

Creatives Rebuild New York

Guaranteed Income for Artists
Process Evaluation

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating impact on artists, many of whom were already financially precarious and had no safety net. According to a [national survey](#) of 33,000 artists and cultural workers, 62% became unemployed nearly overnight, and 95% lost creative income.

Three quarters reported not having any financial safety net. As a result, over half reported being food insecure and 10% experienced homelessness. Chronically marginalized populations—including Black, Indigenous, transgender, and disabled artists—fared worse overall. New York State lost 50 percent of its performing arts jobs alone, and in [New York City](#) this figure climbs to 72 percent—the sharpest losses of any industry. The arts and entertainment sector was the only sector that remained below half of its pre-pandemic employment levels well into 2021.

In early 2021 Governor Cuomo convened the [Reimagine New York Commission](#) to develop policy recommendations for how New York could recover better and more equitably in the wake of the pandemic. The Commission included experts from a range of fields, including Elizabeth Alexander, President of the Mellon Foundation and a passionate arts advocate. The Commission

developed recommendations related to closing the digital divide, equitable access to healthcare, and expanding economic opportunities. One of the specific recommendations was to launch a new entity, Creatives Rebuild New York, to “support dozens of small- to mid-sized community arts organizations and more than 1,000 individual artists over the next two years, acknowledging the role of artists in invigorating local economies, providing insights, and helping find inspiration as we navigate the challenging events of our time.”

The Mellon Foundation launched Creatives Rebuild New York (CRNY) in July 2021 as a three-year initiative fiscally sponsored by the Tides Center. It contributed \$115 Million to anchor the fund and was joined by the Ford Foundation and the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF) who provided \$5 million each.

CRNY has two demonstration funding programs—the Artist Employment Program, which provides artists

with full-time employment in arts and community organizations, and the Guaranteed Income for Artists program, which provides artists with no-strings-attached monthly income. The initiative is guided by a Leadership Council, which functions as an advisory board, and was supported by a Think Tank throughout the process of program design. Both structures included artists, as well as CRNY staff, funders (on the Leadership Council), and others with relevant expertise (such as scholars of Guaranteed Income).

Like many involved in pandemic relief for artists, CRNY recognized that the pandemic merely revealed and magnified artists' experience of financial precarity. As a result, while it sought to help artists recover from the pandemic in the short term, it also aimed to advance conversations and policies that might change their financial conditions over the long term. The program prioritized artists who have been most deeply impacted by structural inequalities in the arts system and society more broadly. Beyond providing direct funds to artists, CRNY is also working to advance the inclusion of artists and their concerns in conversations and policies around guaranteed income and economic justice. Toward this end, it is supporting a range of research, advocacy, and narrative change efforts, with a strong commitment to equitable evaluation practices and artist-centered storytelling. These efforts are designed to provide tools and knowledge that will support others to continue the work and influence policy at the local, state, and national levels.

This document is the result of a process evaluation of the design and implementation of Creatives Rebuild New York's Guaranteed Income for Artists program, conducted by Helicon Collaborative. The evaluation covered the period from inception through program launch and the beginning of disbursement of funds to artists, and looked at its goals, actions taken, critical

choices, and the lessons learned along the way. The evaluation did not include the community building work CRNY has done with artists since launching the program, or the activities it will undertake to help artists transition out of the program at the end of their payment term (however these efforts are discussed briefly in the [Care After Cash](#) and [Conclusion](#) sections of this document). A separate research initiative studying the impacts participating in the program has had on artists is currently underway.

The purpose of this document is twofold:

- To be a resource for other funders and intermediaries who are considering doing a GI or unrestricted cash transfer program for artists. The intention is to provide a transparent review of what CRNY did and why, and what was learned in the process, so that others might learn from and build on the work in new ways.
- To inform a working group that CRNY convened in August and November of 2023 with peer administrators of guaranteed income or direct cash assistance programs for artists and leaders in the guaranteed income movement. The purpose of this working group was to share experiences, discuss lessons learned, and develop recommendations for the field going forward. The strategic opportunities identified in these conversations are [available as a separate document](#).

Methodology



Choral rehearsal. Artist: Lizhen Guo **Photo Credit:** Manhattan Union City Dance Company, New York

This evaluation draws on data and insights gathered from:

- Conversations with the CRNY team
- Review and analysis of internal CRNY memos, surveys, reports, and other critical summary documents
- Interviews with eight CRNY staff and key partners
- Conversations with three artist participants
- Attendance at the Basic Income Guarantee conference in June 2023
- Conversations with peer program administrators and GI experts in August and November 2023.

Research questions covered:

- What significant design choices were made and why, and their implications
- What worked well and what was challenging about the process for applicants, staff, and partners
- Lessons learned that might inform others considering doing similar programs
- Ways that artists are similar to / different from other low income constituencies (according to project partners and advisors that serve a wider constituency)

Program at-a-Glance

CRNY's Guaranteed Income for Artists Program provided 2,400 artists with monthly, no-strings-attached, cash payments of \$1,000 for 18 months. Input on program design was provided by a Think Tank, which included artists, arts administrators, and GI scholars.

The Think Tank discussed and provided guidance on the program design, which included the following components (see links for more details):

- [Overarching program values and goals and application design](#)
- [Payment amounts, frequency, and duration](#)
- [Eligibility requirements](#)
- [Outreach and application launch](#)
- [Weighting and prioritization](#)
- [Selection](#)
- [Verification](#)
- [Enrollment and onboarding](#)
- [Benefits protection and counseling](#)

CRNY conducted extensive outreach to reach artists who are often missed by or excluded from funding programs and artist services, including hiring a diverse outreach team of artists from across the state. There was a fully staffed Help Desk during the application process, which fielded questions and provided application guidance. In total 22,620 interested artists submitted an application and 2,400 were selected randomly via a weighted "lottery," which prioritized artists who face multi-point oppression.

Pre-Selected artists were required to submit documentation to prove that they were an artist, culture-maker, or culture-bearer; lived in New York State; and had financial need, as defined by the [Self-Sufficiency Standard](#). All three requirements were independently verified by CRNY and its partners, Steady App, Probity, and contracted artist reviewers. Once verified, artists were offered benefits counseling

so that they could understand how receiving the GI funds might impact public benefits or other income-based services they already were receiving before deciding to enroll in the program.

