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Jumpstarting Artist Jobs:

Case Studies of U.S. Employment Programs for Creative Workers

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*National Arts Statistics and Evidence-based Reporting Center (NASERC),
National Endowment for the Arts*

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On the cover:

Left image: Artists At Work staff with THRIVE Region Cohort artists from left to right, Nadine Goellner, Scout Eisenberg, Brianna Jones, Juno (aka Tanqueray Harper), Monica Alicia Ellison, Robert Winslow, Kathleen Nolte. Not pictured: Mary Barnett, James McKissic & 2\$ON The Prince (aka Kourtney Brown). Photo by Artists At Work.

Right image: Artist Will Schlough smiling from construction lift. Photo from Hope Corps Downtown Mural Project Grantee SODO BIA. Photo by Austin Wilson.

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Executive Summary

In March 2020, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic prompted local, state, and federal directives to temporarily close schools, workplaces, and public areas and to cancel large gatherings and public events. These closures had immediate and dire repercussions for the U.S. economy, for workers overall, and for artists and cultural workers in particular. In the following month (April 2020), the unemployment rate among workers in arts and cultural industries was 27.4 percent—nearly twice the rate for all workers (Marrone et al. 2020).

Historically, arts and cultural workers have experienced persistent challenges in maintaining reliable employment (Comunian and England 2020). This time, the problem was existential in scope. Several funders attempted to counter COVID-induced spikes in unemployment among artists. Federal, state, and local government agencies—as well as private and community foundations—provided creative workers with financial support, including through grants or even direct employment.

The purpose of this report is to describe federal and nonfederal responses to artist employment challenges during the pandemic. Drawing from findings on how these programs were developed and implemented, the research team provides recommendations for funders and arts administrators who may be interested in supporting future iterations and the sustainability of such programs. Although this report centers on artist employment programs that grew in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the lessons that inform these recommendations remain relevant in a post-pandemic era, as artists and cultural workers still experience economic precarity, including gig employment (e.g., short-term contracts or freelance work) and lack of access to stable health insurance and retirement benefits (American Academy of Arts & Sciences 2021).

The report uses case study analysis to discuss four purposively selected artist employment programs that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic. For each program, the report offers a narrative with facts and figures about how each program was developed (e.g., locations, funding sources) and implemented (e.g., number of operating staff and employed artists). The report itself is organized around three primary research questions:

1. What artist employment programs were created or expanded in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - a. How did federal COVID-19-era artist employment programs resemble or differ from prior responses to national economic crises?
2. What are key program characteristics among recent artist employment programs, such as their locations, goals, operations, and outcomes?
3. What recommendations might be made to funders and arts administrators about the successful design, implementation, and sustainability of artist employment programs?

Artist Relief Efforts in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Congress enacted several significant pieces of legislation that supported the economic conditions of artists and cultural workers impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act of 2020 provided over \$2 trillion in federal aid to workers, households, and small businesses across industries and levels of

government. As part of the CARES Act, Congress appropriated \$75 million to the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), which the agency quickly disbursed to help preserve jobs and support arts organizations that were forced to shut down due to the pandemic (NEA n.d.a).

The CARES Act also established the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), administered by the Small Business Administration, which gave forgivable loans to small business, including self-employed artists and arts organizations. Another key provision of the CARES Act was that it extended unemployment benefits to independent contractors, such as self-employed artists. In the following year, Congress passed the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) to provide additional support for the U.S. economy during the pandemic. ARPA appropriated \$135 million to the NEA to support arts organizations and jobs impacted by the pandemic. The majority (60 percent) of the NEA's ARPA funds were distributed to local arts organizations and individual artists/projects to support jobs, fund operations, and encourage arts participation; the remaining 40 percent of funds were distributed to State Arts Agencies and Regional Arts Organizations for regranting (NEA n.d.b).

While federal COVID-era relief programs offered short-term funding for arts organizations and state and local agencies primarily through grants, private and community foundations and state and local agencies offered more steady and direct financial support to artists through mechanisms such as grants and W-2 employment (i.e., with the artist formally employed by an organization). In April 2020, for example, a national coalition of nonprofits with philanthropic support from multiple foundations launched Artist Relief to provide financial and informational support to artists across disciplines (Artist Relief 2021). Other relief efforts that expanded during the pandemic recovery period include city-level programs that offered guaranteed income for artists (American Academy of Arts & Sciences 2021) and programs that hired artists as employees. Within the latter model, artists worked for a sponsoring agency or partner arts organization and had defined roles and responsibilities to be fulfilled in exchange for a specified wage and potentially employer-provided benefits, such as health insurance and a retirement savings plan.

Key Similarities and Differences among Recent Artist Employment Programs

The research team conducted a scan of popular and trade media as well as academic (e.g., journal articles) and non-academic (e.g., blog posts) publications to identify artist employment programs established after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers compiled a roster of identified programs and documented relevant design features and other collateral information, such as the program's origin date and geographic reach, whether the program offered W-2 employment to artists, and whether research and evaluation work had been conducted on the program. The team considered programs comprehensively when determining which ones to select for an in-depth case study analysis. The ultimate choices span programs offering rich cases and clear points of comparison (e.g., project goals, community engagement) and difference (e.g., scale and geographic reach, funding sources).

Case study analysis of the artist employment programs revealed both alignment and variation among key program design features and implementation strategies. The four programs examined in this report—Artists At Work (AAW), California Creative Corps' (CCC) 18th Street Arts Center (18SAC), Creatives Rebuild New York (CRNY), and Seattle's Hope Corps—exhibited different approaches in responding to artist employment challenges.

For example, each of the four programs reflect slightly different program models, including their mix of funding sources and operating procedures (e.g., hiring practices, compensation packages). The AAW and CRNY programs received either all or some of their funding from nonprofit and philanthropic organizations, with significant contributions from the Mellon Foundation. 18SAC's CCC project was funded by a grant from the California Arts Council, which is supported by the State of California. Seattle's Hope Corps was launched with funding from a one-time NEA grant and is sustained through a specified city/municipal tax.

While COVID-19 was the catalyst for introducing these artist employment programs, their collective goals extended beyond pandemic-related issues. The programs aimed to address broader concerns of community well-being such as mental health, food security, cultural history, and public safety, among others. Topics to be addressed by artist-workers were co-developed by funders, program leaders, and local artists. Artists were hired from a broad array of creative disciplines including but not limited to music, visual arts, film, theater, literature, dance, craft, design, media arts, oral traditions, social practice, and performance art.

Hiring and employment procedures also varied across programs, with AAW and 18SAC hiring artists directly into their organizations as W-2 employees, and CRNY adopting a hybrid model whereby artists were hired either by collaborating partners or by an intermediary organization, also as W-2 employees. Hope Corps was the only focal program that provided artists' wages through grant payments.

The four artist employment programs also differed by scale and geographic reach. For example, AAW reflects a multi-state program model, whereas 18SAC and CRNY reflect statewide programs (California and New York, respectively). Seattle's Hope Corps is embedded within a single city. Despite observed differences in program design, all programs adopted a community-focused approach, allowing artists and creative workers to use their skills to address real-world challenges faced by potentially vulnerable communities.

Recommendations

Based on a broader review of the research literature and case studies of selected contemporary artists employment programs—including program documentation, evaluation reports, and interviews with program administrators—the following recommendations may be considered by funders and arts administrators interested in supporting the development of viable program models.

Program Design and Implementation

- **Early in the design stage, include artists and the communities meant to be served.** In any artist employment program under development, the inclusion of creative workers and representatives of the communities to be served can ensure that the program responds to local needs while authentically supporting artists.
- **Establish clear program expectations while remaining flexible.** Clearly defining artists' and partner organizations' roles and expectations reduces the potential for early misunderstandings between the artist-employee and employer—conflicts that can hinder artists' ability to conduct their planned projects and achieve positive impacts within their communities.
- **Plan for scalability in both directions.** Funders and program administrators may wish to pilot an artist employment program in one community before offering the program in

multiple locations. Starting small can help artists and program staff resolve unanticipated challenges that may arise during initial program implementation. Program administrators should also plan for the additional rounds of funding and infrastructure support needed to hire artists beyond an initial cohort. Funders and administrators also may consider using another intermediary organization to hire the artists and administer employment benefits.

- **Consider the potential benefits and trade-offs of providing multi-year support to artists.** Short-term employment of one year or less may not be enough time for artists to plan and implement creative projects, and communities to experience the full range of benefits provided by artists' work. Because supporting artists' employment for an extended period may prove challenging, funders and arts administrators may want to consider the pros and cons of supporting fewer total artists, but with more resources to complete long-term projects.

Program Sustainability

Beyond the launch of an artist employment program, funders and arts administrators are likely interested in long-term sustainability. The following strategies may be implemented to ensure that funders, arts organizations, the broader public, and artists recognize and experience program benefits.

- **Embed artists within communities to focus on locally relevant projects,** thus increasing the likelihood of public support for the program. Artists can be positioned as collaborators and problem-solvers to address community needs.
- **Foster enduring relationships with all potential partners, including funders and community-based organizations.** Developing programs via a strong networked approach across all parties (e.g., funders, local partners) can benefit programs by diversifying their funding base and deepening community engagement and buy-in to support artists and the program's goals.
- **Offer robust professional development to enhance artists' professional skills.** Professional development opportunities such as training in grant-writing and fundraising, project management, budgeting, and marketing can nurture critical (and transferrable) skills for artists, allowing them to become nimbler and more eligible for future employment opportunities.
- **Demonstrate value through program evaluation and continuous performance measurement,** thus potentially attracting support from funders and other community partners. Devising a theory of change and/or logic model for the artist employment program, coupled with a performance measurement system, can yield much-needed evidence to document the program's impact—and improve its effectiveness.

Introduction

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic provoked drastic national public health measures including school closures, workplace shutdowns, and cancellations of large gatherings and public events. The arts and cultural sector—along with nearly every other sector and industry—was economically upended. The opening of this report describes the impact the COVID-19 pandemic and related virus mitigation actions had on the unemployment rates among artists and other cultural workers.¹ In response to alarming unemployment rates, state and local government agencies, along with philanthropic and arts organizations, drew inspiration from federal relief programs of the 1930s and 1970s to design and implement initiatives that funded and employed artists and cultural workers, thus providing them an opportunity to apply their talents to public service projects.

This report is organized into three sections, aligning with three primary research questions:

1. What artist employment programs were created or expanded in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - a. How did federal COVID-19-era artist employment programs resemble or differ from prior responses to national economic crises?
2. What are key program characteristics among recent artist employment programs, such as their locations, goals, operations, and outcomes?
3. What recommendations might be made to funders and arts administrators about the successful design, implementation, and sustainability of artist employment programs?

The first section of this report describes both federal and nonfederal economic relief efforts to assist artists and cultural workers in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The section presents these efforts as responding to a national spike in unemployment rates and offers a historical overview of federal artist employment programs in times of economic crises. The second section reports an in-depth summary of four selected cases—notable artist employment programs embodying the broad range of programs that emerged in response to the pandemic. Key program characteristics (e.g., location, funding sources, number of employed artists) are described, then compared and contrasted across programs. The final section of this report provides a list of recommendations—or lessons learned—from those directly involved in implementing artist employment programs. These recommendations are directed to funders and arts administrators who might wish to support well-designed programs benefiting unemployed artists and creative workers and ensure the long-term sustainability of such programs.

¹ Relying on available federal statistics, the NEA defines an artist as someone who identifies as having one of 13 specific artist occupations: architects; landscape architects; fine artists, art directors, and animators; designers; actors; producers and directors; dancers and choreographers; music directors and composers; musicians; other entertainers; announcers; writers and authors; and photographers. In general, cultural workers are people who do not identify as having one of the specified artist occupations, but whose employment involves a role that supports the arts. For specific occupational categories that constitute cultural workers, see the National Arts Statistics and Evidence-based Reporting Center (NASERC) Arts Indicator A.2 (<https://www.arts.gov/impact/research/NASERC/artists-and-other-cultural-workers>).

