



# In Pursuit of Equity: Four Case Studies of State Arts Agencies

National Assembly of  
State Arts Agencies  
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## State Arts Agencies and Equity

State arts agencies (SAAs) are tasked with catalyzing arts and culture to serve all residents of the nation's 56 states and jurisdictions. Together, SAAs provide more than 22,000 grants and hundreds of nongrant programs to support the cultural, civic, economic, educational and health benefits that the arts provide. To ensure that these public benefits reach every community, SAAs seek citizen input into planning, engage with multiple state, local and national partners, strive to make granting and agency processes transparent, and routinely make themselves accountable and accessible to the public. These strategies all are vehicles SAAs use to work toward greater equity.

This work is accelerating, however. Catalyzed by the devastating and disparate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the murder of George Floyd, many SAAs are making more ambitious and explicit commitments to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI).

SAAs are reexamining their granting practices, committing to targeted programming, actively seeking the input of historically marginalized communities and bringing a DEI lens to their communications. These efforts are all part of reflective and critical strategies to guarantee that SAAs are fulfilling their role to serve all.

Through four case studies, this report dives into the details of both time-tested and new strategies that SAAs are employing to achieve more equitable outcomes and processes.

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## Methods

This research project was conducted in summer 2021 by the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) in collaboration with the Washington State Arts Commission (ArtsWA). To inform its strategic planning process, ArtsWA sought to learn how other state arts agencies are adapting their grants and services to achieve greater equity. To supply that information, NASAA reviewed existing SAA documentation, facilitated focus groups, and conducted in-depth interviews to gain insights into policy and practice changes under way among SAAs.

Interviews were conducted at the executive level for each SAA to capture its agencywide, long-term strategic plans for engaging in diversity, equity and inclusion work. For this report, NASAA interviewed Anne Bown-Crawford of the California Arts Council, Ken Skrzysz of the Maryland State Arts Council, Michael J. Bobbitt and David Slatery of the Massachusetts Cultural Council, and David Platts of the South Carolina Arts Commission. Each interview was scheduled for an hour and half and followed a semistructured format that allowed for in-depth responses to prepared questions as well as emergent conversation on related topics. The interviews consisted of nine questions, each tailored to be state-specific, that addressed the following themes:

- How equity is viewed and acted upon across the agency
- How equity is woven into planning, partnerships and other agency strategies
- How grant funding is made more equitable and accessible
- How different and equally important calls for equity are balanced
- How equity is positioned within internal and external communications strategies
- How the SAA makes itself more accessible

The four states selected were chosen in partnership with ArtsWA. Each state provided unique opportunities to understand recent strategic planning efforts, a history of equity-focused programming, and new approaches to agency operations. These SAAs are by no means the only ones pursuing equity. [NASAA's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion resources hub](#) offers a broader look at equity programming across SAAs.

NASAA recognizes that language about identity is constantly evolving and that words—especially when wielded by government entities—hold the power to harm as well as to help. This research project considers the systemwide effects that inequity has on distinct populations in the United States. All three reports in this series necessarily refer to particular populations. But we acknowledge that the terminology used is imperfect and may not adequately reflect the preferences, complexity or lived experience of every group. Given those caveats, the following general terminology is used in these reports: Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders; Black; Latinx; LGBTQ+; Native American; people with disabilities; people experiencing homelessness; people experiencing incarceration; remote,

rural, and urban communities; and White. We use people of color when describing practices and policies that affect multiple communities that are non-White, non-Hispanic. We also use the terms historically marginalized, historically represented, and underserved, since those terms are regularly invoked in state and federal government policies that attempt to advance equity. For more guidance on language choice as a vehicle to advance SAAs' equity work, see NASAA's [Inclusive Language Guide](#).

In these case studies, we also adhere to the language that different SAAs are using as well as the ways specific communities name themselves. Other terms, such as *African American*, *Asian*, *BIPOC* (*Black, Indigenous, and/or people of color*), *gay*, *Hispanic*, *Latino*, *nonbinary* and *people with low income*, are used when appropriate.

## Shared Approaches to Equity

Each state arts agency that NASAA interviewed used a variety of context-dependent strategies to foster equity, which you can read about in the case studies section. However, some common approaches and themes were visible across all four states.

### Vision

**Each SAA had a cohesive vision of what equity looks like.** This included explicit commitments to equity, such as the inclusion of it in their strategic plans and value statements, as well as statements of solidarity on their websites. The SAAs were also readily able to name those most affected by inequality in their state—with most naming the intersection of race and geography—and their concrete plans for addressing this inequality. Each SAA also spoke of equity as an internal and external commitment, meaning that agency culture had to commit to equity just as much as in its programming and grant making.

### Strategic Planning

**Each SAA addressed equity in its most recent strategic planning process.** This ranged from including tangible equity goals to centering equity as the focus of the entire strategic plan. Planning practices included intentional outreach to communities that had been underrepresented in previous plans through targeted town halls, public calls for input, surveys, meeting with community leaders, and working with local and state partners.

Strategic goals focused on increasing participation in SAA activities, fostering new partnerships with organizations, reducing barriers to access, and the

*"It was clear—if you go and you ask for input from a diverse audience, you're going to get a diverse response, and that has really led us down this path of beginning to shape our work."*

*– David Platts*

sustainability of diverse artistic and creative practices across the state. These objectives were tied to specific implementation targets and measurement methods to ensure accountability and progress.

### *Grant Making and Programming*

**Each SAA had recently evaluated its grant making practices.** Acting on this information spurred changes in these areas:

- **Panel policies.** Anti-bias training, panelist stipends, and more diverse panelists were all mentioned as strategies to ensure less bias and greater equity during grant adjudication.
- **Funding priorities.** Looking at funding models that prioritized smaller organizations was important. This included a critical examination of how funding was tied to budget size, with a few SAAs considering reversing traditional formulas in which the budget sizes of larger organizations drives grant amount allocations. Creating funding that prioritized organizations led by and for people of color, as well as geographic diversity, was also discussed in each state. In addition, SAAs mentioned shifting their thinking toward being service-providers rather than gatekeepers of funding.
- **Grant applications.** Every SAA mentioned the need to simplify its grant applications. The SAAs also emphasized that asking fewer questions is important in reducing the time burden of applications. Additionally, having multiple ways to apply, such as online applications, written narratives and video submissions, was noted as a way to increase accessibility.
- **Grant Requirements.** Although financial reporting and funding-match requirements are driven by the desire for states to be good stewards of public funding, SAAs found that these and other grant requirements can be barriers to organizations with less capacity to meet them.
- **Technical assistance.** SAAs conveyed the importance of offering technical assistance to all applicants at all stages of the process, including following up after the grant-making process.

SAAs also discussed the importance of seeking and engaging in partnerships to both foster cross-sector arts and culture programming as well as focus equity in their work. SAAs found benefit in working with partners of all sizes, from small nonprofits to other state agencies. Creative programming and partnerships across educational, health, and judicial systems were specifically mentioned for their ability to reach historically underserved and marginalized communities.

### *Internal Operation and Staff*

**The SAAs mentioned that one of the most important aspects of equity was staff engagement.** Staff were seen as the connecting points between equity and the work that



the agency does, so many SAAs saw value in having all staff contribute to strategic planning around equity.

Additional practices such as formal anti-bias and anti-racist staff training, standardizing staff pay and handbooks, and scheduling time for DEI discussions in regular staff meetings were important for engaging staff and fostering equity internally. Informal strategies, such as DEI book clubs and lunches were also discussed as practices that encouraged staff to consider equity in larger contexts and fuel commitment to integrating equitable practices in their work.

