

Dementia-Friendly Walking Groups

A guide for community-based organizations



Friends enjoy time together at the Point Defiance Zoo Walk. Tacoma, WA.

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Introduction

This guide provides a basic overview of how to start a walking group for people with dementia and their loved ones in your community.

In the following pages, you will discover more about the benefits and purpose of a dementia-friendly walking group and the steps involved in planning, marketing, launching and sustaining a group. Sprinkled throughout, you will find spotlights on various dementia-friendly walking groups in Washington, as well as perspectives from walking group members. Additional resources are listed at the end, including an appendix with sample forms that may be helpful.

The guide is intended for organizations that already offer public programs – such as senior centers, parks and recreation departments, or dementia-specific organizations. If you are a community member who would like to see this program in your area, provide this guide to one of these kinds of organizations and recommend they take a look.

Content for this guide was compiled by members of the Washington State Dementia Action Collaborative based on the experience of staff, volunteers and participants in local dementia-friendly walking groups. We hope you find it useful!



A pair takes in the sights at the Japanese Garden. Arts in the Park program, Seattle, WA. Photo: Ryan Hawk

What is a dementia-friendly walking group and what is its purpose?

Dementia-friendly walking groups are social engagement opportunities for people living with memory loss and their loved ones. Exercise and social connection have been shown to improve health, mood, sleep, and cognitive functioning in older adults. By blending physical and social activity into one program, dementia-friendly walking groups can promote health, reduce feelings of isolation, and improve overall quality of life.

Groups are structured in different ways depending on the needs and interests of the participants. Some walking groups take place within sites such as zoos or botanical gardens, while others develop their own routes through the community. Some are followed by time to socialize in a nearby café, while others incorporate more structured activities such as music or nature-themed crafts. While groups can take many forms, the primary goal remains the same: to provide an opportunity for social connection and light exercise through the pleasure of walking together.



Walkers feed the birds at an interactive exhibit.
Woodland Park Zoo Walk, Seattle, WA.

"The social aspect and camaraderie of the zoo walks is our favorite part. It is a place where my husband can feel comfortable just being himself. For me, the bond that has been created with the other care partners has been a wonderful support system and many deep friendships have been formed."

Paula S, care partner

Who attends?

The question of who attends the walking group will be determined by the individual or organization developing the program. There are multiple models that can be successful, but each comes with its own set of considerations.

Early Stage

Some walking groups choose to be exclusive to those with early stage memory loss and their care partners. This can help reduce the number of safety concerns as well as promote a group dynamic that is more conducive to peer support. Because the group members are in the same stage of memory loss, they may relate well to each other and are often experiencing similar challenges. Opting to make the program exclusive to individuals with early stage memory loss requires more work during the registration process, as organization staff will need to determine if interested individuals are appropriate for the group.

Various Stages

Other groups choose to open the program to individuals living with or caring for someone at any stage of memory loss. This requires less effort at registration and opens the group to more potential participants. However, it can increase the risks associated with the middle and late stages of dementia, such as falls, disorientation, or loss of physical or cognitive functioning and may require additional volunteer support.

Integrated Groups

Finally, some market the program to the entire community and invite anyone to attend. This model is used with the goal to promote community integration and reduce stigma. With this model, it becomes even more important that volunteers are attentive to the needs of those living with memory loss and are facilitating conversations between those with and without dementia.



A family strolls through the zoo. Woodland Park Zoo Walk.
Seattle, WA.

"I had no idea we would be coming here this morning, and I'm really glad we did. I always enjoy coming to these places."

John P, person living with dementia

Garden Discovery Walk

Where and when do they take place?

Where

Walking groups can take place anywhere in the community! Commonly used sites include parks, zoos, museums, botanical gardens, malls, and routes through neighborhoods. Some programs elect to walk in the same location each week. This consistency allows for easier planning and coordination as well as increased familiarity and comfort with the location. While the location may stay the same, incorporating new and exciting features such as seasonal displays or occasional "field trips" to other sites can be a great way to add variety and keep walkers engaged.