Section 1: Artist Relief Efforts in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

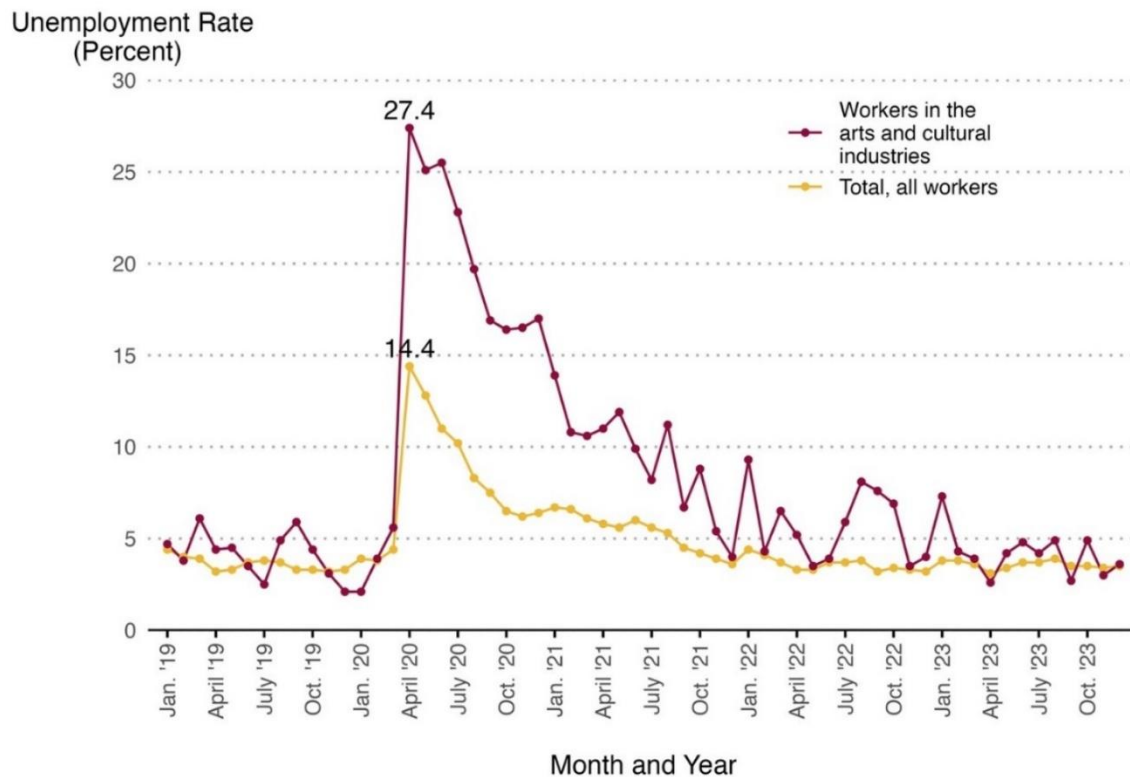
In times when the national economy is strong, unemployment rates for workers in the arts and cultural industries as a group generally trend with U.S. workers overall (NEA 2019).² However, workers in the arts and cultural industries are far more sensitive to economic downturns compared to workers in other industries, leading them to take on non-arts-related jobs, shift to self-employment, or even exit the workforce entirely (Woronkiewicz 2015).

In the early months of the pandemic, many companies and nonprofit organizations were forced to shut down in-person operations and furlough hundreds of thousands of employees. As the pandemic raged on, many Americans, particularly workers whose jobs required in-person social interaction, were unable to work. Artists in some disciplines faced precarious employment options, particularly performing artists—such as dancers, musicians, and stage actors—whose work is highly dependent on live audiences. Without a performance venue and audience, these artists were cut off from a prime source of income. Working artists, who are more likely to hold secondary jobs compared to the overall labor force (NEA 2024), were also particularly affected by spikes in unemployment rates within food services and retail/wholesale industries, both common sources of income for artists (Marrone et al. 2020).

In April 2020, the national unemployment rate spiked to 14.4 percent, up from 3.8 percent just two months earlier (Exhibit 1). While the broader U.S. economy was negatively impacted by mandatory shutdowns and changes in consumer behavior, workers in the arts and cultural sector were more negatively affected, with more than a quarter (27.4 percent) unemployed in April 2020, nearly twice the national unemployment rate that month (Exhibit 1). The economic circumstances were especially difficult for artists of color and those with disabilities—demographic subgroups of arts and cultural workers that experienced even higher rates of unemployment during the pandemic, as they have even in times of relative economic prosperity (Fonner and Roscoe 2022).

² Within arts and cultural industries, employment trends vary by specific occupation. For example, following the COVID-19 pandemic, unemployment rates for animators and architects rebounded more quickly than for performing artists (Iyengar 2021).

Exhibit 1. Unemployment Rates for Workers in the Arts and Cultural Industries, and Workers in General (2019–23)



NOTE: Arts and cultural industries include the total labor force working in the following industries: performing arts companies; promoters of performing arts, sports, and similar events; agents and managers for artists, athletes, entertainers, and other public figures; independent artists, writers, and performers; museums, art galleries, historical sites, and similar institutions; and libraries and archives.

SOURCE: United States Census Bureau [Current Population Survey \(CPS\)](#)

In response to worsening economic conditions for American arts and cultural workers, government agencies and philanthropic and arts organizations sought to implement programs that, in providing financial support to artists, would temper the economic shock of sudden unemployment. A variety of potential funding mechanisms were used by governments and other funders as programs were developed and implemented, ranging from the distribution of large grants to arts organizations (an indirect way of supporting artist employment) to the direct hiring of artists as formal employees of a company or organization (e.g., as W-2 employees). Box 1 presents a summary of funding mechanisms currently available to support artists.

Box 1. Contemporary Funding Mechanisms for Supporting Artists

Provide operational grants to arts organizations. Operational grants are provided to arts organizations through a competitive application process, and grants may be offered to fulfill a specific type of organizational need. For example, grants can focus on general operating support or an organization's space needs (e.g., rent or lease). Within the bounds of the grant agreement, grantees typically have some latitude in how funds are spent. For example, organizations receiving operational grants can use the funds to pay employees, pay rent for space, or purchase computer hardware and software so staff can work from home. Grants can also help organizations build arts venues or maintain existing ones.^a

Provide grants to artists and art projects. With this mechanism, agencies, organizations, or foundations offer funding to individual artists or arts organizations across artistic disciplines through an application process. Funds may be used for multiple purposes, including business and professional development (funding the growth of an artist's business or individual practice), project development (funding a specific project that is typically community engaged), and unrestricted funds (covering an artist's immediate financial needs) (The Abundant Artist n.d.). The amount and type of work, the period of performance, the method of payment, and the quality of products can vary based on the grant agreement. Examples can include residencies; project grants to cover exhibition space; travel, conference, or research grants; and emergency grants. Such awards can even support housing for artists. In general, grants can provide artists with more financial and ultimately creative freedom than other mechanisms, such as contracts or direct employment. Artists' income from grants is taxable, but the artists themselves must ensure they are withholding the correct amount of grant funds for income taxes and Social Security obligations. Grants do not explicitly pay benefits, making health and dental insurance the responsibility of the grantee.

Hire artists as contractors. With this mechanism, artists work for an agency or organization for a pre-determined amount of time to perform specified tasks or projects. Artists can be paid for each product they create by partial payments over time or as a lump sum, according to the terms of the contract. Contracts can also include cancellation clauses. Artists are contractually obligated to develop products or deliver services, but the amount of labor that the artist devotes to developing a particular product can vary. Artists' creative freedom may be limited based on the scope of work dictated by the contract. Contract work is taxable as income, but the withholding of percentages of contract funds for income taxes and Social Security obligations is the artist's responsibility. Contractors are also responsible for their own health and dental insurance.

Hire artists as employees. With this mechanism, artists become employees of the agency or organization. Artists' roles and responsibilities within the organization and their working hours and number of hours worked per week are negotiated between the employer and the artist. The employer pays the artist as a regular employee, withholding taxes and Social Security obligations according to the artist's W-2 form. Artists' creative freedom is determined through their relationship with the employer. Artists may also be eligible for federal, state, and local protections and benefits such as paid or unpaid leave, health insurance, and retirement plans.

Provide artists with guaranteed income. Several local or state arts agencies provide regular payments to artists with no work necessary ("no strings attached"). Examples of such programs are located in New York (Creatives Rebuild New York), San Francisco (YBCA.org), and Minnesota (Springboard for the Arts). Payments range from \$500 to \$1,000 per month.

^a One example is the Shuttered Venue Operators Grant administered by the Small Business Administration during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Indeed, the funding mechanisms adopted by the federal government, state and local governments, and other philanthropic and arts organizations have varied, often informed by historical precedent and the respective proximity of these entities to the communities they serve. The remainder of this section gives an overview of different approaches adopted by federal and nonfederal entities in supporting artists' employment in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Federal Government's Relief for Artists

As early as April 2020, artists and arts advocacy groups began drawing attention to the exceedingly high unemployment rates among artists and cultural workers and calling for the federal government to institute economic relief efforts to support them (Prior 2020). Some opinion pieces and commentaries in mainstream news outlets urged Congress to establish programs which, by directly employing artists, could direct their skills toward public works projects (Prior 2020; Wilkinson 2020). Indeed, the severe toll on artists and cultural workers prompted arts advocates to call for federal relief programs reminiscent of similar programs launched during the Great Depression and the economic downturn of the mid-1970s (Lorton 2020; Wilkinson 2020).

Proponents of artist employment programs referred specifically to the federal Works Progress Administration's (WPA's) Federal Project One (Federal One),³ the New Deal agency's ambitious employment and infrastructure program created in response to the Great Depression and operated between 1935 and 1939. The initiative employed workers such as writers, actors, dancers, visual artists, architects, and musicians (Bellmore and Jackson 2012). Advocates also cited the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), begun in 1973, as a model for a contemporary COVID-era response. While not specifically created as an artist employment program, CETA provided steady income to artists through employment in public service and in arts organizations (American Academy of Arts & Sciences 2021; Jackson et al. 2003).

In response to the Great Recession (2007–09), the federal government also supported artist employment through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) by allocating \$50 million to the NEA to “fund arts projects and activities which preserve jobs in the non-profit arts sector threatened by declines in philanthropic and other support” (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, Pub. L. No. 111–5, 123 Stat. 115). The NEA distributed \$20 million in one-time grants to state and regional arts agencies; the remaining \$30 million were competitively awarded to selected arts projects and activities (NEA 2010). Box 2 provides more details on these historical pre-COVID-19 federal relief programs that supported artists.

Congress enacted several significant pieces of legislation that supported the economic conditions of artists and cultural workers impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act of 2020 provided over \$2 trillion in federal aid to workers, households, and small businesses across industries and levels of government. As part of the CARES Act, Congress appropriated \$75 million to the NEA, and the Arts Endowment fully obligated all funds within five months (NEA n.d.a). The CARES Act also established the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), which was administered by the Small Business Administration and gave forgivable loans to small businesses, including self-employed artists and arts organizations. As a sector, the arts and entertainment industry was relatively successful in securing PPP funding, representing the fourth-highest level of PPP funding relative to total sector pay (SMU DataArts 2024). Another key provision of the CARES Act was that it

³ A collection of arts-related programs, such as the Federal Arts Project, Federal Music Project, Federal Theatre Project, Federal Dance Project, and Federal Writers' Project.

extended unemployment benefits to independent contractors, such as self-employed artists.⁴

In the following year, Congress passed the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) to provide additional support to the U.S. economy during the pandemic. ARPA appropriated \$135 million to the NEA to fund arts organizations and jobs impacted by the pandemic. Sixty percent of the NEA's ARPA funds were awarded through a competitive grant application process, with funds distributed to local arts agencies for regranting and arts organizations to support jobs, fund operations, and encourage participation in the arts. The NEA distributed the remaining 40 percent of funds to State Arts Agencies and Regional Arts Organizations for regranting purposes (NEA n.d.b).

While Congress's COVID-19 relief efforts did not specify that funding for its programs should directly employ artists, the CARES Act and ARPA funds were mediated through businesses, state and local agencies, and other nonprofit organizations that employed artists and cultural workers. Organizational recipients of NEA grants were allowed latitude in how they spent their funds. While state and local arts agencies regranting most of the funds they were allocated, the organizations receiving subgrants used the funding to support salaries of current staff and leadership, purchase or maintain equipment, rent office space or arts venues, or hire artists or cultural workers, among other activities. Unfortunately, reliable statistics are not available for the number of artists who were hired by these agencies or organizations using CARES Act and ARPA funding.

Box 2. Artist Relief Programs Funded by the Federal Government, Pre-COVID-19

Works Progress Administration (WPA): In 1935, Congress appropriated \$4.9 billion to create the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a new federal agency whose goal was to provide paid employment to out-of-work Americans during the Great Depression. A signature WPA program was Federal Project Number One (Federal One), a collection of five projects that provided jobs to artists and historians. The five projects included the Federal Art Project, the Federal Music Project, the Federal Theatre Project, the Federal Writers' Project, and the Historical Records Survey. In 1936, the dance component from the Federal Theatre Project was enhanced into its own project, the Federal Dance Project.

