



**Shifting Policy and Practice Learning Series
Equity Choice Points | September 17, 2020**

Abridged Transcript

[Equity Choice Points](#) was the fourth instalment of NASAA's 2020 [Shifting Policy and Practice: Insights and Actions for States](#) online learning series. These transcripts (abbreviated and adapted from the live accessibility captioning) provide a synopsis of information shared during the session by panelists as well as supplemental resources shared by participants through the video platform's chat function. Any omissions or inaccuracies are unintentional.

HOST: Eric Giles, Learning Services Director, National Assembly of State Arts Agencies

SPEAKERS: Katherin Canton, Race and Equity Manager, California Arts Council; Ayanna Lalia Kiburi, Deputy Director, California Arts Council; Jane Preston, Deputy Director, New England Foundation for the Arts; Ken Skrzysz, Executive Director, Maryland State Arts Council

MODERATOR: Kelly Barsdate, Chief Program and Planning Officer, National Assembly of State Arts Agencies

>> Eric Giles: I want to call our attention to the diversity of the lands we call home. NASAA begins every convening by conveying respect and appreciation for the original people, places, and cultures of this country. If you would, please join me in a moment of reflection to honor the lands which we occupy, commit to their stewardship, and signify our respect for the First Nations and their lands that are the past, present, and future of America. <moment of silence>

Thank you all. I also want to acknowledge that many members are living in areas affected by fires, floods and the aftermath of hurricanes and other perils. NASAA and all your state arts agency colleagues are wishing you strength and resilience, and please let us know if we can help. With that, I'm going to hand things over to NASAA's Chief Program and Planning Officer, Kelly Barsdate.

>> Kelly Barsdate: Thank you, Eric, and hello everybody! We are here today because we want every community to flourish through the arts - regardless of race, geography, age, or ability. And although our field's been striving for that ideal since our very inception, I think most of us would agree that we still have a ways to go before that vision of equity is fully realized.

NASAA wants to help state arts agencies close that distance between our equity aspirations and our

equity actualities. NASAA does that through our research and data, through a community of practice for people of color, and by offering professional development programs like this one. I see many familiar faces in this Zoom room today, and I'm glad to have you back! And for those of you who are new to NASAA's equity conversations, come on in and be welcome.

Today we will turn our focus to equity in grant making: the policies, the practices, and other "choice points" that govern how state arts agency money goes out. States have spent decades designing programs to be fair, transparent, and accountable. These are all really good things, and hallmarks of our field. But...

What if there's a ghost in that machine? How might bias be baked into our systems? Who aren't we reaching? And how can we do a better job of being more equitable? NAASA is calling these questions and we know a lot of you are, too. We hope that this session today can support that work.

To help us out, we're joined by Ayanna Kiburi and Katherin Canton in California, Ken Skrzysz from Maryland and Jane Preston from NEFA. Each in their own way, these four colleagues are JEDIs. They channel The Force to bring about Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion.

The five of us are going to approach this as a kitchen table conversation, informal and candid. And is this kitchen table is extra big, because it has seats for all of you! As our panelists are in dialogue, I hope that you, too, will weigh in via chat with questions or comments throughout the session.

Let's kick things off with a question about equity gaps: **When you think about your grants, are there people or places in your state that may be underfunded?** Let's begin in California. Ayanna, would you start us off?

>> **Ayanna Lalia Kiburi:** I'm Deputy Director for the California arts council and I would say that some really big gaps that we are trying to address in our grant making are around geographic equity. We are still not serving all people in the state of California, particularly those in rural communities or in suburban communities. CAC still needs to work on our geographic reach. I also would say that our funding accessibility issues are problematic. We only have an online application process, and I think that is a barrier and an equity gap that I'd like to find solutions around.

>> **Katherin Canton:** I am in my first month as the Race and Equity Manager for the California arts Council. So very glad to be in conversation with you all! We're coming at the equity and justice conversation by centering on race and focusing on institutional and systemic racism. So the gap that I'm going to identify is the historically stressed and currently stressed relationship between communities - specifically queer, trans, black, Indigenous, people of color communities - and the institution that is state government.