Other programs utilize a rotating model, in which the location of the walk changes each week. This allows participants to enjoy and learn about different neighborhoods, parks, and community spaces. However, it requires significantly more planning, organization, and high levels of communication to ensure that all participants meet at the correct location each week. Reminder emails and handouts that include a map and description of the upcoming location can help alleviate confusion.

When

The frequency of the walking group will depend on the interest of participants and availability of walk volunteers. Groups typically choose to meet weekly, every two weeks, or monthly. Many of the walks take place in the mornings, with a social gathering over lunch. Walks held during the week can be beneficial in that sites and walking routes tend to be less crowded. However, some groups elect to meet on the weekends so that those who work during the week are able to attend.

Regardless of the model used, there are some universal points to consider when deciding upon a location and route for the walking group.

Spotlight: Garden Discovery Walks

Garden Discovery Walks meet at a different Seattle public garden each month and start each walk with group introductions and a flower meditation. The group then enjoys a walk through the garden before ending with refreshments and a creative horticultural activity.



Walkers share a laugh along a trail in West Seattle. Camp Momentia, Seattle, WA. Photo: Paul Zimmerman.

What makes a good walking location and route?

Safety & Accessibility

Safety and accessibility should be a primary focus when determining a quality walking site. Whether or not a site is accessible to the participants will directly affect the success of a program. Some questions to ask when considering a location: Are the paths accessible to walkers who may use canes or wheelchairs? Are they relatively flat? Is it a high traffic area where participants may be bumped, overwhelmed, or become disoriented?

These questions become especially important if the program is open to people at all stages of dementia or is offered year round, when rain or snow become a factor. If the group plans to gather in a café following the walk, it is important to ensure this space is accessible and dementia-friendly as well. For those considering rotating locations, it can be helpful to mention the terrain (i.e., pavement, gravel, mulch, dirt) of the upcoming walk so that group members are able to prepare and plan accordingly.

Distance & Pacing

The distance and speed of the walk will vary between groups depending on the goals and abilities of the participants. Walk routes can be any distance, but typically range from less than a mile up to 3 miles. Depending on the location and number of volunteers, some walks are able to offer a long and short route option, allowing the participants to choose their distance. Some groups opt for a brisk pace, while others

treat the walk as more of a stroll, stopping to observe nature and neighborhood sites along the way. Because the primary goals of a dementia-friendly walking group are social connection and safety, it is important to monitor the speed of the group to ensure that no participants feel left behind or pressured to move faster than they are comfortable. Program descriptions should be clear about the distance, pace, and anticipated time spent on foot, so participants know what to expect.

Transportation & Parking

Participants may arrive at the walking group in a variety of ways, typically by driving, carpooling, or taking public transportation. Ensure that parking is available and accessible for participants and that the walk site is close to bus lines where possible.

If there are parking fees, it can be helpful to seek ways to mitigate the cost. Many places that charge for parking, such as zoos or museums, are willing to partner with community organizations to offer free or discounted parking passes. Additionally, some walking groups partner with assisted living communities that are able to use their vans to transport residents to and from the walk. Volunteers should be ready to brainstorm other transportation options for people who have stopped driving, or who retire from driving during the course of their participation in the group.

“It is the best thing I do each week. The walkers develop new friendships and come together to help one another. I think it is the fresh air, seeing different animals, being together where they are safe and the laughter we always seem to find.”

Sandy D
Zoo Walk Volunteer

Cost

One of the primary benefits of starting a walking program is that the activity itself is free, and thus financially accessible to a larger audience. If planning to host the walk at a venue that typically charges for entry, it can be helpful to explore partnership opportunities in order to receive free or low-cost tickets. If the program includes a social gathering at a café after the walk, it can be worthwhile to ask about senior or group discounts. When talking with participants, be clear about whether or not they are responsible for paying for these snacks or beverages.

