

# Models for Equitably Organizing Art Funding in Cities

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**Cleveland, OH**, created a civic study commission to gather comprehensive data on the arts and culture community and developed a custom plan for the community. The region now has a well-funded and thriving arts community.

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**Silicon Valley, CA**, shifted from only funding large organizations to providing advocacy and supports to a broader variety of artists by merging their older arts council with a dynamic organization experienced in incubating innovate programs.

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**Washington, DC**, went through several stages of reconciling the turbulence within its arts commission with some promising steps. They created a task force that identified 44 recommendations to improve the agency's inclusiveness.

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**Hartford, CT's**, arts council recently undertook a strategic planning process to develop a new mission, vision, and values statement to engage residents more intentionally during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many local governments around the country use arts councils to promote the arts. These councils are usually overseen by a government entity or private nonprofit organization yet often operate independently to prevent political interference in their decisions. Arts councils coordinate funding for artists, award prizes, promote events and the arts community, and, in their best form, ensure that funding is equitable and distributed not just to large organizations but also to smaller ones and individual artists. Investing in the arts can help to support local organizations and artists and create social bonds within a community. It can also grow a region's economy overall. Arts funding has been shown to both create a short-term increase in gross domestic product (GDP) and to [alter the steady state of GDP in the long run](#).<sup>1</sup>

Although the Rochester region of New York is considered a vibrant arts community,<sup>2</sup> it lacks an arts council or other centralized structure for funding artists and arts organizations (particularly smaller ones).<sup>3</sup> As such, we conducted four case studies of other cities' art funding structures to help inform a new model for Rochester. In the past, Monroe County, the county in which Rochester sits, gave more than three-quarters<sup>4</sup> of its \$1.4 million in arts funding to just two organizations and a fifth of it to another seven, although in more recent years the county has allocated a larger share to midsized groups. Advocates for the arts say that what is needed is a more reliable and equitable public funding stream that is resilient to the whims of budget negotiations and has clear and concise guidelines with a process that is open and transparent to all organizations<sup>5</sup>. Such a structure has the potential to increase racial equity in arts funding since local artists note that many Black- and Brown-led organizations have been left out of budgets;<sup>6</sup> and research has shown that some types of smaller arts organizations are more likely than large ones to employ artists who identify as Black or Latine.<sup>7</sup>

Until recently, Rochester had an arts council, but it disbanded during the COVID pandemic after struggling for years. When the council lost its regranting capacity, the county lost a liaison to help it funnel grants to small and midsized arts organizations. Art leaders in the region note that without the council, they lack a neutral clearinghouse for applications to municipal funding opportunities.<sup>8</sup> However, discussions with local leaders revealed that stakeholders in the region do not want to go back to the way that the original council was run, noting concerns about the equity of funding and representation on the council.

With the aim of replacing the former arts council with a new, inclusive entity, at the request of local artists and cultural organizations, the Rochester Area Community Foundation (RACF) convened the various players in the arts and culture community to determine the appetite for a new arts alliance and to facilitate the cocreation of what such an entity might look like. Central to this effort was having the leadership and buy-in from all sectors of the arts community as well as establishing a vehicle to disseminate funding from the city, county, and state. New York State Council on the Arts provided funding in 2022 to RACF to select a consultant to produce an upstate creative economy report to demonstrate the positive economic impact of the arts communities in Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, the Hudson Valley, and Albany and further the narrative of supporting arts investment. Additionally, RACF held listening sessions regarding equity and inclusion in the arts through a new collaboration with Community Foundation of Greater Buffalo in spring 2022. The report from the selected consultant, the Center for Urban Futures, is expected in summer 2023.

So how can RACF best model this new arts alliance to ensure that equity and collaboration are embedded into the system? This summary, based on interviews, provides four case studies of cities that have been successful with growing equity or embedding it within their arts systems and identifies best practices for increasing equity in the arts. With a better structure for supporting artists, the Rochester region could grow into a more vibrant art community.

