



Community
As Medicine®



What If The YMCA Is The Missing Link In America's Health System?

How community-based organizations can strengthen prevention, connection, and whole-person well-being



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How community organizations can strengthen prevention, connection, and whole-person wellbeing.

Have you ever had the feeling of déjà vu—that strange moment when something new feels unexpectedly familiar?

Over the past several years, we at Open Source Wellness have experienced something like this in our work with YMCA leaders across the country. As we partnered with Ys to deliver community-based health programs, we began noticing the same pattern: people improving their health not simply because of medical advice, but because they had found a place where relationships, belonging, and everyday support made healthier choices not only easier but also sustainable.

The experience led us to a surprising realization: in a healthcare system struggling to prevent and treat chronic disease, one of the most promising solutions may have been hiding in plain sight all along.

The YMCA

For 175 years, the YMCA has been grounded in a commitment to strengthening spirit, mind, and body. Today, across Ys from California to Minnesota to Maryland, we're hearing leaders articulate a renewed focus on:

- Whole-person well-being
- Belonging and connection
- Mental health
- Community resilience

Increasingly, YMCA leaders see these strengths not only as expressions of the Y's historic mission, but also as an opportunity to contribute more directly to improving the nation's health for all. Glen Gunderson, President and CEO of the YMCA of the North, says:

"While hospitals and clinics treat illness, the Y helps prevent it by strengthening the everyday conditions that shape well-being—physical activity, connection, belonging, and access to supportive community. With deep roots in communities across the country, the YMCA helps extend health beyond the walls of healthcare and into people's daily lives."



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**Glen Gunderson,
President and CEO of
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Since self-care is the true primary care, the YMCA is an ideal partner to help people take on the challenge of avoiding chronic illness or learning to live optimally with it. The YMCA is an accessible, affordable, and trusted partner for anyone seeking better health and wholeness.

Penny George, Co-chair of the George Family Foundation



Why This Moment Matters

Across the United States, communities are facing rising rates of chronic disease, increasing social isolation, and growing levels of stress and anxiety. These challenges are often magnified for people living in under-resourced communities or facing structural barriers related to social determinants of health—such as low income, unsafe housing, lack of transportation, and limited access to supportive community environments [1,2,3].

Public health research has made it clear that many factors shaping health and well-being are not typically addressed in healthcare settings [3]. Medical care often focuses on treating illness once it appears, which public health experts describe as “downstream” care. But many of the primary drivers of poor physical and mental health—including physical inactivity, social isolation, and chronic stress—are rooted in the everyday environments where people live their lives. These challenges are best addressed “upstream,” in the places where people live, work, and gather in community.

For generations, the YMCA has operated in that upstream space. Long before someone needs a prescription, they can walk into their local Y and find opportunities to move their bodies, build friendships, and experience a sense of belonging. As a result, they may never need that medical prescription.

Todd Tibbits, President and CEO of the YMCA of San Diego County, notes that community-based programs like those offered at the Y “can help reduce the strain on traditional healthcare systems by supporting prevention and addressing the social drivers of health that shape long-term outcomes.”

In this sense, the YMCA has long been part of the public health ecosystem, even if it has not always been recognized as such.

Remembering The YMCA’s Original DNA

“Since self-care is the true primary care, the YMCA is an ideal partner to help people take on the challenge of avoiding chronic illness or learning to live optimally with it. The YMCA is an accessible, affordable, and trusted partner for anyone seeking better health and wholeness,” says Penny George, co-chair of the George Family Foundation.

Her observation echoes something deeply embedded in the YMCA’s history [4].

From its earliest days, the YMCA’s founding vision emphasized the development of spirit, mind, and body. Over time, particularly starting in the 1970s, physical activity began to eclipse the other dimensions of well-being. By the late 2000s, internal research revealed a disconnect. While nearly everyone recognized the YMCA name, many viewed it primarily as a one-dimensional fitness provider: a low-cost alternative to a private health club.

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Yet physical activity was never meant to stand alone. It was always part of a broader, integrated approach to human flourishing.

In 2010, the YMCA rebranded as “The Y,” centering its work around three pillars of impact: Youth Development, Healthy Living, and Social Responsibility. This represented an intentional shift to broaden public understanding from fitness to community impact.

