Project Overview

Americans for the Arts: 2023 Tremaine funded Supporting Individual Artists Field Research Project

Since 2018, Americans for the Arts (AFTA) has been funded by the Emily Hall Tremaine Foundation to produce online classrooms, webinars, coffee chats, blogs, and toolkits about topics related to how local arts agency administrators can work in support of individual artists.

After seven rounds of classrooms together with the Tremaine Foundation, Americans for the Arts decided it was time to refresh the content. AFTA hosted a series of four focus groups in 2021 consisting of past program participants and field experts to gather feedback on the types of programs and program content that would be most relevant to administrators who work with individual artists.

For 2023, AFTA partnered with Mosaic Education Network to lead four focus groups (two with artists and two with local arts agencies) to learn field trends, needs, and ways to support creative and the organizations that support them.

The data collected, included in this report, will be used to share best practices for partnerships, collaboration, advocacy and equity in America’s creative economies.
Data Collection

The analysis featured in this report is a compilation of recommendations and reflections gathered from the following sources:

- Jot form submissions
- Focus group notes
- Research and include other organizations mentioned in the data sets

Data is organized across five main categories: economic, social, culture, educational, equitable advocacy. There may be moments where data overlaps, but it has been coded using the category that fits best represents what was conveyed.

Economic

Captures ways artists can be supported through monetary approaches such as policies, programs, grants, business models and other initiatives. Data in this category specifically details challenges and successes connected to monetary growth.

Social

Captures the ways people can connect to communities and be supported mentally and emotionally. This may include but is not limited to formally or informally building peer relationships and connections to organizations.

Culture

Captures ideas and examples of opportunities for artists to connect and exchange ideas with other artists and culture workers, the role of artists’ identities, and engaging with organizations as decision makers to shape community actions and initiatives.

Educational

Captures opportunities for artists to practice and/or master their craft through mentorships, skill-building, skill-sharing, and other development opportunities.

Equitable Advocacy

Americans for the Arts defines equitable advocacy as our way of intentionally and continuously learning and cultivating more inclusive, diverse, and accessible advocacy practices, interactions, relationships, and programming in
both approach and outcomes. This category from the responses captures opportunities for artists to be treated as “whole” people who manage lives outside of their artistry (e.g., healthcare, income, wages, child care, mentorship, etc.).

Data placed in this category discusses the desire for fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement in the systems, protocols, practices, and policies that allow everyone to be treated fairly, while at the same time striving to identify and eliminate barriers that have prevented the full participation of some groups.

Findings

Data is presented below is broken up by the five main categories: economic, social, culture, educational, equitable advocacy. Combining the responses from artists and local arts agencies.

Economic

The Barriers:

- Artists face challenges balancing part-time and full-time jobs alongside their artistic practice to maintain income.
- Grants and awards are unreliable, causing artists to seek out multiple revenue streams.
- A lack of steady income prevents artists from obtaining lines of credit, quality health insurance, and loans.
- Economic barriers related to privilege and wealth gaps are present in the artist community.
- Regulations and policies around zoning and permitting were found to be cost and time prohibitive. LAAs are also looking for ways to help artists overcome red tape and access financial services. However, LAAs face internal negotiations, tokenism, and funding trends, which can impact how funds are utilized.
- Local Arts Agencies (LAAs) are working at capacity while surveying their networks and communities to see how others might be more engaged.
- LAAs are looking to diversify their funding sources to support their communities better.

Solutions offered:

- Universal income
- Subsidies and more opportunities for work
- A national artist's license
- Arts organizations should prioritize supporting artists and think of artists as people worth preserving and supporting
- Engage in cross-sector programs that could benefit from partnerships, such as environmental conservation or climate justice
- Shift language and application development to re-evaluate LAA processes for obtaining a diverse artist pool.

**Artists**

A theme that emerged across multiple conversations with artists is the struggle of balancing part-time and full-time jobs alongside an artistic practice so that they could maintain some sense of income. Grants, invitations and other awards are unreliable and inconsistent, which means artists have to seek out multiple revenue streams until cycles reopen or opportunities become available. Engaging with smaller revenue streams in a gig format is often stressful and juggling contracts in addition to managing the needs of family and daily life can be debilitating. In addition to risk of burnout and limitations around professional growth, artists experienced existential issues around sacrificing artistic development for work that didn’t align with their goals.

For example, some artists have done other jobs to make money, like going into the classroom, but knew it wasn’t really what they wanted and couldn’t tell the students to follow their dreams if they were not. Furthermore, the inability to track steady income often means that artists are faced with other roadblocks, such as an ability to receive lines of credit, quality health insurance, loans, etc. Others also expressed the shame that accompanied applying for government assistance and how arduous those processes can be. An attendee stated, “If I could change something, it’s not having the need to ask for the handout. I don’t feel like I’m making it. I’m not surviving; I’m surviving off of the grace of God, and my family. I keep stopping to ask for help because it’s an embarrassment.”

Across the board, sustained income or support that could offset everyday expenses was presented as an economic solution. Universal income and other pilot programs were presented as a point of consideration for local arts agencies, as well as a call for more opportunities that support individual artists rather than non-profits as regranting entities.

Another economic barrier presented in the artist-centered conversations were the gaps in wealth and knowledge based on an artists’ background and privilege. For those who have means or a support system that allows them to focus on their work and professional development, this often leads to a more advanced career and access to knowledge and resources that create pathways to more lucrative or beneficial experiences. Several attendees could not say if they would ever own property or a home due to the uncertainty of the arts
landscape. There also appeared to be a disconnect between artists as entrepreneurs and the requirements put before them by local agencies and city government.