## CLEVELAND

Over the past 20 years, the Cuyahoga County arts and culture sector<sup>9</sup> went from a “fiscal emergency to securing one of the highest levels of public funding for arts and culture in the country, becoming recognized as a national leader in creative placemaking.”<sup>10</sup>

Prior to 2006, the region’s arts community was struggling, with few public cultural-development policies or infrastructure. The region undertook six years of trial and error (including a failed property tax levy) and then passed a 10-year tax levy on cigarettes to create a \$158 million fund for arts and culture, with that levy being renewed for another 10 years. In 2023, Governor Mike DeWine signed into law legislation that allows Cuyahoga County to expand its cigarette tax to include nicotine vape products<sup>11</sup>. To distribute these funds, the arts community created Cuyahoga Arts & Culture, which is now is one of the largest local public funders for arts and culture in the nation.

One reason for the funding push dates back to the late 1970s and early 1980s. During that time, local businesses started noticing increases in business activity in conjunction with the arts. This observation, along with a study by McKinsey & Company, showed that resuscitating the Playhouse Square theater in Cleveland would create more jobs and visitor dollars and convinced leaders in Cleveland that helping the arts would help the entire economy. The theater is one of the largest performing arts centers in the US. It was shut down in the late 1960s but revived through grassroot efforts in the early 1970s. This led to the redevelopment of the theater and subsequent growth of local businesses. But this growth did not spread to the broader community because, across the region, people who could have made a difference for arts and culture were not communicating or working together.<sup>12</sup>

During the early and mid-1990s, the Cleveland Foundation and the George Gund Foundation created a civic study commission on the performing arts, made up of community leaders, to study 11 organizations to better understand:

- how to stabilize the groups financially and improve their operations,
- whether Greater Cleveland had enough money to help the organizations grow, and
- what role arts and culture should play in the community’s future development.

The commission's main conclusion was that in an era of eroding support for the arts nationwide, "engendering [a] new climate would require strengthening the relationship between the performing arts and the whole community."<sup>13</sup> The commission urged Cleveland to do two things:

1. "Create a comprehensive cultural planning process through which the arts participate in Greater Cleveland's renewal and growth agenda."
2. "Create a mechanism to generate public support for the arts and create a local civic arts agency to oversee, manage, and distribute the funds."<sup>14</sup>

The commission found that these changes would require understanding two things: (1) the impressions that residents of Northeast Ohio held about arts and culture, and (2) the hard facts about arts and culture as an industry and as part of the regional economy.<sup>15</sup>

To conduct this study, the two foundations created the Community Partnership for Arts and Culture (CPAC), which later became Arts Cleveland.<sup>16</sup> CPAC's goal was to gather comprehensive data on an arts-and-culture community and then craft a plan for that community based on its assets and weaknesses. The data collection process took two years; hundreds of conversations with individuals and groups; dozens of written reports, website posts, and media stories; and a public-informed design process, culminating in Northeast Ohio's Arts & Culture Plan in 2000.<sup>17</sup>

The result of this work, more than 20 years later, is that Northeast Ohio has changed its relationship with arts and culture. The region has dedicated tax dollars to arts and culture and built and renovated arts facilities. Innovative cross-sector partnerships have also emerged. The Centers for Disease and Control and Prevention partnered with arts and culture organizations, health care institutions incorporated arts in the health care experience, and criminal justice institutions connected with arts education organizations.

The government's involvement in this process included approving innovative ordinances to make the region's art and culture sustainable:

- Allow artists to create home and studio spaces for themselves in abandoned or underused industrial buildings.
- Require every public construction project to allot 1 percent of the budget for public art.
- Set aside money for arts-related economic development grants.
- Create arts district.
- Give tax breaks to renovators of historical buildings, film companies that shoot their projects in Ohio, and small music venues that help revitalize their neighborhoods.

The author of *Elevating the Influence of Arts and Culture: A Cleveland Playbook*<sup>18</sup> recommends the following for how to conduct a strategic planning process for the arts:

- Assemble a steering committee or task force with members from a wide range of sectors.
- Obtain quantitative data about the arts and culture sector including employment, finances, participation/attendance, and infrastructure.
- Survey art makers, presenters, and consumers separately about programming, spending, customer satisfaction, and the needs of and obstacles faced by artists, arts businesses, and nonprofits.
- Hold public discussions with residents including community dialogues, focus groups, and "action" discussions.
- Reveal trends: pair local thinking with hard facts about value, cost, and accessibility.

