Artist
Employment
Program

Creatives Rebuild New York

Artist Employment Program Process Evaluation

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Artists Segundo Orellana and Daniel Jimenez participate in Teatro Yerbabruja Downtown Art Festival in Central Islip.
Photo Credit: Teatro Experimental Yerbabruja Inc.

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Introduction

Over the course of two years, Creative Rebuild New York's Artist Employment Program funded employment for 300 artists in collaboration with over 100 community-based organizations across New York State.

This innovative jobs program highlights the need for artists working in collaboration with their communities, demonstrates the value of artists' labor and time, and provides critical stability in an economy that often leaves cultural workers in unsafe, unhealthy, and insecure circumstances. In many ways the program is ground-breaking, and its designers also intended it to be path-paving—to demonstrate the model and impacts so others can iterate on and replicate it.

To that end, this report shares key successes, lessons learned, and recommendations for future program funders, administrators, co-designers, and advocates to consider. It is a result of structured reflection on the design and implementation of the Artist Employment Program (AEP), and covers the period from inception through program launch and the first year of employment.

This report begins by detailing the context, goals, and timeline of the Artist Employment Program's creation. It then reviews several elements of the program's design, with an analysis of its strengths and challenges. It concludes with recommendations generated by CRNY staff and participants for others seeking to build on this work.

From the Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance (BAAD!) event 'Dancing While Black' (2022). Photo Credit: Richard Rivera.

This report complements several other research and advocacy initiatives that Creatives Rebuild New York (CRNY) is conducting:

- Three evaluations studying the impacts of AEP on participating artists and organizations are currently underway, including community based participatory research led by Hester Street Collaborative, an assessment of employment models led by Urban Institute, and qualitative interviews with Deaf and disabled artists led by disability justice artist and organizer Kevin Gotkin.

- An early draft of this document was used to inform a working group that CRNY convened in September and October 2023. That working group brought twenty artist employment program leaders and advocates together to learn from each other's work and to develop future recommendations for the field. The strategic opportunities identified in those conversations are available as a separate document here.

Methods

CRNY contracted Deidra Montgomery and Danya Sherman of Congruence Cultural Strategies to conduct a process evaluation between March and December 2023. Congruence reviewed AEP materials related to planning, outreach, application, selection, and grantee resources; analyzed structured reflection questionnaires completed by staff, Outreach Corps artists, and external reviewers; and designed and facilitated interviews and focus groups with five CRNY staff members, six program designers, six AEP artists, and eight staff from AEP organizations. Congruence reviewed transcriptions from interviews and focus groups, conducted a qualitative analysis, and then

collaborated with CRNY staff to write and edit the report. The final report was not reviewed with non-staff reflection participants.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted confidentially in order to encourage openness. As such, quotes from individuals who participated in the research are included anonymously throughout the report.

This reflection was conducted between March and December 2023, creating a number of limitations. At the time of writing, the program is still in process, and changes are occurring in real time. Congruence was not able to personally observe program implementation, which occurred in 2021 and 2022, or to sit in on programmatic supports offered prior to or after their engagement as evaluators. CRNY determined that it was important to conduct this reflection with ample time to share lessons learned prior to CRNY's closing in December 2024.

Lastly, the scale of the program and diversity of collaborations supported presented another limitation. The number of variables—including size and type of community, size and type of organization, number of artists employed, and range of artistic practices—is vast compared to the sample size for the evaluation, making it a challenge to generalize themes or trends about the program overall.

Progam Overview

Creatives Rebuild New York (CRNY) was created as a response to the crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Artists were a particularly vulnerable group among the many negatively impacted by the inability to work in person.[1]

Many governmental relief programs, like the Small Business Administration's Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), were provided to organizations; many artists didn't benefit from these funds because they weren't full-time staff at organizations, and most of the funds impacted larger arts organizations.[2] These troubling circumstances highlighted extreme gaps in support for workers, leading to new and renewed unionization efforts and innovations in funding.[3] Initially, Creatives Rebuild New York was proposed by Elizabeth Alexander as a member of the Reimagine

New York Commission, which was created by Governor Andrew Cuomo to "recommend how New York could build back better and more equitably in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis."[4] Funding for this effort was ultimately excluded from the state budget, so the Mellon Foundation, led by Elizabeth Alexander, stepped in to fund Creatives Rebuild New York. The vision was to demonstrate funding programs that could be continued by government and/or public-private partnerships. CRNY provided support to

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[1] Cohen, Randy. "COVID-19's Pandemic's Impact on The Arts: Research Update May 12, 2022." Americans for the Arts. Accessed online January 2024 https://www.americansforthearts.org/node/103614