Artists were admitted on a rolling basis in five cohorts, and payments for each cohort started at different times. The program disbursed funds starting June 30, 2022 and will continue through March 15, 2024. Enrolled artists received a monthly direct deposit

into their bank account or were provided with a reloadable debit card if direct deposit was not possible or desirable. CRNY worked to mitigate negative impacts that did occur to participants' benefits, for example by providing lump sum payments to 17 artists who were SSI recipients in order to get around monthly income and resource restrictions.



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Summary of Successes and Challenges

This section describes key takeaways and lessons about the design and implementation of the program. More about each of these areas can be found in the subsequent chapter on [Process Details](#).

Successes

The Guaranteed Income for Artists program was a bold new undertaking that sought to support artists in New York State in an unprecedented way. There were many aspects of the program that can be considered a success.

A BOLD PROGRAM MANDATE

CRNY's providing of unrestricted cash to artists based on need—not artistic excellence—was a powerful intervention in the system of philanthropic support for artists as well as a contribution to the larger GI movement. Although CRNY was not the first artist-focused GI program in the United States, it is one of the largest GI programs of any kind to date and the only one focused on artists that has a statewide scope. This scale offered an opportunity to demonstrate the impact of GI across a large and diverse geography and cohort, as well as learn about the complexities of administering a program of this

size. Along with other GI and unrestricted cash support programs for artists, CRNY has demonstrated how arts philanthropy might support individual artists as whole people, not solely for the products or experiences they create. Additionally, because CRNY and other artist-focused GI programs have been deliberate about engaging with the larger GI movement, it has helped to elevate awareness among GI advocates about artists both as potential allies and a population that would benefit from GI policy.

STRONG VALUES

CRNY's stated ethical framework prioritized: transformative, caring support for artists; trust in and respect for program participants; reparative, equitable access to funds and opportunities; and an invitation to challenge and reimagine existing systems and institutions.

In particular, equity and artist-centeredness were deeply and consistently visible in all aspects of the

GI program design. CRNY and its partners provided individualized care and support to artists at all stages of the process, from application through receiving payment. The eligibility requirements were highly inclusive of artists of different types and skill levels, as well as those typically excluded from many funding opportunities—the undocumented, the unbanked, those who have changed their names, etc. The [selection process](#) prioritized artists who have experienced ‘multi-point oppression’ as a result of historical and structural disadvantages, defined as holding one or more of the following identities: Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color; Deaf/Disabled; LGBTQIAP+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual/Aromantic, Pansexual); Immigrants; Caregivers; Criminal legal system-involved; Lack of financial safety net; and/or Rural.

PARTICIPATORY DESIGN PROCESS

The use of a participatory design process (the [Think Tank](#)) that included artists in decision-making helped CRNY refine the program’s intent and parameters, grapple with tensions, and ensure that the program met the needs of its target constituency. While designing the program in this way took more time and attention on the front end, staff believe it ultimately resulted in a better and more equitable program design.

AN EASY AND ACCESSIBLE APPLICATION

CRNY took steps to ensure its application process was as easy and accessible as possible, including making the application short and simple, providing assistance to those who lacked internet access or otherwise needed help, translating the application and doing outreach in other languages, and using technology tools that were accessible for the vision impaired. Artist feedback verifies that the application process was as easy and accessible as intended.

EXTENSIVE OUTREACH AND HANDS-ON SUPPORT

CRNY deployed creative [outreach methods](#) to ensure wide visibility across the state and with different constituencies, including hiring an Artist Outreach Corps to connect with hard-to-reach artists (those without internet, for example, or New Americans). A fully staffed Help Desk was also essential to fielding questions throughout the process. Both Artist Corps members and Help Desk staff even helped people apply in some cases where extra assistance was needed.

COLLABORATIVE STAFF AND PEER WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

Many of the core CRNY staff and consultants had worked together before, and so there was a foundation of trust and familiarity, which was essential for managing a complex, evolving, and fast-moving process. CRNY also relied heavily on the generous network of guaranteed income advocates, researchers, and program managers for resources and advice, especially the Guaranteed Income Community of Practice and the Jain Family Institute. Other GI and cash transfer programs for artists were also critical allies and advisors, including Springboard for the Arts (which runs the Guaranteed Minimum Income for Artists program), Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (which ran the San Francisco Guaranteed Income Pilot for Artists), and United States Artists (which coordinated the Artist Relief COVID-19 emergency fund).

POSITIVE IMPACT ON ARTISTS

The Guaranteed Income for Artists program is still underway, and its impacts on participating artists will be assessed in detail through a separate impact evaluation. However, artists interviewed for this review mentioned the transformational impact participating in this program has had on their financial lives, confidence, and sense of self.

Challenges

As expected for any ambitious new undertaking, there were some challenges throughout the design and implementation process that should inform others considering artist-focused GI or cash transfer programs, especially at a similar scale. Many of the implications of these challenges are not straightforward and will need to be grappled with by program designers. The 'right' choice will be context- and goal dependent.

DEFINING AND VERIFYING ARTISTIC STATUS

Defining and then verifying criteria for artistry was challenging and time consuming. Few, if any, other Guaranteed Income programs target a vocation, and in fact, some advocates feel doing so is anathema to the values of GI. Rather, most GI programs or pilots target people who share an objectively defined life experience—like being in the foster system or a single mother—or who are simply below a certain income threshold. Establishing criteria for assessing artistry while adhering to GI values of equity and universal deservingness is challenging because objective qualifications (like credentials or years of experience) tend to exclude many of the most underserved artists, yet allowing for entirely subjective self-definition (i.e., “I am because I say I am”) would make it difficult for the program to ensure the funds reach its target population of working artists. Adding additional complexity, some interviewees pointed out that people’s ability to practice art as they would like might be constrained by their current financial situation and unlocked when their basic needs are met. CRNY’s solution was to require proof that someone sought to derive income from their artistic work and/or share it with others but did not assess the quality of that work.