For instance, one participant shared that requirements (for public art RFPs, etc.) are sometimes unfathomable due to the quantity and types of questions in application. They expressed frustration about the lack of transparency, sharing that they are often left asking: Do I need a permit for a city I am going to be in for 3 hours? How do I pay sales tax? What do I need to do to sell my artwork in my community or in other communities? Another participant from Iowa shared their experience with the financial constraints of operating as a “small business” in the eyes of institutions, stating:

“[I can’t] forget insurance! COIs are required anytime you exhibit in a public space and different spaces require different amounts. It’s frustrating and costly. The only place to get funding for indie artists is the [Iowa Arts Council](https://www.iowarts.gov/) which has a 50% cash match. Only a few can meet that threshold. I hear they may move to a reimbursement system, in which only a few can take on debt as they await reimbursement.”

Others echoed this thought, sharing that ordinance terminology is often difficult to interpret. Younger artists, like street performers, find it too complicated and express “why would I take the time to figure it out if I am going to get a fine anyway?”

As evidenced by their input, many artists find processes around zoning, permitting and other regulations to be cost and time prohibitive. Possibilities presented for LAA’s included such efforts as:

- Artists being able to work with larger organizations on compliance with policy for program participation (examples including finger-printing, subsidizing insurance costs and support with certifications)
- The development of a national artists license or national sales tax
- Policies that don’t limit creativity due to over instruction
- Advocating for a new classification that pushes beyond a “small business” to rethink the average artists’ business structure and how they are taxed (ex. “Micro-business”)
- Subsidies such as artist-specific stipends to support cost of living, housing support or free transit passes
  - Reference: [Philadelphia’s Zero Fare Pilot](https://www.transit.nyc/)
  - Reference: [Nashville - The Housing Fund](https://www.housing.org/)
- Increasing the number of local commissions available to artists
- More opportunities for work that utilize artists’ varied skill sets, such as: teaching artist, adjunct professor, dramaturge, consultant, thought partner,
Local Arts Agency

For Local Arts Agencies, supporting the needs of individual artists can often be both a rewarding and challenging task. In conversations with LAAs we learned that many groups are currently working at capacity while actively surveying their networks and communities to see how others might be more engaged. For some LAAs, this might look like engaging/investing in cross-sector programs. It was shared that regional arts orgs receive a lot of federal funding but are looking for private funders to diversify who and how they engage with. This might include collaboration around certain issues such as environmental conservation or climate justice. There is a desire to connect traditional arts funding with specialized/specific funding that might not appear arts-specific on the surface, but would greatly benefit from partnership. This also gives artists expanded opportunities for income and career growth that highlight their expansive skillset and potential for community engagement. One example shared within a group was the New Jersey State Council on the Arts’ involvement in a call to create works of art around climate resilience/coastal flooding. Organizations such as Massachusetts Cultural Council have taken this approach as a way to consider the needs of its community. Through their Culture Rx initiative, they employ artists to offer free music lessons as part of a Social Prescription program—which targets community-based support, typically recommended by a healthcare provider, that ranges anywhere from food banks and housing assistance to arts, culture, and nature.

LAA representatives also mentioned the need for shifts in language and application development. Economic support isn’t simply defined by what you support, but also consideration of who you support and hidden barriers they may encounter. Participants felt that agencies should build in requirements to re-evaluate their processes for obtaining a diverse artist pool and be unafraid to ask how they can change their approach to encourage new artist participation. They also named a need for clarity, citing that advertisements for artists should...
specify the types of artists they are looking for and ask their creative community for recommendations on who to partner with.

One agency shared that they facilitated a program that had a low application rate because many applicants sought to produce outdoor festivals and events that required permits. The permit application process created a roadblock because people couldn’t find the forms they needed. The LAA learned that it would have had a higher success rate if they had incorporated those challenges into their grant application guidance. A lack of a formal business structure is a hurdle that LAAs often encounter when working with artists on large projects. One local government’s artist-in-residence had been working on the public health issue of reckless driving. Before this project, this artist was working ‘freelance’—meaning she didn’t have the infrastructure to take on institutional or government contracts. They worked with her to create infrastructure, and she now has an LLC and insurance requirements that larger contractors require. Some artists are limited by red tape and need help and resources to get around it. This approach leaves artists better equipped than you found them, which should be a mandate across all LAAs.

Other considerations for language and application shifts included examples such as:

- Northern CA Public Art will not share RFPs or RFQs that don’t compensate, including the submission of work. If they encounter an opportunity that does not compensate, they decline, share their reasoning and provide best practices.
- One LAA mentioned that they no longer use the word stipend because it signifies the lack of full-time employment, which has presented limitations for artists around proof of income.
- Considering earlier payouts for artists and lessening funding restrictions.
- Providing statements on letterhead, when requested, that clarify how artists will be paid on a project for proof of income.
- One LAA program does not list deliverables in their grants. Artists are assigned a mentor and given a show for which they will create new work and request they give new work for the show.
- Development of toolkits that lay out the easy steps for people to successfully execute a project (e.g., creative space development).
- Shifting away from medium/genre-based applications and opening up to youth and family-based applications for arts services.

Several groups also discussed how they might link artists to financial services who can assist them in how to report their income in a way for the government assistance programs to understand their income. These suggestions, however, are not without challenges. There were also conversations related to the
internal negotiations administrators face at LAAs. In some instances, issues around tokenism and funding trends arise, where LAAs are responding to what they feel will be awarded rather than the needs named by their local community. Additionally, city officials can often veto recommendations or amendments that LAAs deem necessary, which can impact how funds are utilized.