### **Communications**

**Each SAA we interviewed was committed to publicly highlighting its work on equity.**

Strategies for communications prioritized transparency and discussion of the value that equity work holds for everyone. Communications strategies and outreach were also important aspects of widening the circle of communities that interact with SAAs. This includes practices such as using more diverse representation in communications material, publishing across a wide range of mediums, targeted outreach, increasing public affairs staff capacity and lifting up the equity work in which the agency is engaging.

Their work in equity was an important component of SAAs' conversations with their legislatures. Pointing to increases in more diverse funding recipients, fewer barriers to access, and other equity achievements showed the viability of these strategies as well as the positive statewide impact of state arts agencies. Such communications also presented the SAA as an entity responsive to local needs, modeling a principle of good government valued by elected officials.

SAAs conveyed that equity is an issue that concerns legislators who represent constituents from all parts of their state. Making sure that voices from many diverse constituent groups engage with state government resonates with state legislators that all represent specific geographies with particular demographics.

### **Challenges**

The obstacles to equity are numerous, but each SAA identified a core set of obstacles that presented the biggest challenges to its equity work:

- **Agency capacity.** SAAs reflected on the urgent need for more staff and funding to truly reach the diverse constituents in their states and provide the support needed for all artists and organizations to reach their full potential.
- **The COVID-19 pandemic and its constraint on staff and movement.** SAAs discussed the disparate impacts the pandemic had on artists and creatives, especially those who are Black, Indigenous and/or people of color (BIPOC). SAAs also mentioned that the inability to be physically present in communities across the state limited their ability to engage with the communities they want to serve.

- **Historical injustices caused by the state.** Many SAAs acknowledged that a deficit of trust naturally exists between historically marginalized communities and the state governments that were often architects of this inequity. This distrust affects the relationship building process as well as who is willing to work with any state agency.
- **State and federal regulations.** SAAs challenged laws and regulations that restrict the collection of demographic data. While initially put in place to prevent discrimination, such regulations can result in lack of robust data for use in assessing how well an SAA is serving its full range of populations and can complicate program design and delivery to address service gaps. Other state and federal accountability requirements can create onerous requirements for grantees.
- **Political conflicts.** These take many forms. Politically progressive constituents or authorizers may press to dismantle systems or criticize an SAA for moving too slowly toward equity. Politically conservative constituents or authorizers may resist resource reallocations or oppose actions or trainings grounded in critical race theory. To uphold their mandate to serve everyone, SAAs need to find creative ways of balancing these competing pressures.



transcenDANCE Youth Arts Project, a California Arts Council grantee

## State Arts Agency Case Studies

### California Arts Council

#### Vision

The California Arts Council (CAC) has oriented its entire agency toward pursuing equity. Through its focus on equity and its immediate commitment to the urgency of race equity, CAC is committed to ensuring that arts and culture are inclusive of everyone.

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#### California Arts Council Racial Equity Statement

*The CAC's equity goal is to create a sense of belonging that is so palpable, it is universally experienced. Pursuit of justice in this arena benefits everyone by taking a critical eye to systems of oppression—systems that undercut fairness across multiple demographics, conditions, and experiences.*

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For CAC, equity is pursued through an attention to [racial equity first](#). CAC is not neglecting other forms of equity, but "by prioritizing attention to racial equity, everyone will benefit because racial injustice is the most pervasive and entrenched form of injustice permeating the institutions and systems that everyone must access."

Centering race equity also reflects CAC's understanding that government at all levels (federal, state and local) is responsible for perpetuating systemic racial inequities—and can be responsible for repairing them, as well.

#### Strategic Planning

CAC's comprehensive [2020-2027 Strategic Framework](#) is a departure from the traditional strategic plans that other state arts agencies create. Instead of goals and timelines for accomplishing these goals, the Strategic Framework offers expected outcomes, aspirations, and the tools needed to iteratively address current and emerging challenges.

This system of planning was developed through a process that prioritized diversity of thought, opinion and respondents. Interviews with staff, legislators and the lieutenant governor were accompanied by 24 additional interviews with stakeholders representing diverse racial, geographic and socioeconomic identities. Four focus groups across the state, ensuring geographic diversity of input, were also conducted, alongside phone banks welcoming public calls and a stakeholder survey that garnered more than 1,000 responses that were able to be disaggregated by regional and demographic representation. Additional attention was called to the role of culture, race and implicit bias in the planning process during several agency work sessions in 2019.



The framework articulates a [series of aspirations](#) for grant making, programs, partnerships, policies and communications. In addition to outlining the agency's areas for future action, the agency explains the "root cause rationale" undergirding each direction. This portion of the plan focuses on numerous strategies designed explicitly to advance equity. Examples of action strategies include:

- Creating more funding opportunities for multiyear and operating support, which were not cornerstones of previous CAC grant making. The framework succinctly notes that "because smaller organizations tend to have fewer options for funding their operations and less time to engage in grantwriting, they will benefit the most from this change."
- Systematically reviewing CAC's current funding policies to determine where they disadvantage smaller organizations. Multiple action strategies examine policies that create strain on smaller organizations' capacity, such as matching requirements, fiscal sponsor guidelines, the information required on applications, and data collection and reporting.
- Establishing work groups to inform agency policy and program design. These advisory bodies will broaden the agency's pool of expertise, give historically marginalized communities a direct voice in agency decisions and help build deeper relationships with the communities CAC serves.
- Centering the arts and creativity as a key component in solving social and environmental justice problems. This is viewed as a catalyst for cross-sector partnerships and community engagement, as well as an important advocacy strategy to prevent the arts from being pitted against other pressing policy priorities.

As part of the Strategic Framework, the [Decision Support Tool](#) provides a structured sequence of questions and considerations to help the agency weigh the equity effects and anticipate likely equity consequences of proposed policy changes, programming choices and other agency commitments. It also directs the agency to adopt a public consultation process to guide how resources will be deployed.

Additionally, the Decision Support Tool enumerates a series of distinct action steps for both CAC Council and staff. Following these steps not only ensures that the tool is used as intended but increases the validity of every decision made through using the tool.

The Decision Support Tool is explicit about its commitment to equity through its Equity Alignment section, which indicates that not only was the framework developed through a

***"... every time we do go to the Decision Support Tool, we do slow down to use it. It forces us to think about everything in a more careful manner."***

***-Anne Bown-Crawford***

process immersed in diversity, but the framework's objective is to address racial equity, and through that, all forms of social inequity.

For CAC, the journey toward equity is not about swift advancement of a state agenda, but about "making the tent bigger." The Decision Support Tool helps CAC in "developing an organizational culture that acknowledges and addresses the downsides of moving too quickly." This tempo can be challenging when community needs are pressing, and because current events drive a sense of urgency around action in California. But intentionally "slowing down" the process to create opportunities for equity allows unconscious bias to surface and be addressed and reduces reversion to older ways of doing business.

### ***Grant Making and Programming***

CAC's commitment to equity is visible immediately within its grant programs, as each application includes CAC's Racial Equity Statement. Similarly, applications are encouraged from a wide range of historically underserved groups, like Black, Indigenous, people of color, LGBTQ, rural and people experiencing incarceration. Guidelines for applications are also made accessible in Spanish and large print.

Like other SAAs profiled in this case study project, CAC has worked to adjust its application requirements to make funding easier to secure, especially for small and midsize organizations. Notable changes include:

- Starting in 2019, in every grant category, organizations without 501(c)(3) status were able to utilize a [fiscal sponsor](#) to apply, thus opening up resources for numerous emerging and unincorporated groups.
- The agency reduced application burden by limiting requested financial information to only those data points relevant to proposed projects.
- The agency began paying panelist honoraria to make panel service feasible for individuals with economic limitations.