Restrooms

When considering a location, it is important to ensure that restrooms are available along the walking route and that they are wheelchair accessible. If walking at a site that has gender-specific restrooms, and any participants need support from care partners of a different gender, it can be helpful to inform the site staff ahead of time in order to prevent problems or confusion. In this situation, a volunteer can wait outside the door so the pair can enter together and maintain privacy.

What roles do staff, community members and volunteers play?

As noted, a community-based organization such as a senior center, parks and recreation department, or dementia-specific agency is well-suited to organize and launch the walking group. At the same time, the success of the walk depends upon the involvement of community input and volunteers.

From the beginning, people with dementia and their loved ones play a key role as advisors. As a staff person, be sure to start by assessing participant interest. If you don't yet have contact with anyone with dementia, reach out to other organizations such as senior service or dementia-related agencies. You can invite people with dementia and their loved ones to a focus group, or just have informal conversations. Talk with these advisors about the key features of the proposed walking group, from location, to distance and pace, as well as any social components. Don't skip this step – people with dementia and their loved ones will provide valuable guidance as you move forward.



Walkers stop to enjoy the raptor exhibit. Woodland Park Zoo Walk, Seattle, WA.

Spotlight: Zoo Walks

Zoo Walks occur weekly at the Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle and Point Defiance Zoo in Tacoma. The groups tour various animal exhibits each week, receive occasional presentations from zoo staff, and end by socializing over coffee and snacks at the Zoo Café.

"I have seen things today that I have never seen before. I was just seeing them as they are now, in the moment."

Roger S, person living with dementia
Garden Discovery Walk participant

While your organization will play a leadership role in sustaining the program – from marketing to taking registrations (where applicable), to evaluating and adjusting the program over time – the on-the-ground aspect of leading the walk can be managed by trained volunteers.

Depending on the size of the walking group, several volunteers may be needed in order to effectively facilitate the program and ensure each participant's safety.

Walking groups typically have at least 3 volunteers for groups of 15 or more. These volunteers can include former or current care partners, professionals in the field, or community members with a passion for working with those living with memory loss.



Walkers enjoy a sunny day in Seattle. Out & About Walking Group, Seattle, WA.

Because there are often multiple people helping in the development and facilitation of a walking group, it is important to identify which volunteers will be responsible for which tasks. Establishing clear roles reduces the likelihood of miscommunication.

Some volunteer roles that may be helpful to establish are:

- **Walk Organizer**

Volunteer who is responsible for managing the logistics of the group. These responsibilities include maintaining a roster with up-to-date contact information, tracking participant paperwork and attendance, and communicating with the group (i.e., providing weekly reminders, alerting the group of program or route changes, and serving as the “point person” for participant questions).

- **Leader**

Volunteer(s) at the head of the group who lead the way, point out interesting sites, and keep the group moving.

- **Sweep**

Volunteer at the rear of the group who is responsible for counting people and making sure the group stays together. This becomes especially important in larger groups, groups that are open to people at all stages of dementia, and groups that have walkers with significantly different paces.

- **Float**

Additional volunteer(s) that help with ensuring the group stays together and who are available to help as needed.

Volunteer Training

Volunteer training is another key factor in the growth and success of a walking group. In order to ensure a high quality and safe walking group, it is important to have a process in place that helps determine whether or not an interested volunteer is a good match for the program (i.e., background checks or interviews). Refer to the policies and procedures that your organization already has in place for volunteer recruitment and onboarding.

Providing the same training to all volunteers, regardless of their background or experience, helps ensure consistency and quality. Topics to consider including in a training are volunteer expectations, strategies for effectively leading a walking group, safety recommendations, and the basics of dementia (i.e., facts about the disease, markers of each stage, and communication and coping challenges).

A high amount of volunteer turnover requires increased recruitment and training, which is not only time-intensive and difficult to manage, but can also be disruptive to the social dynamics of the walking group. Because of this, it can be useful to encourage and incentivize long-term commitment during training as well. Whether you purchase an engraved name tag for volunteers at their 6-month mark or celebrate yearly anniversaries with small gifts, providing milestones that encourage volunteers to stay involved over time may help reduce turnover.



