

NYU BOLD PARTNER SPOTLIGHT:



Please include a brief bio here.

Mary Ek is the Program Director for Dementia Friendly America, a national initiative administered by USAging. Through her work, Mary supports dementia-friendly communities and Dementia Friends administrators by providing technical assistance, facilitating learning collaboratives and webinars, and managing the development and sharing of resources. Mary's career began as an educator. For 20 years, Mary served as an educator and administrator in various schools and as the Education Director for Volunteers of America Minnesota. In 2011, Mary joined the Collective Action Lab where she served as a Program Director, Project Leader and Manager for various collaborations and initiatives, one of which was Act on Alzheimer's. Mary was a pioneer and leader in the development of Dementia Friendly America and supported USAging as it acquired the role of DFA administrator.

Key goals of DFA and Dementia-Friendly Communities:

- Decreasing stigma and increasing opportunities for meaningful social interaction to support the ability of people with dementia to remain in community and thrive in day-to-day living.
- Creating and fostering a more dementia friendly culture that supports and addresses the changing needs of people living with dementia

Please start by telling everyone a little bit about the work that you're doing.

Administered by USAging and guided by a council of over 35 national leading organizations, Dementia Friendly America launched in 2015 with a goal to ensure that communities and individuals across the U.S. were equipped to support people living with dementia and their care partners by becoming dementia friendly. DFA's community effort began with six pilot communities and has grown to over 350 communities across 42 states.

Individuals also join the effort to support individuals living with dementia, their families and care partners through DFA's Dementia Friends program, which often serves as a catalyst for a broader community effort. Built on the model of and originally licensed by Dementia Friends UK, thirty states and territories currently hold Dementia Friends sublicenses in the U.S. and offer the opportunity for community members to become Dementia Friends by participating in curriculum-based Dementia Friends sessions. As of October 2022, there are over 124,000 Dementia Friends in the U.S. and that number continues to grow.

What's the story behind why you're doing what you're doing?

The world is hopeful that, one day, there will be a cure for Alzheimer's and dementia. Until that day arrives, the millions of people living with dementia and their essential care partners need greater community support to be able to live and thrive with dignity throughout their dementia journey.

Dementia Friendly America (DFA) was born out of recognition of this need. DFA is committed to effectively addressing this need TODAY and every day until there is a cure. The goal of DFA is to foster the ability of people living with dementia to remain in community and engage and thrive in day-to-day living.

Tell us about some parts of your projects that you're working on now that you are really excited about.

DFA is beginning the process of enhancing its use of technology and expanding its technical assistance and resource base to include national and state learning collaboratives, best practices innovation hubs and expanded sector guides and sector/population specific Dementia Friends curricula. We are especially excited to begin working on a Dementia Friends curriculum for clinicians!

For people who want to know more about your current work and programs, what are 1-2 pieces of information that you think is important for them to know?

Start. Don't wait until you think you have everyone you need at the table. If you have just one individual or one sector who is interested in becoming dementia friendly, you are ready and we have resources to get you started.

What would you tell someone who wanted to start a similar program like yours in their own setting (e.g., another state, county, or city)?

Reach out to us! DFA is happy to guide you in your process, provide resources, and connect you with champions in our network of communities.

Where else can people look to find out more about all the great work that you're doing?

Please visit our website to access our toolkits and resources at <https://www.dfamerica.org/>. You can also find out more about DFA's Dementia Friends program at <https://dementiafriendsusa.org/>.

What is one thing that you wish people knew more about early detection of dementia?

Early detection does NOT mean an early end to quality of life. DFA is working across all sectors to ensure that communities are equipped to support people living with dementia and their care partners so they can live well at home and thrive in their community.

Thank you so much for your time and for all the great work that you do!