



# Advance Sustainable Livelihoods for Arts and Cultural Workers

## Recommendations from Creatives Rebuild New York's Artist Employment Working Group

### Summary

Artists and cultural workers deserve more opportunities to earn sustainable income and be better supported—and less exploited—by our economic systems and institutions. In the fall of 2023, [Creatives Rebuild New York](#) (CRNY) convened a Working Group composed of artist employment program administrators, advocates, researchers, and artists who have unique insights into the challenges, opportunities, and nuances of providing jobs for artists.

**We see an opportunity generated by policy shifts and artist employment programs initiated during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, and offer six recommendations to build on this momentum nationally:**

1. Deepen the analysis of artist employment programs nationwide
2. Develop tools, resources, and guidance for future artist employment programs
3. Create a national research and policy center focused on artists' lives and livelihoods
4. Pilot a national worker cooperative for artists and cultural workers
5. Develop an artists' and cultural workers' bill of rights
6. Convene state policymakers committed to creative workforce development

The ideas described in this document are in the early stages of ideation and require more research and refinement, as well as funding and collaboration, to take forward. We invite fellow funders, government officials, cultural leaders, artists, and organizers to join us to build better economic and financial supports for artists and cultural workers.

For more information or to consider partnering with our Working Group to move the strategic recommendations forward, please contact: Jamie Hand, Director of Strategic Impact and Narrative Change at CRNY ([jamie@creativesrebuildny.org](mailto:jamie@creativesrebuildny.org)).

## Context

Creatives Rebuild New York was launched during the COVID-19 pandemic to demonstrate new financial support structures for artists across New York State. Recognizing that its Artist Employment Program was among several initiatives providing salaries and benefits to artists across the country, CRNY convened twenty artist employment program leaders and advocates for three meetings and a shared research process in September and October 2023. The goals were to learn from each other's programs and advocacy efforts, and to determine what more could be done at a national scale.

We reflected on our collective accomplishments: we have moved millions of dollars to support basic human needs, incorporated artists in co-design and decision-making of programs, aligned arts and non-arts workforce sector needs, and more. In addition to details about our programs, we also discussed systemic barriers these programs contend with. We recognize that artist employment programs represent only one of many ways to support the financial stability of artists, and that "jobs" in the traditional sense do not provide stability for all people.

Over the course of our time together, we sought to answer the question, "What should be done to advance or accelerate artist employment opportunities

### What are Artist Employment Programs?

Artist employment programs (AEPs) fund jobs for artists and cultural workers. Income is often accompanied by health care and other benefits, as well as professional development and other capacity-building initiatives. Artists' jobs within AEPs usually entail duties in service of community need along with time to support the artists' own practice.

Historic precedents include the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA); current examples include CRNY's Artist Employment Program, California Creative Corps, Seattle's 'Hope Corps,' 'Maniobra' in Puerto Rico, and THE OFFICE's 'Artists at Work.'

across the country?" Our recommendations range from **knowledge-building and data collection efforts** that bring nuance to the impact and potential of future programs, to **new infrastructure** that supports both artists and potential employers, to **political advocacy and grassroots movement work** that builds the understanding and will for more and better employment opportunities. While we generated dozens of ideas, the six recommendations prioritized here are specific to strengthening artist employment nationally and capitalizing on the current momentum and interest.

CRNY is a time-limited initiative that will close in December 2024, and recognizes that it cannot move all of this work forward alone. CRNY has committed \$100,000 to seed some of the recommendations below, and to using its platform and networks to build support among funders, government officials, cultural leaders, artists and organizers to further develop and enact more of them.

## Recommendations

### 1. Deepen the analysis of artist employment programs nationwide

Working group participants represented a wide range of approaches to artist employment, which in turn reflect the diversity of contexts, disciplines, and desires of artists themselves.

**We discussed similarities and differences across our programs, and identified three distinct goals or types of artist employment programs:**

- Paying artists to do their work (process, products)
- Applying artists' skills to advance civic and social issues
- Matching artists with jobs in high-demand or growing industries

As a next step, we recommend a comprehensive cross-program scan that builds upon the 8+ artist employment programs we gathered with a rigorous assessment of the impacts and implications of each approach. Participatory research methods that center artists' perspectives and experiences, as well as national public or private funding to support these efforts, would greatly aid in the uptake, refinement, and impact of future programs across the country.

### 2. Develop tools, resources, and guidance for future artist employment programs

CRNY and other working group members have fielded dozens of requests from other state and local leaders seeking to enact their own artist employment programs. We propose to create a "how-to" resource that builds off of our collective

implementation experiences and lessons learned, identifying models worth replicating in other contexts and transparent advice on the challenges inherent in this work. We share a commitment to non-extractive ways of employing artists, and to centering artists' voices and experiences in the design and development of programs. We could also offer consultative support and technical assistance as part of this effort.

