

Through the lens of possibility:

'Best in Wellness' communities radiate growth

ICAA NuStep Pinnacle Award winners foster environments that support residents in thriving and becoming 'creators of community life'

by Julie King, MS

This article is part of ongoing Journal on Active Aging® *coverage highlighting the senior living communities, wellness executives and wellness directors that have won the ICAA NuStep Beacon and Pinnacle Awards through the ICAA NuStep Best in Wellness Awards program.*



Miles of trails support residents of Peconic Landing, a New York life plan community, with opportunities to walk, hike and cycle. Image courtesy of Peconic Landing

Today's thriving senior living communities are shaping every decision—from leadership structure and resident engagement to care coordination and strategic planning—through the lens of wellness. According to the ICAA Wellness Trends Survey 2026, nearly three in four communities (72%) expect to operate as wellness-based communities with care (rather than as care-based with wellness) by 2030.[1]

"This is a fundamental shift," says Colin Milner, founder and CEO of the International Council on Active Aging® (ICAA). "Operationalizing wellness means moving it from an activity to a strategy, culture and business model that enables people to live better, longer and with greater purpose."

Leading the way are the "Best in Wellness" winners of the ICAA NuStep Beacon Award, which every fall recognizes 25 senior living communities in North America for their dedication to building vibrant wellness cultures. The top five communities also receive the ICAA NuStep Pinnacle Award as industry exemplars in embedding wellness throughout their organizations.

An upcoming issue of the *Journal on Active Aging®* will feature the top-ranked 2025 Pinnacle Award recipient—The Mather in Tysons, Virginia—announced last October at the ICAA Conference and Expo. Below are snapshots of how 2025's four other Pinnacle Award-winning communities embrace the opportunities and possibilities of wellness.

Continued on page 54

Through the lens of possibility: 'Best in Wellness' communities radiate growth *Continued from page 53*



Both indoor and outdoor wellness opportunities abound at Berwick Parksville, located on the east coast of Vancouver Island in British Columbia, Canada. Image courtesy of Berwick Communities

Berwick Parksville (Parksville, British Columbia, Canada)

Since opening in 2022, Berwick Parksville has challenged assumptions about aging. Its "Why not?" philosophy is paired with a "What if?" mindset to inspire curiosity, innovation and possibility.

"We believe every person can continue growing, learning and contributing later in life," says Jeannine Krefting, the community's active living manager. "Rather than focus on limitations, we enable residents to make meaningful choices, build confidence, and engage in dimensions of wellness they may never have imagined for themselves."

One way is to invite residents to share their knowledge, hobbies or life experiences, which has taken the form of Berwick's Drama Club, tech education sessions, pickleball programming, resident-run library, and more. This can provide a sense of purpose and enhance cognitive, social and emotional well-being.

"One of the most rewarding transformations is seeing residents shift from participants into leaders, mentors and creators of community life," Krefting comments. "A culture of peer support develops, and residents celebrate each other's successes. This mutual empowerment strengthens relationships and creates a thriving community."

Through digital tools and direct feedback, Berwick measures resident engagement and participation, Krefting continues. The Welbi app, designed to support more personalized resident experiences, helps in tracking attendance and planning programs and also in recording who leads activities. Additionally, Berwick's "Resident Experience Program collects and analyzes data related to physical activity, mental wellness and social interaction," she says. This data "helps us tailor care and programming to better meet individual resident needs, ensuring a more personalized and responsive wellness experience."

Berwick often uses shared experiences to strengthen multiple dimensions of wellness. The community, located on the east coast of Vancouver Island, offers travel programs that encourage physical activity while fostering social connection, cognitive engagement and emotional and spiritual well-being. Examples include hot air balloon rides in the Okanagan Valley, snowshoeing treks on Mount Washington and cruises up the coast to Alaska.

"Travel creates a powerful sense of belonging," Krefting points out. "Much more than an activity—it's a catalyst for empowerment, healthy aging, and a life enriched by continued discovery."

As the next generation of older adults redefines aging and as resident expectations change, Berwick is expanding culinary experiences, cognitive wellness programs, sports opportunities and technology. Individuals can exercise solo or join classes in the Zoom Room for cardio and strength training. A yoga pavilion and a zen garden

Continued on page 56

Through the lens of possibility: 'Best in Wellness' communities radiate growth *Continued from page 54*



Asbury Methodist Village in Gaithersburg, Maryland, 'integrates nature and community' on its 134-acre campus, says Director of Well-Being Belinda Degboe. The entire campus is an arboretum, with 17 acres certified as a Nature Preserve for wildlife. Image courtesy of Asbury Communities

offer outdoor spaces for mindful exercise. And biannual testing is available to monitor strength, stamina and flexibility.