Having grappled extensively with this question and seeing how it played out in practice, CRNY staff

and partners expressed uncertainty about whether or how artistry should be a criterion for future GI programs. One person involved with the program said they had come to believe that “GI should not be targeted by vocation or employment. It goes against what GI is about. Artists need to see themselves and be seen in other GI programs.” Others questioned whether artistic excellence should have been a criterion, or if the program should have used more objective criteria to assess eligibility, such as minimum years of practice or income gained from artistic practice.

DEFINING AND VERIFYING FINANCIAL NEED

Many GI programs do not need to verify financial need because they are selecting from a group that meets charitable criteria by definition—for example, those who are enrolled in public benefits programs, are residents of a qualified low-income census tract, or have other ‘unusual burdens,’ like having been incarcerated or having a disability. Based on CRNY’s legal partners’ interpretations of the regulations, simply being an artist is insufficient to qualify someone for charitable status. Many funding programs for artists use artistic excellence or other benefits to society (such as educational or community-focused work) to qualify their recipients. However, doing so would not have aligned with the program’s values to reach artists facing financial hardship or the GI movement’s values that work should not be a criterion for deservingness.

Therefore, in order to align with the program’s intent and the values of the GI movement, it was essential to verify the financial eligibility of applicants. CRNY opted to use the [Self-Sufficiency Standard](#) instead of a simple income threshold as a more nuanced measure of financial need that takes into account cost of living and household expenses. While staff stand by this choice, it added an additional layer of complexity for verification for both the staff and applicants. Selecting from a pre-qualified pool would simplify verification for

future programs; however limiting eligible applicants to those that are already being reached by services in some way may exclude those who are most marginalized and missed by support systems entirely.

INSUFFICIENT STAFF CAPACITY AND TIME

The sheer volume of applicants and participants created exponentially more complexity than most other GI programs that CRNY consulted with in its design phase, so it was unprepared for what was required. The timeline was compressed because of the sense of urgency to provide relief to artists in a moment of financial crisis, and CRNY lacked adequate staff capacity given scope and ambition of the program, and commitment to provide “high touch” support to applicants and participants. Although CRNY staff were experienced grantmakers, many aspects of the work were more akin to customer service, social service work, or software design, all of which require different skill sets and capacities. In particular, future programs should provide training and support for staff to handle the emotional demands of social service work, which is different from traditional arts grantmaking. CRNY introduced this support for staff midway through the process after realizing its necessity.

Executing the program in a way that prioritized care, rigor, and equity also added time and labor. Doing a participatory planning process and grassroots outreach process further crunched the timeline between application and payment. CRNY staff spent extensive time supporting artists through the process of application and submitting documentation, which often required extensive follow up and consultation. The Help Desk sometimes received 200 emails in a single hour. Staff estimates that a program like this needs at least one person per 150 artists in order to provide this level of personal attention, however this contradicts the (understandable) desire to keep overhead costs low in order to maximize funds available for disbursement.

MANAGING A COMPLEX WEB OF PARTNERSHIPS AND TECHNOLOGY PLATFORMS

There was no single entity or technology tool that could do all that was required to execute the program—from selection to verification to fund distribution to counseling and support.

This also required building a custom database and processes to stitch and synchronize data across multiple sources. This created a disjointed experience for artists, who were sometimes confused about who to contact for what and where to send their information (according to inquiries received).

CRNY had to quickly onboard, manage, and coordinate a range of partners to support different phases of program implementation including:

- Program implementation + process design— independent contractor Kendra Danowski
- Outreach—Artist Outreach Corps and organizational partners
- Help Desk—Good Call as well as independent contractors
- Data analysis and security—Jain Family Institute and independent, certified analysts
- Application submission and verification— Submittable, Steady, Probita, and artist reviewers
- Benefits counseling—Henry Street Settlement and Work Without Limits
- Payments—Steady and Community Financial Resources

TECHNOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

Unanticipated [technological failures](#) experienced through Steady and Submittable caused headaches for CRNY and artists alike. At that time, there was no off-the-shelf platform that could be a 'one stop shop' for application, verification, and payment for Guaranteed Income, although there are a number of companies, including Steady, that are trying to fill this gap for the growing number of GI pilots (now over 130).

However, several interviewees pointed out that there may be an inherent tension between a technology platform that is designed to serve people at scale, and the desire of many GI programs to be more human-centered and high-touch in their interactions with participants. Relying on a technological mechanism to provide financial services to people who are often limited in their access to / comfort with technology and the banking system (such as very low-income, rural, or older people) and may have unusual income situations is a challenge. A Steady representative notes that working with the CRNY program helped them realize that future cash transfer programs need two separate pathways: one for people who can use technological solutions and one for people who cannot.

LACK OF TRUST

CRNY was a new organization designing an experimental program around a concept that is relatively unfamiliar in society generally, let alone in the arts world. In addition, CRNY offered the tantalizing possibility of unrestricted cash to people who were suffering extreme financial hardship. It is therefore unsurprising that there was some confusion and even mistrust among artists about what this was all about, which sometimes manifested in criticism of CRNY. Some questioned CRNY's ethics, suggesting it was choosing artists in biased or fraudulent ways or inappropriately "got their hopes up" when they applied but didn't end up getting selected. Although this was by no means the majority of interactions with artists, most

staff and partners described having interactions with artists that they characterized using words like "anger," "negativity," "frustration" "abuse" and "entitlement."

Some interviewees interpreted these reactions as simply "pent up anger of artists towards funders and the nonprofit industrial complex," based on a misperception that CRNY was a foundation or a government entity. One person noted how the echo chamber of social media amplifies negativity, even when it may be a minority opinion. CRNY's lack of track record as an organization, combined with the expedited timeline, meant that it did not have time to earn the trust of artists that might have mitigated these responses.

It is interesting to note that none of the non-artist GI programs have, to our knowledge, experienced similar trust issues with their target constituencies, while at least one of the other artist-focused programs also faced similar critiques (YBCA). It's possible that this is because many other GI programs (including Springboard) select participants from a pre-qualified list of people rather than having an open call (which CRNY and YBCA both did). The open call, and the outreach around it, raised hopes of a larger group of people than the program ultimately had the capacity to serve, leading to disappointment for a majority of applicants.