- Enlist as many segments of the public as possible to study local arts and culture and participate in the planning process.
- Recruit elected officials and other civic leaders who have the power to set policy and allocate money to become involved in the planning process.

In recent years, however, the Northeast Ohio’s arts community’s concerns about funding, equity, and diversity have emerged, resulting in the creation of a new arts alliance. As a result, Arts Cleveland is being phased out and will be replaced by a yet-to-be-named entity that will work with arts funder Cuyahoga Arts and Culture and a political lobbying group known as the Arts and Culture Action Committee.<sup>19</sup> Despite Cleveland’s general successes in the arts over the past 20 years, it is still one of the largest cities in the country that does not support or promote arts and culture in its government structure.<sup>20</sup> As such, organizations like Assembly for the Arts—a nonprofit organization with a focus on advocacy, cultural policy, racial equity initiatives, research, marketing, and services for nonprofits, artists, and creative businesses—is pushing for the city to create a dedicated staff or department for the arts in city hall dedicated to the creative and cultural industries.<sup>21</sup> The city is responding by seeking applicants for a new position in the Office of the Mayor whose role will be a high-level advisor and advocate for arts and culture, a role that the Cleveland Foundation has committed to funding.<sup>22</sup>

## SILICON VALLEY, CA

The arts community in Silicon Valley, CA, has transformed since the 1980s when its then-arts council, Arts Council Silicon Valley, served as a grantmaking agency to arts organizations in the area and almost exclusively funded large-budget institutions like Symphony San Jose. Over time, the council created a new endowed fund for small to midsize arts organizations in Santa Clara County.

In 2013, Arts Council Silicon Valley merged with 1stACT Silicon Valley to form SVCREATES, a regional nonprofit arts organization whose mission is to accelerate Silicon Valley’s creative culture. This new organization built on the arts council’s history through regional grantmaking and professional development and leveraged the work of 1stACT Silicon Valley in incubating innovative programs and initiatives like SPUR San Jose, School of Arts and Culture at MHP, MALI (Multicultural Arts Leadership Institute), and The Studio.<sup>23</sup>

SVCREATES seeks to build the creative sector’s capacity through grantmaking, hosting the next generation of leaders through the genARTS arts and culture leadership hub, conducting research studies relevant to civic and arts leaders, forming a “creative spaces collaborative,” and leading the development of the Creative Center for the Arts, a multiblock mixed-use development and community arts space.<sup>24</sup> Through advocacy, networking, and grantmaking, SVCREATES seeks to “build the creative sector’s capacity, raise the voice and visibility of the creative sector, and increase access to arts and creativity for high need communities.”

In 2022, SVCREATES accomplished the following:

- Supported 97 diverse local arts leaders through ongoing facilitated peer roundtables.
- Awarded \$403,000 in 64 operating grants to a diverse range of small arts organizations while increasing funding to organizations centered on Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and African, Latinx, Asian, Arab, and Native American (ALAANA) people by 30 percent.
- Distributed \$205,000 in National Endowment for the Arts grants to provide pandemic recovery support to local arts groups, with 80 percent of funds supporting BIPOC/ALAANA-centered groups.
- Conducted online workshops, in-person town halls, and professional development events for over 500 artists, arts leaders, and cultural workers.
- Selected Tshaka Menelik Imhotep Campbell as the 2022–24 Santa Clara County Poet Laureate.<sup>25</sup>

The organization refreshed its strategic framework in 2020 to focus on arts organizations with less than \$2 million in revenue in Santa Clara County and to prioritize increasing access to the arts for high-need communities, while maintaining a focus on grantmaking for small to midsize arts organizations.<sup>26</sup> It also has a strategic goal to model best practices for organizational health, collaborative leadership and diversity, and equity and inclusion. For example, its Equity Council advises the SVCREATES board and is comprised of at least two board members and several community representatives with the goal of guiding the organization in advancing racial and cultural equity within the organization's structure, leadership, programming, and planning.<sup>27</sup>