Along with chef-prepared meals in the formal dining room, residents' culinary options now include all-day dining in The Knight & Castle Pub; breakfast, lunch or dinner in the Sea Glass Bistro; and snacks and to-go meals at Tweed's Coffee. A weekly happy hour also takes place at the rooftop lounge and patio.

"We are creating more flexible ways for residents to shape their daily lives, influence community programming and take on meaningful roles," Krefting says. "Our residents and team have created a culture where curiosity is encouraged, leadership is shared, and everyone is empowered to continue growing, connecting and thriving."

Peconic Landing (Greenport, New York)

Founded almost 25 years ago, Peconic Landing has cultivated a flourishing wellness culture to ensure older adults have opportunities to grow. This equity-based, life plan community, which was the top-ranked 2024 Pinnacle Award winner, organizes its wellness approach around five pillars of successful living inspired by research on "blue zones":

- Move Naturally
- Positive Outlook
- Healthy Eating
- Connect
- Brain Health

"These pillars overlap and reinforce one another, but social connection is often the foundation of wellness," says Robert J. Syron, president and CEO of Peconic Landing and 2025 Pinnacle Award winner in the wellness executive category. "When people feel connected to one another, to their community and to a sense of purpose, they're more likely to embrace learning, stay physically active and try new experiences. True wellness," he believes, "comes from helping each person discover the combination that supports their own goals, interests and well-being."

Residents—known at Peconic Landing as "members"—shape the culture by proposing new programs, leading clubs and volunteering throughout the campus. "What impresses us is how often members are the innovators and continue pushing the envelope," Syron shares. "Many of our most meaningful programs have grown from member interests, expertise and leadership."

In addition to resident initiatives, Peconic Landing has prioritized brain health. Adopting SAIDO Learning—a nonpharmaceutical approach intended to improve cognitive function—has been a reminder that people living with dementia continue to benefit from opportunities to learn, connect and grow. "Beyond cognitive engagement," Syron says, "participants are building confidence, strengthening social connections and looking forward to each session."

Preserving cognitive wellness is the next frontier, according to Syron. "We see tremendous opportunity through lifelong learning, dual-task activities, and equipment specifically designed for brain health," he says. "Our in-

novation philosophy means we will continue to evaluate and translate emerging research into practical experiences that contribute to healthier, more fulfilling lives."

Located in Long Island's East End, the 144-acre Peconic Landing campus supports people in achieving a physically active lifestyle and a "deep connection with nature." Access is available to a half-mile of private beach—where residents kayak, fish, swim and socialize—and six miles of walking and hiking trails. Amenities include sport courts (pickleball, basketball, tennis, bocce), an indoor swimming pool and a fitness center. Residents can visit the library and an education center for lifelong learning, while an arts studio, gallery and theater are available to explore creative expression.

The community measures engagement using a multifaceted approach aligned with its successful living dimensions, Syron says. Annual wellness surveys allow the leadership to develop "insights on individual and collective engagement," with the goal of ensuring initiatives "stay impactful and relevant." Attendance data also helps gauge involvement. And technology plays a role. A HUR iBalance machine enables comprehensive assessments and measures stability outcomes for residents, while the Icon digital communication platform facilitates real-time feedback and engagement tracking.

As engagement in wellness opportunities increases, Peconic Landing's commitment to evolve is reinforced. "Operationalizing wellness means making it part of our entire community's DNA—beyond programming and into strategic planning, dining, healthcare, environmental design and so much more," Syron explains. "Because wellness is embedded across the organization, our members and team members experience it through everyday moments of joy, curiosity and connection."

Asbury Methodist Village (Gaithersburg, Maryland)

Asbury Methodist Village, a 2023 and 2024 Beacon Award winner, considers wellness a shared responsibility across all departments and among residents.

"Residents are not simply recipients of services, but are seen as partners, leaders, teachers and contributors who shape community life," says Belinda Degboe, MHA, director of well-being and two-time ICAA NuStep Pinnacle Award winner in the wellness director category. "This ensures that wellness initiatives aren't top-down but evolve with and for the people they serve."