Each of the projects created state-level units that worked on specific local projects. The length of artists' employment depended on how long their project lasted. For example, a painter working on a mural for the Federal Art Project might choose to stop working once the mural was completed, or the painter could seek to be reassigned to another project. The legislation that launched Federal One did not specify a limit to the amount of time workers could continue their employment. At its peak, Federal One employed an estimated 40,000 artists and cultural workers (Adams & Goldbard, 1995). After funding for Federal One concluded in 1939, many state units previously funded through the program persisted, but only with funding from local and state sources.

Despite the jobs created through Federal One, the programs faced severe criticism and political pushback. For example, some members of the arts community believed that the programs stifled artistic freedom (Fogel and Stevens 1996), and political opponents of the Roosevelt administration claimed that the programs became the propaganda arm of the Democratic Party or were infiltrated by communists (Adams and Goldbard 1995).

⁴ Under the CARES Act, pandemic unemployment assistance was offered for up to 39 weeks to workers who 1) were not eligible for other federal or state unemployment insurance or pandemic emergency unemployment compensation; 2) met certain conditions related to being unemployed, partially unemployed, or unable to work due to COVID-19; 3) were not able to telework; and 4) were not receiving other paid leave (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, Pub. L. No. 116–136, 134 Stat. 281 (2020)).

Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA): During the economic recession of 1973–1975, Congress passed the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), designed to offer employment and training to people who were economically under-resourced, unemployed, or underemployed. Unlike the WPA, CETA did not require a major expansion of the federal government, because CETA funds were disbursed to “prime sponsors” (i.e., state and local governments serving populations greater than 100,000). The prime sponsors—sometimes called “grantees”—were then given latitude to distribute the funds to CETA-qualified organizations or projects. For some large cities, such as Chicago, New York, or San Francisco, the city itself developed projects for CETA workers. In most other cases, however, municipal governments distributed CETA funds to nonprofit organizations, which then created projects using CETA employees. Those who qualified for CETA-supported positions were hired full time for a term of 12 or 24 months.

The decentralized character of CETA meant that different states and municipalities developed their own artist employment models. For example, Chicago designed its “Artist-in-Residency” program, which employed 108 Chicago-area artists per year in nine art fields. New York City employed 500 artists in five programs, including the Cultural Council Foundation Artists Project. This project placed artists with community nonprofit arts organizations for which they taught classes, led workshops, created public art, participated in musical ensembles or theatrical performances, or worked as arts administrators.

CETA’s decentralized dispersal of funds also made it challenging to provide reliable and comparable statistics on the program’s outcomes (Riojas 2006). It is estimated that the program supported over 10,000 artists in 200 localities. CETA supported perhaps an additional 10,000 cultural workers, including arts administrators, museum docents and security staff, curators, and archivists (Garfinkel and Waynberg 2021). CETA-supported artist salaries also varied across localities, with estimates ranging from \$7,000 to \$10,000 per year (Brown 1978), which equates to approximately \$33,900 to \$48,400 in 2024 dollars.

In addition, CETA faced public scrutiny and criticism. Some government officials and employment program administrators reported key weaknesses with CETA, such as a lack of oversight on how state and local governments used funds, leading to jobs for politically connected individuals and misdirection of funds away from low-income Americans most in need of job training (Delaney 1975). Some within the arts community claimed that CETA directed funds to bureaucrat-approved projects and forced artists to adhere to the project/organization’s goals (Dubin 1987; Hagstrom 1988).

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA): Signed into law in February 2009, ARRA intended to provide stimulus to the U.S. economy during the collapse of the stock market at the beginning of the Great Recession. Considered at the time to be the largest peacetime appropriation in American history, ARRA aimed to create jobs, support those affected by the recession, boost economic efficiency through technological advances, invest in infrastructure (such as transportation and environmental protection), and stabilize state and local budgets to maintain essential services (Walter 2022). ARRA allocated \$50 million to the NEA for distribution. The NEA effectively managed recovery efforts by distributing \$48.6 million in grants within 20 weeks with minimal administrative costs, making it the first federal agency to fully allocate its ARRA funds (NEA 2020). The NEA’s ARRA funds were used to support workers whose jobs were lost or jeopardized during the economic downturn (NEA 2010), ultimately preserving over 7,000 jobs in the nonprofit arts sector (NEA 2020).

Nonfederal Relief for Artists

While federal COVID-era relief programs offered short-term funding for arts organizations and state and local agencies primarily through competitive grants, private and community foundations and state and local government agencies offered more steady and direct financial support to artists through artist employment programs. For example, a national network of nonprofits joined forces to provide support at scale with Artist Relief, a program launched in April 2020 by a coalition of arts grantmakers with philanthropic support from multiple foundations⁵ that provided financial and informational support to artists across disciplines (Artist

⁵ A complete list of Artist Relief funding partners can be found at <https://www.artistrelief.org/partners>.

Relief 2021). Artist Relief raised \$25 million and distributed almost \$23.4 million in \$5,000 grants to 4,682 artists between April 2020 and June 2021.

Other relief efforts that expanded during the pandemic recovery period include city-level programs that guaranteed income for artists (American Academy of Arts & Sciences 2021), and programs that hired artists as employees. Within this latter model, artists become employees of the sponsoring agency or partner arts organization and had defined roles and responsibilities to be fulfilled in exchange for a specified wage and, potentially, employer-provided benefits such as health insurance and a retirement savings plan. This approach for arts organizations to directly employ artists may benefit from broader public support. National survey data suggest that Americans are generally more in favor of non-governmental entities such as community organizations and charitable corporations employing or providing funding for their local artists⁶ in comparison to federal, state, or local governments (Novak-Leonard and Skaggs 2017).

Section 2: Case Studies of Contemporary Artist Employment Programs

The research team conducted a scan of popular and trade media and academic (e.g., journal articles) and non-academic (e.g., blog posts) publications to identify artist employment programs established after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. This initial search yielded limited results, with most program funds coming from state arts councils, regional arts organizations, and foundations offering one-time grants. Early in the report planning process, arts experts also shared a list of potentially relevant programs with the research team. The team conducted additional background research to verify additional artist employment programs from this list.

Through this renewed search effort, a number of additional relevant programs were identified, such as Maniobra, a cultural employment initiative launched by the Mellon Foundation and the Centro de Economía Creativa (CEC) based in Puerto Rico; Arts2Work, a national creative workforce initiative that offers a paid apprenticeship program in media arts and creative technologies; and Cross-sector Artists in Residence Lab (CAIR Lab), an organization specializing in building artist-in-residence government programs. The researchers then compiled a roster of identified programs and documented relevant design features and other collateral information, including whether the program offered W-2 employment to artists, the program's origin date and geographic reach, and whether research and evaluation work had been conducted on the program. The team considered programs comprehensively when determining which ones to select for an in-depth case study analysis. The ultimate choices span programs that offer rich cases and clear points of comparison (e.g., project goals, community engagement) and contrast (e.g., scale and geographic reach, funding sources).

The four selected programs include: Artists At Work (AAW), California Creative Corps' (CCC) 18th Street Arts Center (18SAC), Creatives Rebuild New York (CRNY), and Seattle's Hope Corps. Each program has actively participated in public discourse around artist employment issues. Through case study analysis, the researchers sought to understand key program design features such as geographic reach, funding sources, number of employed artists, job parameters such as artist wages and hours worked, and other important factors (Exhibit 2).

⁶ The survey instrument frames the term "artist" as representing "a variety of people who do different kinds of artistic, creative, and cultural activities."

Exhibit 2. Featured Artist Employment Programs Launched During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Artist Employment Program	Years of Operation	U.S. Location(s)	Funder(s)	No. of artists supported	Artists' wages	Empl. Length	Hours ^a per work week	Program Goals	Website
Artists At Work	2020 to Present	AZ, AR, CA, IN, LA, MI, ^b MA, NM, TN, TX	THE OFFICE performing arts + film, FreshGrass Foundation, Mellon Foundation, NEA, Site-specific funders	70	\$32,500 ^c per year (average) excluding benefits	1 year	30	Address social and economic challenges through artistic engagement.	https://www.artists-at-work.org/
California Creative Corps (CCC)	2021 to 2024	CA (all 8 regions)	State of California	~2,514 ^d through grants provided to 14 AOs	Varies	Grant funding for 3 years	Varies by grantee and sub-grantee	Address key social issues through media, outreach, and engagement campaigns.	https://web.archive.org/web/20250306233100/https://arts.ca.gov/grant_program/california-creative-corps/
18th Street Arts Center (a CCC grantee)	2021 to 2024	CA (multiple locations)	State of California	18	\$65,000 and medical and dental benefits + \$50,000 for project costs	1 year	40	Create a California culture map and reduce barriers to health/well-being in high-need communities.	https://18thstreet.org/california-creative-corps/

Artist Employment Program	Years of Operation	U.S. Location(s)	Funder(s)	No. of artists supported	Artists' wages	Empl. Length	Hours ^a per work week	Program Goals	Website
Creatives Rebuild New York	2021 to 2024	NY (multiple locations)	Mellon Foundation, Ford Foundation, Stavros Niarchos Foundation	300	\$65,000 and \$18,200 in benefits	2 years	Varies	Support New York artists and nonprofit organizations working with populations most impacted by COVID-19.	https://www.creativesrebuildny.org/
Hope Corps	2022 to Present	Seattle, WA	Seattle Office of Arts & Culture, NEA	200+	\$5,000 to \$50,000; \$32 per hour	Varies	Varies	Connect underemployed artists with career opportunities. Transform downtown Seattle into a place where residents, workers, and visitors want to spend time.	https://seattle.gov/arts/programs/grants/hope-corps

^a Artists did not hold regular work hours in most instances. Time spent between administrative tasks with employer and creative/community engagement work varied.

^b Michigan was added in 2025.

^c Average based on information provided during interview with program leadership. Salaries increased to a \$40,000 annual rate with gross earnings advertised as \$60,000 in the March 2025 release of the 2025–2026 cohort application.

^d Based on authors' calculations from information posted on grantee's and subgrantee's websites, originally aggregated on the CCC landing page: https://web.archive.org/web/20250306233100/https://arts.ca.gov/grant_program/california-creative-corps/. Note that at the time of publication, the original source website is no longer active. A URL to the archived website is included.

NOTE: No. = Number; Empl. = Employment; AZ = Arizona; AR = Arkansas; CA = California; IN = Indiana; LA = Louisiana; MI = Michigan; MA = Massachusetts; NM = New Mexico; NY = New York; WA = Washington; TN = Tennessee; TX = Texas; AO = Administering Organization.

SOURCE: Authors' compilation based on program sources and interviews with program leaders.

As shown in Exhibit 2, each of the programs selected for case study analysis reflect slightly different program models, including their mix of funding sources and operating procedures (e.g., hiring practices, compensation packages). The AAW and CRNY programs received either all or some of their funding from nonprofit and philanthropic organizations, with significant contributions from the Mellon Foundation. 18SAC's CCC project was funded by a grant from the California Arts Council, which is funded by the State of California. Seattle's Hope Corps was launched with the support of a one-time NEA grant, and it continues to be sustained through a specified city/municipal tax.

While COVID-19 was the catalyst for launching these artist employment programs, their collective goals extended beyond pandemic-related issues. The programs aimed to address broader concerns of community well-being such as mental health, food security, cultural history, and public safety, among others. Topics to be addressed by artist-workers were co-developed by funders, program leaders, and local artists. Artists⁷ were hired from a broad array of creative disciplines, including, but not limited to, music, visual arts, film, theater, literature, dance, craft, design, media arts, oral traditions, social practice, and performance art.