This more holistic perspective has guided the YMCA's response to moments of social change, from industrialization and urban migration to the evolving needs of families and communities, and its commitment to strengthening spirit, mind, and body for all.

Today's rising loneliness, increased prevalence of chronic disease, and growing social disconnection echo the challenges the YMCA has consistently helped communities navigate over the years. At this juncture, institutions that foster belonging, purpose, and mutual support play an important role. In many communities, the Y remains one of the few institutions that bring people together across generations, income levels, and backgrounds.

The question facing many Y leaders today is not whether the organization should change its mission. The mission has remained remarkably relevant.

The question is how to express its mission in today's world.

Tools And Intention

Over time, YMCA facilities and fitness programs became an important engine of financial sustainability. The familiar “swim and gym” model helped stabilize associations and expand access to physical activity across communities nationwide.

That legacy matters, and it should be celebrated.

At the same time, many YMCA leaders are asking a deeper question:

How can the Y continue to evolve while staying grounded in its original mission?

In today's crowded fitness market, treadmills and weight rooms are ubiquitous. What remains distinctive is something harder to replicate: the YMCA's ability to convene community, foster belonging, and create trusted spaces where people support one another's well-being.

This relational strength may be the YMCA's most important asset moving forward.

Whole-Person Well-being In Practice

Across the YMCA movement, through our partnerships with local Y associations, we have observed leaders exploring what whole-person well-being might look like in practice.

Some associations are developing community well-being strategies that extend beyond traditional programming. Others are deepening partnerships with healthcare systems, schools, and community organizations. Still others are experimenting with new approaches to strengthening social connections and supporting lasting health behavior change.

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Taken together, these efforts point toward a shared vision: strengthening the YMCA's role as a community-based hub for well-being.

Community As Medicine® (CAM)

One approach gaining traction across YMCA communities nationwide is Community As Medicine® (CAM), an **evidence-based**, group-based coaching model developed by Open Source Wellness in collaboration with community and healthcare partners.

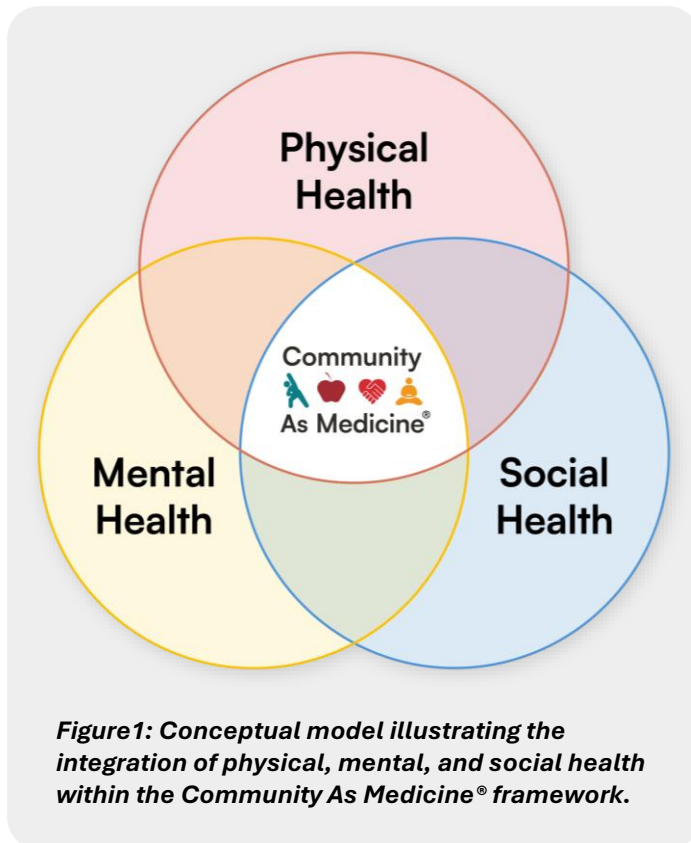
CAM supports whole-person health by integrating physical, mental, and social well-being within facilitated group experiences (Figure 1).