Communications Choices

Some aspects of CRNY's communications and program implementation may have unintentionally contributed to artists' confusion and frustration about the process. In particular:

- CRNY held an open call, rather than randomly selecting from a pre-existing list, which required extensive outreach and PR to attract interest. This built up hope among a large group of applicants who were not ultimately selected.

- CRNY could not legally describe the selection process as a lottery, even though this was the clearest way to help people understand it. The legally mandated technical language of “weighted selection process” was confusing and made it seem like there was something mysterious about the process, which heightened suspicions about fairness.
- Many people interpreted the notification that they were “pre-selected, pending verification of eligibility” as having been selected and approved for payments, and were disappointed when they learned they did not ultimately qualify.
- The repeated technological failures and glitches created understandable frustration and amplified mistrust.



Artist: Juliana Silva **Photo Credit:** New Plays for Young Audiences at NYU

Process Details

The following section includes more detail on each stage of the process, from design through disbursement. Summary takeaways are noted at the top of each section.

ACTIVITY	START	END
CRNY Announced + Initial Core Staff Hired	July 2021	Sept 2021
Think Tank Gatherings	Sept 2021	Jan 2022
Application Period	Feb 2022	March 2022
Selection	March 2022	
Notification of Selection	April 15, 2022	
Documentation of Eligibility Submissions	April 15, 2022	May 10 and every month through October 2022
Notification of Verification Status *monthly	June 2022	Oct 2022
Enrollment/Onboarding/Benefits Counseling *monthly	June 2022	Oct 2022
Virtual and in-person community building activities	Jan 2023	Dec 2023
Transition/Offboarding Support at the end of payments	November 2023	April 2024

Once applicants were notified of [pre-selection](#), they had approximately four weeks to submit documentation proving their eligibility. CRNY took two weeks to [verify](#) eligibility, unless more documentation was required from the applicants (which it often was). Once verified, applicants were notified that they were eligible to enroll, and offered the option of [benefits counseling](#) if relevant to their situation. [Enrollment and onboarding](#) involved linking artists with their preferred method of payment. Participants received their first payment approximately 2-4 weeks after enrollment, depending on the payment option chosen and whether they opted into benefits counseling.

CRNY provided customized support to help applicants navigate and successfully complete all stages of the process and allow as much agency as possible for artists throughout (for example, giving them extra time to submit documentation or enabling them to choose how to receive payment). The result of this effort to provide bespoke care and maximize artist agency was that applicants progressed through the process at different and highly individualized rates, depending on their choices and situation. This meant that all phases of the process had to be managed concurrently, exponentially magnifying the complexity for CRNY and its partners.

Design phase: Think Tank

While a participatory design process took more time and care on the front end, it ultimately resulted in a better and more equitable program design.

From the very beginning, CRNY sought to include intended beneficiaries and other stakeholders in defining program goals and values, surfacing key issues, and making critical decisions about the design of the program. To do this, CRNY convened a [Think Tank](#) in the fall of 2021, made up of working artists, arts administrators or arts and cultural organization representatives, Guaranteed Income scholars, and

economic justice advocates. Daniel Park, Dyresha Harris, and Esteban Kelly from U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives supported CRNY in designing and facilitating the Think Tank.

The Think Tank was split into two working groups: one that was focused on the Guaranteed Income for Artists program and one focused on the Artist Employment Program. Each group met twice a month alone and then a third time all together for four months. The full CRNY team joined all working group meetings. Think Tank participants were paid \$7,500 for their time. The Think Tank was reconvened in October 2022 so that CRNY could share how the programs' actual implementation matched the initial design intentions laid out by the group.

CRNY had \$43.2 M from its foundation partners to distribute to 2,400 artists. CRNY staff determined that the program should seek to advance equity in the arts and align with and add to the larger GI conversation. Other than that, the parameters of the GI program were left relatively open for the Think Tank to determine.

Over the course of four months, the Think Tank discussed and provided guidance on the program design, which included the following components (see links for more details):

- [Overarching program values and goals and application design](#)
- [Payment amounts, frequency, and duration](#)
- [Eligibility requirements](#)
- [Outreach and application launch](#)
- [Weighting and prioritization](#)
- [Selection](#)
- [Verification](#)
- [Enrollment and onboarding](#)
- [Benefits protection and counseling](#)

A foundational decision that came out of the Think Tank process was to do a GI program whose primary purpose was having an impact on artist participants, rather than a pilot whose primary purpose was data gathering (which often involves a Randomized Controlled Trial or RCT). This decision meant that subsequent design choices could be made based on what was best for artists, rather than what would generate the best data. For example, the group opted to have an open call for applications, rather than selecting participants to build a sample. Though CRNY's impact evaluation will ultimately compare the effects of GI on participating artists to those who applied but did not get selected, that study is not designed to 'prove' that cash works. CRNY felt comfortable going this way because of the robust body of evidence that already exists proving the impact of GI on people experiencing financial insecurity.

Payment amounts, frequency, and duration

Program design was artist-centered, with the Think Tank identifying an amount and duration that would have a transformational impact on participants.

The Think Tank and CRNY staff wanted the amount of the GI payments to be “transformational” for participants, and sought to balance maximizing the duration of payments and the amount for individual participants with how that would impact the number of participants overall.

The Think Tank determined that 18 months was the longest the program could feasibly run without exceeding the lifespan of the CRNY initiative. After considering various scenarios, they settled on \$1,000 a month as a meaningful amount, because, as someone said, “the first \$10,000 grant you get as an artist is career changing.”

Although most GI research suggests that monthly payments have a greater impact than a single lump sum, there was a substantial discussion about whether lump sum payments would be more beneficial for artists, allowing them to purchase materials, pay off debt, or make other larger investments in their work or lives. Ultimately, the group decided to provide monthly payments (except for a small number of artists whose SSI benefits required adjusting payment schedules) in order to better align with common practice in the GI movement overall. Participants who were interviewed noted that this amount wasn't enough to cover all of their expenses, but it did offer meaningful relief to their financial stress, which ultimately allowed them to focus more on their art and other responsibilities in their lives.