Social

The Barriers:

- Artists face issues of devaluation, lack of investment, and respect for their work, leading to low self-esteem and a desire for art to be recognized as a necessary part of society
- There is a disconnect between artists and decision-makers that impact their livelihood
- Revitalization efforts can result in artists being pushed out of their communities
- Local Arts Agencies (LAAs) are working to address limited artist spaces and find ways to provide intra-communal support for artists

Solutions offered:

- Artists desire multi-sector engagement, deeper connections with organizations, and improvements in storage and workspace
- Policies for creative spaces
- Reframing art as a legitimate profession
- Reducing labor associated with securing project support, and guidance for outreach and promoting one's practice
- Some cities are refurbishing unused industrial buildings into artist studios
- LAAs are pushing for policies that prioritize creative use of unoccupied spaces
- LAAs aim to engage artists beyond artmaking, inviting them to join boards and committees and get involved in leadership roles
- LAAs advocate for providing artists with the space and resources to respond creatively to issues they feel directly impacted by, such as mental health and first aid training
- LAAs also feel a responsibility to develop spaces for conversation and relationship building and emphasize the need for family-oriented spaces with babysitting services and nursing and lactation spaces
Artists

Feeling devalued within their career choices and removed from community were two of the most prevalent social issues discussed by artists. There was a desire for art to be seen and defined as a necessary part of society and perhaps even a social profession. A lack of investment and respect for artistic practice has, for some, resulted in a lessening of self-esteem and belief in one’s work. Lack of respect was defined by actions such as being asked to work for free or a deeply reduced rate, a lack of consideration for expenses and time put into a project or predatory policies instituted by local businesses that claim to want to work with artists.

Additionally, there was mention of a disconnect between the artists and those who make decisions that greatly impact their livelihoods. When discussing the need for relationship-building, one group member stated, “I strongly agree with the need for connection. [Presenting my art] to a network, org, community of people experiencing it helps me experience belonging. Also like the idea of socializing the idea of artists as service professionals. I also don’t like full-time employees with healthcare and benefits are making decisions about which art gets to which people.”

Some artists expressed a desire to also connect outside of their creative siloes and desired multi-sector engagement with funders, possible buyers and others that could further appreciation for art in local communities. There was also mention of wanting deeper connection with organizations to expand one’s own practice. One attendee shared that “to make the leap from studio art into public art is almost impossible unless you have a portfolio. Someone has to take a risk on you to help build the portfolio. Get LAAs to help local artists be able to qualify for things previously only regional or national artists are able to get, through design studio help, or help with understanding how CODAworx works.”

Conversations also reflected on the fact that once artists revitalize dilapidated parts of communities, they cannot afford to live or work there anymore. Upon getting pushed out, they are often isolated and struggling to recreate the space and sense of camaraderie that once existed. Some attendees felt that spaces that are often designated for artistic engagement can be limited and are not always the most accessible or welcoming for families or other groups.

For many artists, a lack of storage and workspace is also a deep point of stress due to cost and creative limitation. “I also have paintings piling up in the basement,” one artist mentioned, “which a lot of my visual artist friends are also contending with: increasing stock and need to store. It also makes it harder to do large scale works, but I think there is more growth/challenge in being able to work on a large scale.”
Solutions presented for social barriers for artists that respond to space, community and respect for process included:

- A policy that dictates a certain amount of space for artists/creative spaces into development
- Understanding and reframing art as a legitimate profession and compensating artists as such
- Connecting artists with opportunities for placement of their work
- Understanding that artists are not trained fundraisers and reducing labor that accompanies securing project support
- Protections for artists who work with local business owners to mitigate exploitation, such as taking a high percentage of their work and expensive fees for hanging work.
- Guidance for artists to develop skills around outreach and promoting one’s practice.

**Local Arts Agency**

LAA responses to social needs revealed a few projects and approaches that attempt to address limited artist spaces and how artists might be able to gather more organically. Agencies are keenly aware of the need for housing and studios and want to understand how they can assist artists in finding the intra-communal support they need.

Several cities, especially those who have industrial buildings that are no longer in use, are tasked with finding the best use for unoccupied spaces. Agencies know that municipal governments that possess ownership over these spaces could be doing more to center creative use. One example of redevelopment mentioned in groups was an initiative in Camden, NJ. The city of Camden worked with local art agency [Camden FireWorks](#) to refurbish a local space into artist studios. [Nest Arts Factory](#) in Bridgeport, CT was also named as a model to consider when exploring how to develop physical space that responds to the needs of artists. There were also questions raised about how involved LAAs can be in setting policies for redevelopment that is done by non-government entities. The concern was that once developers received their subsidy and met their minimum occupancy requirement, they no longer had the incentive to fill storefronts or studios. Participants were optimistic that LAAs could get involved in pushing against these practices with the goal of increasing access for artists.

Speakers within groups also contemplated how to gather and engage artists beyond artmaking. Suggestions included inviting artists to join boards, committees and other leadership roles. It was recommended that LAAs engage artists on self-identified issues and how they align with their mission and vision.
and view any misalignment as an opportunity for growth and a deepening of support.

“Artist as first responder” was a theme that continued throughout our conversations with LAAs. Many agencies advocate for providing artists with the space and resources to respond creatively to issues they feel directly impacted by. Some LAA’s shared that they’ve supported artists, particularly those with community-engaged practices, with mental health and first aid training. The San Francisco Arts Commission was referenced as an organization that is exploring this term through their residency for artists that was a direct response to COVID-19. The Commission believed in the power of artists as storytellers and developed the program as a way to use the creativity of artists to create photo essays and illustrations that captured the experiences of residents throughout the pandemic. The Kansas Creative Arts Industries Commission was also discussed as an agency that partnered with Emporia State University to develop an Arts in Medicine program. Services through the initiative include individual and group art therapy, workshops for clinicians and arts-based programs at public events. A third example, A Place of Her Own, was also discussed as a site of possibility for those wishing to support the well-being of women of color through artistic interventions.