A volunteer greets walkers with a smile. Woodland Park Zoo Walk, Seattle, WA.

How do you build a sense of community among walkers?

The most frequent feedback received regarding the benefits of the walking groups is the relationships formed among participants and volunteers. Because the structure of the program is relatively simple without many facilitated activities, conversations about the surroundings and about the walkers themselves become the primary focus. Through these conversations, walkers cultivate new friendships, lean on one another for support, and realize that they are not alone. However, these conversations do not always happen organically, and it can take work to build a true sense of community among walkers. Incorporating time to socialize after the walk, celebrating birthdays and anniversaries, and participating in holiday activities can be effective tools in building community.

What kinds of policies and procedures are helpful?

Liability

There are inherent risks involved with individuals participating in a walking group, especially related to falls. While every effort will be made to keep walkers safe, it is important to acknowledge these risks and protect the organization and volunteers who are facilitating the group. Follow your organization's risk management policies and seek additional guidance from your management as you are developing your program and/or if you have questions as you proceed.

As an example, some organizations may require that each participant and volunteer sign a release of liability agreement. Additional documents that may be useful to have completed by each participant are a photo consent form and a registration form including emergency contact information for the person and their care partner. See Appendix for examples.

Pre-Registration & Communication

Because the program is mobile, good communication between volunteers and walk participants is essential. Most walking groups choose to require pre-registration so that volunteers know who to expect. If someone is running late or plans to miss a walk, it is important that they alert the lead volunteer so the group can start on time or does not accidentally leave anyone behind. Phone or email reminders about the walk a couple days prior can help maintain high attendance. It can also be helpful to follow up and check in with individuals who miss a walk without notice.

Weather Policy

This will vary depending upon the region in which the walks are being held; however, it is important to develop a plan for inclement weather.

Determine what type of weather will make the walk unsafe and how cancellations will be communicated with participants. It can be helpful to have a designated volunteer who is responsible for deciding when to cancel and contacting all members of the group.

Some groups opt to cancel the walk entirely if the weather is severe; others opt for a partial cancellation, meaning they still meet at the same time, but gather to socialize rather than walk. It is important to maintain a clear policy and remind participants of it often.



*A little rain can't stop these northwest walkers!
Arts in the Park program, Seattle, WA.*

Spotlight: Out & About Walks

Out and About Walks meet at designated locations across Seattle to explore new neighborhoods every other week. This group includes visits to nearby points of interest, a poem reading at the halfway point of the walk, and socialization at a local café for lunch after the walk.

Transitions

Since dementia symptoms typically change over time, at some point a walking group may no longer be a safe or feasible option for a person. It is important to consider in advance how you will address this situation in a way that maintains dignity for the person and acknowledges the bonds formed among group members. In some cases, a person may be able to attend the social gathering, even if not participating in the walk. In other cases, the responsible organization(s) may need to work with the person and their family to determine programs and services that are better suited for their needs. Some organizations provide a transition policy that explains what factors make a walking group a good fit, when and how these factors may be evaluated with a person, and how a transition will be handled. This can promote open communication and reduce frustration or confusion down the road. If a person needs to stop attending the group, recognize this can be emotional for all involved. Treat this experience gently, with kindness, and consider creating space for the person and the group to express appreciation for their time spent together. Transitions are never easy. But if planned for over time and done with respect, they can honor both the person and the group.

"It's nice to get together to walk a new neighborhood every time we're out. We like seeing new places and learning about art, history, and architecture. This is where we find our support for this journey, with our new tribe."

Carla G., Care partner, Out & About Walks

What materials are helpful?

- **Name Tags**

Having name tags available for the walkers each week can encourage relationship building and alleviate pressure to remember the names of fellow walkers and volunteers.

- **Safety Flags**

If the walking route is through a neighborhood or involves multiple street crossings, bright flags can be helpful in ensuring the group is seen by drivers.