CAC also is working to ensure that its grantees commit to equitable policies. CAC now requires a racial equity statement from applicant organizations and offers technical assistance, [resources](#) and webinars to support organizations in creating one. As the agency [explains](#) to constituents, "The racial equity statement requirement is an opportunity for applicant organizations to explain their commitment and tangible efforts to advancing the leadership of and service to Indigenous people, communities of color, racially and ethnically diverse individuals, tribal communities, immigrant and refugee communities, and communities whose principal languages are not English."

An organization's commitment and implementation of equitable principles is one of the primary categories for adjudication across most grants. There are multiple rationales for this policy. In addition to ensuring that grant investments complement CAC's goal of racial equity, these requirements play a leadership role in helping California's arts organizations to develop and deepen their own DEI practices. For individual artists, community engagement and social impact are criteria for grants.

During the most recent rounds of COVID-19 funding, CAC has been working with multiple informal state and local partners—especially those in Native American and rural populations—to ensure that those who aren't normally part of their grant pool apply for emergency relief grants. CAC is hoping to formalize these partnerships going forward as a strategy for building inroads and relationships with more communities.

A [recent data analysis of the demographic makeup of CAC grantees](#)<sup>1</sup> also was completed to better understand the racial diversity of who is receiving funding. Initial results suggest that White/Caucasian populations are over-represented in the CAC grantee pool while Latinx communities, Asian communities, immigrants, veterans and people with disabilities are significantly under-represented in grantee organizations.

### **CAC Grants and Equity**

Many of CAC's grants promote equity through targeted funding to historically under-resourced communities.

- **[Impact Projects](#)**. These collaborative project grants support artists and artistic practices that respond to social, political and economic issues in California. They prioritize local and community-specific projects.
- **[Innovations + Intersections](#)**. This pilot grant supports creative projects in the intersections between arts and technology or arts and wellness. These projects must be designed to address systemic issues in California.
- **[Reentry Through the Arts](#)**. This project grant supports restorative, transformative and reconciliatory justice through arts projects for those who have been incarcerated.
- **[JUMP StArts](#)**. This artist-in-residence program supports arts and cultural education, apprenticeship or mentorship for "at-risk" youth, with priority for those who are engaged by or in the justice system.

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<sup>1</sup> PDF pages 64-91

However, CAC is constrained in acting upon demographic data by [California Proposition 209](#), which amended the California state constitution to prohibit the consideration of race, sex or ethnicity in public employment, contracting and education. This presents a challenge and requires unique ways of ensuring equity in funding. To ensure that funding and programming is reaching those who need it most, CAC has developed a series of strategies to pursue equitable funding goals:

- Providing the [Statewide and Regional Networks](#) program to create a network of arts service organizations able to provide resources—such as professional development and regranting—for its culturally specific and geographically diverse communities.
- Encouraging systemically marginalized communities to apply by using grant language that specifically names these communities in the application and centers the importance of race equity in CAC's grant making.
- Working to consider the broader inequities that intersect with race, sex and ethnicity across California—such as low income, lack of health care and geographic location—and then tying grants to these indicators. An example of this is the [Relief for Individual Artists and Cultural Practitioners](#) grant, which tied funding to the disparate impacts of COVID-19.

### **Staff and Governance**

CAC staff went through a comprehensive racial equity training in 2017 with the [Government Alliance on Race and Equity](#). Building on this work ultimately led to the creation of the racial equity manager staff position.

With this position, CAC is able to have a full-time staff member to coordinate engagement with diverse communities and to provide critical equity analysis of guidelines, internal processes and new decisions. Beyond policy, the racial equity manager also is able to center equity across the agency through assisting with:

- CAC council trainings

***"Proposition 209 forces us to look at the larger, more universal aspects of a community. So, how does geography affect a community? How does food scarcity? How does the lack of health care affect the community and who are the groups most affected by those larger forces?"***

***-Anne Bown-Crawford***

***"There's such value in having a shared language and developing that language together, and that's what the racial equity manager is in charge of."***

***-Anne Bown-Crawford***

- monthly equity presentations during all-staff meetings
- the Council Equity Committee
- staff equity book clubs
- CAC affinity groups

As CAC continues to integrate the staff position of racial equity manager within the agency, it is mindful of ensuring that its work on equity is a continuous, shared responsibility for all agency staff.

This question of staff burden is pertinent because, like many SAAs, CAC struggles with staff shortages and administrative impediments to hiring during a time where constituent needs are escalating and the agency has been charged with implementing many [new initiatives](#). Staff shortages are especially challenging given California's size—staff must build relationships in a state that is the world's fifth largest economy, with nearly 40 million residents in communities scattered over 163,696 square miles. The agency also acknowledges that it has struggled at times to apply its Decision Support Tool principles to internal operations, and that building an internal staff culture that exemplifies equity is a long-term endeavor.

The CAC council also has gone through race equity training in an effort to build a shared equity vocabulary with staff and constituents and to reflect on its own board culture. Likewise, the council's Equity Committee is a standing committee that is written into the council's [bylaws](#). This committee is responsible for ensuring that grants are equitably distributed and working to "dismantle structural racism and other inequities."

### **Partnerships**

CAC's work in equity has a special emphasis on the role partnerships play in reaching historically marginalized communities. Dedicated to the power of arts and culture to address social issues, CAC works extensively with various partners to strengthen their own equity work as well as promote the use of creative practices in addressing a wide range of social issues. Examples of these partnerships include:

- **California Creative Corps Pilot Program.** The [California Creative Corps Pilot program](#) was created in 2021 through a \$60 million investment in CAC to support California's creative workforce. Funding for this program, which was included in the governor's FY2022 budget, will extend until 2024. Although still in development, the program will commit the funding to supporting local, regional and statewide organizations in all 58 California counties that will in turn fund artists experiencing unemployment and underemployment. Funded artists will support pandemic recovery and environmental, civic and social engagement that is rooted in local contexts and culture. An emphasis will be placed on bringing resources to the communities of color that have been disparately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.



- **California Creative Youth Development Program.** Through a new [\\$40 million investment in CAC's Creative Youth Development \(CYD\) program](#), CAC will continue its [JUMP StArts](#) CYD grant and reinstate four other CYD grants—[Youth Arts Action](#), [Artists in Schools](#), [Arts Education Exposure](#) and [Arts Integration Training](#). These grants are designed to address institutional gaps in opportunities for youth through partnering with community based organizations, educators and local artists. CAC will focus on equity in its new policy guidelines during the upcoming revamp process, acknowledging that [youth of color, communities with low income, and those impacted by the judicial or foster system face the largest barriers to access](#).
- **California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.** CAC partners with the [California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation](#) (CDCR) to provide the [Arts in Corrections program](#) for people experiencing incarceration. Through this partnership, artists and arts organizations support well-being and transformational experiences through on-site arts programming. CAC and CDCR's 2021 report, [Flowers Grown in Concrete: Exploring the Healing Power of the Arts for People Experiencing Incarceration](#), finds that Arts in Corrections helps people experiencing incarceration cope with trauma, strengthen family relationships through artistic practice, and engage with the arts community and with important reentry services after incarceration.
- **Government Alliance on Race and Equity.** Beyond the racial equity training undertaken with the [Government Alliance on Race and Equity](#) (GARE), this partnership involved working with colleagues across 18 different state agencies to form the [California Capitol Cohort of GARE](#). This cohort, the first of its kind in the nation, was instrumental for resource sharing and group learning across state agencies, leading to the formation of CAC's commitment to race equity within its 2020 Strategic Framework.
- **Governor's Office of the Tribal Advisor and Native Artists.** In 2019, CAC met with the [Governor's Office of the Tribal Advisor](#) (Tribal Advisor) and four community based planning partners to organize a [community-led planning meeting](#) with Native American and Indigenous artists based in California. The participants envisioned what an "impactful and accessible statewide gathering of California Native American artists" would look like and how CAC and Tribal Advisor could play a role in advancing equity in the arts for California Indian and American Indian artists in California. The [meeting report](#) summarizes key themes and potential strategies for equity, including:
  - examining and removing public art that demeans Native people and "glorifies their genocide";
  - creating an advisory board through CAC that would provide technical development and funding for new regional groups and Native artists;
  - facilitating a statewide convening of Native American and California Indian artists to make space for community building and further catalyzing investment in this community. These convening was set for 2021 but was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Communications

CAC prioritizes equity, diversity and accessibility in its communications. Through its website, CAC offers curated [racial equity learning resources](#). Through its general communications, CAC highlights the diversity present in the arts and culture sector, ensuring that culture bearers and diverse artistic practices are uplifted and promoted.