>> **Ken Skrzysz:** I'm the executive Director of the Maryland State Arts Council. I'm really honored to be with all of you, Zooming in from beautiful Baltimore. As we looked at equity gaps, one that we have identified is all kinds of marketing: how we promote funding opportunities, the assistance available, and the review process. And the other piece I'm like to mention is a current lack of one-on-one relationships, sitting across the table from people saying, "We're here, we're here to

help you."

>> **Jane Preston:** I'm Deputy Director for Programs at New England Foundation of the Arts, or NEFA. We're the regional arts organization for the six New England states and partner with Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont. As a regional arts organization, NEFA has some more flexibility in grant making and service practices than states do. The number one equity issue we are always working to address is the historic precedent set by what people see when they look at our grant lists and see who we've served in the past. Even though we're making progress in that, I think it's a huge influence for whether a new applicant may see themselves on that grantee list and decide whether to get to know us and to apply. Very much embedded in that challenge is what other panelists have said about really building partnerships and getting introductions to new folks. We want to build trust by ultimately demonstrating that we are making change through who we work with every year.

>> **Kelly Barsdate:** As I listen to all four of you, I think about how equity work is a little bit like time travel. We have to be grounded in historical realities of the past. We have to have an eye to the future. And we have to be really alive and present to today and what's happening right now.

Let's delve a little further into conversation about action steps you all are taking toward equity.

What specific shifts are you making to your grant making strategies?

>> **Ayanna Lalia Kiburi:** The California Arts Council has been trying to grapple with race equity for a while now, and it's been happening at both the agency/staff level as well as with our council. They set policy, we implement policy, and that's how it works. The level of commitment that I'm seeing now from the council has been born from many years of discussions to try and come to a common language and common understanding about equity. Now the council has committed to a Race Equity Strategic Framework. We are looking at race equity across all of our functions as an agency, and across all of our policy making as a council. It shapes decisions affecting how we're looking at grant opportunities, grant making, program development, and implementation all the way across the board.

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Another major shift that I think is very important is in Katherin as our Race and Equity Manager. That formal staff commitment will strengthen our foundation. She leads our race and equity action plan. We've been involved with the Government Alliance on Race and Equity. We're part of the first state cohort in California, and through working with an organization called Race Forward, we have implemented new strategies to look at who we're serving, and how we're serving them. How we do that is near and dear to my heart – whether we meet the mark or otherwise.

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Having that foundation really helps us look at all of the types of programming and how, most

recently, COVID-19 has impacted the state at large but also communities of color, BIPOC organizations and artists. The council has really focused their efforts on tailoring our programming for communities that are most disproportionately impacted by the COVID virus. And that's important. I have a public health background and when you look at history, the social determinants of health are everything when you're talking about race equity. You can't ignore those if you are trying to reach racial equity. So this year I'm really proud that the council that came together to direct our grant opportunities to be focused on people of color and small arts organizations. That's a big shift.

>> **Jane Preston:** Related to what Ayanna is saying, about three years ago when we adopted our current strategic plan we developed a values statement around equity, inclusion and diversity. We came to realize that we have excluded communities in a long list of ways. The new value statement informed all of our grant making as well as our convenings and other services. The programs that we've launched over this summer and the other things we've taken on have been much more explicit about funding artists and organizations that have not previously had access to significant funding.

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>> **Ken Skrzysz:** We have a very supportive council, and a consistently flexible and responsive staff. Our fantasy was if we could get the largest grant programs "cleared up" that it would influence how we approached other programmatic changes. And that partially worked, to infuse the work of equity and justice through every program toward a more holistic community-centered approach. Our new application models a new way that we're working to serve constituents together in our state. It makes equity a very explicit commitment for the agency as well as applicants. As we were developing new guidelines across the agency, staff worked to coordinate a three-month long public editing process. That template was developed and refined and has worked incredibly well.

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>> **Kelly Barsdate:** I love that idea of kind of crowd-sourcing the input and revision. That's brilliant. In listening to all of you, it sounds like the genesis of much of your equity work lies in strategic planning, which makes sense. But it also is true that planning by itself is not enough – it needs to be coupled with action. It's lovely to see different ways that all of you are realizing that.

As you're walking along this path toward equity changes, are you allocating resources differently than you used to? Please put a finer point on how your agency's expenditures of resources – time, money or other kinds of capital - are changing.