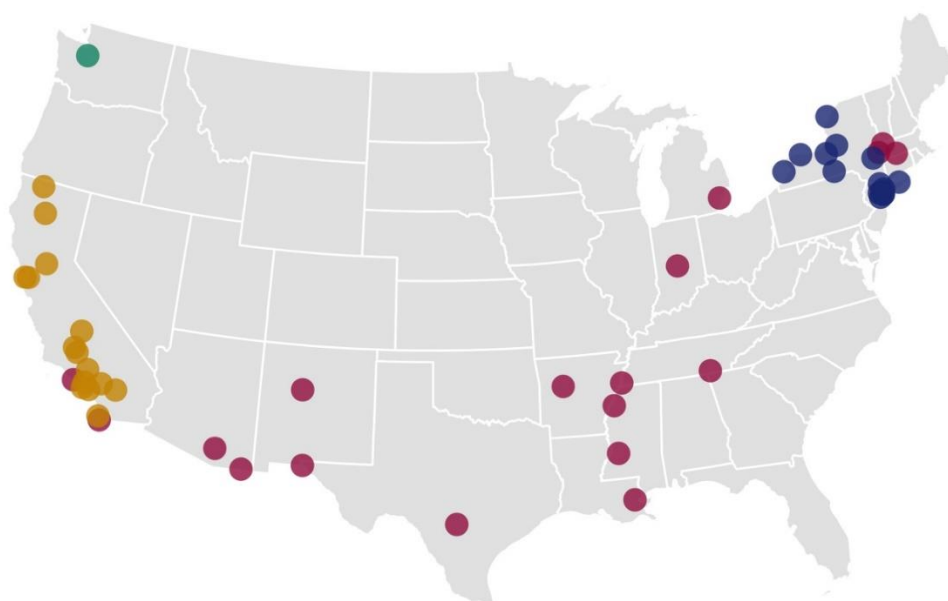
Hiring and employment procedures also varied across programs, with AAW and 18SAC hiring artists directly into their organizations as W-2 employees, and CRNY adopting a hybrid model whereby artists were hired either by collaborating partners or by an intermediary organization, also as W-2 employees. Hope Corps was the only focal program that provided artists' wages through grant payments.

The four artist employment programs also varied in scale and geographic reach (Exhibit 3). For example, AAW reflects a multi-state program model, whereas 18SAC and CRNY reflect statewide programs (California and New York, respectively). Seattle's Hope Corps is embedded in a single city. Despite differences in geographic reach, all programs adopted a community-focused approach, allowing artists and creative workers to use their skills to address real-world challenges faced by potentially vulnerable communities. In addition, all four cases shared the dual purposes of providing artists with a reliable income during the COVID-19 pandemic and helping address community needs.

⁷ Descriptions for the term "artist" varied across the artist employment programs examined in this report. For example, both 18SAC and CRNY program documentation characterize an "artist, culture bearer, or culture maker" as someone who "regularly engages in artistic or cultural practice to: express themselves with the intention of communicating richly to or sharing with others; pass on traditional knowledge and cultural practices; offer cultural resources to their communities; and/or co-organize and co-create within communities toward social impacts." In contrast, Hope Corps describes who is eligible for its program, namely "individual artists, cultural producers, arts administrators, creative workers, community groups, and arts and cultural organizations," but does not define these terms. For the purpose of this report, our research team uses the term "artist," recognizing that featured programs, and the broader field, do not coalesce around one mutually agreed-upon definition.

Exhibit 3. Localities Served by Featured Artist Employment Programs Launched During the COVID-19 Pandemic (2021–present)

● Artists At Work ● CCC: 18th Street Arts Center ● Creatives Rebuild New York ● Hope Corps



NOTES: Point symbols represent the locations of 20 Artists At Work sites, 18 California Creative Corps (CCC) 18th Street Arts Center artist locations, 10 regions served by Creatives Rebuild New York, and Seattle's Hope Corps featured in this report.

SOURCE: Retrieved from information provided on each artist employment program's website.

The following sections describe the four focal artist employment programs selected as cases. Following a discussion of each program, the report synthesizes key similarities and differences in program design features. In addition, key successes and challenges are presented, along with recommendations (Section 3) for funders and arts administrators who may be interested in supporting successful and sustainable artist employment programs in the future.

Artists At Work

Artists At Work (AAW) began in 2020 as a pilot program that provided employment to six artists in the Berkshire region of Massachusetts. Since then, the program has expanded steadily in connection with foundations, civic partners, and arts and cultural organizations.

Program Origins and Funding

In 2020, after witnessing the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the arts and cultural sector, a New York-based company called THE OFFICE performing arts + film (referred to as THE OFFICE) engaged with arts and cultural organizations, nonprofits, foundations, and community leaders to discuss ways of helping artists in critical need during a global health and economic crisis. Inspired by the WPA, THE OFFICE, with financial support from the FreshGrass Foundation, designed a small pilot program that was implemented in 2020–21.

THE OFFICE and the FreshGrass Foundation partnered with six cultural hubs (including a museum, a center for dance, and an independent cinema, among others) located in the Berkshires

region of Western Massachusetts. These organizations identified artists in need of steady financial support and who demonstrated a willingness to apply creative skills toward a social impact initiative within their community. This pilot cohort of artists included a filmmaker, a dancer/choreographer, a visual artist, a textile artist, a musician/singer, and a performance artist.⁸

Following the success of the pilot, AAW received a \$3 million grant from the Mellon Foundation in 2021 to expand its artist employment program to other regions of the country. The additional sites included Los Angeles County, the Mississippi Delta region (includes partnering organizations in Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee), and the Borderlands region (Arizona, New Mexico, and Southern California). From 2022 to 2024, AAW secured additional funding from other private foundations to expand the program to the following regions: Southeastern Tennessee/Northern Georgia; San Antonio, TX; Indianapolis, IN; Springfield, MA; and a return to North Adams, MA. To date, AAW has employed a total of 74 artists working with 80 cultural and community organizations in 20 localities across 11 states.

Program Organization

AAW is a program designed and implemented at the national level by THE OFFICE. Although participating artists are employees of THE OFFICE, some employment-related functions, such as payroll and administering benefits, are handled by ADP, an outside Professional Employment Organization (PEO).⁹ AAW is implemented centrally by a Managing Director, a Program Coordinator, two Program Managers (one who oversees communications and one who oversees fundraising and program development), and Program Liaisons who support artists locally.

AAW artists work with two types of organizations throughout their appointed term: cultural organizations and community partners. Cultural organizations (sometimes referred to as “culture hubs”) are local nonprofit organizations that have strong ties with both the local arts community and other organizations that work to address community needs. These hubs have also included local government agencies and other types of cultural institutions. Cultural organizations receive funding from THE OFFICE to serve as an AAW “host” within the community. These cultural organizations recruit local artists into the program, help them connect with community partners, and support their development and execution of a community-focused project. Community partners (sometimes referred to as “social impact organizations”) are local organizations that work to address a community need and are willing to collaborate with an artist to develop a project to help meet that need. Community partners receive funding for their assistance with the cross-sector collaboration. In addition, local foundations play a fundamental role in the AAW model in that they help to initiate the programs within their locality and provide resources to support artists and their partnering organizations.

AAW also employs a program liaison who assists artists with developing their project with their community partner and meets frequently with participating artists to support the artists’ progress on their projects. Program liaisons also participate in the region’s artist selection process, which includes local arts and culture leaders, representatives of the cultural

⁸ The stories of artists who participated in the pilot project can be found here: <https://www.artists-at-work.org/western-massachusetts>

⁹ A PEO is a type of full-service human resource outsourcing service that performs various employee administration tasks, such as payroll and benefits administration, on behalf of a business. For more information on ADP, see <https://www.adp.com/about-adp.aspx>.

organization, community partners, and other artists. The process for recruiting artists prioritizes local knowledge to ensure that most decisions are made among those who best know the community; however, AAW staff offer input on the selection process as needed.

One example of AAW’s program at a local level is the Thrive Region, which hosted AAW artists in 2022–23. THE OFFICE worked with the Lyndhurst Foundation to create and fund an AAW program in the greater Chattanooga Tennessee area (referred to as the Thrive Region). AAW and the Lyndhurst Foundation connected with ArtsBuild, a Chattanooga-based nonprofit arts/cultural organization that hosted the AAW artists. ArtsBuild connected AAW with five community partners willing to collaborate with local artists on a cross-sector initiative. Representatives of these organizations, along with AAW’s program liaison and local leaders, comprised a review committee that selected artists via an open call for applications to participate in the program. The selected artists were placed with a community partner, and together the artist and community organization formulated a project that the artist could implement to help the community enhance its climate resilience. Artist–organization partner pairings offered a variety of creative practices, including a mixed-media artist paired with the Southeast Tennessee Young Farmers Coalition to create a zine about young farmers, seed farming, soil carbon sequestration, and cooperative economies; a filmmaker paired with green|spaces to conduct interviews with Chattanooga’s residents about the impact of industrialization on Chattanooga’s land and inhabitants, which will become a documentary; and a dancer paired with Thrive’s Resilient Communities program to demonstrate the unifying power of breath and movement by teaching dance classes to students attending a school located in a high-risk flood zone (see Exhibit 4).¹⁰

Exhibit 4. Dancer Monica Alicia Ellison, Artists At Work Thrive Region Artist (2022–23)



SOURCE: Artists At Work.

¹⁰ A complete listing of AAW Thrive Region artists can be found here: <https://www.artists-at-work.org/thrive-region>.

Artist Eligibility and Recruitment

AAW does not prescribe the process or criteria for recruiting and selecting artists to employ. Instead, these responsibilities are primarily left to the local partnering cultural organizations, with AAW staff serving in an advisory role. In practice, local partners have taken three approaches toward recruiting artists: 1) selecting local artists who are already applying their work to address community needs, 2) recruiting artists informally through discussions with local community partners, and 3) soliciting applications through open calls or broad outreach efforts. If local partners already know of artists who contribute to community organizations, they may approach those artists and the organizations for which they work about an AAW position. Some cultural organizations will solicit potential candidates through conversations with community partners. The candidates would then get a special invitation to apply to AAW.

In large part, cultural organizations and artist selection committees are free to use any process and criteria they choose when selecting artists. AAW's only recommended artist selection criteria are that artists should

- be able to work as a W-2 employee,
- reside in or have close ties to the community in which their project is planned,
- demonstrate a strong track record of producing art,
- have an interest in social issues, and
- be flexible in working with different organizations.

Artist Obligations, Compensation, and Benefits

Artists selected for the AAW program have been hired as 75 percent full-time-equivalent employees. Artists are expected to work 30 hours per work week, with 10 hours spent working with their community partner and the remaining 20 hours spent creating their own art.

The terms and conditions of artists' employment are established in a document that is discussed during a site kickoff meeting.¹¹ Each artist's year of employment is structured into three phases: onboarding and relationship building (months 1–3), project development and implementation (months 4–9), and documentation and future planning (months 10–12). Each phase includes recommended goals for artists to accomplish and an anchor meeting involving artists, associated cultural organizations, and community partners. During these meetings, participants discuss community needs, the artist's projects and how they address those needs, the artist's progress on their project, ways in which local organizations can support the artist's work, and adjustments to projects that should be considered given the community context. The final meeting also includes a brainstorming session on ways to sustain the artist's work. In addition to the anchor meetings, each artist meets bimonthly with the AAW Program Liaison. These meetings give artists an opportunity to discuss the progress they are making on their projects and problem-solve challenges they may be facing. At the end of the employment period, artists give a presentation about their experience and the work conducted during their employment.

In return for their work, artists are compensated with a salary and benefits. Artists' salaries vary by site but averaged \$32,500 in 2024. In addition to a specified salary for their creative and community engagement work, artists also receive a benefits package, which includes employer-paid health insurance and a 401(k) retirement savings plan option.

¹¹ The terms and conditions are generally described in the *AAW Artist Toolkit Sample* (see <https://www.artists-at-work.org/s/Sample-Toolkit-2024.pdf>), but program specifics vary by site.

AAW also provides artists with the opportunity to participate in professional development workshops on topics relevant to sustaining one's career. Past workshop topics covered a range of critical topics to develop artists' broader capabilities, including managing a project budget, grant writing, promoting one's work via social media, and career planning, among other topics. In addition, artists also benefitted from networking opportunities and alumni discussion events.

Program Evaluation

AAW has published several evaluation reports and briefs that present data on how AAW is affecting community partners, artists, and the communities in which they work. During interviews with the research team, AAW staff provided additional insight into the challenges they faced in establishing AAW sites and supporting artists.

The *2021–2023 Artists At Work: Supplemental Impact Report* and *Artists At Work 2024 End of Year Snapshot* include the results of a survey of AAW alumni.¹² In addition to steady employment and benefits, nearly all survey respondents indicated that the AAW experience provided them with an opportunity to improve their professional skills. More than 80 percent of AAW alumni reported experiencing other positive outcomes, including expanded networking opportunities and additional paid work opportunities following their AAW year. All respondents believed they made a positive impact on their community.