The move to digital meetings was fully embraced by the agency during the pandemic because it generally made public meetings more accessible for constituents. However, the CAC is considering expanding its public affairs team after the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted so many areas where CAC's reach still does not extend.

### DREAM

[Dream](#) is CAC's newest communication piece, featuring the breadth of diversity in arts and culture across California. With its inaugural edition published in summer 2021, DREAM is the result of a partnership with [Engaging the Senses Foundation](#). Through this magazine, CAC highlights the need to feature the work of artists and culture bearers in their own words. Likewise, CAC centers the magazine in equity through both a reminder of CAC's commitment to racial equity and the power of arts to create a better tomorrow.

Though DREAM, CAC reminds us of the beauty that stems from the centering of unique and diverse voices and the power that dreaming has to envision a more just and equitable future.



The cover of CAC's DREAM magazine. Hien Huynh and Johnny Nguyen perform in the Lenora Lee Dance multimedia dance project "Within These Walls."

# Maryland State Arts Council

## Vision

The [Maryland State Arts Council](#)'s (MSAC) commitment to equity constitutes a core directive for the agency. In pursuing policies and programming that are rooted in equity and justice, "MSAC ensures that all Marylanders have the opportunity to participate in the arts as affirming, enhancing, and necessary life experiences." The agency's Equity and Justice Statement is one of its grounding principles and is read alongside its mission, vision and strategic goals at the beginning of every public meeting.

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### [Maryland State Arts Council Equity and Justice Statement](#)

*The arts celebrate our state's diversity, connect our shared humanity, and transform individuals and communities. The Maryland State Arts Council and its supporting collaborators are committed to advancing and modeling equity, diversity, accessibility, and inclusion in all aspects of our organizations and across communities of our state. MSAC and its grantees are committed to embracing equity and non-discrimination, regardless of race, religious creed, color, age, gender expression, sexual orientation, class, language, and/or ability.*

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MSAC's progress toward equity has been shaped by a shift in priority from equality to equity. Instead of continuing to provide the same resources for all, MSAC strives to provide meaningful resources to those who have been historically under-resourced as a way to ensure just outcomes for all.

Initially, MSAC began its DEI work centered on race. While retaining its initial race equity focus, MSAC has expanded its equity focus to include general issues with access, especially along the intersection of race and geography. As MSAC noted, even the agency's location in Baltimore can unintentionally limit its reach across a state that contains such diversity, from major metropolitan areas shaped by Philadelphia and the nation's capital to remote communities characterized by family farming, forestry, or crab and oyster fishing.

## Strategic Planning

MSAC's most recent [strategic planning](#) was undertaken in 2018 with AMS Planning & Research and prioritized hearing from diverse and under-represented communities. This was achieved through holding more than 20 stakeholder interviews, a stakeholder survey with responses from 740 people, seven open-ended "creative conversations" in geographically diverse locations, and separate listening sessions that addressed each of MSAC's seven program areas, e.g., [Public Art, Grants for Organizations, and Arts in Education](#). AMS Planning & Research also undertook a review of agency practices and included a specific focus on best practices for leading in equity, diversity, inclusion and

access. These actions to promote equity in the planning process align with the results of the stakeholder survey, where the top priority for respondents was, "Ensure equitable funding for artists and arts organizations."

The strategic plan is accompanied by the [Vision, Mission, Goals and Strategies document](#), which outlines the objectives and strategies for each of the five MSAC strategic goals:

- increase participation
- provide intentional support
- build capacity
- leverage connections
- bolster Maryland arts

Each goal and strategy is then broken down into an action, relevant program, and start and end dates in MSAC's [Implementation Evidence](#) report, which lists monitoring DEI progress as a first priority. To create this document, MSAC staff spent two days outlining tangible actions for its program and then attaching them to relevant goals and strategies, as well as creating begin and end dates of six-month increments over three to five years. These actions are then tied into biannual staff performance evaluations. Equity related objectives and metrics noted in the Implementation Evidence report include changes across all program areas, such as:

- Identify 30 new [Grants for Organizations](#)-eligible organizations representing geographic and demographic diversity.
- Make grant documents and applications more accessible by incorporating plain language, braille, audio, video, ASL (American Sign Language), Spanish version and other visual aids such as diagrams.
- Establish public call for panelists to review programs and editors to revise programs.
- Expand field work in communities underrepresented by MSAC folklife grant making in the last five years by 25%.

Regular progress reports are shared with the council, the state department of commerce and other authorizers to demonstrate agency accountability and raise confidence in MSAC's equity work.

MSAC continues to make updates to its internal strategic planning as new challenges and opportunities arise, using the current goals as a baseline upon which an emergent process of planning continues. This was made apparent during the COVID-19 crisis, during which MSAC convened weekly forums with constituents to assess needs, gather input and

*"I just can't tell you how that kind of transparency and accountability has elevated the work of the staff in the eyes of the [MSAC] council and in the eyes of political leadership in the state."*

*– Ken Skrzysz*

develop new program responses that would help the arts community—especially underserved groups—weather the storm.

Skrzesz noted that it was intentional to integrate equity into the strategic plan rather than create a separate DEI plan. This was a deliberate choice to encourage equity to permeate every action of the agency.

### ***Grant Making and Programming***

As MSAC writes on its website under [Our Grantmaking Approach](#), it has committed fully to pursuing DEI principles in grant making and funding. This commitment includes acknowledging privilege, funding more diverse projects, eliminating biases along the granting process, expanding beyond Eurocentric traditions of art, and making investments that "contribute to social change and demonstrate aesthetic excellence in terms relevant to context and intent." These commitments to equitable grant making, alongside the aforementioned strategic goals and equity justice statement, are present on every grant application.

Some of the recent steps that MSAC has taken to make grant making more equitable include:

- Reworking Grants for Organizations (GFO) funding using a new, graduated formula that will set award caps as a smaller portion of large organizations' budgets and a larger portion of smaller organizations' budgets. This revised scale, in tandem with an across-the-board \$1 million grant cap, is projected to increase funding for small and mid-sized groups, which comprise more than 90% of the GFO grantee pool. MSAC will phase in the new funding model over five years, beginning fiscal year 2024.
- Changing the organization grant application question from "community served" to "geographic area served." This switch in question encouraged organizations to engage with the demographics of their service area rather than a preconceived notion of community.
- Emphasizing that artistic programming must be "of" (originating from) an applicant's community, not merely "for" audiences.
- Providing [Professional Development Opportunity Grants](#) and [Creativity Grants for Projects](#) aimed at smaller organizations and independent artists, groups that often do not have the capacity to consistently invest in professional development without external support.
- Reducing grant applications to four narrative questions.
- Removing matching requirements for many grants.
- Focusing on simplicity in its new online Smart Simple grants management platform.
- Removing artistic excellence language from grant requirements and using suggestions from [Animating Democracy's Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change](#) to evaluate applications on more inclusive qualities, such as:



- outstanding achievement
  - communication of the creative process
  - alignment of work with vision
  - evocative experiences and heightened sensations,
  - communication of collective meaning beyond artist's perspective and experience
- Clearly defining MSAC expectations for community engagement in each application's evaluation rubric.
- Accepting video submissions for the Maryland Traditions grant and expanding this submission method to most programs in the near future.
- Capping arts and education funding in each county based on student population and need to allow for a more geographically equitable spread of funding.