[2] Fonner, Daniel. "Smaller Organizations in NYC Experience Greater Difficulties with PPP Program." SMU Data Arts, Jul 16, 2020 Accessed online February 2024 https://culturaldata.org/learn/data-at-work/2020/small-organizations-in-nyc-experience-greater-difficulties-with-ppp-program/

[3] Wallace, Alicia. "America's workers gained power during Covid. A volatile economy will put that to the test." CNN Business, June 14, 2022. Accessed online January 2024 at https://www.cnn.com/2022/06/14/economy/labor-union-momentum-economy/index.html

[4] The Reimagine New York Commission Report, Action Plan for a Reimagined New York," March 31, 2021. Accessed online January 2024 at https://www.governor.ny.gov/sites/default/files/atoms/files/CRNY_Report.pdf

individual artists through two programs: Guaranteed Income for Artists (GI) and the Artist Employment Program (AEP).

The goal of the AEP is to support artists' livelihood via stable employment, support arts and non-arts community-based organizations, and support community-driven social impact. Several historic programs—including the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA)—served as models for its design.[5]

TIMELINE	
Launch of CRNY	June 2021
Think Tank Gatherings	September 2021-January 2022
Application Guidelines Released	March 2022
Stage One Applications Due	March 25, 2022
Stage One Finalists Notified	April 25-May 20, 2022
Stage Two Interviews	June 6, 2022
Selected Partnerships Publicly Announced	June 2022
Artists Employment Begins	July 2022
Organizational Funds Disbursed	July 2022, January 2023, July 2023, January 2024
Collaboration Support	July 2022-June 2024
Artist Employment Ends	June 2024

Context

In addition to reflecting on the program itself, both interviewees and CRNY staff brought up the structural and systemic context that artist employment programs operate in—and in some cases are working to address. From the paucity of liveable wages in the nonprofit sphere and lack of social protections for low-wage and contract workers, to the complexity of employment law and dysfunction of both private healthcare and public benefits systems in the U.S.—no single employment program will be able to transform the lives and livelihoods of artists without extensive advocacy and organizing efforts for systems change in parallel.

[5] Anania, Billie. "ART/WORK: How the Government-Funded CETA Jobs Put Artists to Work," February 28, 2023, Creatives Rebuild NY. Accessed online January 2024 at https://www.creativesrebuildny.org/2023/02/28/art-work/

Reflections on Program Design

The Think Tank

KEY DETAILS

To design both the Guaranteed income for Artists program and the Artist Employment Program, Creatives Rebuild New York gathered a diverse group of 28 advisors into a Think Tank to participate in facilitated meetings over a period of four months in fall of 2021. Think Tank members included New York state artists, scholars, strategists, and activists with wide-ranging identities and experiences. Through bi-monthly facilitated digital meetings, this group advised on the direction and details of both demonstration programs. The Think Tank ensured close attention was paid to disrupting the traditional power dynamics between artists and employers, and centering artists in every step of the process. They specifically guided CRNY's decisions around the ap plication structure, geographic distribution, and salary and funding parity across the state.

THINK TANK STRENGTHS

All who participated noted the diversity of perspectives and expertise, including the critical lens of lived experience, as a particular strength of the Think Tank.

While CRNY was anxious to to release funds to artists as soon as possible at an urgent time—those benefiting from the funding—needed to inform the program design. The team understood that prioritizing artists in the design, and in particular those who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC); Deaf and Disabled; and/or Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual/Aromantic, Pansexual+ (LGBTQIAP+), was a key step in ensuring that artists' needs and perspectives were central in the program design. Equally important was the inclusion of people from across New York State with whom the CRNY team was not already familiar and who were not usually involved in funding decisions. CRNY did this in order to forefront BIPOC artist voices, particularly Indigenous voices. Through the Think Tank process, CRNY was encouraged to shift the focus from selecting and funding organizations to centering the needs and perspectives of artists. Many replicable successes, and no real challenges, were noted about the Think Tank, and participants were clear that a similar process should be included in all funding programs so that participants can have a hand in designing and determining the programs that may serve them.

> " As much as it complicated things, the Think Tank was the first time that I've seen people design with, not for. And I was so impressed by it. I think it's what I've always wanted to see in any type of program, bar none."

Program Elements

BIG CHOICES

As advised by the Think Tank, CRNY designed the beneficiaries of the program to be threefold: artists, community-based organizations, and communities. They also prioritized collaborations working with communities that are "BIPOC, immigrants, LGBTQIAP+, Deaf/Disabled, criminal legal system involved, living at or below the poverty line, and/or living in rural areas." This commitment was further articulated in CRNY's guiding values statement, as influenced by the Think Tank's directives: "CRNY's ethical framework prioritizes transformative, caring support for artists; trust in and respect for program participants; worker solidarity and labor acknowledgement; reparative, equitable access to funds and opportunities; and an invitation to challenge and reimagine existing systems and institutions."