Eligibility requirements

Establishing eligibility criteria is a necessary but challenging step in program design, as it inherently involves making choices of who is 'in' and 'out'. Defining artistry in a way that was equitable and inclusive yet aligned with the program's mandate to reach working artists was challenging. Parameters for geographic and financial eligibility also presented complex questions around inclusion and intent.

There were three main aspects of eligibility: who would qualify as an artist, how to assess financial need, and the geographical parameters of the program.

DEFINITION OF “ARTIST”

Who ‘counts’ as an artist is highly contested and deeply political. Historically, academia and arts philanthropy have typically defined artistry in a way that elevates Western European fine art disciplines—studio-based visual art, theater, opera, classical music, etc.—and contemporary studio art, and excludes other non-Western cultural traditions and more experimental or popular artforms. Narrow definitions of artistry have created systemic inequities

in opportunity, excluding some artists from grant opportunities, awards, teaching positions, work opportunities, and recognition. As a result of this, some who feel that allowing people to self-define as an artist is the only way to ensure equity.

CRNY staff considered several commonly used definitions of artists, but ultimately did not find them inclusive enough. They wanted to allow for a broad interpretation of artistry to include those whose artistic outputs might not look like an art product. At the same time, they worried that leaving eligibility completely open self-definition would not allow them to effectively target people who were truly committed to art-making as a vocation. The Think Tank came up with the following definition:

An artist, culture bearer, and culture maker is someone who regularly engages in artistic practice to:

- express themselves with the intention of communicating richly to others;
- pass on traditional knowledge and cultural practices;
- have social impacts with and within communities; and/or
- bring cultural resources to their communities.

Artists seek to derive income from their work and/or create community with their work. Artists hold and maintain a commitment to continuing their artistic practice and share or present their artistic practice with others.

CRNY further defined a list of qualifying artistic disciplines for the purpose of the program: Craft; Creative Placemaking; Dance; Design; Film; Literary Arts; Media Arts; Music; Oral Traditions; Social Practice; Theater; Performance Art; Traditional Arts;

Visual Arts; and Interdisciplinary Arts. Artists doing solely commercial creative work—like wedding photography, dj'ing or culinary arts—were not eligible.

Participating artists interviewed for this evaluation appreciated the emphasis on commitment to one's artistic practice, as opposed to the more conventional criteria such as a particular set of credentials or a portfolio of work or project idea. One said: "The competitive aspect of most grants works against a sense of community among artists. Also, many grants exclude people who don't have a certain educational background. But many of us work full time jobs and don't have time to get a masters degree." Another one said that the guidelines gave them "a sense of belonging and openness about what an artist could be. And I knew that if I didn't get chosen, it wouldn't be because I'm not good enough."

FINANCIAL NEED

In order to meet IRS requirements for charitable purpose without assessing artistic excellence, which would go against the principles of a GI program, the program had to ensure applicants had financial need. Many non-artist focused GI programs do not have this challenge because they are inherently selecting participants from a pool of people who are defined by their financial need—for example those receiving public benefits or unhoused people. In contrast to most GI programs, CRNY program targeted a professional sector made up of individuals with a range of economic situations. IRS regulations aside, it was important to the Think Tank that the program prioritize artists with the greatest financial need.

After considering various official measures, the Think Tank ultimately settled on the "[Self-Sufficiency Standard](#)" as its income measure, which was developed by the University of Washington's Center for Women's Welfare at the School of Social Work. This measure is preferred by many economic justice

advocates to the Official Poverty Measure because it takes into account family composition, ages of children, geographic differences in costs, and other costs of living when calculating an adequate income for meeting basic needs.

GEOGRAPHY

CRNY determined applicants that had to have residency within the geographical boundaries of New York State at the time of the application. This decision was not made lightly. The Think Tank considered whether people who live in parts of New Jersey that are functionally New York City suburbs should be included. It considered how to handle people who recently left NY because of COVID or arrived just recently to take advantage of dropping rents. Due to the complexity of determining who would qualify as a New Yorker, the team decided to use the state geographical boundary as the guide, despite its imperfections.

Outreach and Application Launch

CRNY and its partners conducted extensive outreach to ensure wide awareness of the program, including among populations often missed by traditional funding programs and artist services. Making the application easy and accessible, by making it available in multiple languages and for people with disabilities, was critical. The downside of extensive outreach was that the number of applications greatly exceeded available program slots, and led to disappointment for many who were not ultimately selected.

CRNY knew that it would not be sufficient to conduct outreach solely through existing artist intermediaries, such as the New York State Council on the Arts or local arts councils. These mainstream networks are important conduits for information, but they often miss many of the most marginalized artists, either by discipline or identity—exactly the artists the program

most wanted to reach. There is no comprehensive database of artists in New York State (or any state), and information about who and where artists are is fragmented.

To fill in the gaps, in January 2022 CRNY hired 10 artist-organizers to be part of an [Artist Outreach Corps](#) that would reach out to geographic and identity-based communities who have historically been underrepresented and under-resourced by philanthropic efforts. Artist Outreach Corps members had existing deep ties with targeted communities outside of New York City and with Black, Indigenous, Deaf and Disabled, and Rural communities. The CRNY team met with the Artist Outreach Corps weekly to debrief, share progress, and collectively troubleshoot challenges.

The Artist Outreach Corps was given resources and encouraged to conduct outreach in ways they deemed most relevant in order to ensure their respective communities were informed about the opportunity and knew how to apply. One challenge was reaching people who did not have access to the internet or technology, either because of age, location, or a choice to be off grid. Artist Outreach Corps members conducted in-person gatherings to overcome the digital divide and occasionally even helped people fill out and submit applications. Another challenge was helping some artists understand that they were eligible for the program. This included newly arrived immigrants who sometimes do not define their cultural traditions as art (for example, a Sudanese woodworker who didn't consider their work art because it was used in daily life) and artists who operate outside dominant culture, like drag performers.

In addition to the Artist Outreach Corps, CRNY hosted 12 [informational webinars](#), partnering with arts organizations across the state, such as the New York State Council on the Arts and local arts agencies, to spread the word. CRNY did its own social media

outreach, and staffed a full time Help Desk to field calls and emails from artists. The Help Desk was inundated, receiving hundreds of emails and calls a day about the GI and AEP programs combined.