>> **Ken Skrzysz:** Our reallocation began with the development of Creativity Grants to specifically support small projects and organizations with smaller budgets. Applications are reviewed monthly. This allows small organizations to get to know us and then they get into the pipeline for larger funding. In addition to the Creativity Grant we launched a professional development grant and we broadened the scope of our public art grants. We've also added an equitable distribution formula for [arts education](#) and introduced the possibility of match waivers based on need for arts education. Through all this work, we've already increased our grant pool by 40 new grantees in three years. That was after no new applicants for many years prior. We pay panelists and advisors to do the work. We've also reallocated some administrative funds to create staff time for development and technical assistance. Also, after digging into data for the independent artists award program, we've moved to regional award model that recognizes and values work that's being produced beyond the urban centers in our state. All of this is designed to allocate resource more broadly, responsibly and equitably.

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>> **Ayanna Lalia Kiburi:** One of the areas that I feel really proud of, that the council has prioritized, is increasing the capacity of artists and arts administrators of color. We're fortunate enough to get a grant from private funder that we matched with some of our own funding to put together an administrator fellowship. We need more diversity in this sector so that was a leadership development commitment that the council made, alongside other standing funding commitments, to make some headway.

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We're also trying to align our work with the notion that artists are "second responders" and always have been in that role, societally. They need to be supported in this crisis, so we are trying to find new funding streams to support artists directly, especially BIPOC artists. We also are looking at demographic data, any data sets that we can, to make sure that we are serving those arts organizations who are not getting any funding at all. Generally that's true for very, very small organizations that haven't been able to get at the table because of our funding restrictions. So I see the council really starting to think more strategically about the allocation of the funds. The pot is not that big, but we have to make sure that we're looking at race or equity any funding those that don't have any other opportunity, and maybe not funding some of those that actually do have other opportunities. So that is a difficult but important ideological shift to bring to fruition.

>> **Kelly Barsdate:** Katherin, in terms of resource shifts, I know that your position is new. And your staff time must constitute a big shift. Can you tell folks a little more about your role?

>> **Katherin Canton:** Yes, although I'm still figuring it out after only a few weeks here. I am our internal adviser on race and equity practices, a channel for resources and knowledge sets. What I'm doing over the next two months is assessing our organizational culture for internal practices, council

practices and determining how we interface and really relate, reciprocally, to community and how we are held accountable through our policies and practices.

>> **Kelly Barsdate:** Welcome to the network. We're really glad you're here. Jane, how about NEFA? How do you see your resource allocations, grant funds or time equations changing?

>> **Jane Preston:** Well, in these strange times, we've gotten some opportunities to actually expand who NEFA is funding. We combined any CARES funding that we got with about twice as much from the Mellon foundation for grants organizations for stabilization and resilience. We were very conscious in taking the opportunity to go beyond the organizations that we had historically funded. That involved a lot of direct calls to new organizations and really talking through what the opportunity was. Most of the organizations we took time to connect with were funded, and so we really see that as a new network of grantees that we can sustain and build on.

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We're also taking a critical look at the performing arts framework that has been the historic basis of the regional arts organizations, and which is still at the center of a lot of the work we do with state arts agencies. To some extent, the flexibility that has come with performance is not happening right now. So the latitude that we've been able to give – things like forgiveness of matching funds, paying grants earlier, and relaxing some of the restrictions – are translating into more general support for artisans and organizations. We also were in the process of a new artist support program that will be a companion to the touring programs. So really rounding out the network and hopefully shifting some of that power balance between the organizations and the artists in the region is something we're looking forward to continuing even after COVID-19.

>> **Kelly Barsdate:** It seems to me like a threshold issue for all of the changes that you have been describing is the depth and the breadth of relationships that you have with different constituent groups – both individuals and communities. It calls to mind, you know, the truism of, "If we build it, they will come." But we know that it doesn't quite work that way. It takes intentionality to build trust and connection to diversify your funding pool. **Can you share some strategies that you've been pursuing around that relationship-building piece?**

>> **Katherin Canton:** One of the things that is important is that now a lot of our staff come from the communities we're trying to reach, so we're more representative as an agency. We're more connected to communities on a human level. It feels really important to continue those relationships, and we do better when we're seen as trusted community members that folks can converse honestly with.