CRNY determined that artists across the state would receive the same salary and support for benefits. While another option would have been scaling by cost of living in a particular place, the Think Tank decided that equal pay across the state was more important given the historical imbalance of arts funding directed primarily to New York City and other urban centers. It was also determined that artists would receive access to employer-sponsored health benefits and the protections of W2 employment (e.g., access to worker's compensation, tax withholding, unemployment, etc.) as part of the program.

To make eligibility and participation possible for smaller organizations that may not have the operational or human resources capacity to bring on new employees or provide health benefits, CRNY partnered with Tribeworks, a worker-owned cooperative. Tribeworks became a critical piece of intermediary infrastructure, as they provided employment and benefits for 170 out of 300 artists. Artists employed through Tribeworks also had the option of joining as a cooperative member, a status which can continue after the AEP ends. Tribeworks' alignment with solidarity economy values and their overall commitment to artists as a class of workers were key factors in CRNY's decision to partner with them.

CRNY hired an Outreach Corps to get the word out across the vast scale of New York State— especially to artists and organizations doing grassroots, intensive community-based work with the populations being prioritized, and to those who are not often funded through similar grants and programs. The Outreach Corps was composed of ten regional artist organizers who conducted outreach, answered questions, and assisted with applications. Outreach Corps members

were hired through an open call, but in order to find the cultural organizers who could most successfully utilize their networks and understand the nuance of applicants, CRNY staff leaned on their ecosystem of contacts. Staff found that when at least three people mentioned the same potential Outreach Corps member, this was a sign that that person was a cornerstone of the region and might be able to successfully identify gaps in the region. They also ensured that the pool of Outreach Corps members hired were diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, geography, and artistic discipline, and hired one Outreach Corps member specifically focused on reaching Deaf and Disabled applicants. CRNY also collaborated with Good Call to administer a Help Desk, an email and call based hotline for those needing technical support.

To operationalize the Think Tank's push to balance power dynamics between artists and organizations, CRNY required a joint application. Applications were open to collaborations only; specific artists had to be named in an organization's application and those artists had to fill out their own sections as well as collaborate on a shared section and take part in a joint second-round interview. The program would also guarantee dedicated time for artists' personal practice; an explicitly articulated process for grievances and navigating conflict; and jointly created agreements around work hours and responsibilities to help address power dynamics.

BronxNet Media educator and producer, Estefanía Chaves, works with Fresh Air Fund students at South Bronx studio.
Photo Credit: Michael Palma Mir

Program Model at a Glance

- 300 artists employed for two years

- Artists received a salary of $65,000/ year (based on New York State's median income) and benefits package equivalent to 28% of salary, including medical, worker's compensation, and unemployment insurances

- Artists' salary included paid and dedicated time for artists to devote to their own personal artistic practice

- Organizations received between $25,000–$100,000 per year to support operational or programmatic costs associated with artists' employment (scaled based on the number of artists and level of need in the collaboration)

- Collaborations working with or in the following communities were prioritized: BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color), immigrants, LGBTQIAP+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual/Aromantic, Pansexual+), Deaf/Disabled, criminal legal system-involved, living at or below the poverty line, and/or living in rural areas (see full demographic data here)

- Application had to be completed collaboratively by artists and organizations

- Criteria for selection did not include an assessment of individual artists' financial need or artistic merit. External reviewers evaluated applicants based on the strength and integrity of the proposed collaborations, and the potential to benefit their named communities

- CRNY partnered with Tribeworks, a worker-owned cooperative that acted as an employment intermediary and handled payroll and benefits for 170 out of the 300 participating artists

- Program supports for participating artists and organizations included: assistance with shared agreements; twice yearly check-ins on Zoom; conflict mediation as needed; specialized webinars on fundraising, employment law, and other topics; 7 regional in-person gatherings; monthly online hangouts; and digital community offerings (dedicated social media network and directory)

PROGRAM DESIGN STRENGTHS

The AEP salary of $65,000, which is the median household income in the state of New York, offers a real living wage for artists. This level of funding, as well as the structure of providing W2 employment that includes time for artists to focus on their own practice, was reported as extremely meaningful by the vast majority of interviewees. It has resulted in many people being able to live safe, healthy, secure lives. Wages for artists—specifically for artistic work, not administrative work—gives artists the rare opportunity to do paid work on their practice. These choices related to salary and benefits also demonstrate the value and worth of artists' time, contributing both to their own artistic practice and to community-engaged social change projects.

The opportunity to offer W2 employment and benefits through Tribeworks allowed participation by organizations that otherwise would not have been able to collaborate with artists. Additional funding for the organizations was critical to relieving burden, especially for small organizations, and

allowed for flexibility across the collaborations. Some organizations used funds to invest heavily in work developed by their employed artists, while others used the funds to supplement their program offerings or administrative expenses.