CRNY also hired a disability justice and a language justice consultant to make sure that the application itself would be maximally accessible. The application was translated into [10 languages](#) other than English, and social media toolkits were created to enable people to spread the word in English, Spanish, and Mandarin. CRNY chose online platform Submittable to host the application because it was compatible with screen reading for blind or visually impaired people.

Applications were accepted between February 14, 2022 and March 27, 2022. The 22,620 applications the program received speaks highly of the outreach effort, yet participant artists interviewed for this evaluation had a perception that the visibility was low and “a lot of people didn’t know about it.” Many artists found out about the program by word of mouth from other artists. The high number of applicants also meant disappointment for more than 19,000 artists who were not selected. As CRNY noted on its website, the high volume of interest “underscores the upsetting reality that artists and culture bearers are blatantly underserved—and that sustainable support structures for artists in New York State are severely lacking.”

Weighting and Prioritization

To align with the program’s values and intent, the selection process was designed to ensure artists who have experienced the greatest historical disadvantages and harms were prioritized.

To align with its intent, CRNY had to define what it meant to “advance equity” in practice and how this intention would be embedded through the application process. The Think Tank defined this as an intention to support artists that were experiencing “multi-point oppression.”

The following characteristics were prioritized by the group as being tied to historical and structural disadvantages:

- Black, Indigenous, and People of Color
- Deaf/Disabled
- LGBTQIAP+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual/Aromantic, Pansexual)
- Immigrants
- Caregivers
- Criminal legal system-involved
- Lack of financial safety net
- Rural

CRNY worked with data specialists to design and implement the weighted randomization process for selection. Applicants who claimed one or more prioritized identities had their names put in the selection pool an additional time for each of these identities they held. The algorithm selected applicants randomly from the pool, but those with more points were more likely to be selected. As [CRNY put it on its website](#), this meant “artists who hold those prioritized identities and life circumstances were more likely to be selected. That said, all eligible artists—regardless of their identity, circumstance, and location within New York State—had a chance of being selected.” The algorithm was also set to ensure that there was at least one artist selected from each county in the state.

Selection

CRNY prioritized a simple application to reduce the barriers to apply. This meant that applicants were “pre-selected” pending verification of their income, residency, and evidence of an artistic practice.

The Think Tank sought to make the application process as easy as possible and not take more than 15 minutes to complete ([see guidelines](#) for instructions and application questions). The decision was made not to ask for materials needed to verify eligibility at the application stage. Instead, applicants were pre-screened based on their answers to application questions and then put in a pool of pre-selected applicants. This pool was then asked to submit further documentation to prove their eligibility.

On April 15, 2022 applicants were notified of their status as either pre-selected, waitlisted, or not selected. The 2,400 pre-selected artists moved forward into the verification process and an additional 600 were put on a wait list, pending verification results. All applicants were anonymized using a unique numeric ID, and the data was held by the Jain Family Institute in order to ensure that there was no bias or perceived bias for or against any artist or group of artists by CRNY. This unique code also made it easier for CRNY to sync data across multiple data sets with different partners throughout the process.

Verification Process

The verification process was challenging and a major ‘pain point’ for both applicants and CRNY. CRNY conducted extensive personal outreach to ensure that applicants submitted documentation and were supported throughout the process. Every effort was made to ensure anyone who was pre-selected and was indeed eligible for the program was admitted.

Because complete documentation was not collected at the application stage, pre-selected applicants were required to submit documentation to verify their eligibility around the three primary criteria: their artistry, financial need, and New York State residency.

CRNY’s verification process was much more complex than most GI programs for several reasons:

- **Scale:** very few GI programs are statewide.
- **Specificity:** very few GI programs target a professional sector, especially one that lacks clear professional boundaries or accreditation.
- **Sample:** many GI programs select participants out of a pre-screened group that meets desired specifications, rather than through an open call.

CRNY’s worked diligently to ensure that any pre-selected applicant who was eligible for the program made it through the process to receive payments. Based on its belief that those most likely to struggle to complete the process would also be those most in need, the CRNY team conducted extensive outreach to applicants to encourage them to submit documentation and help them through the verification process. The original deadline to provide materials was May 6, 2022, but CRNY conducted outreach and accepted documentation through October 2022, admitting eligible applicants on a monthly rolling basis. In total, 1,130 of the program participants required some kind of additional support to complete the verification and onboarding process, including several hundred who needed to submit additional documentation to confirm residency, income, or artistry.

In total, 1,957 of the pre-selected applicants submitted full documentation and were approved. Approximately 400 people did not submit any documentation at all, despite at least five contact attempts by CRNY. An additional 452 applicants from the waitlist, who passed verification, were therefore invited to enroll. Nine eligible artists declined to enroll in the program. Less than 8% of applicants did not pass verification, including a small number of people who misrepresented themselves as artists or falsely reported their income or residency. A small 'fraud ring' was discovered, involving five applications that used the same false identification materials.

Artistry was verified by artist reviewers who assessed whether the applicant qualified as an artist according to the CRNY criteria. Artistic quality was not judged in any way. Financial need was verified by Steady based on documentation uploaded by artists. CRNY had planned to have NY State Residency verified through an automatic software solution. When it discovered that its software partner ID.Me was being investigated

for privacy concerns, it switched to manual residency verification with partner Probity.

Verification was a major 'pain point' for CRNY staff, partners, and applicants themselves.

Not requiring documentation at the application stage added substantial confusion and complication at the verification stage, although artists appreciated the ease of application and CRNY believes this was the best approach. Many applicants did not submit documentation in a timely way, sometimes because they interpreted the notification of pre-selection as acceptance into the program. Others who ended up not qualifying after being told they were pre-selected were upset for a similar reason. One artist who was accepted to the program said: "the prequalifying language was confusing. It gave me a lot of anxiety that I might not get in." Other artists submitted incomplete information, which required CRNY and partners to follow up and request more or different information.



