

WA plans social prescribing pilot: Could doctors prescribe art? | The Seattle Times

Summarize

[Sydney Jackson](#) Aug. 27, 2026 at 6:00 am

By

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When combat veteran Shānda De Anda reentered civilian life in Tacoma after 24 years, public spaces often sent her into hypervigilant panic. Her therapist had a surprising suggestion: Join a choir.

Known as social prescribing, healthcare providers sometimes refer patients to nonclinical, community-based activities to improve their health and well-being. Washington is now exploring whether this practice could work alongside conventional treatment statewide, with potential coverage through insurance or other third-party payers.

In July, the Washington State Arts Commission signed a [two-year, \\$250,000 contract](#) with Atlanta-based [SocialRx](#) to help build social prescribing into the state's healthcare system. Seattle nonprofit Path with Art is providing money and project management for the pilot program, and is in the process of securing more funders. The state arts commission expects no state money will be used for the pilot.

The modern social prescribing movement took off in 1980s London when the Bromley by Bow Centre [began connecting patients](#) to community resources like art classes and gardening projects. Since then, similar programs have spread throughout the U.K. and Europe — in England, one such program reported [general practitioner visits](#) dropped by 37% and hospital admissions by 27% over eight years. The practice has picked up momentum across the U.S. amid growing public attention to loneliness and social isolation as health risks.

"We're looking forward to the day when you can go to your doctor, and depending on your condition, they can prescribe a dose of arts just like they could prescribe a dose of oxycodone," said Karen Hanan, who initiated the

contract before [retiring in June](#) as executive director of the state arts commission, known as ArtsWA.

The contract comes as [1.6 million Washingtonians](#) live with a mental health condition, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness. ArtsWA is now forming a coalition with SocialRx, Path with Art and other local groups to plan the rollout and solidify agreements with providers and third-party payers. The pilot is set to start in King County, with a goal to reach all counties statewide. Due to the time it takes to plan the pilot, ArtsWA said, the first prescriptions likely won't be written until the contract's second year.

Five years after joining a Seattle veterans choir through Path with Art, De Anda says the experience helped her acclimate — and made it possible for her to attend a large-venue concert with her son for the first time.

“I felt so unsafe in the world,” she said. “I’ve gained my confidence back.”



A member of the veterans choir run by Seattle Opera and Path with Art makes a sheet music notation during a rehearsal on Aug. 6. (Ken Lambert / The Seattle Times)

Arts as medicine

Formerly known as Art Pharmacy, Atlanta-based SocialRx launched in 2022 and has since formed partnerships in a dozen states with plans to expand nationwide. Washington has been in talks with SocialRx for years to trial social prescribing, and is on track to be first on the West Coast to launch a statewide program — though that may be a ways off.

The SocialRx model has worked like this: A provider identifies a patient dealing with loneliness, isolation, depression or anxiety and refers them to the program. A SocialRx staffer then reaches out directly to learn what might resonate with that person, whether it's a pottery class, a concert or a dance workshop. SocialRx handles the logistics, including transportation, and checks in to keep people engaged while reporting back to the referring provider. Participants fill out a well-being questionnaire when they enroll and after each activity.

Massachusetts was the [first state in the country](#) to partner with SocialRx in 2024, and has published [a field guide](#) for other state and local governments to follow. Oregon may be next — after [early results](#) from a small pilot program, Portland Playhouse is working with SocialRx on a coalition that could level up the practice statewide.

When researchers at Johns Hopkins University [tracked mental health changes](#) among SocialRx participants from 2023 to 2025, the participants reported improved mental health and fewer depressive symptoms over time in a five-question survey. SocialRx — which employed the study's authors — has also reported that most patients who receive a prescription stick with the program, and the majority ask for a “refill” once their prescribed activities run out.

SocialRx's founder and CEO, Chris Appleton, brings a complicated history to the venture. In 2019, he resigned as longtime executive director of Atlanta arts nonprofit WonderRoot after more than a dozen former employees and artists alleged he [fostered a culture of “disrespect and intimidation,”](#) among other accusations.

An [independent investigation](#) cleared Appleton of some of the allegations, but substantiated a pattern of unprofessional conduct and financial mismanagement. The nonprofit shuttered shortly after Appleton's departure.

Asked about Appleton's history, ArtsWA said in a statement: “Our focus was and remains on SocialRx and its model for bringing positive life-changing outcomes to Washingtonians. As part of our due diligence, we spoke with multiple states that worked with SocialRx. We're confident that their infrastructure will help local partners deliver this innovative program to Washington State.”

SocialRx declined to provide comment about its contract with ArtsWA, and did not respond to request for comment about Appleton.

‘Hope for the future’

Something like social prescribing has existed for nearly two decades in Washington through [Path with Art](#). The nonprofit partners with about 60 health, housing and human services agencies across the state to [connect people to free, trauma-informed arts programming](#) for healing purposes.

Supporting the SocialRx contract is a way to help scale the work Path with Art started, CEO Holly Jacobson said. Since 2020, Path with Art programs have grown 188% to about 2,000 annual participants. In a Johns Hopkins University study published in May, [more than 80%](#) of Path with Art participants reported feeling less lonely after eight weeks, while just over 90% had a greater belief in their ability to accomplish goals despite difficulty.

Through Path with Art, De Anda explored several creative outlets and eventually taught her own class on writing and gardening built around all five senses. She became an ambassador for the nonprofit, and at a gala event stepped in as keynote speaker, sharing her story publicly for the first time — the same night she first told her husband what she'd been through. She's now studying to become a marriage and family therapist at Pacific Lutheran University.

Another veteran, Chris Wisdom, credits Path with Art with helping her overcome decades of debilitating social anxiety and isolation. Her therapist recommended art classes to help work through trauma from her service, which kept her from leaving the house most days. She now creates colorful, large-scale art pieces that have been showcased at Seattle's McCaw Hall.

"I have a sense of purpose," Wisdom said. "I have hope for the future."

'Healing in community'

ArtsWA isn't starting from scratch when it comes to bridging the arts and healthcare. For nearly a decade, the agency has connected veterans with arts programming through its [Wellness, Arts, and the Military program](#), which works with the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs to bring arts activities to the state's four veterans homes.

It's an effort that [last year won an Abraham Lincoln Pillars of Excellence award](#), a national honor for outstanding state-level veterans support programs from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs. Recent state budget cuts forced the program to scale back, though outside grants have kept it operating through next year. ArtsWA also [provides direct grants](#) to military-affiliated Washingtonians for

personal art projects, which the state says is the only program of its kind in the country. The grants open for applications on Aug. 19.

Kevin Gaines, an Air Force veteran in Everett who was deployed multiple times to Iraq, Afghanistan and Central Africa, has received the grant twice. He used it to learn [airbrushing and figure painting for Dungeons & Dragons](#), a hobby he says has become central to managing his PTSD, alongside guitar and years of VA therapy. This year, he used his grant to teach accessible painting techniques at the Everett Public Library.

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“I’ve done a lot of work through therapy,” Gaines said, “but painting is the most beneficial thing I’ve found for my mental health.”

Gaines, Wisdom and De Anda said they’d go to their provider for social prescribing given the chance.

“That would be amazing,” De Anda said. “Healing in community has been so much more important than I realized.”

Sydney Jackson: Sydney Jackson is a Seattle-based freelance writer and editor.