Thoughtful and trail-blazing aspects of the program were appreciated widely. In a philanthropic ecosystem where multi-year grants are rare, AEP's two-year timeline created time for artists to meaningfully integrate into an organizations' inner workings, for

artists to contribute to programmatic impact, and for organizational leadership to learn about what working with artists is like long-term. The two-year salary—as opposed to more traditional project-specific funding—created a flexible structure and spacious timeline that made it possible for artists to explore and change direction as their creative processes evolved. Many participants noted that the regional gatherings and other networking events also facilitated valuable information sharing and connection.

> "
> The ability to support process and not just outcomes—the process of the artists working in community, the process of the artists working on creative work—means that things are going to iterate through time and shift.
> And that's a good thing."

PROGRAM DESIGN CHALLENGES

Any new funding program—and especially a complex one run statewide at this scale—can expect to encounter variation and challenges as it moves from design to implementation. Below are tensions and challenges noted by interviewees and CRNY staff.

Timeline

CRNY sought to move funds quickly given the level of need artists and organizations were facing during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, many early decisions, partnerships, and other elements of the program were implemented at a rapid speed and intense pace. Staff experienced a tension between this urgency and CRNY's fundamental values, which

include a commitment to providing care and support to applicants (and partners) at all stages of the process.

Salary levels

While the salary of $65,000 matches the statewide median income, median income varies dramatically from region to region. Pay parity became an issue in the several cases in which AEP artists made a higher salary than other staff at the participating organization. This was further complicated by the perception that artists had fewer responsibilities because they were paid to do their artistic practice alongside organizational work. The disparity between participating artist salaries and median salary in regions where cost of living is lower than others may

also mean that many organizations will not be able to sustain the salary after the program's sunset, resulting in unemployment.

Access to benefits

Though CRNY mandated and funded benefits as part of the program, the actual benefits that artists received varied widely, as they were provided directly by each collaborating organization or by Tribeworks. Some organizations do not offer retirement plans or flexible spending accounts (FSA's), for example, and healthcare plans are unique to each organization. Out of pocket healthcare costs—for things like deductibles, specialist care, and premiums for other family members—ran especially high for those with chronic care needs, and network coverage was lacking in rural areas and for those seeking mental health care.

Conflict resolution

AEP staff have been in regular communication with participating artists and organizations through check-ins, regional gatherings, and more. For about 90% of the collaborations, they observe that very little or no conflict has arisen. For the 10% who have experienced conflict, much of it has been a result of the level of flexibility the program was intentionally designed to have. That some collaborations used Tribeworks to pay their artists led to confusion about whom artists should be accountable to; other artists felt it wasn't clear how to seek support when they felt they were asked to do work other than what was initially agreed to. Some organizations sought to give artists agency and then struggled not to put undue management burden on them. CRNY's openness to the details of the time allotted for artists to work on their own practice during their work hours for the organization—when, what, how, and for whom—created tension and questions for some. For others, the process of creating a shared agreement after the start of the grant period highlighted critical differences after a collaboration had already begun.

Nestor "Panama" Eversley performing during The Fortune Society's Pennants & Poets event. Photo Credit: Jenny Polak

Reflections on Program Implementation

Outreach and Application Process

KEY DETAILS

The Artist Employment Program launched simultaneously with the Guaranteed Income for Artists program, and thus many of the outreach efforts supported both programs. Outreach included 12 information sessions that were organized and run by CRNY staff and held with local partners around the state of New York. Information sessions had access support provided via Zoom.

CRNY's outreach efforts were supported by hired artist-organizers across the state, referred to collectively as the Outreach Corps. Corps members held their own events, publicized the programs through their own social media accounts, and made themselves available by phone and email to discuss the CRNY opportunities with their networks. Outreach Corps members were trusted sources for people who would not normally apply or think they were eligible, answering questions and offering encouragement.

The application process first required artists and organizations to provide information and answer form

questions via text in a joint application online, using the Submittable platform. To support connections, CRNY created a directory of organizations for artists to contact if interested in collaboration. During the initial application process, CRNY partnered with Good Call to create a phone and email-based Help Desk that provided extensive technical assistance and fielded thousands of questions about eligibility and program structure. The Help Desk also provided multilingual translators. CRNY translated its website and application guidelines into the top 10 languages spoken in the state of New York, and offered translation support via the Help Desk for those interested in applying in languages other than English or Spanish.

> **"**
>
> The work that [the Outreach Corps] did on the ground was unbelievable. They were able to reach into communities and reach into places that I think we never would have gotten."