>> **Ayanna Lalia Kiburi:** I agree, and I also think there is a lot still to learn about how to do community dialogue correctly. I want to see even more of that, especially before policy is made - to get input about the potential impacts. We now have a "decision support tool" that we are using with our Council as they look through policy changes. I think we also need to use that internally. We want to be as thoughtful as we can be around choice points, to borrow that term. There's a moment where we say, "Have we engaged with the people that are going to be most impacted by this idea?" That's a moment to pause, because we need to really stop and think about that question. Katherin has reminded me recently that we need to slow down. If you're really looking at race equity, you have to take things more thoughtfully and you need to not buy into the white supremacist legacy culture about everything needing to be done yesterday. We need to take the time to engage with the communities we are trying to serve. I'm also realizing, as an administrator of the staff, that they are a community, too. I take that very seriously, because they're the ones that are going to be working with communities who are affected, whatever the work ultimately is. I need new pathways to do that as well.

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>> **Ken Skrzysz:** Ayanna, I wanted to shine a light on that idea of tempo and sequence. What we are now expecting of our grantees is that programmatic development happens as a response to what they are learning from their constituents. And we have to model that same behavior. Constituent involvement does slow everything down and allows many voices. It allows us to digest what's being said and heard. And I will say that a gift of the virtual platforms forced upon us by the pandemic is that we're able to more consistently engage with constituents. I understand the virtual divide, but I can also acknowledge the number of new constituents that are engaging with us virtually and giving us ideas to infuse into our planning.

>> **Jane Preston:** I would reinforce what everyone said about who is serving on the staff and advisory roles and in leadership. Three of the four directors of our major grant-making programs are now people of color, and all of the program teams now include staff of color. That makes our ability to connect with communities even stronger.

Another facet of community relationships is that NEFA has become very intentional about who serves on our grant panels and how much time we spend with them. In recent years we have increased orientation and cohort-building time into our panel meetings. Panelists are increasingly folks that are closer to the field, including more artists. And we are compensating them more, to enable more artists to serve on those panels, and so the panels reflect folks who are in the same situation as applicants. That way applicants can really recognize themselves in the people who are making the decisions.

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We also have invested in a lot of equity training and have multiple working groups in-house that are keeping these issues in their conversations constantly. So we're

trying to build internal capacity.

>> **Ayanna Lalia Kiburi:** Everyone is at a different pace in this work, so you have the pace of staff and that's going to be faster than anybody. Right? Because they're the ones, as described, that are most connected to the field and the temperature and the speed and the understanding and ideology of the field. And then you have the state bureaucratic institution. Even with great minds, it moves more slowly, with different pressures. And then you have a council. And in addition to those three, you have the community. Everyone is going at a different speed, and everyone has an expectation about where we need to be right now. Juggling that is quite a challenge. We're trying to work within a system and blow it apart, but without losing funding for our missions. It's a challenge to be forthright about the conditions, and the ideology, and race equity and the foundation of it all while still negotiating movement of a council, negotiating movement within a state bureaucratic institution, and the expectations of different communities that you're trying to serve.

>> **Kelly Barsdate:** That's a perfect segue, Ayanna, to a question I think that's on the minds of a lot of state arts agencies, which is about backlash. Because this is, as John Lewis would say, is "good trouble." Right? Equity work is going to stir some pots. **How are your agencies coping with backlash? How are you trying to address discomfort and lay a solid groundwork for success?**

>> **Ken Skrzysz:** As you know, I was particularly excited to see this question on the panel agenda. Because of our commitment to make changes to programs that hadn't been changed at the Maryland State Arts Council in decades, a letter signed by five state arts leaders was sent to the governor urging him to have me removed from my position. That pushback came, to be honest, from some white folks who were interested in holding onto past ways of doing things and who were about what it would mean to move beyond our historic scope. It was not easy, but that difficult situation ultimately resulted in the governor and secretary of commerce supporting our vision and standing behind what we were doing. Additional pushback came back from some organizations who were concerned about losing funding. The staff stepped up to respond through professional development sessions, to broaden everyone's understanding of what this work was about and how a commitment to equity and justice is expansive rather than a zero sum game.

