup>8</sup> Extrapolated nationally, this translates into 11 million Americans and 16,000 DC citizens annually avoiding chronic disease onset, preventing more than 1 million U.S. deaths and 1,200 DC deaths each year. The financial benefits are equally striking: savings of about \$400 billion nationally and \$700 million locally from preventable early deaths. In Washington DC alone, chronic diseases cost \$6 billion annually—about \$8,400 per citizen—impacting nearly 400,000 residents, with 14% of that cost linked to avoidable deaths.<sup>13</sup>

## Arts, environment, and infrastructure: The Kennedy Center, Theodore Roosevelt Island, and Bridge

The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, originally established in 1958 and designated a living memorial to President Kennedy in 1964, is the busiest arts facility in the U.S., hosting approximately 3,000 performances each year and welcoming over 2.1 million visitors. Its expansive lawns and plaza serve as a green roof for The REACH, integrating art, public space, and sustainable landscape design reviewed by multiple commissions.

Adjacent to the urban environment, Theodore Roosevelt Island spans 91 acres of wooded retreat along the Potomac. Acquired by “The Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Association” in 1932, the island was designed as a natural escape from the city while contributing to the broader network of parklands in Washington, D.C.

The nearby Theodore Roosevelt Bridge, carrying Interstate 66 and U.S. Route 50 between Virginia and Washington, D.C., is scheduled for a major rehabilitation project with an estimated budget of \$100–150 million. The renovation aims to enhance safety for pedestrians and bicyclists, linking cultural spaces, natural landscapes, and urban infrastructure into a cohesive, accessible corridor.

## Prevention and treatment

Engagement with the arts and the environment offers powerful pathways to prevent and treat chronic disease, mental health challenges, and social isolation. Just 45 minutes of artmaking reduces cortisol in 75% of people, group singing lowers anxiety by 33%, and dance therapy decreases depression by 72% within twelve weeks.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, only 20 minutes of daily nature exposure reduces

stress, improves cognition, and regulates blood pressure and sleep (Fudge, 2023). Together, arts and nature create a synergistic effect, strengthening both individual well-being and community resilience. Performing arts enhance communication, self-expression, and social functioning (NOAH, 2017), while also managing anxiety and boosting optimism.<sup>15</sup> Nature exposure restores mental health, lowers cardiovascular risk, and encourages healthier lifestyles.<sup>16,17</sup> Both are highly cost-effective: every \$1 invested in arts saves \$10, and nature-based interventions yield \$40.<sup>18</sup>

These benefits are especially critical in underserved communities with limited access to health care, nutritious food, or mental health support.<sup>19</sup> Community arts reduce loneliness and encourage healthier behaviors,<sup>7</sup> while green spaces provide safe, restorative areas for activity and social connection.<sup>20</sup> Integrating artistic engagement with nature supports a preventive health model that reduces chronic disease and builds long-term resilience. Achieving this requires coordinated public–private investment, large-scale interventions, and collaboration among theater organizations, environmental groups, health systems, and policymakers to ensure equitable access to these healing benefits.<sup>4,21</sup>

## Prescribed arts to prevent, mitigate, and fight chronic diseases

There is growing interest in healthy and environmentally friendly products and services. Ticketing for health is an avenue for conscious buyers.<sup>22</sup> The arts, when on prescription, can be used to prevent diseases from ever manifesting. To preserve the cultural and communal benefits of art, theaters must find ways to make attendance more affordable for average Americans, particularly those from lower-middle-income households who are more exposed to chronic diseases.<sup>23</sup>

Nowadays, a growing number of “green,” “blue,” “nature,” and “park” prescriptions are becoming more common to prevent and treat chronic diseases. The arts and environment can act as a unifier and a touchstone for humans, directly impacting well-being.<sup>24</sup> Prescribed Arts & Environment Ticketing can serve as an incentive from the health sector to promote the performing arts and act as a prevention mechanism. When mental health providers “prescribe” therapeutically beneficial performing arts, it can contribute to a 10–15% budget growth year over year for theater organizations.<sup>25</sup>