OUTREACH AND APPLICATION STRENGTHS

Interviewees commend CRNY on the unusually thoughtful and rigorous approach to outreach, and wished more grant programs would follow suit. The geographic distribution of Outreach Corps members and local knowledge made it possible to focus on communities that are typically underrepresented in applications and generally underfunded. This was key to reaching underserved artists and organizations, and resulted in a diverse applicant pool. Outreach was conducted in English, Spanish and Mandarin Chinese; Corps members also provided support in the process, ensuring that support was provided to people based on their individual levels of experience and comfort. Beyond the Outreach Corps, collaboration with regional partners to host virtual information sessions ensured outreach was meaningfully conducted across the state.

Further, CRNY's definition of artists was broad, and inclusive of a wide variety of artistic disciplines and practices. For those who had questions, both

the Outreach Corps and Help Desk were critical in helping people navigate the online application process and understanding which program (AEP or GI) they were eligible for. The questions received by the Outreach Corps and Help Desk were used to create a supplemental Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document that helped illuminate common pain points.

OUTREACH AND APPLICATION CHALLENGES

Some structural and several technical issues were noted as challenges in the outreach and application processes. First, some potential applicants struggled to distinguish between the GI and AEP programs to determine which would be the best fit. CRNY staff reflected that launching and publicizing both programs simultaneously added to this confusion: the messaging around artist employment is nuanced, the collaboration requirements were specific, and eligibility requirements for the two programs were quite different.

Other challenges related to supporting applicants include that outreach in languages other than the most popular in the state of New York (English, Spanish, and Mandarin Chinese) could have used deeper community engagement by hiring Outreach Corps members or partnering with service organizations fluent in Russian, Yiddish, Bengali, Korean, Haitian Creole, Italian, Polish, and Arabic. Applicants relying on translated documents required additional support due to technical terminology (jargon) of the arts sector whose effectiveness or meaning diminished during the translation process. The Help Desk was overwhelmed with questions via email and phone, and as a result applicants were sometimes on hold for hours trying to get support.

While the requirement of a shared application helped ensure that partnerships between artists and organizations were mutual, it also made it difficult for artists without extensive networks or

past collaboration experience to find appropriate organizations for a two-year collaboration. The shared authorship also required an unexpected baseline of familiarity and power sharing not often seen within arts sector grant applications.

The technical application process was challenging, in that it was difficult to find an online application platform that allowed multiple users to contribute to one submission—a critical component of the co-created application. This also made it hard for applicants to navigate, and challenging for CRNY staff to access the resulting data.

Lastly, the overwhelming 'success' of outreach efforts led to far more applications than the CRNY team anticipated. Many artists and organizations who were not selected expressed frustration when they learned CRNY funded less than 4% of applicants, and CRNY staff questioned whether outreach should have been more targeted.

Applicant Review and Selection Process

KEY DETAILS

The selection process for the Artist Employment Program had two stages: an application review stage and an interview stage. Phase One was the joint application, detailed above. Phase Two consisted of a 60–90 minute interview, the questions for which were provided in advance to those selected for Phase Two. Interviewers included one member of the CRNY staff and an external reviewer with familiarity with the region, artistic discipline, and/or community represented in the proposal.

CRNY staff expected up to 300-500 applications; in the end, 2,700 applications were submitted, 1,800 of which were eligible. CRNY brought on 20 external reviewers to support decision-making for the

expected 300-500 applications. Reviewers were hired from a diverse range of geographic regions and lived experiences so that local and cultural expertise could be leveraged. To reduce conflicts of interest, CRNY did not allow applicants to serve as reviewers.

REVIEW AND SELECTION STRENGTHS

Many aspects of the selection process were successful. The joint application form and interviews created a platform for artists and organizations to have equal voice in the design and structure of the collaboration. Artistic merit was intentionally not a decision point for panelists. Work samples were not accepted, though artists could submit a website in order for reviewers to understand their practice in relation to the proposed collaboration. Instead of artistic merit, the criteria that panelists based selection on included the integrity of connection and alignment between the artist and organization, and potential for impact.

Participants noted that the focus on priority communities resulted in a more diverse applicant pool than the vast majority of other arts grants. Additionally, the peer reviewers provided helpful context about artists, organizations, and communities described in the applications. The Phase Two interviews shifted the burden away from additional written application materials and allowed reviewers to see people interact live, which gave a much clearer picture of the strength and integrity of the collaboration. This process was noted to set the tone from the beginning that artists are at the center of the program.

> "The program has been most successful where artists had a relationship with the organization or at least feel close alignment with the organization's mission; where organizations have a respect for and understanding of artist labor, and in organizations that have flexibility and resources to help manage the projects and support the artists in various ways."