AAW staff discussed several challenges in implementing their program. First, AAW staff described difficulties in determining an appropriate salary that represents a livable wage in all regions and states. For example, a salary that provides a livable wage for artists in rural Texas or Mississippi would be insufficient for artists working in Los Angeles. Second, AAW experienced challenges related to scaling up their program. To expand the program into a new region, AAW staff needed to dedicate significant time and effort to generating interest and commitment from local foundations to invest in the AAW program for their region. AAW also needed to develop strong relationships with stable cultural organizations that could serve as lead partners for each site. These cultural organizations needed to have connections with both the local artist community and local community partners that are working to address social problems.

Another expansion-related challenge mentioned by AAW staff involved sustaining the sites to accommodate multiple cohorts of artists. With the exception of the western Massachusetts region,¹³ the other seven AAW regions/sites had supported just a single cohort of artists. The primary reason for this was a lack of multi-year or longer-term funding support that the program relied on to provide salaries, benefits, and resources to the artists and participating organizations.

In March 2025, AAW announced¹⁴ the expansion of its employment program to employ 24 artists across six locations (with 4 artists per location): Los Angeles County, California; Tucson, Arizona; Albuquerque, New Mexico; New Orleans, Louisiana; Indianapolis, Indiana; and a new location in Dearborn, Michigan. This new 18-month cohort will have more time for their social engagement projects, and annual salaries will increase to \$40,000. The expansion, funded by

¹² This report provides a high-level summary of the *2021–2023 Artists at Work: Supplemental Impact Report* and *Artists at Work 2024 End of Year Snapshot*. Full details can be found at <https://www.artists-at-work.org/s/Artists-At-WorkSupplemental-Impact-ReportMarch-2024small.pdf> and <https://www.artists-at-work.org/s/AAW-2024-End-of-Year-Snapshot.pdf>, respectively.

¹³ In 2024, AAW established a cohort of artists in the North Adams area of Massachusetts, located in the same region as AAW's 2020 pilot cohort.

¹⁴ This announcement was made in a March 18, 2025, press release, available here: <https://mailchi.mp/b8187ce18ab7/artists-at-work-announces-new-expansion-in-6-cities>.

\$2 million from the Mellon Foundation and other funders, such as the Herbert Simon Family Foundation, will also support continued evaluations of the program. This expansion highlights the profound influence of the artists in each region, the strong partnerships formed with various foundations and cultural organizations, and the significant value their creative work brings to their communities.

California Creative Corps (CCC)

In 2021, the California Arts Council (CAC) established the California Creative Corps (CCC), a 3-year media, outreach, and engagement program centered around four goals:

1. getting Californians vaccinated and promoting behaviors that reduce the spread of COVID-19;
2. conserving water and energy and preparing for emergencies;
3. engaging in civic affairs, including voting; and
4. increasing awareness of social justice concerns and engaging in community.

One particular CCC grantee—the 18th Street Arts Center (18SAC)—offered employment opportunities to artists across the state from 2023–24. This report specifically highlights CCC’s 18SAC artist employment program as a noteworthy example of the broader CCC initiative, which is briefly described below.

Program Origins and Funding

In the year following the outbreak of COVID-19, California Governor Gavin Newsom unveiled his California Comeback Plan, in which he proposed several significant investments in the arts, including a one-time allocation of \$60 million to the CAC—a state agency that supports arts, culture, and creative expression in California—to establish the CCC. The general purpose of these investments was to nurture and heal communities across the state through the arts (California Arts Council 2021).

The CAC convened artists, culture bearers,¹⁵ creative individuals, and arts administrators from across the state of California to participate in regional Community Development Panels. Each panel was charged with identifying priority populations as well as community values, needs, resources, and opportunities. Then, representatives from each regional panel joined to assemble a state-level panel to collectively provide guidance on grant application criteria and processes. The CAC and the state-level panel decided to distribute CCC funds as grants across all regions, prioritizing communities in the lowest quartile (i.e., bottom 25%) of the California Healthy Places Index (HPI). The HPI is a composite measure on a 100-point scale that incorporates indicators of communities’ education levels, job opportunities, water and air quality, and life expectancy.

Program Organization

Grants for CCC funds were awarded to “administering organizations” (AOs), which were responsible for planning and executing program goals either regionally or statewide by redistributing the funds to subgrantees. AOs’ responsibilities included developing their own outreach strategies and application process for subgrants, managing subgrantee awards, and

¹⁵ According to CCC-related program documentation, the term “culture bearers” describes individuals who “are from the cultural/heritage lineage they practice and advance intergenerational lifeways, evolving cultural art practices that educate, exchange, and share to preserve ancestral knowledge.” For additional details see: <https://communitypartners.org/landing-page/california-creative-corps-artist-fellowship/>.

reporting back to the CAC on program findings. In addition, AOs were charged with providing mentoring opportunities to subgrantees, supporting the visibility of subgrantees' work, and meeting regularly with other AOs throughout the funding period. Applying AOs could request between \$1 million and \$5 million for the entire grant period, and actual awarded amounts ranged from \$2.54 million to \$4.75 million. Each AO was required to distribute its CCC funds such that 80 percent went to artists in the form of salaries, grants, or stipends; the remaining 20 percent could be used for other expenses incurred in administering the grant.

Eligibility and Recruitment of Arts Organizations and Artists

California-based nonprofit arts and cultural organizations as well as arts-based local government, tribal government, and nonprofit social service organizations were eligible to apply to be an AO. Nonprofit arts and social service organizations had to have at least two years of arts programming experience, exhibit capabilities in managing regranting programs to organizations and individuals, demonstrate strong relationships with resource-limited communities identified by the California HPI, and have capacity to provide technical assistance to grant applicants.

California-based individual artists ages 18 and older, local governments, and nonprofit organizations (both arts and non-arts based) were eligible to receive CCC subgrants. Each AO had flexibility regarding criteria for regranting funds but had to ensure that subgrantees were California-based, worked or lived within the HPI community proposed, and were not served by others CAC projects.

Overall, the CAC distributed \$59.4 million to 14 AOs across California (using \$600,000 for administrative costs). Three of the AOs distributed their allotted funds to organizations or artists statewide, while the other 11 AOs distributed their funds within a specific region. 18SAC was one of the three AOs that implemented a statewide artist employment program. The following section provides a more in-depth discussion of its program.

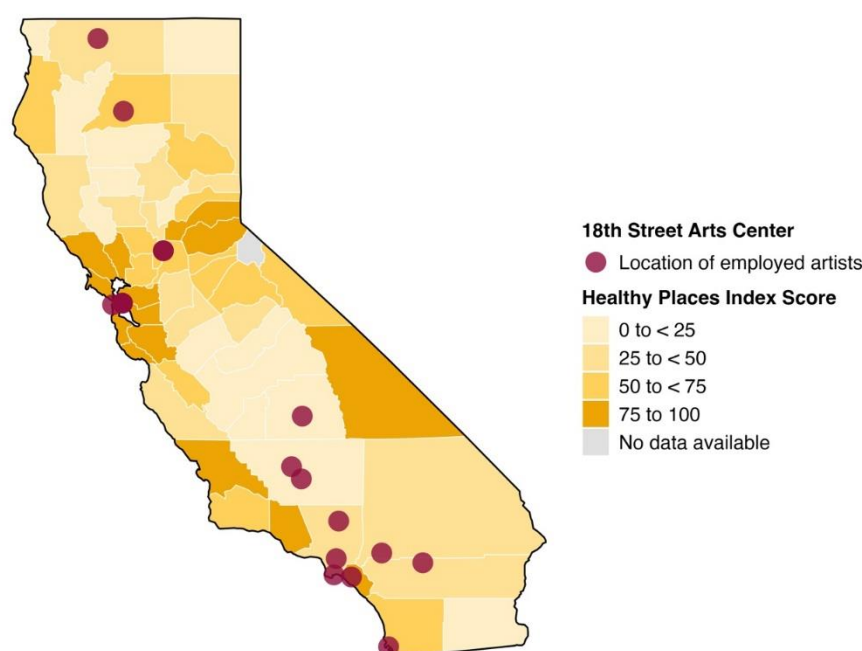
18th Street Arts Center (a CCC grantee)

The 18th Street Arts Center (18SAC) is a nonprofit arts organization located in Santa Monica, California. The organization had previous experience serving as host for other artist employment programs and administering subgrants to individuals. Leaders of 18SAC believe that hiring artists as employees can be more impactful than simply awarding them a grant. Accordingly, their CCC grant proposal involved using the CCC funds to hire individual artists within priority communities to create projects related to one of CCC's four articulated goals. In January 2023, 18SAC released a request for qualifications, which asked interested artists and culture bearers to apply to become a Community Engagement Art Project Fellow.¹⁶ After completing the two-stage application process, successful applicants were expected to complete two projects within a 12-month period: 1) the art project described in their proposal that focused on one of the four statewide goals within their high-priority community, and 2) a culture asset map of their project community informed by interviewing 20 or more residents and other data sources they collected. For this work, each of the 18 artist-employees received a livable wage salary for one year (\$65,000) with health benefits, a 401(k) retirement savings plan, and up to \$50,000 for funding production costs associated with their project. Exhibit 5 presents the

¹⁶ 18SAC also accepted applications from teams of artists working together.

locations of the 18 artist-employees selected as Fellows, along with county-level measures of California’s HPI, the measure by which 18SAC defined high-priority communities.

Exhibit 5. Locations of Artists Employed by 18th Street Arts Center and County-Level Healthy Places Index Score (2023–24)



NOTES: The 18 employed artists and culture bearers were distributed evenly across California’s three regions (6 in Northern, 6 in Central, and 6 in Southern).

SOURCE: Retrieved from information provided on 18th Street Arts Center website and California Healthy Places Index website.

Program Origins and Funding

Prior to the CAC’s call for applications for CCC funding, 18SAC had experience commissioning dozens of artists’ public engagement projects and regranting funds. 18SAC also served as a cultural organization for the AAW Los Angeles County region. These experiences helped build the organization’s internal capacity to recruit and select artists for employment and coach them on their community-engagement partnerships. In addition, 18SAC had previously developed a cultural asset mapping project focused on its neighborhood in Santa Monica, which prepared the Center’s staff to understand the value and impact of cultural asset mapping and to train newly hired artists to produce similar culture maps. Therefore, when 18SAC was awarded a \$3.31 million CCC grant to serve as an AO, they already had processes in place to recruit artists, hire successful applicants, and coach them on improving their community engagement work.

Program Organization

Even with the institutional knowledge on how to contract individual artists to produce public engagement art projects, adding 18 artist-employees required hiring extra administrative staff. These administrators worked with 18SAC’s Deputy Director of Artistic Programs to manage the CCC grant and provide human resources (HR) and finance support.

Drawing upon THE OFFICE's AAW employment model, 18SAC lacked the internal capacity to perform the HR functions associated with an artist employment program (e.g., hiring, payroll, managing benefits, state-mandated employee training). Thus, the organization decided to outsource most of those functions to a PEO that operates mostly online (Bambee).

18SAC also hired consultants to help coach the CCC artists in preparing their full second-round proposals (e.g. budgeting, contracting other special consultants, best practices in culturally sensitive community engagement, cultural asset mapping, and evaluation). 18SAC also contracted consultants from the RAND Corporation to design program evaluation tools. Another consultant from Esri (developers of ArcGIS software) was retained by 18SAC to create StoryMaps templates for the 18 culture maps and to upload assets gathered by artists.

Artist Eligibility and Recruitment

The artist application process consisted of two phases. The first phase was intentionally simple to encourage a wide variety of artists from across California to apply. 18SAC distributed a request for qualifications that required interested artists to submit a résumé and statement of interest (i.e., the artist's initial thoughts about an art project that meets one of the CCC goals and targets a high-priority community). Matchmaking between artists and community partners was not provided, but artists needed to have an idea of who their partner might be at this stage. The responses from 375 applicants were reviewed by regional panels (separate panels for applicants from Northern California, Central California, and Southern California). Following the first phase reviews, 42 applicants remained in contention (14 from each region) and moved on to the next phase.

During the second phase, the 42 artists were paid a \$1,000 stipend to participate in a month-long series of professional development sessions to further develop their project into a proposal.¹⁷ Participants also had access to 18SAC staff and consultants who could provide guidance on their proposal. A panel of external reviewers evaluated each proposal. The remaining proposals were evaluated against five criteria: 1) artists' qualifications and experience; 2) artists' experience conducting community engagement activities; 3) artists' experience leading public arts projects at the community level; 4) evidence that artists have working relationships in the proposed high-priority community; and 5) strength of the proposed program plan (e.g., whether there was a history of similar projects being done in similar communities with similar durations). The 18 artists and culture bearers with the highest evaluation scores were hired by 18SAC as remote employees with the title of "Arts Fellows." The majority of artists selected were those with established social engagement practices and pre-existing relationships with their community partners; these factors were taken into consideration due to the one-year length of the employment period and the length of time needed to make an impact within a community.