Agencies also described feeling a sense of responsibility to develop spaces for conversation and relationship building. Many people felt that informal gatherings and activating community spaces allowed them to spread information more effectively and locate artists through non-traditional means. The importance of family-oriented spaces also emerged, with participants specifically asserting the need for babysitting services and nursing and lactation spaces as a standard, rather than an exception.

**Additional example: Englewood Arts - They have had success in re-zoning to an arts district to attract artists to live, work, and sell in an area that has had trouble retaining residents.**

- Zoning: https://9f9a126b-e6fb-4a3c-bb22-5b143027e5e8.filesusr.com/ugd/3ea1b9_1daf5335e4364de6951942ef0ecf9ff4.pdf

Other Resources shared:

- SF Public Works: http://sfpublicworks.org/services/permits
- Arts Fairfax: https://artsfairfax.org/creativespaces/
- SF Public Works (Graffiti): http://sfpublicworks.org/graffiti
Culture

The Barriers:
- Many artists experience isolation due to blighted neighborhoods, lack of feedback after completing degree programs, and inconsistent engagement with other artists
- Rural artists have limited access to engagement opportunities
- There are disparities in support based on geography, with the South often being underfunded

Solutions offered:
- Artists benefit from being part of a shared community, offering opportunities for solidarity, resource sharing, and feedback
- LAAs can address these gaps by finding creative ways to gather artists with non-creatives, creating opportunities for networking and engagement outside of traditional art spaces, offering studio support, training, co-working spaces, and equipping civic leaders to engage with artists
- Local Arts Agencies (LAAs) prioritize the involvement of local artists who understand community needs and can lead the efforts to combat residents leaving for better opportunities elsewhere
- LAAs believe that artists can encourage connection and join communities together in ways that agencies cannot.
- To expand their reach, LAAs are exploring cultural ambassador programs to identify gaps and pay a cultural ambassador to reach out to underrepresented communities
- LAAs are exploring ways to engage people who qualify for art-related needs but may not identify themselves as artists, including the use of feedback and data collection tools to reveal points of connection

Artists

Artists undoubtedly benefit from being part of a shared community. Many focus group members desired moments to foster solidarity with their peers around shared struggles and professional growth. Several participants saw opportunities for resource sharing as something that was often lacking as part of their practice, citing that LAA’s could aid with supporting the capacity, financing and time needed to create these kinds of exchanges and bridge-building to local officials.

Some felt that human connection is degrading and shared examples of neighborhoods in their respective cities that have been blighted and isolated for some time, with no sense of creative unity. Others mentioned how there is often no space for feedback and criticism after completing a degree program. For some artists, studio visits and other engagements with artists professionals
aren’t consistent. Thus, having time and space to engage with peers about the development of their work would be invaluable.

Some LAA’s have programs that might allow for a cohort model or, at minimum, could gather artists in informal ways to foster engagement. Rural artists, in particular, have isolation to contend with. Many artists attended online artist happy hours during the pandemic and saw an increase in learning from others in these engagements. Conversely, older artists sometimes struggled the most with the pivot to online interaction, sharing that the quality of their connections suffered despite there being an uptick in the quantity of events.

In terms of geography, there was mention of disparities in support based on region. The South was likened to a “desert” as it pertains to funding and artists have often been encouraged to look to more lucrative “hubs” to advance themselves. This is particularly frustrating for those who wish to remain and make an impact in the region they have invested in. In isolation, artists don’t know what information or opportunities they may be bypassing. Community and cultural exchange allow them to happen upon information through informal conversation and people who have become familiar with their work. It is felt that there is an obligation to fellow artists to make sure they are aware of opportunities, support systems and options for the barriers they are experiencing.

Solutions for LAAs to support gaps in cultural connection included:

- Finding creative ways to gather artists with those who may not be creatives to raise awareness around needs and challenges faced by artists.
- Creating opportunities for networking and engagement that feel more integrated into the fabric of a community and how people exist within it (outside of traditional art spaces)
- Intentionality about creating a space for social stability for artists
- LAA’s positioning themselves as a “one-stop shop” for common resources needed by artists (such as studio support, training for certain systems, etc.)
- Deeper investment in areas that are less prioritized in the arts landscape, such as the South and rural areas.
- Opportunities for co-working spaces
- LAA’s can equip civic leaders with the language and tools needed to engage artists in civic conversation

Local Arts Agency

Agencies know that cultural support and engagement are central to successfully connecting with and supporting artists as community leaders. Rather than outsourcing national talent, agencies noted the importance of identifying artists
in the community who can meet the needs of the projects they develop. Oftentimes, institutions will bring in more notable artists as a way to gain cache and a false sense of credibility. In turn, local artists suffer and aren’t able to employ their ideas in the places they live and work. Similarly, some LAAs feel there needs to be an ideological shift, where people are encouraged to feel pride in their communities.

Many are trying to combat residents leaving for better opportunities elsewhere and feel art can be a powerful tool to make that happen. How can this be effective if local artists aren’t prioritized in leading these efforts? One LAA discussed how their poet laureate applied for a community engagement grant and created a “poetry in the parks” project, around echo poetry. People came to hear the poetry, look at the stars, and learn about light pollution and the artist was able to engage their interests in environmental issues.

LAAs also realize that they are sometimes limited in how deep their individual reach extends. Artists, they feel, are uniquely equipped to join communities together and encourage connection in ways that agencies simply cannot. As one participant expressed, “cities and community leaders can think about engaging that kind of power (connecting with the artists) asking them for advice on helping with certain community issues they are struggling with.” This engagement has led to the development of hyper-local festivals and installations with artists at the helm of key decisions.