REVIEW AND SELECTION CHALLENGES

The most significant challenge was the intense workload for reviewers on a tight timeline, as CRNY received more than three times as many applications as they expected. Software platform constraints created another challenge – viewing, filtering, and managing the data was not straightforward for CRNY staff, who believe the selection process would have benefitted from a relational database that connected all applicants and organizations within a collaboration. Much of the demographic information and key characteristics of organizations and individuals needed to be hand-collated or assessed qualitatively since the data was not easy to sort or filter. As a result, it was difficult for staff and reviewers to ensure certain demographics and disciplines were as represented in the final pool as was desired.

Ongoing Operations

KEY DETAILS

After completing onboarding and set-up, CRNY staff shifted their focus to program operations. This has included responding to arising needs in real time and introducing tools to address unanticipated challenges. For example, after an early disagreement necessitated mediation, CRNY made conflict management services available to address conflicts arising between artists and organization, with roughly 10% of collaborations experiencing conflict. After realizing that some of the conflicts arising between artists and organizations stemmed from a lack of agreement about work schedules and locations, and frequency and types of communications, CRNY staff required artists and relevant staff at their collaborator organizations to create shared agreements.

In response to often-noted feedback from arts organizations about other grants requiring onerous reporting, CRNY set up individual Zoom meetings with each collaboration in lieu of written reports. These

meetings are set to occur twice in each grant year between CRNY staff and AEP participants to discuss struggles, accomplishments, and learnings. This allows for timely responses and adjustments.

Realizing that artists and organizations needed additional support for how to collaborate early on in the process, CRNY provided free access to Art Train, a training and technical assistance program of Springboard for the Arts, as well as a series of webinars on fundraising, accessibility, and employment law in response to requests for more support around capacity building and professional development.

Beginning in year two of the program, CRNY planned additional 'transition supports' for artists and organizations in advance of the program's end date. Based on participant requests, CRNY staff also developed a series of program elements to help AEP artists and organizations connect with one another online and in person. These included:

- informal monthly gatherings on Zoom,
- a dedicated online social media site run by Tribeworks where grantees can share expertise, questions, work, and access a shared calendar,
- an online directory of all participants, and
- regional in-person gatherings.

> "
> **It wasn't micromanaging us, it wasn't forcing outcomes. It was recognizing that the people who got the grants know what they're doing for the most part and allowing us to do it."**

OPERATIONAL STRENGTHS

Participants roundly appreciated CRNY staff for being communicative and responsive. They also appreciated staff's willingness to adapt and to integrate grantee feedback into ongoing program design and offerings. All noted how wonderful it was to have a lessened burden for grantees by not requiring formal reporting; and also appreciated the focus on experience and process over delivery of artistic 'product.' CRNY staff noted that because this is a time-bound initiative with no future rounds of funding, they experienced little sense of pressure on grantees to 'impress' them, as is often the case. Staff noted many times during check-ins that if grantees did less than what they intended there would be no withholding of funds or other ramifications, and if they did more, there was also no way for a reward to be offered, leading to a high degree of authenticity and clarity in communication.

The open-endedness of the program has created an enormous amount of creativity and variation in how

collaborations have unfolded. The work ranges from labor organizing for fair pay within the theater industry to intertribal collaboration among Haudenosaunee culture bearers. This open-endedness allowed collaborations to respond to what was needed in their individual communities (without necessitating a scope change from a funder) and what emerged from the process of shared work.

> "
> This was experimental. So much can be learned from the stuff that goes wrong. And so there's value in that too."

OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES

A few artists and staff at organizations mentioned that their staff sometimes struggled to understand the full scope of creative processes and what cultural work is. That led some to overly prescribe traditional artistic products (e.g., murals, sculptures) for their collaborations. A few collaborations struggled with the high degree of flexibility of the program; for some, conflict stemmed from a lack of clarity about these aspects of the program. As noted above, there were not initial shared agreements about specific work hours and responsibilities of the artists, though these were later required.

Several collaborations noted that the timing of the onboarding process was challenging. Grants were awarded in June, and employment was expected to begin one month later in July. This was challenging for organizations, especially smaller ones with less operations—and human resource capacity—and for artists who had been working independently. There were also some general administrative hurdles common for grants, including missing deadlines for paperwork that resulted in some artists missing open enrollment periods for healthcare and other benefits.

Finally, a few of the larger organizations' human resources teams struggled to internally classify the work artists were doing within salaried employment, particularly if they were hesitant to 'count' the artist's own hours devoted to their personal practice as part of their organizational duties—even though that was a grant requirement and essential to the collaboration. This pushed some organizations to re-think how they manage all of their employees, which was beneficial in several cases.

Recommendations for Future Programs

For artists interested in salaried employment with an organization and organizations that are interested in having artists as part of their workforce, an artist employment program can be a transformative experience for artists, organizations, and communities. Below are recommendations for future programs, including things CRNY did do as well as things to consider doing differently.