One single visit won’t deliver permanent results, so the emphasis should be on long-term engagement.<sup>26</sup> People who participate in arts activities more than once a week have higher life satisfaction and better mental health.<sup>27</sup>

## Kennedy Center prescribed arts & environment ticketing program

Subsidized Prescribed Arts & Environmental tickets should reflect the true cost of production, including fair wages, ethical sourcing, and environmental and health considerations. Transparent pricing enhances consumer confidence, promotes loyalty, differentiates offerings, and supports sustainable business practices.<sup>28</sup>

Research highlights the importance of early health screening, social connection, physical activity, meditation, and nutrition—including vitamins, fresh food, and sugar management—for overall well-being.<sup>29</sup> The design of spaces and programs is crucial: environments that encourage movement, provide fresh food and water, and raise awareness can improve prevention and management of chronic diseases. Health interventions should extend beyond medication,

targeting behaviors and environmental factors that contribute to illness, and promoting preventive routines even before disease onset.

To reduce chronic disease prevalence among roughly 25,000 residents annually in Alexandria, Arlington, and Washington, DC, three strategies are recommended:

- 1) Connect performing arts venues to natural environments, prioritizing the Potomac River
- 2) Implement programming that raises awareness of the arts and environment in disease prevention, with systematic outcome monitoring
- 3) Align catering with healthy lifestyle principles, offering fresh food and quality beverages.

This integrated approach advances public health while reinforcing sustainable cultural and environmental practices.

### Infrastructure: The Trump Bridge and building with the Charlie Kirk Theater

Chronic disease is shaped not only by individual behavior but also by structural, socioeconomic, and environmental factors.<sup>30,31</sup> Government interventions—urban planning, zoning, school meals, and industry regulation—are essential, and monitoring morbidity and mortality helps target action (WHO, 2021) (Figure 1).<sup>31</sup>



**Figure 1** Artistic proposal for the “Trump” Bridge.

Source: Author, adapted from internet picture.

The Kennedy Center can play a unique role in promoting health by combining arts, nature, and physical activity. Its riverside location and open spaces already encourage walking, reflection, and engagement, while a proposed pedestrian bridge to Roosevelt Park would expand access with trails, vegetation, and a theater over the water. To honor the recently deceased, this new performance space would be named the Charlie Kirk Theater, located within the Trump building at the Trump Bridge. The theater would serve as a dedicated venue for prescribed arts programming, health-centered performances, and community events, symbolizing the integration of culture, wellness, and civic legacy.

Integrating such renovations with the Prescribed Arts & Environment Ticketing program would strengthen chronic disease prevention through movement, environmental engagement, and cultural participation. Coordinated investment across arts, health, and well-being is vital to set national standards and develop training for artists and administrators in healthcare settings.<sup>32</sup>

### Arts & environment programming and monitoring

Dramaturgical analysis provides a valuable framework for understanding political communication in policymaking, highlighting how discursive dynamics and unconventional forms of governance emerge. Building on this, the Prescribed Arts & Environment (A&E) Ticketing Program should use structured programming to foster healthier habits and prevent chronic diseases. Performances can address risk factors, events can encourage physical activity and healthy diets, and exhibitions can highlight prevention data and cost savings. Special events with public figures and medical guidance can further inspire behavior change, while collaborations between artists and scientists ensure the program’s credibility and impact.

Effectiveness can be measured through indicators such as disease-specific participation, time spent at the Kennedy Center, patient visits, and treatment adherence. Evaluation should capture both health outcomes and psychosocial benefits, including reduced isolation, stronger social connections, and improved confidence and emotional expression.<sup>12,33,34</sup> Integrating theater therapy and natural environments adds further support for mental clarity, physical activity, and healthier lifestyles. By combining arts, nature, and scientific guidance, the program provides an evidence-based approach to prevention and treatment, leveraging the Kennedy Center’s cultural influence to build healthier communities.<sup>24</sup>

**Healthy catering: food & beverages:** Public health can be supported by providing honest nutritional information, avoiding misleading claims (e.g., some vitamins, supplements, or diagnostic tests), acknowledging potential harms (such as “alcopops”), and not exploiting children through marketing. The Kennedy Center (KC) should ensure its food and beverage supply supports healthy habits—fresh, chemical-free, and free from sodas, artificial additives, and ultra-processed foods—while clearly communicating the risks of unhealthy consumption and its link to chronic diseases. Collaboration with farmers to provide nutritious options, including juices and water without fluorides, will further promote behavioral change.