That starts with the expertise, creativity and life experience of residents. "We intentionally shifted from asking 'What programs should we offer?' to 'What gifts and passions already exist within our community?' and invite residents to co-create programs with us," Degboe explains. "When people can contribute rather than simply consume, they develop a stronger sense of ownership, purpose and belonging."

Resident-led programs include the Keese School lecture series and the Iris Music Project, a collaboration with the National Philharmonic where musicians and residents co-create performances. As well, the Gaithersburg Beloved Community Initiative has more than 100 residents mentoring students, leading arts programs, supporting literacy and advocating for housing and equity.

Another popular initiative is Kinnections Brain Health. This program combines cognitive training, physical exercise, social connection, stress management, nutrition education and purposeful living to help prevent decline and support optimization. Trained Brain Health coaches personalize each person's experience and monitor progress.

"Residents consistently report greater confidence, stronger social connections, increased engagement, and empowerment to maintain their cognitive health," Degboe notes, adding that Kinnections has a 95% retention rate. "Physicians encourage res-

Continued on page 58

Resources

Internet

ICAA NuStep Best in Wellness Awards (ICAA NuStep Beacon And Pinnacle Awards)
https://beaconaward.icaa.cc/

International Council on Active Aging (ICAA)
https://www.icaa.cc

NuStep, LLC
https://nustep.com

Award-winners

Asbury Methodist Village
https://www.asbury.org/asbury-methodist-village/

Berwick Parksville
https://berwickretirement.com/parksville/overview/

The Mather
https://www.themathertysons.com

Moorings Park
https://www.mooringspark.org/moorings-park

Peconic Landing
https://peconiclanding.org/

Print

The editors. (2025). Benchmark of excellence: Awards recognize Best in Wellness Class of 2025. *Journal on Active Aging, 24*(5), 60–61. Available free to ICAA members in the Articles archives ["Wellness articles topics," "Industry development" category] at www.icaa.cc

Through the lens of possibility: 'Best in Wellness' communities radiate growth *Continued from page 57*



Moorings Park Communities in Naples, Florida, supports residents in thriving through its TrueSpan™ evidence-based approach to well-being. Wellness is embedded in the community's culture and community design, explains Vice President Tom Mann. Image courtesy of Moorings Park Communities

idents to continue their active lifestyles because of these positive changes."

The 134-acre campus "integrates nature and community at every turn," Degboe continues. "A resident-driven effort transformed 17 acres into a certified Nature Preserve, and in 2019, our entire campus became an arboretum." Along with pollinator gardens and wildflower meadows, "new recreation zones invite outdoor engagement," she says. A central fitness center (supplemented by satellite gyms) is available for indoor activity, while "community hubs like the Blue Note Bistro and Rosborough Center nurture connection, creativity and cognitive health. The Rosborough Center," she continues, "houses our Brain Health Center, climbing wall, boxing studio, tech center, performance theater and art gallery."

Among the variety of wellness options at Asbury Methodist Village, "tremendous enthusiasm" exists for programs centered on healthy longevity, purpose, belonging and lifelong learning. "While every person's journey is unique," Degboe says, "wellness is empowering people to maximize their abilities, maintain independence, build meaningful relationships, and live with purpose and hope."

To accomplish that, the community continuously evaluates and refines programs based on feedback, resident outcomes and emerging research to maintain relevancy and effectiveness. The team tracks resident engagement using both attendance sheets and the Icon system, according to Degboe. Annual quality of life surveys and associate experience surveys help "monitor well-being, satisfaction and program impact." She adds, for cognitive engagement, measurable metrics are available through Kinnections and other brain health tools. "Whether through brain health tech or survey feedback, data ensures our approach is informed, responsive, and resident- and associate-centered," she stresses.

Ultimately, Degboe concludes, "our vision is a community where people don't simply live longer; they continue learning, contributing and flourishing through every stage of life."

Moorings Park Communities (Naples, Florida)

Moorings Park, a winner of multiple Beacon and Pinnacle Awards, views aging as an opportunity to grow stronger, smarter and more connected. Every aspect of the resident experience is designed to help individuals live with purpose and vitality.

"We proactively invest in physical, cognitive, social, emotional and spiritual well-being," says Tom Mann, vice president of sales and marketing for the life plan community. "This influences everything from community design to programming so residents can pursue their goals, maintain independence longer and continue doing what matters most to them."