Rather than focusing on a single diagnosis or condition, CAM programs bring together diverse groups of participants who have a range of health challenges and goals. In structured sessions led by trained facilitators, participants engage in activities that combine:

- Physical activity
- Healthy nutrition
- Stress reduction
- Social connection

The approach is experiential, culturally affirming, and grounded in trauma-informed coaching. Participants are not passively receiving health education; they are actively practicing new behaviors and supporting one another along the way. When the CAM program ends, participants have created a community among themselves that is sustained through their continued membership at the Y.

This is what makes the partnership between CAM and the Y so impactful. Participants gain skills in how to create community with those in the group, as well as with others. They learn the importance of reaching out to others both to receive support and to give it, and they experience improved mental, physical, and social well-being as a result. Because CAM groups are embedded at the Y, participants experience the Y as a place where community is formed and sustained.



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Community As Medicine shifts the center of care from the clinic to the community ecosystem where people live, work, and play.

Ron Stout, MD, MPH, President and CEO of the Ardmore Institute of Health

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In several of our YMCA partnerships, these programs are also connected to healthcare systems, allowing clinicians to “prescribe the Y” by referring patients to CAM groups delivered within YMCA communities. Further, some health plans are providing reimbursement for CAM groups. (See Figure 2.)

Ron Stout, MD, MPH, President and CEO of Ardmore Institute of Health, observes, “Community As Medicine shifts the center of care from the clinic to the community ecosystem where people live, work, and play.”

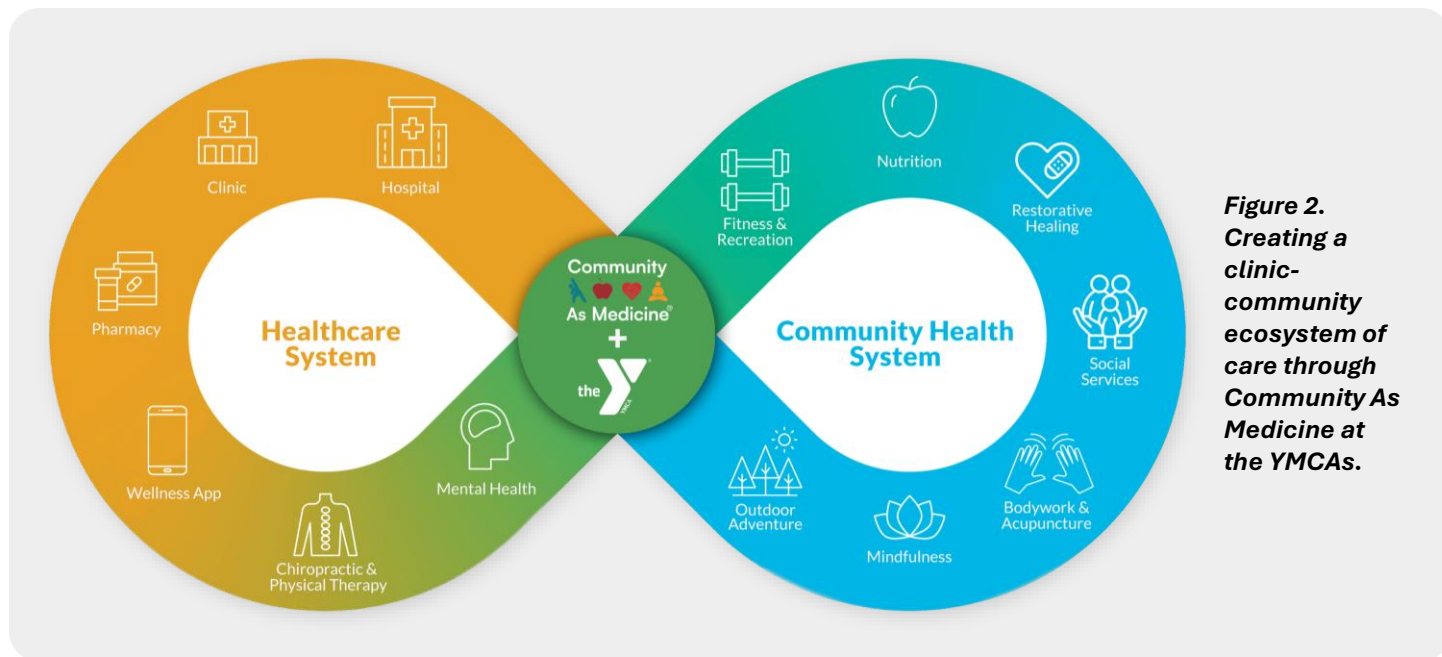


Figure 2. *Creating a clinic-community ecosystem of care through Community As Medicine at the YMCAs.*

Aligning Mission and Margin

For YMCA leaders, mission and margin are never separate conversations.