In retrospect, what I acknowledge now is that communications and training need to be specifically sequenced into the evolution in this work. For example, when I arrived at the Maryland State Arts Council, we had an equity, diversity, and inclusion committee on the council, and all of the work sat in that Committee. We combined that committee with our policy committee so that lens was always presents as we were changing and approving new policies. We then moved to offer training to both the council and staff that focused on theory and historic perspectives. And now our action lies in that learning by applying it to the development of new procedures and policies and communications. So the message here is that this work is not linear, it's not clean, and it leaves everybody feeling unsettled and frustrated to some degree. And they're all justified in all of those feelings. We have more work to do, but we also have accomplished a lot. We can acknowledge both of those things.

So having said all of that, as difficult as these processes can be, we've tried as a staff to apply the creative process to this work. We find the creative process as artists. It's a way to problem-solve.

Working through a creative process leads to change, and can allow us to find joy in the righting of these historic wrongs and see the privilege in living in this particular moment in time, and to be energized and excited by the changes we're making. It has been quite the three-year journey. I really appreciate the time and space to call attention to what I call whiplash.

>> **Kelly Barsdate:** Thank you, Ken, for your honesty and your candor and also your optimism. I think it's really inspirational to know that deep work can come with deep challenges, but also deep success and even joy, at the same time. Any other thoughts on whiplash or push back? Ayanna or Jane or Katherin?

>> **Ayanna Lalia Kiburi:** Yes, I can give you a specific instance. When we reviewed our federal CARES dollars, we decided to distribute those CARES Act dollars through our state and local partnership grant program. It's comprised of county-level partners. Because it was CARES Act money we had in mind the social determinants of health and the stress on BIPOC individuals, as Katherin said earlier, and their higher mortality rates. Because of all of that, the council voted to focus those funds on communities that were the most disproportionately impacted by the virus. And that's really all we said. Because of proposition 209 we couldn't have racialized language in our requirements, but we were fully expecting our state and local partners would embrace that focus and put the funds where they were the most needed. But we did get push back. We had some communities who were completely outraged that we would ever put that condition on those funds, and that we would be so directive in our requirements. Those constituents were writing letters, expressing to us that they're poor and they're white and why would we discount them?

Some of them came around with a lot of discussion. Some of them didn't, and did not accept the funds. That highlighted how BIPOC people in those communities probably have never been served through our funding structures. That was heartbreaking, but a good reality-check for us. We're definitely using that information to develop a plan around technical assistance and around making sure our language is clear about who we want to serve. We are getting more creative around our restrictions with Proposition 209 in using data to approximate the communities and the organizations that represent those communities.

>> **Jane Preston:** When I referenced the more explicit language that NEFA has been putting into our grant programs, that certainly raised questions. Staff are getting questions from the organizations who have traditionally received our funding about where their funds fall in these shifts? I think that the new cohorts that we've funded, particularly with the COVID-related funds, are a great answer to that. About a third of those organizations are BIPOC-led. About another third, are from rural areas. There's some overlap in those constituencies, but that cohort overall is actually showing the direction that we want to go in better than anything written in guidelines or priorities.

The artists and the organizations we fund are our best way of creating more relationships. And, frankly, they also are the best advocacy we have for our funders and our board and really showing some progress to the staff, too.

>> **Katherin Canton:** One of the things I want to add is I think our work is constant capacity-building, resource-building and answering the question, "Why race?" Whether it's a

community member or council member or a staff member, it's a constant question. It does not always get expressed directly, or out loud or in a confrontational way. But it's always there, and it definitely has an impact on our capacity to do this work and have conversations that gain traction. It's part of trying to shift white supremacy culture. It's real, and those feelings come up. We need better tools to normalize the language around white supremacy culture so that we can better identify when these characteristics and these habits arise. We also need to provide talking points to everyone, whether it's staff or council members or grantees, around the importance of centering on race.

>> **Kelly Barsdate:** I love that idea of normalizing equity, and creating explicit supportive structures - both outside the agency and within the agency - to make the work happen. That's fantastic. We're getting a ton of questions coming through in the chat, which I'd like to tuck into now.

I'd like to build on what Katherin said by addressing some **questions about supporting structures**. Ken, you talked about different committee structures or staff team structures. Anything to add about internal staff structures or council structures that you have found to be particularly useful over time?