Continued on page 60

Through the lens of possibility: 'Best in Wellness' communities radiate growth *Continued from page 58*

On the 88-acre campus, fine arts and pottery studios provide spaces for hands-on creativity, while the nondenominational Bower Chapel offers lectures and concerts year-round. Landscaped grounds boast lakes, gardens, nature preserves, and rubberized trails for walking.

Mann highlights "the 37,000 square-foot Center for Healthy Living [which] has offices for physicians, nurses and specialists," and a university fellow in geriatrics. "Besides outpatient rehabilitation and a program that integrates healthcare with other Moorings Park services, the Center has cutting-edge exercise equipment, group fitness and personal trainers, memory classes, and virtual technology to stimulate the brain," he says. The building also boasts a café, a salon and spa, and a theater/multifunctional space with surround sound.

Further options are available to residents on Moorings Park's north side. In addition to a clubhouse with restaurants, a resort-style swimming pool, and a fitness center, amenities include a putting green, tennis courts, pickleball courts, bocce ball and lawn croquet, according to Mann.

All the amenities "are designed to bring people together in community," he stresses.

"Engagement begins with data," he states. It starts with two evidence-based screenings that serve as a baseline for individualized planning. The Wellness Assessment examines frailty, cognition and mood; and the Senior Fitness Test measures muscle mass and physical function. "This, combined with workout equipment designed to track [individual] progress, surveys and TrueSpan Navigator meetings, ensures participation is both personalized and measurable," he says.

Residents meet with a Navigator, who coordinates with physicians, fitness specialists, therapists, nutrition professionals, community resources and other experts to develop a custom wellness plan aligned with individual goals. "The Navigator serves as a personal guide and a friend for each resident's journey, providing accountability and encouragement along the way," Mann points out.

"Our framework blends personalized wellness navigation with concierge medicine, a robust lifestyle platform, and meaningful community," he continues. "Success is helping residents rediscover confidence, pursue the activities they love, maintain relationships, contribute to their community and believe that some of their best years are ahead."

Other positive results come from Moorings Park's fitness programs. Participants have experienced a 35% improvement in overall strength, along with measurable gains in functional mobility, balance, endurance and physical performance.

"Collaborating with the geriatric experts from Johns Hopkins University in our fellowship program, we are continuing to evaluate outcomes using a more comprehensive, evidence-based approach to better understand the relationship between personalized wellness interventions, healthspan and resident well-being over time," Mann states.

Moorings Park is also investing in advanced health technologies, interdisciplinary care coordination, personalized resident experiences, and environments for active aging. Mann concludes, "The next generation of older adults wants purpose, personalization, technology, lifelong learning, proactive wellness, and experiences that support an active lifestyle."

A promising future

As more senior living communities shift to a wellness-with-care model and evolve their organizations, the ICAA NuStep Pinnacle Award winners demonstrate the value of embedding wellness as a competitive imperative.

"Senior living communities are continually redesigning aging as an active, fully engaged life stage," says Carmen Fox, marketing product manager at NuStep LLC, the Michigan-based manufacturer of inclusive fitness equipment and longtime champion of older-adult wellness. "These awards recognize those that fully integrate wellness throughout the organization to enhance healthspan."

As the industry continues to evolve, a new philosophy of possibility has emerged. "We're seeing communities look more at possibility rather than decline, improvement rather than maintenance, and human potential rather than chronological age," ICAA's Milner adds. "Wellness is moving from aspiration into everyday practice."

Julie King, MS, has been a certified group exercise instructor and personal trainer for more than 25 years. She holds multiple certifications and a master's degree in science (kinesiology). Over her career, King has led virtually every class format—including indoor cycling, mat pilates, yoga, kickboxing, boot camp and aquatics—at commercial health clubs, corporate fitness centers, wellness centers, schools and online. She also has served as a fitness director, fitness/wellness coordinator, health club manager and a contributing editor for Club Business International *(now* Health & Fitness Business*) magazine. King has been published in* Club Industry, Club Solutions, Campus Rec™, National Fitness Trade Journal, Recreation Management *and* Fitness Management. *She is also a longtime regular contributor to the* Journal on Active Aging®. *King can be reached at julie.king1@comcast.net*

Reference

1. Ryan, P. (2026). ICAA Wellness Industry Trends Survey 2026. Vancouver, BC: International Council on Active Aging. Once published, the report will be available online in the "Research" section (click on "Reports") at https://www.icaa.cc