- **Sign-In sheet**

This helps track group participation over time. It also indicates who has missed consecutive walks and should be contacted to ensure that they are okay and nothing is interfering with their ability to attend.

- **Emergency Contact list**

It is a good idea to have a list of emergency contacts for the walkers and for that list to be brought to every walk. While most of the time it won't be needed, if an accident happens, it will be invaluable.

How do you get the word out?

After the walk details have been planned and volunteers are trained, the next step is to promote the program. Send flyers throughout the community including physician's offices, libraries, gyms, places of worship or senior centers. Add the walk to online event calendars, neighborhood newsletters, community bulletins, and social media pages. Send press releases to local newspapers, or even radio or TV journalists. Note that it takes time to build a group, so don't be dismayed by low numbers in the beginning.

Once a consistent group of walkers has formed, the participants themselves will become the best form of marketing as they invite others to join.

How do you evaluate and improve your group over time?

Your organization likely already has tools for evaluating programs, such as satisfaction surveys or informal participant interviews. Use these same systems to evaluate the walking group, where applicable. Recognize that the people who attend your walks will be a rich source of information about what is working well or what could be improved. Check in periodically with participants and volunteers about aspects of the walk—including location, day of the week, time or pace. If participation grows over time, you may need to split into two or more groups. This can also be an opportunity to tailor groups to different preferences, for example having a group that walks faster or farther, or a group that meets on a weekend rather than a weekday.



Colors abound for walkers at the Japanese Garden. Garden Discovery Walk, Seattle, WA.

Additional Resources

More information and resources on dementia-friendly walking groups:

- Scotland's Dementia Friendly Walking Project: www.pathsforall.org.uk/pfa/health-walks/dementia-friendly-walking.html; www.alliance-scotland.org.uk/blog/opinion/paths-dementia-friendly-walking-project/

Other walking group guides and suggestions:

- Mall-walking program guide: www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/downloads/mallwalking-guide.pdf
- Walking group start-up guides: <http://prevent.org/data/files/initiatives/walkinggroup.pdf>; <http://createthegood.org/toolkit/start-walking-group>
- Surgeon General's Call to Action to promote walking: www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/calls/walking-and-walkable-communities/exec-summary

Stay in Touch!

Visit the Dementia Action Collaborative website at www.dshs.wa.gov/altsa/dementia-action-collaborative. Sign up for updates about dementia-friendly communities by emailing dementiafriendlywa@gmail.com.

Walking Groups in Washington: A Brief History

- **Summer 2011, Seattle:** The first dementia-friendly walking group in Washington State was piloted at Jefferson Park, offered by the Alzheimer's Association with support from Seattle Parks and Recreation. Funded by a national Alzheimer's Association grant, [the program](#) met weekly throughout the summer.
- **Spring 2012, Seattle:** The Alzheimer's Association launched a weekly walking program at [Woodland Park Zoo](#) with support from Seattle Parks and Recreation and Greenwood Senior Center. With the appeal of zoo exhibits and a social hour afterward in the zoo café, this unique program has grown in popularity.
- **Fall 2013, Seattle:** After his diagnosis of Alzheimer's, avid walkers Steve Olsen and his wife Nancy organized a new walking group for people with memory loss and their loved ones. Called [Out & About](#), this bi-weekly group walks in various neighborhoods, noting local points of interest. In 2014 it was incorporated into Seattle Parks and Recreation's Dementia-Friendly Recreation programs.
- **Fall 2014, Tacoma:** The Alzheimer's Association and Lutheran Community Services Northwest launched a weekly [Zoo Walk](#) at Tacoma's Point Defiance Zoo.
- **Spring 2017, Seattle:** Seattle Parks and Recreation and the UW Memory & Brain Wellness Center began the monthly [Garden Discovery Walks](#) program, which explores a public garden and includes a nature-inspired activity.
- **Summer 2017, Lacey:** Senior Services for the South Sound piloted a summer walking program beside the lake at Lacey Senior Center.
- **Summer 2017, Edmonds:** The Alzheimer's Association worked with staff at Cascadia Art Museum to start a monthly Art Walk on-site at the museum.
- **Fall 2017, Seattle:** A Momentia organizing group in West Seattle launched a new monthly walk bringing together residents from two retirement communities for a singalong and a walk in local parks.