>> **Ken Skrzysz:** I would say that it is the connection between the learning that take place around theory and history, as I said, and actionizing that knowledge. As I said, the sequence is not linear, but what we've recognized recently is that having what we were discovering in our training and research translate into how we operate is the hardest step. That's when it begins to feel powerful.

>> **Ayanna Lalia Kiburi:** I don't think that we have all of this wrapped up. Being a constant learner is requisite for this type of work. I think that having a race and equity action plan for a state arts agency is a good start, and we have one. It's not finished and that's why a lot of the focus of Katherin's activities is to get that updated, maybe change it. We're also developing a logic model that I think will help with the inputs and the outputs for staff who understand how they're contributing to the outcome and how our strategic way forward is making a difference. We need to always be looking at what is the objective and exactly how did that become the objective?

It's an iterative process. You have to kind of stay in the flow and learn to pivot when one particular direction is not working. You know you also need to de-egoize it. Maybe that's not a word, but you can't take challenges personally, you need to see them as learning opportunities. This is not easy work, but if we're committed we'll find a way.

>> **Kelly Barsdate:** Oh, I think de-egoize is totally a word. My only question is whether it has one or two hyphens. Now for a legal question. One of the states earlier in the session wrote in a chat that they've **run into problems prioritizing funding for BIPOC grantees due to the legal risk of protected classes and not discriminating based on race**. That is certainly a fear and a concern. Any experience from our panelists about negotiating those legal things and finding a way forward to do this work anyway?

>> **Katherin Canton:** I'm happy to speak on that. In California we have Proposition 209 that basically prohibits using race, sex, etc. as a determinant for public funding or resources. So we have

that legal infrastructure or parameters. We are prohibited from using racialized language and we understand that. But we're still able to say communities of color and still, as Ayanna mentioned, use other data points about communities, backgrounds and experiences that can help us focus our funding and support to communities of color. It's been interesting coming from the nonprofit world into state government to navigate that. We do a lot of checking in with the legal team. We were writing up some guidelines the other day and the legal team gave us some great context and case language. That actually is really helpful, to have a really great relationship with a legal team.

>> **Ayanna Lalia Kiburi:** Yes it was really fascinating, I think, for our attorneys. They were very helpful and extremely thorough. There's also been interest from staff and council to make sure we are funding organizations that are of, by, and for the communities that they serve. An indicator of that is whether or not an organization is diverse and whether it's board is diverse. Since we can't ask direct questions about the demographics of these applicants, we're learning from other nonprofit community organizations that have figured out a way to mine community information to serve as a proxy to learn more about communities. For instance, where people own homes, where they own cars, where there are grocery stores or not, where there are food deserts. There's many ways to cross-reference data sets, so you approximate those groups and organizations that are the most under-represented and need those funds.

>> **Kelly Barsdate:** I think those are great observations about data points. Another thing I've seen some state arts agencies do is to use their own funding gaps as a data point. They can reference communities that have not been reached in that way – by pointing to funding gaps or areas where dollars are not given out in proportion to population demographics. That is another way of talking about targeting funds that really speaks to the public purpose and public necessity of a state arts council.

Eric, I know that you have been monitoring your own chat line in case any questions have come across the transom that way. Have any come in?

>> **Eric Giles:** Yes, I've had two. I can go ahead and start with the first one: **Have any of you had success in making contact and getting applications from tribal groups?** If so, how did you do it?

>> **Jane Preston:** NEFA has spent about the past 10 years building relationships with tribal communities in New England, through close relationships with many of the artists. We had funding for a native arts grant program for about seven years that unfortunately does not exist as a separate program now, but we still have active partnerships that stem from it. In fact, we helped fund an organization called the Northeast Indigenous Arts Alliance and our former native arts program manager works there.

It's all about relationships and communication with those tribal communities over time. In the COVID-19 grants that I talked about earlier, we specifically reached out to some of the members of that Indigenous Arts Alliance. We really wanted to be sure that we got substantial funds to those organizations through that special opportunity, because sometimes our project grants just are too restrictive to really be what the indigenous communities need. Multiple strategies have to be combined - relationships, of course, and trust-building, to show we actually are committed for the long haul to having those relationships with the native artists and the indigenous communities.