An interesting point of consideration is also the shift in how agencies feel artists are currently identifying. There was mention of people not necessarily identifying themselves as artists. As a result, one agency is exploring other words that might connect with people who qualify to meet an art-related need but might not identify themselves as an artist. Another solution LAAs offered was to allow artists to identify what they are doing in some sort of feedback / data collection tool and propose ideas for future programming. The hope is that even if someone with a practice may not use the label of “artist,” gaining insight into their process might reveal points of connection that an agency may otherwise not know.

Cultural Ambassador programs, such as the one managed by San Francisco Arts Commission, are emerging as ways to expand reach through artists’ leadership. When discussing the intention behind such programs, a participant explained:

“We have been steadily increasing our cultural ambassador program where we look at who has applied to our grants, identify gaps, and pay a cultural ambassador to reach out to communities that don’t have representation. You have to increase the funds for those folks because it is a niche relationship, but it’s work that deserves a longer timeline. It’s hard to find folks but they are the
ones helping us get grantees. It’s been a five-year development [of that program].”

Educational

The Barriers:

- Grant-writing was identified as the most commonly mentioned educational barrier for artists
- Skill and knowledge gaps around financial literacy
- Lack of education related to business development, entrepreneurship, and practical application of marketing, taxes, finances, and business structure
- Legal barriers and government rules can be complex and costly for artists, and political systems could benefit from less combativeness

Solutions offered:

- Local Arts Agencies (LAAs) could support artists by offering direct support, training, and mentorship.
- Create positions that focus on direct support for artists, teach artists about policy issues regarding funding, provide editorial guidance with grants, and mentorship for best practices for small business owners
- LAAs have some influence in the government sectors, with some members having connections with mayors and city councils which can be leveraged to change policy barriers
- Early education and advocacy should start in K-12 grade levels, as artists are leaving programs without the education needed to sustain themselves

Artists

Of all educational barriers shared during focus groups, grant-writing—specifically a lack of skill and knowledge of opportunities—was the most frequently mentioned. In nearly every group, participants mentioned a need for support with grant applications and where to locate them. Many artists didn’t feel fully equipped to successfully complete applications or strategize around how to create a funding plan to pursue opportunities. For instance, one group member disclosed that when they contacted their local Cultural Affairs office, the staff member simply told them what they needed to do for a grant, when they were actually seeking information on how to execute. This left them feeling like they weren’t heard and that the office wasn’t equipped to give artists extended time and guidance. “[They need to] listen to what our needs are, and respond accordingly,” they shared, “and to put on the mind frame of [being] our agent. If you’re a sports person, the agent is there to provide you with what you need [to do your job].”
Several other artists expressed feeling secure in their technical skills, but alluded to receiving no education related to business development or entrepreneurship. Marketing, taxes, finances and business structures were all named as integral parts of an artists’ education. There was recognition that while resources exist to educate business owners, mentorship and guidance would support artists with comprehension and practical application. There was also an expressed desire to dive into cooperative models and other aspects of the real estate market to explore options for collective space development. However, without the proper resources, artists were unsure that they’d be able to break into these sectors.

Participants felt that LAA’s were best suited to support with education in the following ways:

- Train artists and local admins in active listening so that they can understand what artists are asking for. Athletes have agents and they help them. A lot of arts agencies have the money and resources but don’t always share them.
- Create position(s) that focus on direct support for artists
- Teach public and local artists about policy issues regarding public and private funding
- Possible editorial guidance with grants or training workshops
- Mentorship for best practices for small business owners

**Local Arts Agency**

Just as artists may feel unequipped to navigate business management and entrepreneurship, agencies also expressed seeing the pattern of artists struggling with the costs and responsibility of being a freelancer/small business. Financial literacy often comes up as a continued education need within LAAs. One group member shared that they often get requests for financial workshops but they are also the least attended. They hope to get clarity around low registration and what might discourage participation. Others mentioned that early-stage artists are actively seeking out education on how to start an arts business and how agencies can and should provide support in this area. The Center for Cultural Innovation and National Grant Foundation were both listed as possible resources for individuals interested in grant workshops and other related training.

There was a census in multiple circles that legal barriers and government rules are complex, and mistakes for artists can be costly. While there was no clear solution, group members were clear that political spaces and systems could benefit from less combativeness. For some, their positions in LAAs allowed them to have some influence within these sectors. One participant shared: “I
have an odd position where I’m dual hatted as a city employee and I run the arts council. I get to be that connection point for the community and I have an in with the mayor and the city council.”

Lastly, there was brief discussion on early education and how advocacy should start with K-12 grade levels. Artists are leaving programs without the education needed to sustain themselves as entrepreneurs, and youth don’t always understand what a viable pathway into art could look like. One participant shared that they felt an artist advocate for local government is the best option. They went on further to say, “in terms of public schools, no one has any bandwidth [or] capacity. We’ve done a lot of our funding through behavioral health organizations because there are numbers behind that, and the research shows [arts are useful to their sector]. As much as I would like it to be uplifted in the schools, they’re tapped.”