Additionally, MSAC created a [Special Request Grant](#) for projects that are not eligible for other MSAC grants. This grant specifically encourages projects that support engagement of Black, Indigenous and people of color. Funding for this grant comes from returned or unobligated funds identified through a quarterly internal audit of MSAC's budget. The Special Request Grant presented an opportunity for MSAC to make the discretionary grant process transparent.

To ensure that its funding policies are transparent and responsive, MSAC has adopted a decision-making model that systematically reviews all its grant categories and recruits community involvement in policy decisions. The agency follows a 16-week process that blends staff expertise with public input:

1. MSAC staff members research national standards for evolving practices and recommend a time line for guidelines changes. A recent example of this research is MSAC's [Equitable Funding Model Research Packet for their Grants for Organizations program](#).
2. One or more public listening sessions are convened to invite community ideas and input.
3. [Call for Editors](#) is published to invite members of the public to serve as advisors. MSAC looks for applicants who have experience relevant to the grant program under review, for example, experience as an arts administrator, independent artist or community stakeholder, as well as with organizations of varying budget sizes.
4. A panel of editors is approved by the staff, council and assistant secretary. Editors engage in a team editing process and receive \$300 for their work.
5. Proposed policy changes are drafted.
6. A series of editing meetings is held to consider alternatives and policy revisions.
7. Proposed changes are sent to the Secretary of Commerce for review and to the Assistant Attorney General for edits.
8. The final version is sent to the Council for a recommendation to the Secretary of Commerce and, upon approval, is published.

During the public listening sessions, a recurring challenge is to hold space for community reactions. Rather than structuring the sessions as question-and-answer forums, MSAC briefly presents a proposed policy shift, then steps back to allow a wide range of participant responses, comments and counterproposals. During this time MSAC tries to focus on harvesting information, not on redirecting or defending its proposed approach.

MSAC has also focused on how panelist selection and panel adjudication can introduce bias into the grant-making process. To remedy this, it removed the need to be recommended to serve on a panel, allowing anyone to apply to be a panelist. MSAC also increased panelist pay and introduced extensive implicit bias training, and strives for diversity in panel makeup by proactively promoting panel service through diverse and nontraditional arts networks across the state. However, MSAC notes that it cannot ask for racial demographic information when selecting panelists and has to instead guarantee diversity through other means, such as geographic diversity.

### **Staff and Governance**

MSAC's board initially had a DEI Committee, however this committee was merged into the Policy Committee. The previous separation of the DEI and Policy committees sometimes led to an imbalance where policy changes were separated from equity concerns. Through the combination of these two committees, the MSAC council strives to view every policy change through the holistic lens of equity and justice, recognizing that this process requires continuous work.

***"The real change occurs through empathy, and that can only happen when you find yourself in someone else."***

***– Ken Skrzysz***

As mentioned under strategic planning, staff are fully engaged in the equity work of MSAC. This included an [initial equity and justice training](#) for council members and staff. This training was also made available to other cultural agencies, like Maryland Humanities, and all the county arts council executive directors so that the statewide cultural field would have a shared baseline when approaching equity. The training took place over six sessions in 2020 and covered:

- Self Awareness & Our Intersectionality
- Generative Conflict and Restorative Justice
- Institutional Reconciliation: How Are We Inequitable?
- Institutional Reconciliation: How Do We Undo Inequity?
- Aesthetic Perspectives
- Accessibility Planning

## Creativity Grants

[Creativity Grants](#) arose in 2020 after MSAC realized that there was no funding mechanism to directly reach small, nonprofit organizations and independent artists that are not traditionally part of MSAC's funding sphere. After a successful start, in which Creativity Grants were awarded to more than 160 artists and organizations, funding for FY2022 has been doubled.

Grant awards range from \$1,000 to \$3,500 and are awarded on a rolling basis. Projects and organizations funded by this grant must be relevant to the community in which they take place. Organizations, which may use the funding for general operating support, must not have an income greater than \$50,000 unless they have not received another MSAC grant.

MAY 2021 CREATIVITY GRANT AWARDEE

# BALLET AFTER DARK

BALTIMORE CITY



The Bmore Empowered fiscally sponsored program, Ballet After Dark, aims to bridge the gap between trauma experienced and safe spaces that provide holistic treatment to survivors of sexual and domestic assault by offering trauma-informed ballet and other somatic art programming to women and youth.

Learn more about the Maryland State Arts Council Creativity Grant!  
[msac.org/programs/creativity-grants](https://msac.org/programs/creativity-grants)

Ballet After Dark, a recipient of the Maryland State Arts Council's Creativity Grant

Reflecting on this training, Skrzesz speculated that it could have been more productive to intentionally foster a community of learning through an exploratory town hall or listening session before diving into intense, in-depth trainings with constituent organizations. He thinks that a common understanding of the equity journey from the outset may have yielded greater buy-in to the trainings from the broader arts community.

MSAC [undertook a large number of policy and procedure changes](#) in a short period of time, while also launching many additional programs and services in response to the pandemic. The agency's approach to implementing its equity principles triggered mixed responses from current and former council members, as well as from grantees. Some enthusiastically embraced the changes, some felt that equity issues were not tackled directly enough, others experienced the shifts as too abrupt. MSAC also faced high levels of staff fatigue and turnover, including the departure of the executive director. MSAC continues to strive for a productive balance between taking decisive action and taking the time to achieve consensus and buy-in. Such implementation challenges are not unique to MSAC—other SAAs report similar tensions.

### Communications

MSAC's primary focus for communications is transparency and accessibility. This often includes engaging the arts community and seeking public input that will affect the development of new programs through the public editing process and community based consultations. As the agency's new strategic plan was launched, MSAC staff leadership spent a great deal of time visiting with artists and arts organizations in communities the agency had not previously served. Making the effort to spend face-to-face time was an important way to secure trust and gain information to guide MSAC's plan implementation. Outreach strategies had to shift to virtual vehicles, however, during the pandemic of 2020 and 2021.

*"We learned that the way to build trust in communities that we were not serving was to get in the car and go to them."*  
-Ken Skrzesz

Strategies for communicating MSAC's work on equity and transparency include:

- [Coffee with Ken](#), weekly virtual meetings with Executive Director Ken Skrzesz during the pandemic to discuss equity strategies for the arts field;
- [curated resources](#) for equity and justice learning and work;
- making all meetings about policy changes public and refusing to take private meetings to influence policy;
- publishing a [MSAC website glossary](#) to facilitate better communication;
- instituting an expanded suite of online [professional development](#) seminars designed to help artists and arts organizations advance DEI in their own work and adapt their



programs to the pandemic. These programs are seen as especially important for smaller organizations that don't have administrative budgets large enough to pay for continuing education for staff;

- sponsoring a curated [IDENTITY](#) exhibition that explored the intersections between cultural, social, gender and racial identities;
- initiating a [Land Acknowledgement Project](#) in which staff consulted with tribes whose lands are claimed by Maryland. Through compensated consultations with tribal representatives, Maryland Traditions staff are preparing public materials on land acknowledgements, how to create them, why they are meaningful, and how to use them to facilitate further positive change. These materials, along with information about tribes and their histories, will be available toward the end of 2021. In the meantime, a [Still Here](#) social media campaign has been launched to showcase the history and artworks of Maryland's Indigenous cultures.