Program Design

Co-design the program with potential participants. Create a structure (through an advisory group or some other method) to ensure that the design and implementation are values aligned. Take care to ensure that potential applicants receiving public benefits are part of the co-design process, given the impact that salaries and benefits from an AEP have on that group specifically. Consider working with AEP participants for thought partnership and mentorship.

Clearly define the bounds of artists' employment. Define the bounds of the artist's job duties, schedule, and relationship with other staff at the organizations as clearly as possible. Establish baseline guidance around the division of artists' time between collaborative work and personal practice (e.g., 60% time for artists to work on organizational duties versus 40% on personal practice). To help avoid conflict, mandate shared agreements and clarify expectations for both parties as part of phase two of the application, or as a program begins. Make clear conflict resolution procedures and mediation resources available from the start. Be sure to consult employment lawyers to support contracting and make sure expectations and agreements comply with employment law.

Build in a mechanism for small organizations to receive grants and hire artists. Many small organizations may not be able to participate in and benefit from artist employment programs without a mechanism to support—or an intermediary to replace—the human resource capacity requirements of participation. To help make participation possible for even small organizations, an intermediary, worker cooperative, or other solution should be sought to make organizations that cannot administer an artist's W2 payroll, and health benefits, or meet other associated demands, eligible to participate. While this has the added benefit of disrupting hierarchies between employees and employers, it may also add ambiguity and complexity

if conflicts arise. It can complicate where the ultimate power of authority lies.

Consider the timeline with grace. Integrating an artist as an employee of an organization can be complex, especially when efforts are made to develop an artist's community-oriented work and make space for the artist's own personal practice. Participatory program design and thoughtful outreach and application processes take time. Balance the urgency to get funds into the hands of people who need it, with the time it takes to do so with care. When the program begins, consider a six-month orientation period specifically for onboarding to build trusting relationships, understand each other's needs and working styles, determine shared agreements, and work through any issues that may arise. There is a need for an extended integration period, and for the program as a whole to last sufficiently long for community work to have maximum impact.

Consider equity between regions and pay parity within organizations when determining artists' salary. Examine the pros and cons of offering a salary that doesn't take into account regional variation in cost of living. Using a state-wide median income to determine a flat salary for all artists, as CRNY did, provided a real living wage for many, but also created pay disparity within organizations (for example, the artist's salary could be higher than that of an organization's leadership). In some regions, it also diminishes the likelihood that an organization can keep an artist employed at the same level—or at all—after the program ends. Whatever the salary level is, provide support for organizations to have transparent conversations about salary within the entire organization.

Outreach and Application Process

Conduct thorough and equitable outreach.
In order for programs to be accessible to communities, organizations, and individuals across demographics and geographies—and to more successfully engage those who are often shut out from these opportunities—employ trusted cultural organizers to conduct local outreach. Partner with local place-based entities to offer regional information sessions. Offer outreach to immigrant communities in multiple languages, and offer in-person sessions in areas of the state with limited internet bandwidth, as is often the case for tribal nations or in rural communities. Municipal governments and organizations can be approached specifically. Proactively provide access supports to ensure that Deaf and Disabled applicants can participate. Ensure there is generous time built in to outreach and application processes, and that there is plenty of technical support to address any issues that may arise unexpectedly.

Support matchmaking. Establish a process and resources to support introductions or matchmaking among artists and organizations that do not have a pre-existing relationship. Make sure to build in sufficient time for artists and organizations to deepen their understanding of each other's practices, goals, strengths, and weaknesses before collaborating on an application or entering into a long term employment relationship.

Design the application process to encourage collaboration and power-sharing.
If a collaboration is being funded (rather than an artist, organization, or other entity on their own), the application should be jointly completed. This can minimize power imbalances once the grant is awarded and ensure that the proposal being submitted is one that both the artist and organization have agency in designing. Funding that supports multiple parties may

require custom software to allow for true collaboration in the application process—a platform where people can fill out different sections of the application simultaneously and separately. An interview-based application process can also reveal underlying power dynamics, as seeing collaborators interact can give a clearer picture (than what can be understood in writing) of the strength and integrity of a team, and can set the tone for centering artists from the beginning. Other ideas to consider are paying artists for the application process, building in time to hear from artists independently, and conducting webinars before final decisions are made to clarify the goals, intentions, and expectations of each collaborator in the program.

Application Review and Selection Process

Align selection criteria with values. Artist employment programs can support a range of artists with a variety of skills, experiences, and practices. Program goals may include community impact, public access, or any number of other outcomes. At their core, however, employment programs are supporting a relationship between individuals and organizations. As such, selection criteria should go beyond the conventional (and subjective) assessment of 'artistic merit' and instead prioritize the strength and integrity of the proposed collaboration, as well as the degree to which support will be mutually beneficial for both the artist and the organization.