The following brief descriptions highlight a sample of projects from 18SAC Arts Fellows supported through the CCC grant:¹⁸

¹⁷ Parts of the professional development sessions were led by consultants, including a consultant from the RAND Corporation who discussed survey development and methodology, consultants from Esri (ArcGIS) who discussed the StoryMaps software, an expert who discussed the process for creating culture maps, and a finance person who discussed budgeting.

¹⁸ Descriptions of all 18 projects can be found here:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20250313013359/https://18thstreet.org/californiacreativecorps/>.

- Artists Mike Blockstein and Reanne Estrada continued their social practice known as Public Matters to help improve the quality of life for residents in an East LA neighborhood through creative, community-driven interventions that blended art, humor, and activism.
- Artist Alicia Riojas created an oral history project about the experiences of front-line healthcare access advocates during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Artists Ethel & Carlo Zafranco created a collection of four murals showing the rich history of Palmdale, CA (see example in Exhibit 6). Community members provided input into the murals' content and could participate in "community paint days." The muralists also helped train six students in their process and technique.

Exhibit 6. Mural in Palmdale, California Created by 18th Street Arts Center Arts Fellows (2023–24)



SOURCE: 18th Street Arts Center and Ethel & Carlo Zafranco.

Artist Obligations, Compensation, and Benefits

Fellows were hired directly by 18SAC through a 12-month adjusted employment contract, and they had to adhere to terms provided in an amended employee handbook. During their 12-month employment period, Fellows were expected to complete their proposed project, interview 20 community participants, meet with their 18SAC supervisor twice a month, record their progress in monthly journals and surveys, and complete their community culture-mapping project. Although Fellows were required to work 40 hours per week, they were free to set their own work schedules.

The artists were trained to use ArcGIS StoryMaps for their culture-mapping project. 18SAC staff provided artists with templates for entering data, images, and interviews into the StoryMaps

software, but artists were free to determine what specific content they wanted to include. This required project deliverable allowed 18SAC staff to begin understanding the cultural landscape of regions throughout the state that had not been documented and to begin building a network of cultural resources that could be accessed by others in the future.

For their work, 18SAC paid the Arts Fellows a salary of \$65,000 over 12 months and offered full health and retirement benefits. Fellows also received \$50,000 for project development to cover the costs of supplies, materials, and studio space associated with their projects. All Arts Fellows—whether individual artists or members of a Limited Liability Company (LLC)—were given the options of receiving their compensation as a salary or as payment to an LLC on a regular pay schedule. Approximately two-thirds of Fellows opted to receive compensation as a salary. The \$50,000 in production funds were distributed in three installments over the course of the year.

“Having employment through 18SAC’s Creative Corps program meant that, for the first time, I could fully dedicate myself to the work without the constant worry of making ends meet or sacrificing my well-being. Before this fellowship, doing the work I believed in—and that my community deeply needed—meant juggling a full-time job while burning the midnight oil to push my creative and cultural projects forward. I had done this for years, but the exhaustion and self-exploitation were unsustainable. When 18SAC provided this opportunity, it was nothing short of revolutionary.”

—Miki’ala Catalfano, Co-Director of Native Roots Network and 18th Street Arts Center Artist Fellow

Program Evaluation

The RAND Corporation supported 18SAC with developing the evaluation framework and survey instruments and consulted on implementing evaluation activities. Program evaluation efforts included data collected by Arts Fellows from participating community members. Artists distributed surveys after community engagement events that captured community participants’ demographics, measures of their well-being and sense of belonging in the community, and perceptions of whether the program made any changes in these outcomes. Fellows shared the participant feedback they received during bi-monthly check-ins with 18SAC staff. Triangulating multiple data sources including check-in meetings, artists’ journal entries, and responses to artist and community member surveys provided 18SAC managers with insights into the program’s potential successes. For example, participating community members self-reported an improved sense of community and overall well-being.

The 18SAC staff interviewed for this report provided a holistic view of the strengths of the program and the challenges they experienced while serving as a CCC AO. Program strengths included:

- **Clear expectations regarding employment and compensation.** Artists said that 18SAC clearly specified the terms of employment in the modified employee handbook and at preliminary trainings.
- **Artists’ sense of being trusted.** The program’s transparent work requirements provided the necessary structure and accountability, but artists felt 18SAC trusted them to approach the work and their work schedules in ways that were authentic to their creative practice.
- **Value of culture maps.** Artists’ culture maps represented a tangible benefit to the state of California. The maps improved policymakers’ understanding of high-priority

communities across the state, and the data from these maps provide opportunities for future research.

- **Financial stability for artists.** Not only did employment provide the Fellows with a stable paycheck at a living wage, but many were able to obtain much-needed affordable and higher-quality health services. Nearly all Fellows had never had access to a retirement plan before; most used this opportunity to contribute the maximum allowable amount.

Those who managed 18SAC's CCC grant also mentioned the following challenges:

- **Artists' ability to complete project milestones on time.** A few Fellows requested adjustments to internal timelines and deadlines for their projects or 18SAC's requested deliverables (e.g., work documentation, surveys, budget actuals), and one Fellow was unable to complete their project within 12 months. Fellows may have needed project extensions due to personal life challenges or due to their project's focus shifting from their originally proposed idea.
- **Changes in community partners or organizational representatives.** During the course of the project, some Fellows realized that adjusting their community partners or organizational representatives was necessary for greater impact. While 18SAC prioritized hiring artists with strong community connections, some Fellows needed additional support in identifying and collaborating with the right individuals and organizations. Strengthening connections between the 18SAC and high-priority communities could further enhance artists' ability to create meaningful, high-quality work on time.
- **Communication strategy and project promotion.** Some artists said that they spent too much time during the initial months of their employment explaining to community members what the CCC was and what they wanted to do in the community. Providing Arts Fellows with drafted talking points, pamphlets, or promotional material about their work may have led to better community engagement, better survey response rates, higher job satisfaction among artists, and more candid input from residents for Fellows' culture maps.
- **Scaling up and scaling down the program.** 18SAC staff interviewed mentioned that in January 2023, their organization suddenly grew from a staff of 15 and budget of \$1.5 million to a staff of 33 and budget of \$4.8 million. 18SAC's leaders had to hire additional full-time staff to help coordinate their CCC work. At the project's conclusion in 2024, the organization faced the opposite problem: they had more full-time staff than they could support and had to make difficult staffing reductions.

While 18SAC was not able to retain any of the Fellows after the program ended, they were able to champion them through actively promoting their work. 18SAC also retained some of the administrative structures they had adopted while implementing their CCC grant. For example, they maintained the online PEO provider. Most notably, the repository of data collected through StoryMaps offers a lasting resource for communities, arts researchers, and state policymakers.

Creatives Rebuild New York's Artist Employment Program

In May 2020, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo created an 18-member commission to explore methods of reimagining New York with an emphasis on helping those most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Reimagine New York Commission focused on three key areas: 1) reducing the digital divide by improving connectivity for low-income populations, 2) improving

access to healthcare through telehealth, and 3) expanding employment opportunities. For the last area of focus, the Commission recommended encouraging businesses to expand career pathways for their employees, improving job training programs to better align with in-demand jobs, taking measures to help small business owners and entrepreneurs, and “lift[ing] up arts and cultural workers and institutions to strengthen our communities and drive economic growth” (Reimagine New York Commission 2021). Specifically, the Commission recommended that the state develop the Creatives Rebuild New York (CRNY) program to support small- to mid-sized arts organizations and thousands of New York artists, benefiting communities across the state (Reimagine New York Commission 2021).

Program Origins and Funding

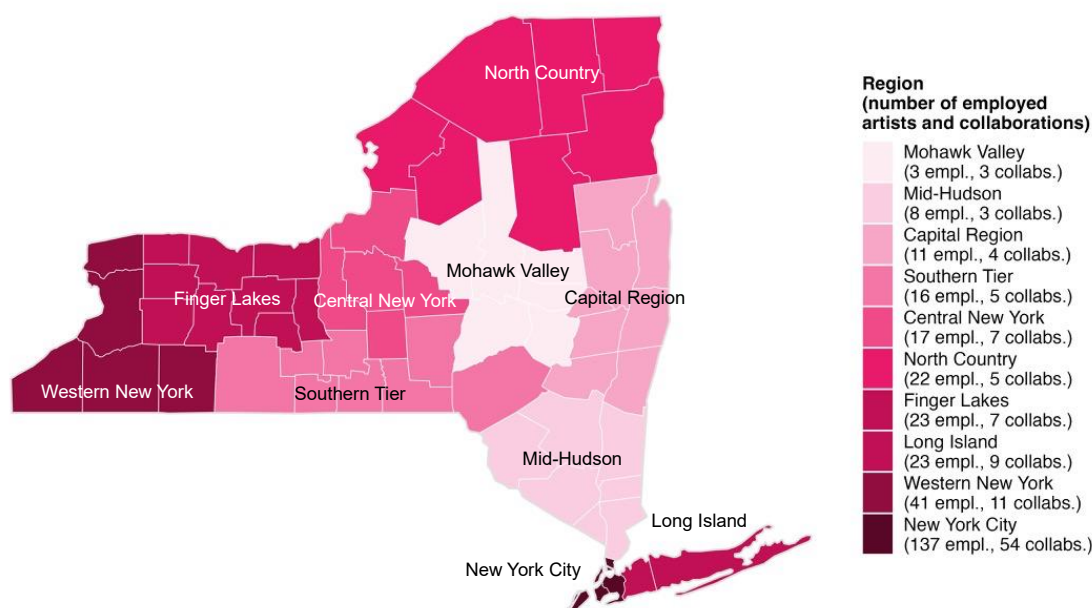
Because the CRNY program was not included in the state budget as expected, the Mellon Foundation stepped in and committed \$115 million to establish CRNY at the Tides Center (a nonprofit fiscal sponsor). In addition, the Ford Foundation and the Stavros Niarchos Foundation each contributed \$5 million to establish CRNY and its artist support programs. CRNY ultimately was established as a three-year time-bound initiative that included two demonstration programs: the Artist Employment Program (AEP) and the Guaranteed Income for Artists program (GI).¹⁹ The combined \$125 million funded the two programs, with \$64.1 million allocated to AEP, \$46.6 million allocated to GI, and the remaining funds used for research, policy, advocacy, and communication efforts.

One of the first steps CRNY staff took was to convene an advisory group of New York state residents comprised of artists, activists, scholars, and strategists, including some former CETA participants who drew inspiration from their experience to co-design both the AEP and GI demonstration programs. This 28-person group—referred to as “the Think Tank”—participated in several facilitated virtual meetings and offered many recommendations for the AEP, some of which included:

- Funds should be distributed across Empire State Development Regions (Exhibit 7).
- Funds should be distributed to collaborative partnerships consisting of artists and community-based organizations, municipalities, and/or tribal governments.
- Artists belonging to communities hardest hit by COVID-19 and community organizations that work with these populations should have the highest priority for funding.

¹⁹ CRNY’s GI program supported 2,400 artists, culture bearers, and culture makers across the state of New York by providing no-strings-attached monthly payments in the amount of \$1,000. Employment was not a factor in receiving funds, which excludes this CRNY component from further discussion in this report.

Exhibit 7. Number of Creatives Rebuild New York Employed Artists and Collaborating Organizations, by Region (2023–24).



NOTES: empl. = employees; collabs. = collaborations. Collaborations represent the nonprofit community organization with which artists worked. Organizations could collaborate with multiple artists.

SOURCE: Creatives Rebuild New York's website (<https://www.creativesrebuildny.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/AEP-Statistics-for-Website2024.pdf>).

Program Organization

While CRNY had full-time staff and a leadership council providing programmatic and administrative oversight of the initiative, a key aspect of the employment program design was the support from many collaborators and partners (Exhibit 8).²⁰ These partners provided essential resources and expertise to support CRNY and AEP artists in various aspects of the program, from executing program logistics to providing professional development and benefits support.

²⁰ For more information on CRNY collaborators and partners, see: <https://www.creativesrebuildny.org/partners/>.