### 3. Create a national research and policy center focused on artists' lives and livelihoods

There is a need for an institution or network that maintains a data-driven knowledge base on the topic of artists' and cultural workers' lives and livelihoods. This center could consolidate and translate learnings from across the fields of arts and culture, labor/workforce, economic development, and social services into language that can be used by others for policymaking and advocacy work. The goals would be to centralize data about individual artists; to document how workforce programs and economic policy shifts impact cultural workers and their communities (allowing for differences across various demographics and geographies); and to articulate the impact of steady income for artists and cultural workers. Participatory and artist-informed research would form the basis of building collective power and advocacy work on these issues. This center could be modeled on existing organizations such as [The Workers Lab](#) or [Project Evident](#), or embedded within more established institutions such as [Pew Research Center](#).

### 4. Pilot a national worker cooperative for artists and cultural workers

Artists often work as 1099 workers or consultants, and cannot access the benefits and protections that W2 employees receive. To do so, artists can

either seek employment or establish their own LLCs or organizations. Yet many nonprofit arts and cultural organizations operate on shoestring budgets and cannot afford to provide salaries and benefits to their staff, let alone pay them thriving wages. A worker cooperative intermediary that provides arts and cultural workers with access to these protections and benefits could be a game changer, offering income stability, insurance options, and ownership of the entity itself. Such a cooperative would benefit independent arts workers, as well as organizations who want to employ artists but are unable to do so directly. This pilot could build on several exciting precedents (such as [Tribeworks](#), [California Nonprofit Performing Arts Paymaster](#), and other efforts around [legislation for portable benefits](#)), and build more awareness around the benefits of cooperative ownership structures.

## 5. Develop an artists' and cultural workers' bill of rights

The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated how economically vulnerable many artists are. It highlighted unjust gaps in our sector that left artists behind, indicating the need for a safety net and a collective voice to advocate. Inspired by the [Domestic Workers Bill of Rights](#) in New York State and [the associated national campaign](#), an artists' and cultural workers' bill of rights would provide greater protections to ensure that artists are treated with the dignity and respect that all people deserve. The bill of rights would help organizations and artists to adopt a set of ethical standards to guide their best interests when collaborating and negotiating, create a platform for artists and organizations to collaborate on building consensus and understanding each others' needs, and increase the likelihood that artists and organizations evolve their relationship, if desired,

from temporary gig work to full time employment. Artists and cultural workers should be supported to articulate these rights and protections, and lead any related legislative campaigns at local, state, and federal levels.

## 6. Convene state policymakers committed to creative workforce development

Funding for artist employment programs drastically varies by state and region, as does knowledge of and political will to enact workforce development policies and programs that include the creative sector. Facilitating gatherings of state-level officials across arts, labor, and economic development agencies - particularly in states like California, Washington, Illinois, and New York, where collaboration is already underway - would enable peer-to-peer learning and build a stronger case to integrate artists into state-level workforce efforts. Sample legislation and program models could be created to help interested policymakers operationalize them in their home states or regions.

Notably, the working group identified two overarching principles that must guide any work moving forward: **Artists and cultural workers must lead and/or co-design these efforts, as they continue to be the best equipped to articulate and meet their own needs. And alliances between artists, cultural workers, and arts administrators will be critical to building resilience and solidarity within the arts sector, and resolving power dynamics often present within artist employment programs.**

## Related Opportunities

Our discussions were far-ranging, and naturally touched on the broader systems within which artist employment programs exist: Nationally representative data about individual artists is lacking. Healthcare in the U.S. is broken. The social safety net fails, by

design, to support some of our most vulnerable populations. Artists and culture workers hold many other identities - caregiver, undocumented, disabled, senior - that must be honored simultaneously when thinking about sustaining a livelihood.

### Several ideas that speak to these systemic challenges, as well as broader gaps within the arts sector, emerged:

- Local, regional, and national **communities of practice** are needed to provide critical sources of peer support -- whether for artists and cultural workers, program administrators, or others. These communities or networks should include mentor pairing, convenings, mutual aid, knowledge exchange, professional development, and political organizing for future issues.
- Arts and culture stakeholders often fail to engage in political organizing, and should more regularly **fund ballot initiatives and political candidates**. Any advocacy or lobbying efforts must be in solidarity with labor and other movements such that all contract and low-wage workers would benefit.
- The precarity that artists and cultural workers face is not widely understood beyond the trope of 'starving artist.' A **national strategic communications campaign** that captures and amplifies stories of how artists' and cultural workers' lives are transformed by stable employment - and how communities are impacted as a result - would expand public support.
- The **U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics has invited public input on changes to its occupational codes**. This is a rare opportunity to achieve more comprehensive data on artists and cultural workers that expands our understanding of who counts as an artist, accurately reflects the ways artists allocate their time, and paves the way for employers to recognize all forms of creative labor.
- The pathway for artists to engage in the creative economy is not scaffolded the way other industries are. **Strengthening and expanding career pathways** - from high school through college and graduate / professional schools, with clear skill mapping and job opportunities - and embedding this work with the existing career and technical education work being done across the country, could better support artists' livelihoods.

## Working Group Participants

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### FACILITATORS:

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Creatives Rebuild New York (CRNY) is a three-year, \$125 million initiative that provides guaranteed income and employment opportunities to artists across New York State. Fiscally sponsored by Tides Center, CRNY represents a \$125 million funding commitment, anchored by \$115 million from the Mellon Foundation and \$5 million each from the Ford Foundation and Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF). Learn more at [creativesrebuildny.org](https://creativesrebuildny.org).