Following the first 10 years of implementation since the organization's founding in 2013, SVCREATES is leveraging lessons learned from the history of the Arts Council Silicon Valley to provide advocacy and support to artists in new ways in the region, including grant opportunities for individual artists, arts organizations, and local educators, especially those in high need.<sup>28</sup>

## WASHINGTON, DC, REGION

The District of Columbia Commission on the Arts and Humanities (CAH), established in 1968, is an agency within the District of Columbia (DC) government.<sup>29</sup> Its mandate is to initiate and evaluate efforts related to arts and humanities and promote existing and new arts and humanities programs. It is funded by the DC government and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). It is the district's designated state arts agency and has an approximately \$40 million budget. Volunteer commission members are nominated by the mayor and confirmed by the DC City Council to three-year terms. The Commission hires the executive director, with consent of the city council.

The CAH operates several programs:

- Arts Building Communities, which provides grants to artists, arts organizations, and community groups for performances, exhibitions, and services, with an emphasis on underserved communities
- DC Creates Public Art, which supports the placement of public art and support services
- Arts Learning and Outreach, which supports arts education to DC youth

Control of the commission has been part of a local tug-of-war between the mayor's office, CAH, and the city council. CAH has also faced internal instability, with repeated executive director turnover in recent years and accusations of a hostile workplace environment.<sup>30</sup> The mayor's office has worked to place cultural funding directly under its control (and at one point proposed legislation that would have turned CAH into an advisory body instead of a funding arm). In 2019, the mayor's office then attempted to prevent access to CAH's art collection, while the city council passed a motion ensuring its independence.<sup>31</sup>

CAH has also faced increased scrutiny in recent years, as local stakeholders have questioned its grantmaking processes. In October 2021, CAH Commissioner and Howard University professor Natalie Hopkinson posted an analysis of CAH grant funding from 2020 showing that about 80 percent of CAH grant funds went to the four (of eight) DC wards with a majority white population.<sup>32</sup> DC City Council Chair Phil Mendelson's response was that the analysis was flawed (as many large recipients, located downtown, provided resources to other groups in DC). An effort to remove Hopkinson and one other commissioner from the commission failed after the city council passed emergency legislation to approve their renominations.<sup>33</sup>

Over the past year, CAH has made changes to its processes and approaches. These changes included creating a task force that identified 44 recommendations to improve the agency's inclusiveness and do a better job of identifying and supporting new talent.<sup>34</sup> One of the biggest ramifications of the changes was that the commission altered its grant formula, which previously reserved 28 percent of grants to split among the National Capital Art Cohort, a 21-member institutional group that includes a number of large institutions in DC. The updated formula

makes these institutions compete for grants and provides additional funds to other organizations. There are additional changes as well, including the following:

- dropping of matching funds, which some stakeholders consider burdensome,
- providing a second year of renewal eligibility to small organizations receiving funding from the LiftOff grant program,
- giving stipends to panelists, and
- reweighting the formula toward measures of inclusion and diversity.

In recent assessments, stakeholders considered the changes promising, even if there is still work to be done.<sup>35</sup> Overall, while DC is in a somewhat unique institutional situation, recent history there shows both the challenges and potential approaches for implementing more equitable funding models responsive to a wider range of potential stakeholders.

Elsewhere in the DC area, a number of arts agencies in Northern Virginia have recently taken steps to formalize a multijurisdictional alliance.<sup>36</sup> The Northern Virginia Local Arts Agencies (NVLAA) intends to support professional development for artists, performers, and arts nonprofits across the region. While NVLAA is less focused on grantmaking than collaborative programming and workshops, this initiative is another approach that supports artists and arts organizations.