Create a jury-of-peers review panel.
Hiring external reviewers who can bring local, community, or discipline-specific expertise helps identify under-recognized local artists and lift up cultural understanding and sensitivities that program administrators may not be aware of. Prioritize reviewers from underrepresented communities in order to operationalize the inclusion of those

communities in the final selection. Ensure that enough time is given for reviewers to meaningfully review all applications and discuss with each other.

Ensure that data tracking aligns with values and intended impacts. Use data methodically to support applicants from prioritized marginalized communities. This will make it easier to ensure that groups and communities that are often underfunded are represented in the grantee pool and set up for success in the program.

Ongoing Operations

Carefully consider salary and healthcare benefits, specifically how they may impact people with disabilities and others receiving public benefits. Administrators need to understand how their program can put an individual's housing, healthcare, and other public benefits at risk. Be sure to assess how salaried income may impact any benefits that participants are receiving from various public aid programs, especially if those programs' eligibility were means-tested.[6] Offer benefits counseling for those who are at risk of losing their status or qualification, and be prepared to advise and adapt to a variety of circumstances.
Also take into consideration the current imperfect and inequitable state of healthcare, and unique needs that may arise among program participants. Employer-sponsored healthcare programs vary in quality, cost, and accessibility. The more participants a program can enroll through one program, the more purchasing power it has, and the higher the likelihood of better benefits.

Provide additional wraparound services for artists and organizations. Offer professional development capacity-building activities throughout the program, with specific attention towards how artists can transition out of a program most effectively. Suggested topics include: budgeting, human resource management, working with artists and community training, financial management, social media and

marketing, connecting with tax advisors, small business development, and effective communication. Recognize that many people carry trauma from past or current employment and community relationships, and consider trainings for program staff and participating organizations in areas such as non-violent communication, cultural sensitivity, and other methods used in social service provision. Create opportunities for artists and organizations to share knowledge, experiences, and networks through virtual and in-person gatherings or other peer-to-peer forums.

Lessen burdens on applicants and grantees.
Artist employment programs can be an opportunity to implement many of the principles of trust-based philanthropy.[7] In the application process, recognize that work samples can be a barrier for artists in early career stages or those who don't have funds to document their work professionally. Find other ways to get to know artists and organizations outside of written applications, which tend to prioritize those with professional fundraising staff or expertise.

After funding decisions have been made, consider forgoing formal reporting from participating artists and organizations, and create a funding schedule that is not conditional upon awardees meeting certain milestones but rather allows for evolution and growth that can happen in longer term employment relationships. This requires a shift in mindset for staff, as well as for grantees who may be used to a more hierarchical relationship. To help facilitate responsive communications, create multimodal communication platforms to reach artists and organizations with different communication needs and preferences.

> " Several arts organization leaders noted that they never before understood how much time and labor it takes for the artists they've been working with for years to actually do the work."

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[6] The United States Census Bureau, "About Program Income and Public Assistance." Accessed online January 2024, https://www.census.gov/topics/income-poverty/public-assistance/about.html

[7] The Trust-Based Philanthropy Project, "Overview: A trust-based approach." Accessed online January 2024 at https://www.trustbasedphilanthropy.org/overview

Conclusion

Creatives Rebuild New York commissioned this process evaluation to provide transparency into the design and implementation of the Artist Employment Program for both participants and fellow program administrators.

In the coming months, CRNY will publicly release additional resources and documents developed to support AEP collaborations during the application process and funding period. Acknowledging that artist employment programs have unique contexts, variables, and goals, CRNY nonetheless hopes that others might learn from and build on this work in new ways.

As CRNY prepares to sunset in December of 2024, it is working not only to evaluate the impacts of the program on participating artists and organizations, but also to build collective power among artists and ensure that they are involved as constituents and creative partners in conversations about labor protections, social safety net reforms, and more. Forthcoming activities include:

- Advancing the recommendations of the Artist Employment Program Working Group with fellow program administrators, funders, policymakers, and artists/organizations who have participated in an artist employment program.

- Sharing multimedia storytelling campaigns that highlight the community impacts of CRNY-supported collaborations across New York State.

- Engaging New York City and State policymakers, through virtual and in-person workshops, to define and advance a set of priority actions and implementable solutions to address the economic precarity of artists.

For more information about CRNY's Artist Employment Program, or if you are interested in partnering to advance any of the working group recommendations, please contact: Jamie Hand, CRNY Director of Strategic Impact and Narrative Change (jamie@creativesrebuildny.org)

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Dancer Peniel Guerrier preparing dancers for a performance in Fall 2020.
Photo Credit: Flanbwayan Haitian Literacy Project

CREATIVES REBUILD NEW YORK