Exhibit 8. Summary of Creatives Rebuild New York Partnerships, by Support Role

Process Support Partners

The Outreach Corps was a group of ten artist-organizers who assisted CRNY to publicize the employment opportunity and encourage artists and organizations to apply.

Good Call is a community-focused, technology-driven nonprofit that provided help desk support during the initial application phase. Good Call addressed inquiries about the program and provided technical assistance and multilingual translation services for applicants who speak languages other than English or Spanish.

Tribeworks is a worker-owned cooperative and payment and benefits platform that administered payroll, benefits, and HR functions for collaborating organizations that did not have the capacity to administer W-2 payroll and/or offer benefits. Tribeworks conducted the formal hiring process, handled artists' W-2 forms and payroll, oversaw artists' benefits, and provided artists with state-mandated employee training.

Untangled Resolutions is a consulting firm that aided in the design of CRNY's conflict mediation process, provided mediation between collaborations, and facilitated the *Artist and Cultural Workers Bill of Rights*.

Professional Development Support Partners

Springboard for the Arts is a Minnesota-based nonprofit offering training and technical assistance through its Art-Train program. CRNY provided artists with free access to this program to help them and their collaborating organizations develop skills for more successful collaboration.

Artists U is a grassroots artist-run platform that provided a workshop series on creating sustainable artistic practices.

New York Foundation for the Arts (NYFA) is a group of industry professionals who provided one-on-one coaching and resources to artists.

Entertainment Community Fund is a national nonprofit human services organization for all performing arts and entertainment professionals that provided informational webinars on housing and healthcare to CRNY artists.

Onboarding & Offboarding Benefits Counseling

The Dale Jones Burch Neighborhood Center at Henry Street Settlement is a benefits counseling partner providing social services such as benefits screening, legal services, and parent support.

Work Without Limits is a benefits counseling partner providing counseling to help artists understand the impact of earnings on eligibility for public benefits with an emphasis on supporting individuals with a disability.

Artist Eligibility and Recruitment

The partnership with Outreach Corps allowed CRNY to publicize the AEP opportunity through their connections with the arts community and community organizations throughout New York state. Twelve virtual information sessions were held to describe the program, the application process, and the benefits and responsibilities for artists and organizations. Artists and organizations interested in participating in the initiative were directed to application instructions on the CRNY website.²¹

CRNY required artists and their collaborating organizations to apply together through a web-based application portal. The outreach strategy resulted in a total of 2,741 applications

²¹ See <https://www.creativesrebuildny.org/>.

received, of which 1,800 were eligible.²² During the first phase of the application review process, a group of paid external reviewers evaluated the applications based on the strength of the artist–organization partnership and the perceived likelihood that the partnership would be beneficial to one of the targeted communities. The strongest applications advanced to the second phase of the selection process: a 60- to 90-minute interview involving the artist, a representative of the partnering organization, a member of CRNY staff, and an external reviewer. Each proposed collaboration was rated against the same set of application evaluation criteria. CRNY accepted 300 artists into the program, along with 98 collaborating community-based organizations.

Artist Obligations, Compensation, and Benefits

Initially, CRNY avoided being overly prescriptive for artists’ terms of employment. Artists and their collaborating partners were expected to determine the details of the artists’ employment, which led to some misunderstandings over the interpretation of employment terms.²³ Shortly after AEP began, CRNY strongly encouraged artists and their employers to establish written shared agreements about the artists’ roles and responsibilities to foster smoother collaborations.

Think Tank members helped determine the artists’ salaries. Rather than establishing separate compensation rates for areas of the state with different costs of living, the Think Tank recommended that all artists receive the same salary: \$65,000 per year for two years, which was commensurate with median income in New York State in 2021. Artists were directly employed by their collaborating organization when the organization had the capacity to administer both W-2 payroll and benefits. CRNY also paid collaborating organizations \$18,200 per artist per year to cover employers’ tax responsibilities (i.e., employer contributions to FICA, unemployment insurance, and worker’s compensation) as well as artists’ benefits, such as health insurance and retirement. The partnership with Tribeworks provided a unique opportunity for both artists and collaborating organizations. Organizations that did not have the internal capacity to hire artists directly could still participate in AEP through Tribeworks’ worker-owned cooperative. Tribeworks hired these artists directly as W-2 employees, offered benefits, and administered payroll and other HR services. These benefits were portable (i.e. benefits go with the artist and not the job), offering artists relatively more financial stability beyond the program.

CRNY provided additional funding to artists’ collaborating organizations to cover costs associated with the collaboration, from materials to supporting other organizational staff. The amount per organization depended on multiple factors, including the number of artists hosted by the organization and the needs of the employer/organization. Funding for organizations ranged from \$25,000 to \$100,000 per year. To minimize the administrative burden on participants, regular check-in meetings were conducted virtually twice per year between CRNY and AEP participants in lieu of written reporting. Professional development was offered through specialized webinars on various topics, including fundraising, accessibility, and employment law. In addition, artists created a robust community network through both in-person and online gatherings. During their second year of employment, CRNY began transition supports and

²² Eligible applications were ones for which both the artist and organizational portions of the application were completed, a specific community was identified, and the work described fit CRNY’s definition for eligible artistic disciplines (<https://www.creativesrebuildny.org/how-crny-defines-artist/>).

²³ Common misunderstandings included the amount of time allocated for the artists’ personal artistic practice versus the working hours (e.g., 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.) employers expected artists to work at the organization.

provided exit packets that contained resources for artists that could be used after the formal conclusion of their AEP participation.

Program Evaluation

CRNY allocated funds to pay for research and evaluation activities that offer some of the most robust evidence to support future artist employment programs. These activities included an implementation analysis through the first year of the program (Sherman and Montgomery 2024), a mixed-methods evaluation comparing the differences between AEP's two employment models (i.e., direct employment by a partner organization versus employment by Tribeworks; Treskon et al. 2024), a special-focus report on the experiences of Deaf and disabled artists who participated in the AEP (Gotkin 2024), and a summative evaluation on the AEP's impacts on artists' financial and overall wellbeing and partner organizations' financial stability and capacity (Figueroa et al. 2025), among others.

Through these comprehensive evaluation efforts, several consistent findings emerged, such as self-reported improvement in artists' financial stability and personal well-being and general overall satisfaction with the administration of the AEP among artists and partner organizations. Research and evaluation efforts also illuminated additional areas for program improvement. Key recommendations included improving communication and information sharing between artists and organizations, fostering worker-friendly and disability-affirming workplaces, and creating clearer career pathways for artists, especially for when AEP concludes.

Seattle's Hope Corps

In 2020, Seattle's Office of Arts & Culture (ARTS) began planning a program to combat the high COVID-related unemployment rates among creative workers in the city. Planners wanted to design a program that offered artists a substantial source of income while also encouraging them to participate in civic improvement efforts, therefore planners called the program "Hope Corps." Four program design components make Hope Corps different from the other artist employment programs previously described in this report:

1. Hope Corps funds artists not through W-2 employment, but through grants to artists or arts organizations. This feature is similar to most CCC administrative organizations that supported artists through grants.
2. Hope Corps is funded by a city government agency, ARTS, which is funded in part through a specific tax.
3. Hope Corps continues to provide funding for artists and has funded at least four cohorts of grant recipients thus far.
4. The specific types of art funded vary each grant cycle, based on needs identified by the city's staff and elected officials.

Program Origins and Funding

As was the case with the other programs previously described, Seattle's city government was concerned about the toll that COVID-19 took on the arts community. ARTS drew inspiration from economic relief programs developed during the Great Depression and committed to developing a program to provide a living wage to as many creative Seattleites as possible.

The agency convened an advisory group composed of residents with past involvement with the Seattle Arts Commission, previous grantees, and funders in other city departments to discuss the needs of artists and arts organizations, as well as to integrate community input within the

program’s design. The agency also organized a series of focus groups as another avenue to gather input from artists and cultural organizers; individuals provided feedback on program features such as the form of support to be offered, the requirements for the funding, and the types of reporting that the agency should require of artists and organizations. Unlike other artist employment program developers, ARTS preferred to keep the program “nimble” (i.e., make few long-term commitments) and to distribute the funds as fast as possible. Given these preferences, the program developers concluded that grants represented the best mechanism for supporting artists with predictable income.

Program planners estimated that \$2 million would be needed to provide 100 artists with part-time jobs that paid decent wages (determined to be up to \$30,000 per year). The first \$500,000 of the funding came from an ARPA grant issued by the NEA. ARTS obtained the remaining \$1.5 million from proceeds of Seattle’s JumpStart Payroll tax. An estimated 365 artists²⁴ were funded in 2022.

ARTS continues to offer Hope Corps grants through their allotment of the city’s general fund and their portion of the city’s admissions tax, which is a tax on tickets to sporting events, movies, large concerts and popular attractions. Beyond the one-time support from the NEA, no other external funding sources support the Hope Corps program.

Program Organization

Hope Corps is one of several grant programs run by ARTS that includes executive, communications, and finance staff, among other interdepartmental staff. Key points of contact from its creative placemaking division support the grant’s general operations.

Artist Eligibility and Recruitment

The focus of the Hope Corps grants changes from year to year. During the program’s first year (i.e., 2022–23 grant cycle), grants were awarded to artists and arts organizations that focused on one of six focal areas: 1) public health, 2) mental health and healing, 3) food security, 4) storytelling, 5) social connection and belonging, and 6) arts education.

A portion of Hope Corps funding also supported a multi-agency multimedia campaign called “Beloved,” which aimed to bring attention to the causes of and solutions for gun violence. The Beloved grants supported 58 other artists²⁵ who “produced essays, livestream events, exhibitions, and public art installations” on the topic (Vansynghel 2022).

During the program’s 2023–24 grant cycle, Hope Corps grants funded the creation of murals within the city’s downtown area and in parks throughout the city. A total of \$877,000 was offered through Hope Corps grants to individual artists, community organizations, and neighborhood associations to create murals, primarily downtown.

During the most recent 2024–25 grant cycle, \$853,347 in Hope Corps grants were awarded to 23 artists and organizations as part of the mayor’s downtown activation plan. The grants support artists and organizations who have proposed public arts projects in specific downtown Seattle neighborhoods. Examples of projects include music festivals, public concerts, street

²⁴ An estimated number of artists was provided by Hope Corps staff and may include some artists who made short-term contributions to Hope Corps funded projects.

²⁵ This is a total number that includes artists/creative workers who were employed full-time or for short-term commitments (including for one day).

theater productions, public showings of a film and exhibit, and festivals celebrating specific communities.

ARTS hired community liaisons during the first grant year to help publicize the availability of the Hope Corps grants. For later grant cycles, the agency publicized the Hope Corps grant opportunities through its website, social media, and newsletters, as well as through personal outreach. Those interested in applying for a grant uploaded their proposals through a web portal. The agency's staff are available to help interested artists and organizations talk through ideas and provide feedback on materials prior to submission. A community panel then reviews the proposals and rates them using established criteria (listed below).

Though the focus areas for Hope Corps grants change each funding cycle, the minimum requirements for grants include the following criteria:²⁶

- Proposals must be submitted by an individual artist, organization, or community-based group located in Seattle.
- Proposed projects must address at least one of the focus areas.
- Projects must be promoted to and accessible to the general public.
- Projects must pay each creative worker a living wage, defined as \$32 per hour.

Proposed projects are then evaluated based on criteria that include the career opportunities for the local creative workforce created by the project; its alignment with Hope Corps focus areas; the project's potential to connect to audiences; and the artist's relationship with the neighborhood in which the project is proposed. Hope Corps grant applicants must also demonstrate an ability to complete projects similar to the one proposed (or show capacity for growth while receiving support from a more experienced partner).

Artist Obligations, Compensation, and Benefits

The agency's payment system for Hope Corps grantees includes a project monitoring component. Specifically, grantees are required to submit deliverables 3–4 times throughout the course of their project. Specific deliverables can include updates to project plans, applications for permits or insurance, photo documentation of the artwork or arts event (along with links to project-related websites), and a final report.

Hope Corps grantees can also participate in the community of practice that ARTS established. The community of practice takes the form of periodic virtual meetings and some in-person events that allow agency staff to share information about their program and provide grantees with opportunities to get acquainted, participate in workshops, ask questions or request support, and publicize their work.

Hope Corps grant applicants establish their own compensation rates, with the minimum requirement being that projects pay workers at least \$32 per hour. During the initial 2022–23 grant cycle, grantees could expect to earn up to \$30,000 (Vansynghel 2022). Hope Corps grants do not provide for health or retirement benefits.