*We Shall Pass through the Combahee*, by Stephen Towns. Natural and synthetic fabric, nylon tulle, polyester and cotton thread, metallic thread, crystal glass beads, buttons, 2019



## Mass Cultural Council

### Vision

Mass Cultural Council is committed to leading Massachusetts in promoting diversity, equity and inclusion. This work emerges through a cross-sector focus that situates culture as a driving force for equity across the arts, humanities and sciences.

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#### Mass Cultural Council Commitment to Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion

*We believe in the power of culture. Working through the arts, humanities, and sciences, culture is a dynamic force for enriching communities, growing the economy, increasing accessibility, and fostering individual creativity. Culture is intrinsically valuable and unique in its ability to lift the human spirit.*

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Mass Cultural Council aims to honor diversity, invest equitably, and listen to and act on constituents' calls for change. As Mass Cultural Council leaders note, these changes are not an end, but part of continual, evolving process.

In contrast to the three other states profiled in this case study, Mass Cultural Council not only acknowledges equity in its over-arching strategic plan but is developing a specific race equity plan to guide its work in the DEI sphere. Without this focus, the agency believes it is all too possible to overlook specific equity challenges.

### Strategic Planning

Mass Cultural Council currently has two working strategic plans that guide its long-term work: an agency strategic plan and a DEI plan that were developed in 2017. The agency also will release a new Race Equity Plan in fall 2021 to replace the current DEI plan.

#### 2018-2022 Strategic Plan

Mass Cultural Council's [2018-2022 Strategic Plan](#) centers diversity and inclusion in the arts through its values and vision. Additionally, one of the five goals outlined in the plan is "advancing inclusion and equity." This goal, like the others, is supported by a series of objectives that charge the agency to:

- cultivate a culture of equity and inclusion within Mass Cultural Council to ensure these values are reflected in all of our grants and initiatives;
- encourage full participation in Mass Cultural Council-supported programs by promoting universal design principles, inclusive practices and equitable access for all;
- increase diversity in the sector by creating connections and expanding leadership opportunities for people of color, people with disabilities and other underrepresented groups;

- support artists and organizations working in diverse cultural traditions and/or underrepresented communities, with improved outreach, focused investment and technical assistance.

### Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Plan

Complementing the strategic plan is Mass Cultural Council's [DEI plan](#), which has served as the core of its equity work since 2017. The four-year plan divides Mass Cultural Council's equity work into five goal areas:

- internal culture
- grant making and awards
- training, technical assistance and other services
- marketing and communications
- partnerships

To convey accountability and transparency, the DEI plan included a comprehensive list of completed equity actions for 2017-2019. This report itemizes action steps ranging from the conscious adoption of more inclusive language to revising personnel policies, changing hiring practices, conducting in-depth training for staff and constituents, reducing barriers in grant application and review practices, and seeking continual feedback. The report also articulated a road map for work from FY2019-FY2021 and beyond.

### Race Equity Plan

Because its DEI plan ends in 2021, Mass Cultural Council is currently reimagining its equity work. Its next steps will be to create a series of tactical plans to address specific inequities, with the first plan addressing race equity (forthcoming fall 2021). As discussed in the interview, this plan is being drafted after Mass Cultural Council convened a [listening tour](#) and internal deliberations on equity in response to George Floyd's murder, as well as drawing from the agency's two years of racial equity training and education, provided by the [Disruptive Equity Education Project](#), [Third Eye Cultural Collaborative](#), [BRIDGE](#) and [Cultural Equity Learning Community](#).

The listening tour consisted of four 90-minute sessions centered on what an equitable cultural sector would look like and how artists and cultural workers can support broader race equity, as well as Mass Cultural Council's role in achieving race equity. The agency has summarized [results from the listening tour](#).

Staff met twice with Executive Director Michael J. Bobbitt for 90-minute sessions to discuss the need for a race equity plan, the format and process for building a plan, and the obstacles to such a plan. After this, an ad-hoc committee of staff and council members took the anti-racist recommendations from the staff and began drafting the race equity plan, which will include outcome goals, time lines and annual updates.

The draft plan is being vetted with advisors before being presented to the council for adoption. This report, *In Pursuit of Equity: Four Case Studies of State Arts Agencies*, will be updated in winter 2020 to include more details from the race equity plan after the plan has been released publically.

While the agency is focusing first on racial equity for this dedicated plan, Mass Cultural Council intends to develop plans for other aspects of DEI as well. The agency hopes to develop a rural community plan, a disability plan and a gender equality plan in the future.

### ***Grant Making and Programming***

Making grants and funding more equitable is a top priority for Mass Cultural Council. To align with its goal to "[encourage full participation in Mass Cultural Council-supported programs](#)," the agency has committed to a series of changes across all aspects of its grant programs, such as:

#### ***Grant Panels***

- Encouraging and selecting panelists that represent the demographic and creative diversity of the state
- Standardizing equity practices and training for panelists, including training to evaluate applications on content over presentation
- Collecting panelist data to ensure that panelists continue to represent the diversity of the state

#### ***Grant Applications***

- Reducing the amount of time required to complete an application
- Adding criteria that rewards race equity and intersectional justice training, policies, reparative processes or actions
- Removing financial audit requirements from all but one grant category

#### ***Grant Funding***

- Reexamining tiered funding models that have prioritized larger institutions
- Considering funding specifically for BIPOC-led or BIPOC-supported organizations

#### ***Grant Outreach***

- Hiring BIPOC outreach coordinators to build stake and relationships in BIPOC communities to reach new grant applicants
- Identifying and reacting to unmet need through tracking agencywide and program-specific metrics on applicants and grantees, including [Local Cultural Council](#) grant applicants.

Mass Cultural Council engages in other programming to promote equity through arts and culture. These include:

- supporting the [ArtsBoston Network for Arts Administrators of Color](#) to further BIPOC professional development
- starting a [Creative Youth Development BIPOC Alumni Council](#) to lift up the voices of young BIPOC creatives
- improving access to arts and cultural activities through the three-pronged [CultureRx Initiative](#)
- engaging with [local cultural councils](#) to promote [equity considerations when developing council priorities](#)
- increasing the accessibility of cultural organizations through the [Universal Participation Initiative](#)



Albino Mbhe and his trio perform at City of Chelsea's Music on the Square Series.

When the new race equity plan is unveiled, NASAA will describe and reference that work as well as expand the Grant Making and Programming section.

### **Governance and Staff**

For Mass Cultural Council, external work begins with an equally strong internal commitment to equity. The agency is pursuing this through specific actions designed to develop a culture that centers equity as an operational priority. Examples of actions include:

- internal staff training on racial equity;
- writing and leading with anti-racism statements in job descriptions, applications and postings;
- ensuring a commitment to racial diversity in both staff recruitment and hiring;
- recommending racially and geographically diverse candidates for nomination to the agency's appointed governing council;
- standardizing racism incident reporting for both internal and external contacts;
- pay equity assessment and adjustments if necessary, to be undertaken per state law;
- regular one-on-one meetings between staff and the executive director;
- updating the employee handbook to detail equitable practices, such as modeling inclusive behavior and guidelines for sending job announcements to organizations with a commitment to accessible and inclusive planning;
- planning equity trainings for appointed council members.

Mass Cultural Council also is seeking to hire four BIPOC outreach coordinators, as mentioned under Grant Outreach above. Each of these positions would be contracted for four months, be paid a total of \$15,000, and work with one of four Massachusetts cultural groups: Asian American Pacific Islander, Black, Latinx, or First Nations/Indigenous. The outreach coordinators will work to reach cultural-sector stakeholders that Mass Cultural Council is not currently serving, with the goal of facilitating better agency investment and deeper relationships with these communities. The position's scope of work includes:

- connecting with their assigned community's partners, cultural workers and cultural organizations and engaging them in Mass Cultural Council programs, services and grant making;
- discussing outreach strategies and educating Mass Cultural Council staff;
- managing a list of prospective relationships;
- drafting a final report and evaluation.

