MAKING WORK PAY: STRENGTHENING THE LOCAL ECONOMY AND ARTS OPPORTUNITIES

Local Arts Agencies can work with artists to strengthen the economy by ensuring work pays enough to meet basic needs. Too many artists have to juggle multiple jobs and projects to make ends meet, making it difficult to contribute to the local arts scene and often leading to artists giving up their practice.

When work pays enough to secure housing, food, entertainment, and household, artists do better, and have the ability to participate in local events and performances. When artists can count on a steady income, they can meet the requirements to successfully apply for loans to expand their work, buy a home to solidify their place in the community, and get healthcare for themselves and their families.

What is the Challenge?
Systems make all of these important steps to economic security difficult.

- **Local government ordinances and requirements** for public arts practices (busking, street art) are hard to uncover and complicated to sort out. “Do I need a permit? Do I pay sales tax?”

- Governments and funders often treat Individual artists **like small businesses** but artists don’t have the resources and capacity to meet the requirements of insurance, matching funds for grants, or ability to work while waiting for reimbursement later.

- **Grant invitations and other awards are unreliable and inconsistent.** Artists must take time to meet the proposal requirements without pay or any sense that they will get an award.

- **Applications for public work supports like child care and insurance are complicated** and can feel dehumanizing. “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 of the grace of God, and my family. I keep stopping to ask for help because it’s an embarrassment.”

- Jobs just **don’t pay enough to cover basic needs**, requiring practicing artists to take on extra work outside the arts and contributing to financial stress.

**Creatively addressing barriers**

While balancing limited resources

“I want to have conversations with arts organizations and ask, ‘Who are you here to support?’ The community that gets the art? The art form? Or the people who make the art? Because if you say your budget is about supporting artists, but you’re not, there is a problem. At the end of the day, how are you making your financial choices and who are you supporting? They get the sense artists are seen as an ever-renewing resource - if artists fail there will be more artists coming up behind them. But we should think of artists as people worth preserving and supporting.”

- Anonymous artist, 2023
What Can We Do? Solutions to Try

Consider Organizational Systems

• Create processes that simplify and reduce costs for program participation requirements like insurance, certifications, etc.

• Adopt and advocate for policies that support creativity and don’t over-instruct.

• Rebalance grantmaking to increase funding and commissions for artists.

• Support and create opportunities for work that broadens the idea of artists’ work as something more than the making of art.

• Explore cross-sector work with arts and climate justice, housing, health, transportation, planning, and more. Seeking funds to support community goals with creative approaches can have many benefits for the arts community, including providing new funds to hire artists.

The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) Arts Incubation Research (AIR) Lab explores the intersection of the arts, entrepreneurship, and innovation with a research agenda that intends to understand the economic potential of artists as non-conventional entrepreneurs and the impact of the digital divide upon arts-based entrepreneurs.

• Review application, grant, and reporting requirements with artists to ensure a diverse pool of artists have access to the funds.

• Provide compensation for all RFQs and RFPs.

• Develop a payment system that recognizes the need for payment up-front and throughout a project.

Advocate for Local Policy

• Promote the idea of a new classification beyond “small business” for example “micro-business” to acknowledge the individual artists business structure.

• Consider programs that support transportation and housing costs like Philadelphia’s Zero Fare Pilot and Paducah Kentucky’s Lowertown Artists Program

• Advocate for transparent and simple permit application process for events and public performances.

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 expect.

• Support ease of access to publicly funded work-supports like child care, transportation, and health insurance.

• Consider implementing or advocating for a guaranteed income program like Creatives Rebuild New York, Yerba Buena Center For The Arts or Springboard’s Guaranteed Minimum Income for Artists.

For more information about Americans for the Arts’ Supporting Individual Artists Field Research Project and findings, please read the full report or reach out to services@artsusa.org.