**Equitable Advocacy**

**The Barriers:**

- Artists are facing various challenges due to the devaluation of art as a professional career path
- Policies that could offer support or pay livable wages often exclude those in the creative economy
- Healthcare and employment instability are significant concerns for artists
- Aging artists are worried about how they will support themselves in retirement
- Aging artists are worried about how they will support themselves in retirement
- Limited agency support and funding landscapes also pose challenges, particularly for rural or under-resourced communities
- Some LAAs face barriers from city systems, while others struggled to maintain relationships with artists due to perceived hypocrisy or “extractiveness”
- Data analysis was a concern, with a need to understand the implications of economic disparities and communities served

**Solutions offered:**

- Local Arts Agencies (LAAs) can support artists by advocating for living wages, social security for aging artists, and healthcare advocacy
- LAAs can collaborate with artists on advocacy points and policy development and expand funding support
- LAAs can advocate for artist recognition and promote spending on individuals.
Artists

The prominent issue raised within equity advocacy is the impact of art being systematically devalued. Those in power do not always share the belief that art is a professional career path. As a result, artists' needs aren't taken seriously. This creates a domino effect where policies that could offer support, or pay livable wages, often exclude those in the creative economy. Healthcare was a system that was consistently mentioned across each group. One participant shared how precarious maintaining healthcare could be, stating:

“I'm grateful to have healthcare coverage, but it is high deductible and catastrophic coverage. I will never be able to afford the out-of-pocket expense should I need to rely on it. I go without care because of the high costs, the complicated medical system of referrals, and I don't always get needed prescriptions because of their exponentially increasing costs.”

Others agreed with the belief that the U.S. healthcare system is unkind to self-employed workers (which artists are usually classified under) and expressed worry about the impact that lost income would have on maintaining coverage. Additionally, aging artists are met with the sobering possibility of not being able to produce work past a certain age. There was concern for how an artist might support themselves once they reach “retirement age.” They felt that LAA’s have a responsibility to be deeply engaged in this conversation.

There were also numerous challenges connected to employment that were revealed throughout our conversations. Seasonal income, or income instability, was a common worry amongst groups. Inconsistencies in revenue often leads to a misrepresentation of an artists’ actual income and what they can anticipate. Many participants mentioned having to argue with entities about their income as it appears on paper, versus actuals. Another consideration around employment insecurity is that unemployment systems typically prioritize “conforming employees—people who are employed for other people, not for artists with a variety of sources of income. For some benefits, like food assistance, simultaneously couldn’t make ends meet and made too much money.

Some artists described limited agency support within their respective regions. One participant specifically mentioned there being only one funding source for individual artists in the state of Iowa. For this person, and others, a limited funding landscape means that they are one of several individuals competing for
a small pool of resources. This, compounded, with the rejection of federal support in some instances, leaves residents financially strapped and unable to invest in relocation or save for major life changes. As the aforementioned artists summarized, “People can't afford to stay and live, and yet they can't afford to move.”

LAAs were asked to consider the following methods of support around economic advocacy:

- Build partnerships with places that need artists services and advocate for living wages/holistic support
- Greater advocacy towards social security for aging artists
- Organize around healthcare advocacy and support; specifically looking at possibilities for group rates or negotiation in support of artists.
  - Resource: Fractured Atlas attempted to support this, but could not cover every region of the United States because of the different state insurance laws. The program ended in 2019.
- Deeper collaboration with artists on advocacy points and policy development
- Expanding funding support in ways that could benefit rural or under-resourced communities.

Local Arts Agency

It was expressed that LAAs can advocate for recognition of artists entrepreneurs and promote that state, federal and local funding can and should be spent on individuals. Many agreed that there is a “value-based issue” at hand here where our country and society does not value artistic creativity when it's not part of the larger capitalist society. Additionally, strength in numbers approach was listed as a primary strategy to advancing any advocacy efforts—whether through regional convening or peer collaborations. A desire for resource sharing and learning also emerged in conversation, with administrators brainstorming ways to share policy templates and findings.

Others also explained that they actively try to implement programs for artist support, but are sometimes blocked by powers above them. In these one person detailed how city government hindered a local agency’s Universal Basic Income initiative:

“[There are barriers to] our ability to pay individuals. The city systems are only set up to pay large business corporations. They still can’t pay individuals electronically. They have tried to pilot this multiple times to pay via electronic transfer then the city shut down the process. This was detrimental to their relationship building. It had to be a regranting opportunity which caused a host
of other issues. [This shift meant] it didn’t meet the idea of what UBI is for. There are other cities going through this same issue.”

Fractured relationships with artists were also discussed as a challenge encountered by some agencies, specifically when they are perceived as being hypocritical or extractive. One administrator mentioned feeling tension around the questions because they felt that they’re asking artists to fit into a mold the agency created for them. “I’ve found that the artists choose to do these types of projects on their own,” they stated. “I have less desire to ask the artists to do this work when we don’t know how to do it ourselves. The most common thing I hear from artists is that they don’t want to apply because it’s so difficult to work with us.”

Many representatives in the focus groups shared that they are currently engaged in advocacy work that often goes unseen by many of their community members. Such efforts have included anti-displacement laws and trying to advocate for artists to not get pushed out of communities due to affordability. It was stated that the fair housing laws are so restrictive that state and federal view that kind of language as discriminatory. The process is nuanced and complex, and usually ends with a “no.” Others described working towards arranging bus passes to widen access to transportation and rallying resources for artists as parents (i.e., support for childcare). The fight for equitable compensation and educating those who partner with artists on fair wages also surfaced as an area of focus.

Finally, there was an expressed concern for how data is actually analyzed and used by LAAs beyond reporting to create policy and shifts in support. One participant lifted up important points of consideration, asking questions such as: How many folks take the time to dissect demographics beyond reporting? In your city, state, county, or your parish, how do you understand the implications for the breakdown of racial demographics? Then continued by stating that “It’s easy to see that our city is made up of these different groups, but when you start thinking about economic disparities, it’s important for arts organizations to not only pull data, but to understand their relationship to it. Folks may know who they serve, but understanding deeply the communities that they’re situated in is [something totally different].”

Closing

This experience revealed that artists are clear about their needs and are excited to envision possibilities for a new, more supportive future. There is a shared
agreement that the system, in its current state, does not offer the conditions for most to thrive within their respective practices. While many try to organize and rally around these barriers, their efforts can only advance so far without the help of local arts agencies. Based on what was shared, artists’ often only feel valued as key contributors to society when they are needed to support a bottom line or completion of a project. Their call(s) to action are rooted in a deep desire for holistic acceptance and understanding of what it truly takes to live and produce as a professional artist.