Program Evaluation

In 2023, Hope Corps commissioned an evaluation of its Beloved campaign (Headwater People 2023). Data collected through surveys and interviews with participating individuals and organizations informed a set of recommendations for improving the program, including:

²⁶ See <https://seattle.gov/arts/programs/grants/hope-corps/materials>.

- Hire an artist as a dedicated ARTS staff member to support grantees.
- Connect with hard-to-reach communities.
- Hire creative workers to fill skills gaps within city departments.
- Build strategic relationships across city departments to help creative workers access resources.
- Provide mental health resources.
- Provide long-term financial and career building support.

The formal evaluation of the Beloved campaign and other data collection activities have provided useful information to ARTS staff as the program continues to develop. For example, artists who responded to an exit survey at the conclusion of their project self-reported positive outcomes. Large majorities of respondents indicated that they had advanced their skills and knowledge (89 percent), were confident in their ability to find stable work/income after the program (84 percent), and had expanded their social and professional network (79 percent; Seattle Office of Arts & Culture n.d.).

Hope Corps reports that as of November 2024, \$3.75 million has been invested in artist employment, supporting more than 200 creative workers. In addition, for more than 100 Hope Corps-supported projects, artists earned as much as \$30,000 (Seattle Office of Arts & Culture n.d.).

Summary Across Cases

When comparing across the four artist employment programs examined, key similarities emerged despite each having adopted a unique program model (Exhibit 9). For example, all programs realized the dual purposes of supporting artists and cultural workers with employment opportunities while also addressing community needs. While contemporary artist employment programs drew inspiration from pre-COVID-19 federal economic relief programs, they more intentionally placed artists, particularly those with established ties to their local communities, in central roles to shape these programs. Engaging artists in the program design phase yielded artist-friendly approaches, such as allowing artists more time to focus on their creative practice rather than on administrative functions.

The four featured programs centered the needs of both the artistic community by providing stable, meaningful work and the needs of communities by addressing critical issues such as public health, community engagement, and basic needs security. Working independently or part of a multi-disciplinary team, artists across all programs raised awareness and sought to address these important community concerns in collaboration with community organizations that supported their efforts. In the case of CRNY, some artists were even employed directly by these community partners.

In addition, programs embedded professional development opportunities for artists into their routine operations, providing artist-workers with additional training and support to build other professional skills, such as project management, as well as networking opportunities.

There were also notable differences in program design features across the four artist employment programs examined. As previously discussed, programs varied substantially by scale and geographic reach. Although it started as a pilot initiative in a single state, AAW now reflects a mature model that extends across multiple states and regions. In contrast, 18SAC and CRNY are anchored within California and New York, respectively, and Hope Corps focuses on a single city, Seattle. Programs also varied terms of artists' wage rate and length of employment.

For example, 18SAC paid artists \$65,000 for 40-hour work weeks and 12 months of employment, whereas AAW paid artists approximately \$32,500, on average, for 30-hour work weeks and 12 months of employment. Both programs offered W-2 employment and benefits including health insurance and a retirement plan option.

Exhibit 9. Summary of Key Similarities and Differences among Featured Artist Employment Programs

Similarities	Differences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Artists put at the center of programming, selection, and implementation processes Community/social engagement project requirements for creative workers Included artists and cultural workers across a range of creative disciplines Minimized administrative/reporting requirements for artists Networking and professional development opportunities provided 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scale and geographic range of program (e.g., city, state, regional, national) Mix of program funding sources (e.g., foundation/federal grant, city/state appropriation) Length of employment and wage level Inclusion/exclusion of healthcare or retirement benefits in compensation package Required project deliverables from employed artists Number and rigor of program evaluation activities

Section 3: Recommendations

We conclude this report by providing recommendations to funders and arts administrators who may be interested in supporting the successful design and implementation of an artist employment program. We also include recommendations that can help such programs to remain sustainable beyond the pilot stage. The following recommendations were developed by incorporating multiple data sources, including evaluation reports of the artist employment programs examined, direct feedback provided by directors of these programs, and background research collected during our literature review. Even though this report centers on artist employment programs that grew in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the lessons learned that inform these recommendations remain relevant in a post-pandemic era; artists and cultural workers still experience economic precarity, including from gig employment (e.g., short-term contracts or freelance work) and lack of access to stable health insurance and retirement benefits (American Academy of Arts & Sciences 2021).

Design and Implementation

Whether funded through public or private sources or a combination of the two, a positive return on investment for a potential funder of any artist employment program hinges on the successful design and implementation of the program.

Early in the design stage, include artists and the communities meant to be served. The inclusion of creative workers and representatives of the intended communities to be served at the program development stage can ensure that the program responds to local needs while authentically supporting artists. Engaging these potential partners can help program developers better understand context-relevant parameters such as appropriate artist-employee salaries, length and expectations of work commitment, program elements that artists might find beneficial or challenging, and ways to effectively publicize the employment opportunity to artists.

All of the artist employment programs examined adopted this strategy. For example, the CCC convened both regional and state panels to design its program, including identifying priority populations to be served and community needs to be addressed. Similarly, CRNY's Think Tank was comprised of New York State artists who provided recommendations early in the program design stage.

Establish clear program expectations while remaining flexible. Clearly defining artists' and partner organizations' roles and expectations reduces the potential for any early misunderstandings between the artist-employee and employer that may hinder an artist's ability to conduct their planned projects and achieve positive impacts within their communities. In interviews, program leaders highlighted the importance of a balanced relationship between artists and hiring/collaborating organizations that honors the needs of both parties. Programs with clear initial agreements faced fewer conflicts, whereas providing only limited guidance can require mediation, as CRNY learned early on. Similarly, setting priority areas for project work, such as those established by Hope Corps, or clearly specified project deliverables, such as 18SAC's StoryMaps, offers structured mechanisms for artists to meet both the partner organization's and community's needs.

Across the four programs examined, administrators emphasized the need to avoid making the program too prescriptive for artists and to trust artists' creative process. Examples of flexible approaches include not dictating how and when artists should work and avoiding overly burdensome administrative reporting requirements. Many artists are accustomed to working nontraditional hours outside a 9-to-5 workday and to holding multiple jobs with varied employment arrangements outside of their artistic practice to support their creative work. Some are even hesitant to apply to arts programs with complicated application processes (Jackson et al. 2003). Programs should be mindful of artists' work styles and allow flexibility in how artists engage in their practice.

Plan for scalability in both directions. Funders and program administrators may wish to pilot an artist employment program in one community before offering the program in multiple locations, similarly to the AAW model that began in Massachusetts before expanding to other regions throughout the U.S. Starting small can help artists and program staff and artists resolve unanticipated challenges that may arise during initial program implementation, ultimately improving the program design when expanded to other locations or before adding new cohorts of artists.

Program administrators should also plan for the additional rounds of funding and infrastructure support needed to hire artists beyond an initial cohort. Funders and administrators also may consider using another intermediary organization to hire the artists and administer employment benefits. Partnerships with intermediary organizations offering portable benefits may provide more sustained benefits to artists as they transition out of the program, as exemplified in CRNY's partnership with Tribeworks.

Program administrators should also consider how to scale down program operations, in the event the program is short-lived. Creating clear career pathways for artists once their employment ends, either due to program closure or conclusion of their tenure, can help ensure they have access to continued economic opportunities. Transition-out strategies may include offering resources to help artists understand details about their last paycheck, unemployment eligibility, and health insurance coverage, as well as how to stay connected to networks established during the program and where to look for more funding.

Consider the potential benefits and trade-offs of providing multi-year support to artists. Short-term employment of one year or less may not be enough time for artists to plan and implement creative projects, and communities to experience the full range of benefits provided by artists' work. Among the four programs examined in this report, CRNY offered the longest employment duration at 2 years; however, an evaluation of the CRNY program (Figueroa et al. 2025) characterized its program as "short-term" in nature and recommended providing artists with an even longer timeframe, particularly for onboarding purposes. In addition, program leaders shared in interviews with the research team that longer project periods are generally more beneficial in terms of giving artists enough time to commit to community-focused work and make a deeper impact. This additional time may be especially important for artists and communities to cultivate meaningful relationships that did not exist before the start of the employment program. Because supporting artists' employment for an extended period may prove challenging, funders and arts administrators may want to consider the pros and cons of supporting fewer total artists, but with more resources to complete long-term projects.

Program Sustainability

Potential funders and arts administrators are likely interested in supporting programs that adopt strategies that help ensure their sustainability into the future, making longer-term impacts in improving artists' and communities' economic and social conditions. The following strategies may be implemented to ensure that funders, arts organizations, the broader public, and artists recognize and experience program benefits.

Embed artists within communities to focus on locally relevant projects, thus increasing the likelihood of public support for the program. National survey research finds that U.S. adults are more likely to be in support of public funding for artists if they are viewed as collaborators and problem-solvers working within communities to address their needs (Novak-Leonard and Skaggs 2021). Additional evidence points to the economic benefits artists can provide to communities, from revitalization to fostering innovation (American Academy of Arts & Sciences 2021; Sherman et al. 2020). Each of the four artist employment programs examined in this report aimed to enrich communities through localized artist-driven projects. As a key example, most CRNY partner organizations reported that they benefited from greater public visibility and deeper community engagement as a result of their program participation (Figueroa et al. 2025).

Foster enduring relationships with all potential partners, including funders and community-based organizations. Developing programs via a strong networked approach across all parties (e.g., funders, local partners) can benefit programs by diversifying their funding base and deepening community engagement and buy-in to support artists and the program's goals. For example, cultivating and leveraging local foundation and community financial support may offset potential funding gaps from inconsistent federal or state budgets and supplement support from national philanthropic funders. AAW's continued program growth with new cohorts in new regions speaks to the benefits of coalition building, particularly between regional and national funders. While program leaders interviewed by the research team noted that many artists were more successful in making impacts in their communities when they collaborated with organizations they already knew, especially for time-limited projects, it is also important for program administrators to communicate with collaborating organizations about how their investment in community-based artists strengthens local culture and engagement and requires their support to help sustain and grow the program over time.

Offer robust professional development to enhance artists' professional skills. A key feature of highlighted programs was their integration of professional development activities for the employed artists. While the specific professional development opportunities varied across programs, many included skills that are transferable in other contexts, even at the application stage, such as grant-writing and fundraising, project management, budgeting, and marketing. Developing critical skills beyond artistic training may position artists to become nimbler and more eligible for future employment opportunities.

Demonstrate value through program evaluation and continuous performance measurement, thus potentially attracting support from funders and other community partners. Devising a theory of change and/or logic model for the artist employment program, coupled with a performance measurement system, can yield much-needed evidence to document the program's impact—and improve the program's effectiveness. For example, qualitative evidence (even including compelling narratives) can provide funders with rich examples of program successes or individual artists' impact on their community. And quantitative evidence, such as quantifiable earnings, post-program employment, or even self-reported measures of improved health and well-being, can provide the “hard data” that suggest positive program impacts.

Conclusion

As artists and cultural workers experienced disproportionately adverse economic impacts due to the COVID-19 pandemic, federal and nonfederal relief efforts were launched to support these individuals. Emergency federal stimulus funds provided an economic lifeline to individuals and organizations but were short-term infusions of financial support not structured for long-term sustainability. Nonprofit arts and philanthropic organizations also stepped up to offer funding and employment to artists and cultural workers in need. Artist employment programs, as a model, vary substantially across many key dimensions, including funding sources (e.g., federal, state, local, and philanthropic sources), scale and geographic reach, and terms of employment (e.g., artist wages, provision of benefits). Despite differences in how the programs were designed and ultimately implemented, they sought to leverage artists' skills to conduct meaningful work that addressed community needs (e.g., social connection and belonging) and larger policy goals (e.g., public health and safety).

Artist employment program funders and administrators may consider a number of strategies that can foster successful program development, implementation, and sustainability. For example, engaging creative workers and representatives of the communities meant to be served early in the program design stage can help ensure that programs are effective in responding to community needs and supporting artists with stable (yet flexible) work. Similarly, adopting a collaborative, networked approach to program design and implementation can help to deepen community engagement and diversify program funding streams, resulting in increased community buy-in and potentially less volatility in funding support.

Artist employment programs are one mechanism to address the employment challenges artists and cultural workers face, particularly during economic downturns. Such programs can provide artists with stable employment and an opportunity to apply their creative skillsets to address real-world challenges in innovative, community-engaged ways. Artists, community organizations, intermediaries, and funders (federal or otherwise) can all play a role in developing, implementing, and sustaining programs that improve employment opportunities while advancing broader community and policy goals.

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