Integrating fresh, healthy food into the prescribed Arts & Environment ticketing program contributes to preventing and treating chronic disease. Social and environmental barriers—such as where people live, lack of opportunity, or societal perceptions—affect health outcomes.<sup>35</sup> Properly designed, arts and environmental programs complement activities like gardening by engaging, comforting, and supporting participants, reinforcing social connections, and helping maintain personal identity.

### Risks and mitigation

Any enterprise carries risks, so it is essential to evaluate, avoid, minimize, mitigate, and compensate for potential impacts. The main risks identified include infrastructure challenges, such as insufficient investment capacity, missing licenses, and limited rainwater storage, alongside medium-level risks like design or quality gaps, and lower-level concerns such as space for solar panels or electric shuttle availability. Programming risks are also significant, ranging from inadequate dramaturgy, lack of health professionals specializing in chronic diseases, and low audience engagement, to medium-level issues such as missing performance indicators and limited exercise spaces, and minor concerns like participant equipment. Healthy catering presents risks as well, particularly the limited availability of reliable suppliers and, to a lesser extent, low public demand.



Mitigation strategies focus on securing funding and licenses early, planning for water management and solar projects, recruiting skilled health professionals, sourcing appealing and nutritious foods, ensuring access to exercise spaces and equipment, selecting quality contractors, and designing menus and activities that foster engagement.

## Objective

To demonstrate the value of a Prescribed Arts & Environment Ticketing program at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts to prevent and reduce the incidence of chronic diseases among vulnerable populations.

Specific objectives include:

- Estimating the population affected by chronic disease in DC, Alexandria, and Arlington over the next 10 years.
- Estimating the population that can have chronic diseases prevented by regularly participating in KC performing arts programs (twice a month over 10 years).
- Estimating the costs of running the KC program and the savings from preventing the spread of chronic diseases.

## Methodological approach

This is a general study using a desk review of data and information about the main chronic diseases affecting the U.S. population, with a focus on DC, Arlington, and Alexandria. The review collected data on the number of people affected and the costs of treating chronic diseases from official health institutions and organizations.

A desk review was also performed on prescribed ticketing and existing strategies for preventing and treating chronic diseases through arts and environment programming. Data from chronic disease statistics were analyzed to extrapolate results for the proposed program at the Kennedy Center. Emphasis was given to the center's location and features that would benefit the program, including its environment and healthy food options.

## Results

There is a correlation between existing facilities and income levels and the occurrence and prevalence of chronic diseases, showing the influence of social structure and the availability of adequate infrastructure. The income distribution within the DC region with 279,500 individuals in the high-risk, low-income group earning less than \$60,000 per year, which gives them little to no access to regular performing arts, compromising their mental health. At the same time, a similar number of high-income individuals would benefit from tailored programs. The low-income population is mainly affected by overweight and Frequent Mental Distress (FMD). All seven chronic diseases mentioned can be prevented by enrollment in arts and environment activities. Currently, healthcare expenditures for these illnesses total \$6 billion per year in the region.

Obesity is the main source of costs for fighting chronic diseases and is a gateway to entering the statistics, which can be prevented by a change in habits, including incorporating arts and the environment into one's schedule. Routine visits to the Kennedy Center to participate in performing arts and enjoy the surrounding environment for exercise can change this trajectory.

There will be 16,000 new cases of chronic disease patients entering statistics yearly in the DC region, while in the Alexandria, Arlington, and DC region, some 25,000 new cases are expected to

occur yearly. All of them can be addressed by a KC Prescribed Arts & Environment Ticketing program. The program would distribute tickets for attendance at a minimum of two activities each month over a year, with a total expenditure of some US\$24 million/year, which is just 2% of today's costs for treating the very same population.