Local arts agencies have made several strides, as evidenced in the report, to rethink what individual artist support means. However, it is apparent that the need for direct input, collaboration and cross-sector advocacy are ever-present. Offering grants and project-specific support only creates a short-term response to a long-term, systemic problem. At its core, society needs to rethink how artists are viewed, supported and engaged as shapers of culture. Agencies are uniquely poised to support this shift given their proximity to local and regional government entities, insight into policy language and development, and (hopefully) deep relationships to the artists that enrich the communities they serve.

Appendix

Focus Group Themes & Questions

Topic #1 Moving from Surviving to Thriving: Fulfilling artists' basic needs by addressing barriers to a high quality of life

September 15th 1-2:30 EST

Context

Americans for the Arts (AFTA) spoke with artists and local artist agencies about the challenges they experience when trying to meet their basic needs. AFTA learned from local arts agencies about challenges to support artists due to systemic barriers, such as federal benefits like SNAP, housing vouchers, SSI/SSDI. The purpose of the discussion was to better understand how artists experience everyday life. The information collected from our conversation will help Americans for the Arts better inform local arts agencies regarding how to support local artists like you.

Questions
1. Part of being a thriving artist is having access to necessary resources, such as healthcare, childcare, and housing. Sometimes, artists may need to use local and federal support programs like SNAP, housing vouchers, Title XX and social security. These programs often use income as a qualifier for access. Such regulations create barriers for artists with inconsistent income. Have you experienced not getting access to state or federal resources? What was the barrier? If you could change the rules to get access, what would you change them to?

2. For many businesses, there are seasonal highs and lows when it comes to profits throughout the year. This experience is no different for artists. Therefore, artists must find alternative streams of income in the less profitable seasons. What are some additional streams of income you use? What do you wish you could do, but there are barriers to access them (i.e., could be an art teacher but don't have the time or money to gain the skills and license, could provide online content but don't have the resources to execute, etc.)?

3. If you were to give advice to Americans for the Arts (AFTA) as they work with your local arts agency, what would you say AFTA could do to ensure that artists in your community get their basic needs met?

4. The goal of Americans for the Arts is to move artists from surviving to thriving. According to Maslow’s 5 Levels of Human Need, every human should have the following:

1. Physiological Needs: Food, water, clothing, sleep, and shelter
2. Safety and Security: Health, employment, property, family, and social stability
3. Love and Belonging: sense of connection
4. Self-esteem: Confidence, achievement, ability to be a unique human being
5. Self-actualization: Creativity, acceptance, experience purpose.

If you were in control and budget, time, or bureaucratic red tape were not an issue, what would you need or want to successfully access all five of the levels of human need?

Topic #2 Sustaining Artists' Businesses: How to continuously support artists as creative economy drivers

September 20th 1-2:30 EST

Context

There has been a continued conversation about artists' role in the gig economy, and how the pandemic exposed the lack of recognition for artists as
contributors to America’s economy (GDP). There is an opportunity to advocate for their unprecedented access to pandemic emergency relief becoming a permanent fixture, rather than a one-off initiative.

Questions

1. There are multiple kinds of artists engaging in various sectors. Too often, this means artists who provide an intangible service (e.g. performing artists) and artists who provide tangible goods (e.g. visual artists) have different experiences and varying levels of success and support in creative economies. Have you noticed or experienced differences in support and success among artists depending on their form or art in your city? If so, what differences have you noticed or experienced?

2. According to The Policy Circle, local and state business laws, such as licensing laws and distribution rules, impact artists’ abilities to create and sell their work. Permits can also impact the ability of artists to organize art or music festivals. For example, New Orleans requires artists to have certain licenses to sell their art in certain places. Washington state requires a business license for artists who earn a certain amount of money from their art sales. Often, these licenses are required to allow artists to receive grants to support their work. What experiences have you had with local regulations and rules that impact your creative business? Have they helped, hurt, or something else?

3. For self-employed artists and people who work in household enterprises, geographic isolation and lack of business experience are the biggest obstacles. Are there other barriers that impact your business (e.g., where you live, needing access to business skills, etc.)?

4. If you were to give advice to Americans for the Arts (AFTA) as they work with your local arts agencies, what would you say AFTA could do to ensure that artists in your community are able to thrive economically in your community?

Topic #3 I Am More Than My Artwork: Discuss how artists can use their transferable skills and life experiences to be problem solvers and decision makers in the community

November 13th 3-4:30 EST

Context

Many local arts agencies have recognized that community work is sustained when artists are considered for skills beyond their artwork and utilized more broadly as community leaders. The questions for this topic are focused on exploring how artists can add value to their community outside of their artistry.
We want to learn how local arts agencies can support artists in identifying roles they can play to leverage other skills and knowledge in their community.

Questions

1. Connecting artists to the needs of local government. The City of Miami created an art-in-public-life resident to bring attention to rising ocean tide and the impact on building and infrastructure in the area. How might local arts agencies work with artists to convey messages your city wants the public to understand?

2. Artists as public health advocates. Irina Cumberland is a seascape artist who left medical school to heal people through her paintings. Based on a NASA study that links looking at fractal-based natural scenery (like oceans) to reducing stress, Cumberland sees her work as supporting mental health. How might local artist agencies connect artists to organizations and institutions to address city, county, or statewide issues like mental health?

3. Additionally, Irina Cumberland creates her oil painting on recycled plastic due to her concern about polluted oceans. How might local arts agencies learn about and utilize artists with passions outside of their artwork to address issues impacting the public and/or the environment?