Could your group be next?

"Being in nature has always been my most effective de-stressor. The walks provide a wonderful mix of serenity, discovery, and inspiration.

I leave every Garden Discovery Walk feeling peaceful and refreshed. I look forward to sharing familiar and new gardens each month with my Garden Walk friends!"

Cheryl P, care partner and volunteer
Garden Discovery Walk



Walkers explore a public demonstration garden.
Garden Discovery Walks, Seattle, WA.

APPENDIX—Sample Forms

Please note that the following forms are examples of those used by the Alzheimer's Association. They may not be applicable to your agency. Discuss all forms and procedures with your supervisor and/or your agency's risk management department and follow your agency's policies.

Sample Release of Liability Form:

ASSUMPTION OF RISK, RELEASE AND PERMISSION IN CONNECTION WITH DEMENTIA-FRIENDLY WALKING PROGRAM

This Release is executed on _____, 201__ by (Full Name) _____, of
(Address) _____, City of _____, State of _____.

In consideration of being a participant in or attendee in the dementia-friendly walking program which is a series of events that may include physical and other risks including, but not limited to, injuries, falls, interaction with other participants, effects of weather, traffic and other event conditions, I hereby expressly assume all risks, including bodily and personal injury, death, property loss or other damages of any kind arising in any way out of my participation in or attendance at the events and related activities.

I am solely responsible for my own health and safety. I represent that I am physically fit and able to participate in or to attend the events. I will consider my physical condition and health before participating in any of the events.

I hereby for myself, my heirs, executors and administrators, release, discharge and agree not to sue organization name, its officers, directors, volunteers, employees, sponsors and agents, from any and all liability, claims, demands and causes of action whatsoever, arising out of my participation in or attendance at the events and related activities – whether resulting from the negligence of any of the above or from any other cause.

I agree that my assumption of risk and this release hereunder shall be as broad and inclusive as is permitted under applicable law, and that if any portion thereof is held invalid, it is agreed that the remainder shall notwithstanding, continue in full force and effect.

I grant full permission in perpetuity to the organizers of this events, their representatives, successors, assigns, licensees, employees and any person, corporation or entity acting under their permission, to use, re-use, reproduce, distribute, publish and re-publish my name and image as a participant in the event in any still or moving photographic image, likeness, video, sound or other recordings of me during the events.

I HAVE READ, UNDERSTAND AND AGREE TO THE TERMS OF THIS AGREEMENT.

Signed

Date

Sample Photo Consent Form:

CONSENT AND RELEASE FORM

I, _____, hereby grant organization name permission to take my photograph, record my voice, and shoot film/video footage of me (the “Images and Images and Recordings”). I hereby grant to organization name the irrevocable right to use the Images and Recordings in organization name educational, informational and promotional efforts, including distribution to the news media. I understand that my signature on this form signifies my consent to grant these rights. I also hereby grant organization name and those acting within its authority the unqualified right to reproduce, copyright, publish, circulate or otherwise use the Images and Recordings.

This consent and release covers the use of the Images and Images and Recordings in any form (whether now known or later invented), including print, broadcast and online use, and any media of advertising, publicity or trade in any part of the world for an unlimited period of time. I shall have no claim with respect to the use of the Images and Recordings (including, without limitation, claims for compensation of any kind or royalties or any claim of defamation or violation of rights of privacy or publicity). I hold organization name free and harmless from any and all claims and liability arising out of or in connection with the use of the Images and Recordings.

I also agree that I may be identified by name, and I fully understand that this is a complete release of all claims against organization name, or any other person, firm or corporation by reason of any such use of the Images and Recordings.

I certify that I am 18 years of age or over and represent that I am able to grant the foregoing rights.

Signature Date _____

Name (*please print*)

Address

City, State, Zip

Phone