***What we discovered was that the process has to be about a shift in culture, both internally and externally, and that's what will drive our action steps. We can come up with programmatic and policy changes, but if we don't really address the culture in our action steps, which has to move everyone to an anti-racist culture, then anything that we do on the surface would just not last.***

***– Michael Bobbitt***



## Communications

Mass Cultural Council's public communications strategy aims to position the agency as a leader in the arts and culture field's equity movement. This push aligns with the goals of the governor and executive branch, which are similarly committed to equity, justice and meeting the needs of underserved communities.

Communications from Mass Cultural Council can be sorted by tags, one being [diversity, equity and inclusion](#). Recent announcements on its [Commitment to DEI](#) and [Reconfirming that Commitment](#) are forthright about Mass Cultural Council's push for equity.

Diversity and inclusion also are noted in Mass Cultural Council's 2020 edition of [This is the power of culture](#) case statement. Written primarily for elected officials, this document serves as the agency's policy plank and is used by advocates to position annual requests for state investments in the arts and culture.

The 2020 edition frames the agency's DEI work in this way: "We are making culture inclusive and welcoming to everyone in Massachusetts—as creators, participants, or audiences—and free of barriers, whether physical, educational, or societal. Why? Because, as our state grows more diverse, culture helps us build relationships across ethnic, racial, and generational lines. It makes our community stronger."

The platform features the agency's universal access efforts, social justice programs, DEI plan and social determinants of health. It was used in tandem with a [2021 Power of Culture Advocacy Campaign](#) and [data about pandemic losses](#) sustained by the Massachusetts creative sector, which noted that "Mass Cultural Council would consider and prioritize many factors including racial diversity and equity, geographic diversity, and programmatic diversity within the cultural sector, as well as economic need and recipients' economic impact." This strategy ultimately resulted in a [\\$21,375,000 state investment in the Mass Cultural Council for FY2022](#), the largest appropriation for the state's cultural sector since the late 1980s.

When discussing statewide conversations with stakeholders, Michael J. Bobbitt noted that the conversation is much more than push-back to changes to the status quo, but is equally important "push-forward" from voices seeking changes that promote equity.

### CultureRx Initiative

The [CultureRx Initiative](#) is a comprehensive set of programs created by Mass Cultural Council and partners that recognize the important role of arts, culture, and community in supporting health and well-being. To ensure that the most economically vulnerable populations have access to these benefits, Mass Cultural Council organizes two programs to ensure that arts and cultural experiences remain accessible.



A young girl visits the Norman Rockwell Museum as part of Mass Cultural Council's Social Prescription Program.

### Card to Culture

The [Card to Culture](#) program is the result of a partnership with the [MA Executive Office of Health and Human Services' Department of Transitional Assistance](#), [MA Women, Infants, & Children Nutrition program](#), and [Massachusetts Health Connector](#). Massachusetts residents who are either Electronic Benefit Transfer cardholders, Women, Infant, & Children Nutrition Program cardholders, or ConnectorCare cardholders are eligible for free or reduced admissions at participating arts and cultural organizations.

To participate, organizations set free or discounted admission for eligible cardholders. In turn, the partner agencies that administer these programs promote these participating arts and culture organizations to their respective cardholders. Organizations are expected to apply the same discounts to holders of any of the three cards and receive [training, communications and policy support](#) from Mass Cultural Council.

### Social Prescription Pilot

To further promote the health benefits of arts and culture, the Social Prescription Pilot works with professional care providers to encourage "social prescribing"—a written prescription for patients to participate in cultural programming at one of Mass Cultural Councils Social Prescription Pilot Organizations. These organizations are then reimbursed for the cost of attendance by Mass Cultural Council. [Initial results](#) from the pilot have been positive, as patients reported an overall increase in their well-being. Practitioners similarly found the program good for patients and useful in strengthening the relationship between practitioner and patient.

## South Carolina Arts Commission

### Vision

The [South Carolina Arts Commission](#) (SCAC) views equity as the filter through which all agency actions pass: "The mission of the South Carolina Arts Commission is to promote equitable access to the arts and support the cultivation of creativity in South Carolina." Like the other state arts agencies in these case studies, SCAC recognizes the importance of emphasizing racial equity in its greater push for equity.

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### [South Carolina Arts Commission Social Justice Statement](#)

*We Value Diversity, Equity, Access, and Inclusion. We believe in our collective responsibility to support culturally relevant and responsive art.*

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While SCAC benefits from the diversity already present in the state, Executive Director David Platts mentions that extra attention must be placed on actions to reach those who are historically marginalized by intersections of identity, such as race and geography. To achieve this, creating and utilizing diverse partnerships have become part of the driving forces behind SCAC's work.

### Strategic Planning

SCAC's most recent [Strategic Plan](#) was adopted in November 2020. To guarantee that diverse voices were brought to the table during the planning process, 17 listening sessions were held across the state in geographically diverse and accessible spaces. SCAC also worked through its current grant program networks, like [Art of Community – Rural SC Program](#), and other partners, like the [Catawba Native American Studies Center](#) and [South Carolina Hispanic Alliance](#), to ensure that racial, ethnic and geographic diversity was prioritized when convening these meetings. A survey of more than 1,000 constituents also supported the development of this strategic plan.

In a departure from past strategic planning, SCAC designed its current plan to last only 5 years instead of the previous 10. This encourages SCAC to be more responsive to changing conditions (cultural, demographic and economic) and commits the agency to revisiting the plan sooner.

While equity, diversity and inclusion are centered in the mission and values of the organization, equity is also widely present in the strategic plan's outcomes and goals:

- Influence our constituency in their efforts to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion in policies and practices.
- Provide leadership in diversity, equity, and inclusion through our policies and practices.

- Develop diverse cross-sector relationships that engage arts and culture providers to address local issues in matters that may include economic, community or workforce development, healthcare, education, public safety, housing or capital.

To ensure accountability to the strategic plan, SCAC staff have an internal working document in which specific commitments are tied to each outcome, ensuring that the outcomes are supported by tangible action. In general terms, these include:

- Creating new grant programs that intentionally increase accessibility for rural communities, people with disabilities and BIPOC citizens
- Publishing statements on equity
- Developing leadership opportunities for BIPOC artists and creatives
- Implementing DEI training for staff and commissioners

### **Grant Making and Programming**

SCAC has taken a variety of steps to align its grant making with its goals for equity. Even before this most recent strategic plan, SCAC contracted with Black woman-owned [Red Olive Culture Commons](#) to evaluate its practices for equity while sitting in on panel meetings. This insight, alongside evaluation from other previous panelists, led to multiple changes across the grant process:

- reduced match requirements
- moved application cycle for small organizations from one year to two years to reduce annual workload of application
- extended grant eligibility to non-arts organizations conducting arts programming
- simplified the application and final reporting process
- provided more funding upfront so that funding burden is not on grantees

***"What we've discovered is that once constituents have a relationship with us, then they come back. They know that we're here for them and they know that we're going to help them. And that's tremendous."***

***-David Platts***

SCAC has focused much of its attention on providing technical assistance to organizations and individuals seeking grants. Recognizing that the bureaucratic procedures involved in grant applications are often a barrier, SCAC commits to having a staff member whose primary role is to assist with grant applications. This always-available technical assistance is also key to sustaining relationships between SCAC, artists, arts organizations and community groups seeking funds. Likewise, SCAC commits to these relationships by reaching out to counties, communities and grantees who have "fallen off the radar" and have not tapped into agency resources in recent years.