4. Artist as consultants. Sometimes artists have to navigate systems of support such as food stamps, health care, and unemployment benefits. Oftentimes, the questions asked about artists’ income that are used to determine qualification doesn’t recognize the uniqueness of creative independent entrepreneurs. How could local arts agencies advocate for support agencies to reevaluate their application process and determination factors to ensure artists are not denied support?

5. Artists who create public works can find themselves restricted by zoning policies and other barriers. The Arts & Planning Toolkit, a project of the Metropolitan Area Planning Council's Arts & Culture Department of Boston, states that, “Artistic practices often fall between use categories because acceptable uses change across zoning districts. Therefore, it often takes people with special expertise – beyond the knowledge of working artists – to navigate what may be acceptable practices where they live and work. For example, is a potter who has a wheel and electric kiln in their home a light manufacturer in which case they need to move into an industrial district? What if this person sells their wares - does that mean they are running a retail operation and should instead be in a commercial space? Or can they continue to operate their studio, and sell a few things inside their private home in a residential neighborhood? Planners can help clarify acceptable uses that encourage safe and sound artistic production.” How might local arts agencies advocate for artists to
participate in policy-making processes with decision makers (such as City Council, a Zoning Board, a Planning Board, a Regional Planning Agency, etc.)?

6. Using transferable skills. Many artists have transferable skills such as research abilities, customer service, attention to detail, creative problem-solving, self-motivation, and time management. How could a local arts agency support artists in utilizing those skills outside of their artistic practice (such as teaching artist, adjunct professor, dramaturge, consultant, thought partner, collaborator, administrative support, etc.)?

7. Sometimes a topic in an artist’ work is connected to the artist personally (i.e. Climate change, women’s rights, racism, immigration policy etc.). How might local arts agencies work with artists and the organizations in their city to address an issue an artist addresses their work?

8. Building interdisciplinary partnerships. Research proves that the arts integrate mind, body and spirit, increase understanding of difficult abstractions, and elevate higher order thinking skills. During the 2010-2011 academic year, a cooperative effort of the Ohio State University College of Medicine (OSUCOM) and Columbus Museum of Art (CMA) established Art of Analysis (AoA) - a program that worked with medical students participating in learning communities. The program provided emotional support to students to encourage them through the arduous process of medical training, to develop critical thinking skills, engender empathy, increase tolerance for ambiguity, build team problem solving abilities, and consider multiple perspectives through the observation of artwork. How might local arts agencies build partnerships between artists and other entities that allow artists to use their transferable skills to support goals outside of their artistic practice?

Topic #4 If Only Arts Agencies Did This: Best practices and successful initiatives that offer artists what they need to get to where they want to be

November 20th 3-4:30 EST

Context

This conversation focuses on how local arts agencies can best support artists, and understand what’s working, and what’s not. The questions are formed from the themes of previous artist-focused conversations. The goal is for local arts agencies to consider how they might address the issues in their spheres of influence.

Economic support
1. Artists are everyday humans first. Therefore, artists often need help with expenses such as childcare, mental health services, healthcare and transportation. Some artists have suggested some of the following:

- A group rate/policy for all artists combined. A healthcare group that would help individual people negotiate costs in line with what insurance companies would pay?
- Universal income and healthcare.
- Offer artists free transportation, like the City of Philadelphia did for its city employees.
- National artists license
- National sales tax
- Tax credits for artists
- Centralize resource/supply share

How might a local artist agency support in developing one or more of the above ideas?

2. Artists need more funding support for general operating expenses, such as the building, utilities, business insurance etc., than project-related only funding. Some artist-focused organizations have created art residencies that involve free rent and public showings. Other organizations offer subsidized studio space, and some artists have suggested sustainability tax cuts. For example, Nashville, Tennessee created a program that creates more affordable housing for artists. What are some ways your organization currently or could support artists with overhead costs?

Artists as contributors to community growth

3. Artists historically moved to dilapidated parts of communities and revitalize it, however, overtime they cannot afford to live or work there anymore. How might local arts agencies support policy that dictates a certain amount of space for artists/creatives in a developing area?

Limited access

4. Many local artist agencies are working to address current and historical inequities that negatively impact individual artists. However, some artists believe local arts agencies have “pet” artists that get significant funding, or they only offer opportunities to black or brown artists, or artists in certain parts of town. How can local arts agencies ensure they are working with multiple artists of various mediums? How can local arts agencies simultaneously address equities issues impacting artists based on certain demographics, and continue to support artists who are not with those demographics?
Education

5. Grants can be a great opportunity for artists to get access to additional funds. However, many artists need additional support, such as free grant writing workshops, an editor to help with the grant writing process filling gaps to strengthen applications, and a centralized location for learning about grants available. What are some ways your organization currently or could support artists with accessing grants?

6. A barrier to artists getting paid a livable income is many businesses and individual consumers do not offer artists fair compensation. Some believe exposure, donation of time and work, and paying high competition entrance fees are healthy ways to engage with artists. How could local arts agencies educate the public that artists are professionals, and their time and work shouldn’t be devalued?

Advocacy

7. A challenge product-producing artists face is a lack of demand for artwork. One solution could be for local artists agencies to support artists in getting commissions from businesses (e.g. One Columbia for Arts and History partnered with The Kroger Co.). How might local arts agencies work with local businesses and corporations to create commissions for artists?

8. Depending on an artist’s geographic location, if they are formally connected to an organization, if an artist has an agent or ability to network with buyers, it can determine an artist’s success. How could local arts agencies support artists’ success with these potential barriers?

Professional Community Building

9. Local arts agencies sometimes create spaces for artists to engage with each other. However, those places often are large events (e.g. the symphony) or adult locations (e.g. a bar). These locations don’t work well for artists with families. How can local arts agencies support artists in building community in multiple ways?