Balbir at work. Artist: Balbir Krishan **Photo Credit:** Balbir Krishan

Verification was also challenging for reasons related to 1) the nature of artists' incomes and household compositions and 2) the technological platforms:

1. INCOME AND HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION

Many applicants were unclear what “household income” meant. CRNY received over 300 questions about this in a single information session, and it was one of the most common questions received by the Help Desk. Many people lived with roommates or in multi-family households and were unsure whether the income of others with whom they live should be included. Moreover, artists' incomes are often unconventional—for example, they may be cash-based or unbanked—and may vary greatly month to month and year to year. Some felt that their 2021 income was uncommonly high and did not accurately reflect their typical income, while others had no income at all and did not know how to indicate that.

2. TECHNOLOGY

The dependence on online platforms for submitting documentation was a challenge for some applicants, either because they were not comfortable with the technology or did not have consistent access to the Internet. In addition, both apps that applicants had to use to submit documentation, Submittable and Steady,

were glitchy, leading to frustration among applicants and rupturing trust with CRNY.

CRNY chose to work with Steady because it could automatically verify income. However, to do this, Steady relies on third party software Plaid—commonly used by digital financial platforms like Venmo, Zelle, and Cashapp- to access bank information for income verification and payment distribution. Many applicants to the CRNY program were either unbanked or used small banks and credit unions, which did not always link with Plaid. Some applicants had no income at all, which the app did not initially have a way to account for, leading to an inability to complete the verification process. Banks also limit the number of months Plaid can “look back” into a bank account, usually 12. By the time applicants were being verified, starting in June 2022, parts of 2021 fell outside of the app's look-back period, thereby causing data to be incomplete. All of these situations led to headaches for applicants and CRNY, as well as platform partners.



In the recording studio
Artist: Helen Sung Photo Credit: Anna Yatskevich

Enrollment and Onboarding

Participants could choose to receive their payments via direct deposit, which required a bank account that could link with Plaid, or a preloaded debit card. Technological glitches resulted in some payment failures among initial cohorts that were later resolved.

Once people were verified, they were invited to formally enroll in the program. Those who received public benefits were provided with counseling to help them understand the risks and decide whether they wanted to participate (see Benefits Counseling section below).

Once people affirmatively opted in to the program they began the process of ‘onboarding’ to get connected to payment. This process differed based on various factors: whether people had a Social Security number, a bank account, and /or could connect to Steady, CRNY’s payment platform. Artists were given the choice about whether they wanted to receive direct deposits (which required them to have a bank account that was compatible with Steady) or a debit card through Community Financial Resources, which was accessible to the unbanked and those who do not have a Social Security Number. Because Steady was not compatible

with all banks / credit unions, some artists had to open a new bank account in order to receive direct deposit. CRNY and Steady helped artists open new bank accounts if they did not have another option they preferred. 2,215 artists are receiving payment as a direct deposit through Steady, and 185 artists are receiving payment either through a prepaid debit card or through a deposit into a newly formed credit union bank account through Community Financial Resources.

The first payments were made on June 30 to people who had completed enrollment by June 15 and had a bank account that could be linked to Steady and did not need benefits counseling. Those who completed enrollment by June 15 who wanted to receive a debit card received their first payment on July 15. Around 100 payments failed for the first cohort due to issues with bank linking. Steady’s previous cohorts had been around 100 people total, and they admit that they did not have the process in place to effectively onboard a cohort of this size. Payment failure was remedied for subsequent cohorts as the product was improved, and now stands at less than 0.2% a month (for many reasons having to do with changes in participants’ banking information).

PAYMENT COHORT	# OF PARTICIPANTS	FIRST PAYMENT DATE*	FINAL PAYMENT DATE*
1	989	6/30/2022	11/15/2023
2	664	7/15/2022	12/15/2023
3	174	8/15/2022	1/15/2024
4	462	9/15/2022	2/15/2024
5	111	10/15/2022	3/15/2024

*If the 15th fell on a weekend or holiday, then payment was made on the Friday before

Benefits Protection and Counseling

GI payments can sometimes jeopardize other benefits that participants are already receiving. CRNY provided benefits counseling and support for artists receiving public benefits, and in some cases adjusted payment schedules to reduce impact.

GI participants often risk having their other public benefits—Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, and Housing benefits—reduced as a result of temporarily exceeding income limits for these programs. This is called the “[benefits cliff](#)” and defeats the purpose of GI, which is intended to supplement public benefits and low-income wages that are not sufficient to meet people’s basic needs. Thus, GI program designers are faced with needing to find ways to protect participants’ existing benefits, or at least mitigate negative impacts through design choices.

The CRNY team conducted research and outreach to understand how other GI programs have dealt with this issue. Some programs are designed to weed out participants that are likely to have the biggest issues with benefits, most notably SSI recipients. The CRNY team and Think Tank felt that doing this would run counter to the equity values of the program by excluding the people most in need. In addition, there is no comprehensive data set about artists who receive benefits. Other GI programs secure a benefits waiver from the state by getting certified by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) as a research pilot, which requires structuring the research as a randomized controlled trial. CRNY had decided with the Think Tank not to take that approach (nor would the timeline have allowed it) and felt a more participatory and creative research approach would be more appropriate and useful.

So, benefits counseling was provided to applicants receiving public benefits so that they could make an

informed decision about whether to participate in the program, and how to mitigate any negative impacts on their benefits if they opted in. CRNY worked with two entities that already provided benefits counseling for low-income people, Henry Street Settlement (for NYC-based artists) and Work Without Limits (for artists in the rest of New York State as well as those receiving SSI regardless of location). A third of eligible applicants (32%) self-disclosed being enrolled in public benefits, 56% of that group opted into receiving benefits counseling, and 99% of those chose to enroll, even though some of their benefits were or might be impacted.

Henry Street Settlement (HSS) and Work Without Limits (WLL) felt positively about the experience, though both struggled to handle the influx of inquiries at one time and get up to speed on how GI might impact public benefits. The CRNY population differed in some key ways from their typical case. For one, they were more likely to be self-employed, although WLL notes that they are seeing more self-employed people in general these days. Additionally, CRNY artists were more likely to be younger, working age, and with the potential (and hope) of some lifetime economic mobility. HSS’s typical case is an older person on a fixed income. Regardless, many of the situations faced by CRNY artists were similar to those faced by other people on public benefits. HSS felt encouraged that they were able to help connect artists to additional benefits and services that they were not aware of, like rental assistance, and expressed a wish that more artists would know they can use social service organizations like theirs. One common struggle they heard about from artists was depression or anxiety due to their financial precarity. Unfortunately, HSS was unable to help much in this arena due to a multiple-months-long wait list at New York City’s subsidized mental health clinics.

