LOCAL ARTS AGENCIES
SUPPORTING INDIVIDUAL ARTISTS

FIELD RESEARCH PROJECT FINDINGS
AMERICANS FOR THE ARTS FOR TREMAINE FOUNDATION 2023

INTRODUCTION

Since 2018, Americans for the Arts (AFTA) and Emily Hall Tremaine Foundation have partnered to provide support for local arts agency administrators working with individual artists.

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

And in 2023, AFTA partnered with Mosaic Education Network to lead an additional four focus groups—two with artists and two with local arts agencies—to identify field trends, needs, and ways to support creative workers and the organizations that work with them.

In this summary report, we review the methodology of this research. For a complete list of the findings for each topic, and to read more about the entire process, please read the full Local Arts Agencies Supporting Individual Artists 2023 Report.

FOCUS GROUPS

The research included four focus group sessions, two each for artists and local arts agencies.

In the first two sessions, twenty-three artists participated to share their thoughts. In the first of these gatherings, they discussed “Moving from Surviving to Thriving: Fulfilling artists' basic needs by addressing barriers to a high quality of life.”

Artists spoke about the challenges they experience when trying to meet basic needs. The purpose of the discussion was to better understand how artists experience everyday life. They responded to prompts like these:

- Part of being a thriving artist is having access to necessary resources, such as health care, 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?**
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?

In the second focus group with artists, the topic was “Sustaining Artists' Businesses: Discuss how to continuously support artists as creative economy drivers.”

This conversation recognized the ongoing dialogue about artists' role in the gig economy, and how the pandemic exposed the lack of recognition for artists as contributors to America’s economy. Artists highlighted the need for advocacy to extend the unprecedented access to pandemic emergency relief for permanent work supports to gig workers, rather than limiting it to a one-off emergency initiative. The artists responded to questions like:

- 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 require 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?

- 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?

The third and fourth focus groups included twenty-seven representatives of local arts agencies. In the first of these, participants considered “how artists can use their transferable skills and life experiences to be problem solvers and decision makers in the community.”

Staff in local arts agencies recognize the importance of partnering with artists for the value they bring to community work as community leaders. This group explored the ways local arts agencies can support artists by promoting the skills they bring beyond making art with questions like:

- **Artists 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?
• **Using transferable skills.** Many artists have transferable skills such as research acumen, 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.)?

In the final focus group, the conversation centered on how local arts agencies can best support artists, and understand what’s working, and what’s not. The questions reflected earlier issues raised by artists. For example:

• **Grant proposals.** 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 or filling gaps to strengthen applications, and a centralized location for learning about available grants. What are some ways your organization currently supports or could support artists with accessing grants?

• **A living wage.** A barrier to artists getting paid a livable income is that 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, but they are not. How could local arts agencies educate the public that artists are professionals, and their time and work shouldn’t be devalued?

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**DATA ANALYSIS OVERVIEW**

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

• Focus groups, as described above, including fifty individuals
• Notes submitted by five individuals who registered, but could not attend the focus groups

Researchers analyzed and coded the responses, identifying five categories: social, economic, culture, educational, and equity advocacy.

• **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.
• **Economic:** Captures the way 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.
• **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**: Captures opportunities for artists to be treated as “whole” people who manage lives outside of their artistry (e.g., healthcare, income, wages, childcare, mentorship, etc.). Data placed in this category covers 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.

**CLOSING**

This research confirms that artists are clear about their needs and excited to envision possibilities for a more supportive future. There is consensus 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 their lives around these barriers, their efforts can only advance so far without the help of local arts agencies. Artists sense that others see their primary value as key contributors to society only as support for the bottom line or completion of a project. Instead, artists would like to work collaboratively toward holistic acceptance, participation in multiple aspects of community health, and broad public understanding of what it takes to live and contribute as a professional artist.

Local arts agencies have made some strides in rethinking and reimagining partnerships with individual artists. Staff are also aware that there is an ongoing need for more direct input, collaboration, and cross-sector advocacy. Offering grants and project-specific support creates a short-term response to a long-term, systemic problem. The public view of artists, all that they are asked to contribute, and how they live and earn, must shift. Local arts agency staff are well-positioned to support this shift given their proximity to local and regional government entities—to provide insight into policy language and development—and their partnerships with the artists who enrich the communities they serve.