With this level of implementation, some 250,000 individuals will be directly affected by the Prescribed Arts & Environment Ticketing within the low-income group, with the same number potentially influencing the high-income group. The expenditure over the years will reach some US\$240 million/year in 10 years, which represents less than 5% of today's costs for the same illness treated with traditional medication methods. Additionally, a "premium" Prescribed Arts & Environment Ticketing can be offered to wealthy individuals, which would give them access to facilities, meals, and programming all year round.

When compared to the figures annually invested in treating chronic diseases within the region, the prescribed arts & environment ticketing is a bargain, and it invests in changing the perspective of the future. With the program of prescribed Arts & Environment Ticketing, one expects to find a fit and thriving healthy KC audience instead of sick and struggling medicine patients. Based on the statistics, with a change in infrastructure, adaptations for a health programming, and considering food & beverage suppliers, we can expect to eliminate the new occurrences of chronic disease not associated with genetics/heredity or other personal un-balance.

The statistics about chronic diseases show an increasing number of cases every year without any Prescribed Arts & Environment Ticketing, which would add, in 10 years, some 65% to today's expenditure—US\$4 billion annually. Besides that, there is the obvious result of having a healthier population versus a sickening one. Immediate access to the Kennedy Center can be provided to the 680,000 people in DC, 160,000 individuals in Alexandria, and 234,000 inhabitants in Arlington, all of whom would benefit from a prescribed arts & environment ticketing program for chronic disease prevention. Chronic diseases can be stopped from happening by adopting a prescribed arts & environment program directed to approach people who would not go to the theater or exercise due to socioeconomic constraints. The Prescribed Arts & Environment ticketing intervention will change lives, save billions of US dollars, and prevent some 2,000 early deaths each year.

## Discussion & Conclusion

Implementing Arts & Environment (A&E) programs requires careful planning to accommodate an anticipated 12.5% annual increase in audience participation. Key challenges include ensuring access despite personal or work schedule conflicts. Corporations that allow employees to participate in A&E activities can help reduce chronic disease risks,<sup>33</sup> while insurers and public funds could support preventive initiatives, ultimately lowering healthcare costs.

Urban areas often lack dedicated venues, limiting accessibility, but repurposing underused spaces can maximize public health benefits.<sup>14</sup> Periods of low attendance in theaters and green spaces can also be used to host programs, particularly for at-risk populations. Flexible scheduling during work hours and dynamic pricing strategies further improve participation and cost-effectiveness. Free or discounted events such as festivals, concerts, and wellness programs reduce barriers and expand engagement.<sup>33</sup> Embedding A&E activities into daily routines, group programs, and targeted outreach ensures equitable access. Allowing dedicated participation time enhances employee well-being and helps prevent occupational chronic diseases.<sup>33</sup>

Collaboration among leaders in the arts, environment, health, and social care sectors can position the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts as a national hub for best practices. The Center could coordinate research, promote collaboration, disseminate knowledge, and inform policy on Prescribed Arts & Environment Ticketing. Investments in creating a supportive cultural atmosphere would generate tangible health benefits for audiences. Tickets could even be made available by prescription to prevent, reduce, treat, or mitigate chronic diseases. Affluent audiences would also benefit through premium health-oriented experiences designed to enhance both well-being and cultural engagement.<sup>36–85</sup>

The main areas of intervention include infrastructure improvements related to the Theodore Roosevelt Bridge, integration of arts and environment in programming, and the adoption of healthier food and beverage options. With a 10-year operational horizon, the Prescribed Arts & Environment Ticketing Program could prevent approximately 250,000 cases of chronic disease. Program expenditures are expected to peak at around USD 240 million annually in the tenth year—a fraction of the USD 4 billion in additional medical treatment costs projected for the same population in Alexandria, Arlington, and Washington, DC. The total investment required is estimated at between USD 307.3 million and USD 511.3 million, with key risks identified and mitigation strategies already proposed.

As part of this vision, the Charlie Kirk Theater at the Trump Bridge & Building will serve not only as a symbolic memorial but also as a dedicated venue where arts, wellness, and civic legacy converge—cementing the integration of cultural engagement and public health in the nation's capital.

## Acknowledgments

None.

## Funding

None.

## Conflicts of interest

Authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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