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>> **Kelly Barsdate:** I heard two key ideas there: relationship-building and flexibility. Not necessarily holding your grant categories too tightly or rigidly, but really looking at tailoring opportunities to different expectations, different needs and different pathways for making creative work happen. Eric, you said you had another question?

>> **Eric Giles:** I have another anonymous question: **My staff is "all in" on equity, but our council is resistant. Any advice on how to engage my council productively?**

>> **Ayanna Lalia Kiburi:** Our council works in committees. When smaller groups can talk in a focused way and provide data and research, that helps to formulate a better understanding and bring recommendations to the greater council. That has been really effective for us. It makes equity a recurring refrain. We have an equity committee, as well as a policy committee and an allocations committee. They all work to address equity from their vantage points. And the equity committee has been engaged in looking across all policy that we have with all of our grant programs and providing an assessment to the greater council, which really motivated a lot of changes.

The most important recent change is that the council voted to not only have our agency's race equity statement embedded in our guidelines, but also that each applicant must have a race equity statement as an organization, as an eligibility requirement. That's a huge shift. I wouldn't have seen that in 2015. It took all of the years preceding this and the process of developing a strategic framework and our own equity statement that got to this point. So I think it's about continuing to engage. Also, the council needs to hear from the public. We increased our public input to the council and brought in groups that we were trying to serve. That helped a lot. We also brought in the organizers with the Government Alliance on Race Equity and they shared their perspective and expertise about how race equity can show up in a government organization. And we had an amazing consultant that helped them walk through this particular framework and develop outcomes for the council. We really had to equip them to make race equity the focus of policy, and also prepare them to defend that stand to the public.

>> **Kelly Barsdate:** So it took time. They didn't get there right away. Ken, what would you add?

>> **Ken Skrzysz:** We instituted an ongoing equity and justice training curriculum for our council. I would say that that was moderately successful. What was more successful was finding ways to really connect them to the work and the response of constituents. We've established a staff program partnership with each councilor. We called it "speed dating." We connected staff and constituents with councilors who wanted linkages with specific program areas. That alignment allows them to take a deeper dive into what's happening. Then they understand the issues of equity in real time and in the real voices of constituents.

>> **Kelly Barsdate:** So it's not an abstract issue? It's a lived experience for them?

>> **Ken Skrzysz:** Absolutely.

>> **Kelly Barsdate:** I want to do a final lightning round with all of our panelists. The question is this: **If you could shift anything you wanted to about your grants in the blink of an eye - without fear of pushback, whiplash or legal constraints - what is the one thing that would make greatest difference in equitable grant making in your state?** I know it's cruel and unusual punishment to pick just one thing, but let's try. Jane, I'm going to put you on the hot seat. Would you start us out?

>> **Jane Preston:** Sure. I feel as if the pandemic has given us the permission and opportunity to change things quickly, and I hope that we will be able to continue that flexibility. If I had to pick one thing, I think it would be to continue more general operating support across all of our funding. So even if it's a project that is seeking funding, there can be support to sustain the artist or the organization as well.

>> **Katherin Canton:** I'm really thinking about policy, systems and structures. So for me that one thing is going to the council and how the council gets appointed. Making sure that the council is, as folks have been saying, of, by and for the community.

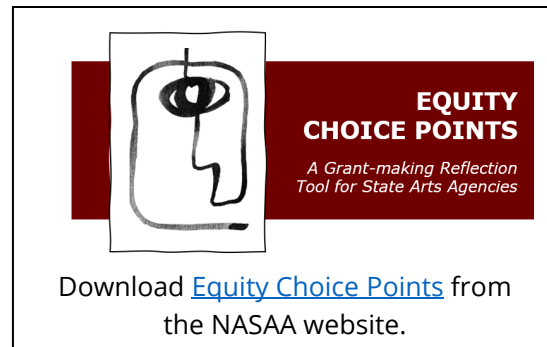
>> **Ayanna Lalia Kiburi:** Oh, gosh. It is cruel and unusual punishment to think of just one. I guess would like to eliminate the application process. I would love to go to a process where organizations could just share with us what they need, maybe in an interview or something like that. I think the application process is a huge barrier. An online application process is a huge barrier. There must be another model that states can use. I hope we can get there someday.