## HARTFORD, CT

As a legacy city hit hard by deindustrialization and suburbanization, Hartford has taken intentional steps to promote and foster its arts community in the past several decades. Founded in the early 1970s by its first board of directors, the Greater Hartford Arts Council (GHAC) provides financial and organizational resources to support the arts and culture sector.<sup>37</sup> It also connects residents with opportunities to contribute to and experience the arts in Hartford. GHAC is funded by the business sector, individual donors, and the city and state governments, with workplace-giving campaigns being a key fundraising activity. Through these donations, GHAC has been able to establish multiple grant programs, community programs, paid summer apprenticeships for students, public art installations, workshops, and concerts. GHAC supports over 150 arts organizations in 34 Greater Hartford municipalities with a \$3 million budget. Its board of directors is comprised of roughly 15 members who represent businesses, nonprofits, universities, and community members in the Hartford area.

In early 2021, GHAC undertook a strategic planning process to develop a new mission, vision, and values statement.<sup>38</sup> Over 600 community members, arts leaders, artists, and donors participated in a community-input survey and focus groups to inform this plan. The council launched this process from efforts made to more intentionally engage residents during the COVID-19 pandemic. Established during the height of the pandemic, the Arts Network connects leaders from local small and midsize arts organizations to discuss ways to maintain their businesses and stimulate the arts sector during the COVID-19 crisis.<sup>39</sup> In June of 2020, GHAC also established the Artist Advisory Committee (AAC) to “inform, support, and educate the Greater Hartford Arts Council about its role as an advocate for artists in the Greater Hartford region.” Collaboration through these groups provided artists with mutual support and enabled GHAC to advocate for the needs of artists at the local and national level.

In 2022, GHAC welcomed a new CEO with experience in the sphere of diversity, equity, and inclusion: Rev. Shelley Best, who is a long-time Hartford resident and leader in the arts community. In a recent interview with the *Hartford Business Journal*, she expressed her commitment to transforming the arts industry to better reflect the region’s rich diversity.<sup>40</sup> She also described the relationship between GHAC and the public as lacking, stating how some members of the community perceive the council as exclusionary. As her first plan as CEO to address this issue, Best led a listening tour of the region in the summer of 2022 to seek out the voices of diverse artists. Best stated

that her priority moving forward will be to promote the work of small and midsize arts entities, but she also acknowledged the need to foster relationships with sponsors and politicians to share limited resources. At a news conference in May of 2023, GHAC shared that over 1,300 artists were employed while over 280,000 people had attended Hartford-based events in the past year.<sup>41</sup>

## BEST PRACTICES FOR INCREASING EQUITY IN THE ARTS

Based on our case studies and literature reviews, we identified the following best practices that can help guide Rochester to continue on this journey:

- **Take the time to listen, learn, and study before designing any type of solution.** When the Cleveland Foundation first created a civic study commission on the performing arts made up of community leaders, and again when they created CPAC (later Arts Cleveland), they took time to gather comprehensive data on the arts and culture community and craft a plan for that community based on its proven assets and issues. The process took two years, hundreds of conversations with individuals and groups; dozens of written reports, website posts and media stories; and a publicly informed design process, culminating in Northeast Ohio's Arts & Culture Plan in 2000.
- **Consider creating an equity council as part of the new arts organization.** In Silicon Valley, the SVCREATES equity council is comprised of at least two board members and several community representatives with the goal of guiding the organization in advancing racial and cultural equity within the organization's structure, leadership, programming, and planning.<sup>42</sup>
- **Develop a funding formula that adequately weights diversity and inclusion.** As the case study of Washington, DC, makes clear, weighting inclusion and diversity into funding can be a complicated and contentious process, but one that, through dialogue, can lead to innovative solutions.
- **Create an infrastructure in the city hall or local government dedicated to the creative and cultural industries with a focus on equity in arts funding.** This could involve hiring a senior advisor and advocate for the arts, like the City of Cleveland and the Hartford's Greater Arts Council, or creating an entire department of cultural affairs like that of New York City<sup>43</sup> to support the fine arts and for-profit creative industries including music, design, film, and fashion.

We also identified some targeted actions that could help Rochester widen inclusion and access:

- **Compensate individuals assessing arts applications for their time.** This might include everyone who sits on a panel of judges.
- **Minimize matching fund requirements.** This can make it easier for smaller arts organizations to apply for funding awards.
- **Provide access to unrestricted funding and grants for individual artists.** This can enable community members to leverage these funds outside of established organizations.

## TOOLBOX AND RESOURCES

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