One significant question was whether SSI benefits would be impacted by the GI funds. Initially, the Social Security Administration had suggested that they would not be impacted, as long as funds were put into an [ABLE](#) account and so WWL had been counseling artists in that direction. The decision that benefits would ultimately be impacted because the funds were all from private sources came late in the process and required WWL to go back to artists they had previously told otherwise. CRNY worked with 17 artists whose benefits would be affected to restructure their payments to minimize the impact and compensate

them for lost income. Because SSI benefits are calculated on a monthly basis, GI funds were provided in up to 3 installments so that participants only lost SSI benefits in the months when they received the GI payment.

Participating in the counseling services did delay the start day of payments, depending on the complexity of the case, which some participants found frustrating, according to feedback on online forums and directly to CRNY staff.



Artist: Jacinta Bunnell **Photo:** Michael Wilcock

Care After Cash

The first cohort of GI program participants received their final payment in November 2023. While the scope of this particular evaluation is limited to the design and implementation of the process to distribute GI funds to artists, CRNY has adopted a “care after cash” philosophy in order to support artists’ transition

through and beyond the end of payment distribution. Even though a strong value of GI is no-strings-attached funding, a care after cash approach considers that this may not always be what best serves the needs of participants or advances the goals of the GI movement.



Brooklyn GI Artist Gathering
Photo Credit: Christian Hendricks

CRNY's post-fund distribution programming falls into the following three categories:

1. WRAP-AROUND SERVICES AND SUPPORTS

CRNY is partnering with existing artist-serving organizations such as ArtistU, New York Foundation for the Arts, and Entertainment Community Fund to provide program participants with access to a variety of wrap around services and supports. These include professional development workshops for aspects of an artistic practice; advice on how to access housing, healthcare, and public benefits; and financial planning for non-traditional workers. In addition, artists can make an appointment with CRNY staff for one-on-one support on any topic of their choice.

2. COMMUNITY

Many participating artists have expressed feeling alone and craving greater connections with fellow artists in the program—to share their experience in the program, to discuss how to deal with the funds coming to an end, and to share resources and build connections with one another. Other GI programs have found a similar appetite for connection and sharing among participants. To support this, CRNY is offering various opportunities for artists to gather, network, and learn together through:

- A private social networking platform hosted at Tribeworks for program participants (including participants in CRNY's Artist Employment Program) to have conversations and share about opportunities and resources
- Seven in-person [regional artist gatherings](#) across New York State in October 2023
- Monthly digital peer driven exchanges

3. COLLECTIVE ACTION

CRNY is also exploring how providing direct cash can be a doorway for political education and community power building. Some GI advocates argue that it is a missed opportunity not to attempt to engage and organize GI program participants as a constituency for economic justice issues. As Maura Cuffie-Peterson mused in an internal document: "How can we build a power base amongst pilot participants for a guaranteed basic income if the reality of participating in a GI pilot may be characterized by the same isolation that the bootstraps myth has so successfully imparted? Yes, we all are deserving of an income floor, and we should be trusted to use resources as we see fit for ourselves, but how can we purport that GI fits into a solidarity economy framework if at the end of the day, and the end of these pilots, it's up to each individual to just figure it out on their own?"

Toward this end CRNY is supporting the development of [political education curriculum](#) for artists (and others) about GI, supporting artists to attend national and state level GI movement events, and spearheading the launch of a New York State cash coalition that includes artists. It is also considering other ways that it can support leadership development for artists and artist advocates who want to develop their role as organizers around GI as well as other areas of policy action that have the potential to transform working and living conditions for artists and creatives in New York State and beyond (see CRNY's [advocacy platform](#) for more).

Conclusion

The goal of this evaluation is to provide transparency into CRNY's process—including the choices made and their results—so that others who might be considering launching a similar program can learn and build on them. It is intentionally not a guide or a toolkit—there is no one 'right' way to run a GI program, and all design choices have tradeoffs.

Running a program of this size and scale in accordance with values of artist-centered care and equity is not easy, and there were certainly challenges along the way. However, feedback from artists suggests that the impact that the funds had on program participants was indeed transformational.

As CRNY prepares to sunset in December of 2024, it is working to ensure that the program has contributed not only to the wellbeing of participating artists, but also to advancing efforts to achieve permanent GI policy. Toward this end, it is investing in other narrative, network-building, knowledge-sharing, and advocacy activities to help advance the movement and ensure artists are involved as constituents and creative partners. These activities include:

- Convening a working group of artist advocate peers and leaders in the guaranteed income movement. The group developed [recommendations](#) that

are intended to harness and direct the interest from both artist advocates and GI leaders towards collaborative actions that will be most strategic for advancing the guaranteed income movement's goals.

- Commissioning a cross-disciplinary, mixed-methods evaluation of the [impacts](#) of the GI program on the social, economic, and artistic wellbeing of artists, including a quantitative survey of both applicants and participants in the program, qualitative interviews with and creative documentation by participating artists, and an advisory group of artists to provide input on the research design.
- Supporting the development of a communications campaign that will challenge harmful narratives around work and deservingness.

- Initiating the launch of a New York State Cash Coalition of advocates, researchers, and program implementers that can advance social safety net reforms and cash policy legislation at the state level.
- 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 in New York.

For more information about CRNY’s Guaranteed Income for Artists program, or if you are interested in partnering to advance any of the working group recommendations, please contact:

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Queens GI Artist Gathering
 Photo Credit: Christian Hendricks

CREATIVES REBUILD NEW YORK



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Please cite as: Frasz, A. (2024). *Creatives Rebuild New York Artist Guaranteed Income for Artists Process Evaluation*. Creatives Rebuild New York / Helicon Collaborative.

Publication Design: Fenton

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.