>> **Ken Skrzysz:** Ayanna, I am right with you. My thought about this is to simplify, simplify, simplify. I think we forget sometimes that our job is to distribute funding, not to create hurdles to funding. Our job is to offer professional development and technical assistance to empower creatives towards a more sustainable future. So I keep asking myself, how can we serve constituents and have the greatest impact with the least amount of burden to those we're serving? So I couldn't agree more.

>> **Kelly Barsdate:** I love all of this. Thank you for these amazing and inspirational ideas. We've talked about some very important equity strategies today, but of course this is just the tip of the iceberg. Every grant a state arts agency or a regional arts organization makes is the product of 100 different formal and informal, structured and organic choices. And each one of those choices is an

opportunity to be more inclusive. And NASAA has a brand new publication resource to help you seize those moments!

It's called **Equity Choice Points**, and it is a toolkit just for state arts agencies. It invites us to interrogate our funding systems from start to finish - from the very beginning when we are making first contact with constituents and how eligibility parameters are set, to the middle of the process and how things are adjudicated, to how award amounts are determined and how we can lay the groundwork for systems and change.



Every state is different. As you have heard today, every state's approach to equity is going to be unique. So, in that spirit, the Equity Choice Points toolkit includes examples from more than a dozen state arts agencies, including the great work of California and NEFA and Maryland that you have heard about today.

And fair warning: the guide also pokes some sacred cows along the way. It raises the unintended consequences of longstanding traditions. Like definitions of excellence. There's been a robust conversation about excellence in the chat column today, and the toolkit notes that as a big equity barrier. It also looks at formula funding and the biases that are harbored in those systems. And matching requirements, just to name a few. So the guide is not for the faint of heart, but hopefully it is a useful catalyst to your thinking and to your action.

I want to close, I think, with two anecdotes that offer some food for thought for equity work for our field. One is about sandwiches and the other is about sidewalks.

A few years back, Vu Le from Nonprofit AF used an analogy that really stuck with me. Imagine that you have three kids and three sandwiches. It seems fair to give each kid a sandwich. Right? If but what if one of the kids had not eaten for a few days and another kid just came from a banquet or a birthday party or something like that and is stuffed? Equity is about recognizing those circumstances, and helping the kid who is hungry to get fed. And maybe that means the other kid gets less, or maybe even none. Vu Le calls this "the courage to be unfair." I've worked in this state arts agency field for almost 30 years and it seems to me like we are very, very invested in the "same sandwich for everyone" mentality. But maybe this moment in America can be a catalyst to rethink our support for communities that are chronically under-nourished. Maybe we can use what MLK called "the fierce urgency of now" to create conditions where everybody can thrive through the arts.

It's that idea of "everybody" that brings me to my second story, which is about sidewalks. Back in the late 60s - I promise, this will be relevant, so bear with me! - back in the late 60s and early 70s, a few cities started to modify sidewalks to install ramps to help people with wheelchairs. It caused a lot of havoc, because it meant ripping up the streets and stuff like that. But the end result? 50 years later, curb cuts don't just help people with disabilities. They make life better for postal workers, for parents pushing babies in strollers, for people with luggage, for people with stiff knees, and for everyone else. Curb cuts prove that equity does not have to be a zero sum game.

RELATED RESOURCES

Angela Glover Blackwell,
[The Curb-Cut Effect](#)

Vu Le, [The Courage to Be Unfair](#)

Angela Glover Blackwell puts this beautifully. She writes, "When we create the circumstances that allow people who have been left behind to participate more fully in society, we all win." I love that, and I think it's very true - and I think it's the public sector's job to help everybody win.

With that, I'd like to close by thanking Ayanna, Katherin, Jane, and Ken for being with us today and sharing their experience and their wisdom and their hope. You are my JEDI heroes, The Force is truly strong within you. I really admire the open hearts and open ears and spirit of learning and experimentation that you all are bringing to this work.

Thanks, also, to everyone else in our audience for joining in today. NAASA is cheering you on. We are here to be a resource. None of us are in this alone. And I really couldn't ask for better traveling companions along the way.

So that's a wrap for today's session. Thanks again for being part of this work. Take care and be well!