Operating community facilities is complex and expensive. Leaders must ensure financial sustainability while staying true to the organization’s purpose.

Innovations in community well-being, including partnerships with healthcare systems, may offer new pathways to achieve both objectives.

As Todd Tibbits notes, “Community As Medicine brings the YMCA’s mission to life by shifting healthcare beyond clinical settings and into the community. This advances the Y’s commitment to building a healthy spirit, mind, and body for all by recognizing social connection and healthy lifestyle habits as essential health interventions.”

In this way, the Y becomes an extension of the primary care appointment, helping prevent and reduce chronic disease, decrease social isolation, and promote mental well-being in ways that clinical settings alone cannot.

Whole-person well-being is not simply a mission imperative. It also represents a strategic opportunity for the YMCA to differentiate itself in a rapidly evolving health environment.

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Todd Tibbits, President and CEO of the YMCA of San Diego County



As healthcare systems seek more effective approaches to improve mental, physical, and social well-being, the answer does not lie solely within clinics and hospitals. It also lies in the trusted community institutions that have long supported holistic health and a sense of belonging in everyday life.

For more than 175 years, the YMCA has helped communities strengthen spirit, mind, and body. In today's changing health system, that mission is more relevant than ever.

An Invitation to the Conversation

The YMCA movement is large, diverse, and deeply rooted in local communities. There is no single model that will work everywhere.

What is clear, however, is that many YMCA leaders are already asking important questions:

- How can we strengthen belonging and social connection in our communities?
- How can we support whole-person well-being in practical ways?
- How might the YMCA deepen its role as a trusted partner in the healthcare ecosystem?
- How do we evolve our delivery system to become a prominent resource for social drivers of health?

At Open Source Wellness, we partner with YMCA leaders as they explore these questions.

Improving community health will not be accomplished by healthcare systems alone. It will emerge through collaboration between clinical care and trusted community institutions that have deep roots and a long history of bringing people together.

The YMCA is extremely well-positioned to have a leadership role in this work.

If your YMCA is exploring how to leverage the power of community to better fulfill your mission and advance your strategy, we would welcome the opportunity to connect.

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About the Authors

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Michaela Hayes, MHSA, CFRE, GPC, is a public health professional, gerontologist, development expert, educator, and lifelong learner. Her work focuses on supporting organizations and leaders in addressing upstream social drivers of health and advancing health and well-being for all. She is currently the Development Director with Open Source Wellness.

Ryan Bean, MLIS, is an archivist with the Katuz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, and is responsible for preserving and providing access to the rich history of the American Young Men's Christian Association.

Sally Duplantier, MS, is a gerontologist, researcher, and doctoral student in Global Public Health Leadership at Indiana University. She is dedicated to expanding access to healthy aging through community-based programs and partnerships.

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Open Source Wellness (OSW), a 501(c)(3) non-profit, is committed to creating a world in which everyone experiences abundant health, well-being, and human connection, especially those who have been historically excluded and marginalized. OSW creates "Community As Medicine®" by partnering with communities and healthcare to deliver joyful, trauma-informed, and culturally relevant programs that achieve this outcome. View this [video](#).

**Community
As Medicine®**

Learn more about OSW's [evidence-basis](#), as documented in its numerous [research publications](#).

Recent studies include: [Equitable Access to Lifestyle Medicine: FQHCs, YMCAs, Trauma-Informed Health Coaching, and "Community as Medicine and Community as Medicine: A Qualitative Study of How Group Health Coaching and Social Connection Improve Mental Well-Being in Older Adults](#)

Learn more about the history of the American YMCA: <https://www.lib.umn.edu/collections/special/ymca>