Alongside community arts development, individual artists assistance and support for cultural organizations, another programmatic priority for SCAC is equitable arts education,

which [research](#) has shown to be an effective strategy for supporting academic success for at-risk youth. Among SCAC's leading efforts is the [Arts in Basic Curriculum \(ABC\) Project](#).

This collaboration between SCAC, the South Carolina Department of Education and Winthrop University helps schools to integrate arts learning across the curriculum. [Results](#) from a 2018 Gallup Student Poll that surveyed 8,287 South Carolina students found that kids from lower-income ABC schools scored higher than the state mean on measures of learning engagement, hope, entrepreneurial aspiration and career/financial literacy—all factors that can help to neutralize the effects of poverty. A landmark [\\$20 million investment](#) in federal relief funding through the South Carolina Department of Education will be dedicated to arts education collaborations with SCAC and will further advance equitable access to arts education. These funds will be used to remediate learning losses caused by the pandemic—[effects that are especially pronounced for rural, poor and BIPOC students](#)—and will support the expansion of the ABC program into more underserved schools.

### ***Internal Operations and Staff***

SCAC commits to furthering the conversation on equity through its internal practices. Decision making in the agency often receives direct input from a staff DEI Committee, on which the executive director also sits. This team helps to make equity a collectively held value across multiple agency programs and operational functions.

Staff received race equity training from [Race Forward](#) through a partnership with the Donnelly Foundation and the S.C. Arts Alliance. Likewise, SCAC commissioners are invited to participate in staff trainings, of which they have taken advantage. Informal DEI staff lunches promote open conversation about race through exploring shared experiences and discussing relevant news and media. All staff are empowered to critically weigh in on strategic planning and equity work.

***"We're working on diversity, equity, inclusion inside the agency, too. It starts here. We have to be fully accountable as well, and we've been taking it on as a staff—working toward educating ourselves as well."***

***-David Platts***



### ***The Art of Community: Rural SC***

An example of one SCAC's recipes for developing community relationships, [The Art of Community: Rural SC](#) flips the script and puts communities in charge of the entire process. The program, which began in 2015 with 6 counties, now serves 15 rural and tribal communities across South Carolina—nearly one-third of all South Carolina counties. Many of these counties are economically distressed (designated as federal opportunity zones) and/or comprised of primarily African American, Latinx or Native American populations.

Each community is represented by a local cultural leader—a Maven—that then assembles teams of local community members to envision how arts and culture can play a role in critical issues, such as:

- economic, community or workforce development
- health care
- education
- public safety
- housing
- capital

Once communities identify a project they want to pursue, grants are provided by SCAC to achieve these teams' plans for a better community, alongside opportunities for cultural exchange across the state. Documentation has been key to the process, and their success and challenges can be seen in their [newsletter](#) and across the [18 videos](#) the different communities have produced.

This work has been especially important for SCAC because it has helped it to reimagine its role as a grantor: "It's no longer that we are this sort of beacon on a hill, for lack of a better way to describe it." Instead, SCAC understands its work as reaching out to serve the ideas and dreams of the communities.



Young artists Mariah and Daniyah Cunningham indulged in their own creativity at the WHAM! Creation Station.

## Communications

To make public communications more accessible, SCAC has activated Google Translate so the entire website can be translated into more than 100 languages. The agency has translated specific website and printable content into Spanish and it promotes staff able to provide constituent services in that language. As a note, in beginning its work to translate website material into Spanish, SCAC ran into a major roadblock with translating grants into Spanish. SCAC realized that a superficial change of grant language without supporting infrastructure—such as panelists who can translate and technical assistance available in Spanish—may do harm. SCAC is currently working to find a partner and reganter who can address these challenges and create sustainable and systematic equity.

The agency highlights its commitment to equity by publishing a [statement of solidarity](#) on race equity. SCAC also has plans to provide a professional learning series on equity for arts organizations.

Platts described the importance of outlining equity when speaking with legislators and state government: It is a compelling argument to say that more South Carolinians—legislators' constituents—benefit from the increased accessibility and reach of SCAC.

***"We can't expect other organizations to have these conversations if we're not willing to take them on."***

***-David Platts***

The South Carolina Arts Alliance's [advocacy talking points for SCAC funding](#) bear this out, noting that "the South Carolina Arts Commission (SCAC) is the only state agency with a mission to promote equitable access to the arts and support the cultivation of creativity across South Carolina." In South Carolina, rural equity and racial equity are complementary goals. 29% of South Carolina's population—and 40% of the state's African American population—[lives in rural regions as of the last decennial census](#).

The number of rural African American, Native American and Latinx residents is likely to have grown even further when new census estimates are released. This helps to unify support for equity work in South Carolina, as elected officials, citizen advocates and community leaders all perceive the relevance of equitable access to the arts as a benefit to the state's cultural, educational and economic future.

## The Long Journey

Each of the state arts agencies studied in this report is on an ongoing journey toward shifting large state bureaucratic systems. These case studies highlight the challenges and creative solutions being adopted by four SAAs in their pursuits of a more just, inclusive and equitable arts sector.

The steps these agencies are taking are not easy. To borrow from [Race Forward](#) and the Government Alliance on Race Equity, some of these activities are "three-pound weights"—small lifts that slowly build an agency's equity muscles. Others are more expansive policy strategies aimed at creating new paradigms for supporting the arts. Regardless of scale, the SAA efforts profiled here all are characterized by continuous learning, fortitude in the face of setbacks and ingenuity in finding new ways to rewire government systems that can sometimes be slow to adapt. Together, these SAA stories demonstrate that progress is possible toward the ultimate goal of serving all communities through the arts.

## Our Thanks

NASAA would like to thank Anne Bown-Crawford, Ken Skrzysz, Michael J. Bobbitt, David Slatery, and David Platts for their insight, candor and invaluable time during our interviews. This would not have been possible without their full support. We are especially grateful to the Washington State Arts Commission for its fruitful collaboration on this report, as well as its two companion volumes: [Deepening Relationships with Diverse Communities: State Arts Agency Strategies](#) and [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in State Arts Agency Public Art Programs: A Roundtable](#).

## Image Credits

**Cover:** Photo courtesy of Lily Cai Dance Company and the California Arts Council

**Page 7:** transcenDANCE Youth Arts Project, a California Arts Council grantee. Photo courtesy transcenDANCE Youth Arts Project

**Page 15:** The cover of CAC's magazine, DREAM. Hien Huynh and Johnny Nguyen perform in the Lenora Lee Dance multimedia dance project "Within These Walls." Photo by KateFim, courtesy of Lenora Lee Dance and the California Arts Council.

**Page 21:** Ballet After Dark, recipient of the Maryland State Arts Council's Creativity Grant, is a Baltimore based program that provides trauma-informed, holistic dance therapy to survivors of sexual and intimate partner violence. Photo courtesy of Ballet After Dark.

**Page 23:** *We Shall Pass through the Combahee*, by Stephen Towns. Natural and synthetic fabric, nylon tulle, polyester and cotton thread, metallic thread, crystal glass beads, buttons, 2019. Photo courtesy of the artist.

**Page 27:** Albino Mbie and his trio perform at City of Chelsea's Music on the Square Series. Photo by Luis Cotto.

**Page 30:** A young girl visits the Norman Rockwell Museum as part of the Mass Cultural Council's Social Prescription Program. Photo courtesy of Mass Cultural Council.

**Page 34:** WHAM! Festival, a 23-day celebration of art, history and music in Walterboro, South Carolina, featured more than 100 artists and performers. Young artists Mariah and Daniyah Cunningham indulged in their own creativity at the WHAM! Creation Station. This festival is sponsored by The Art of Community: Rural SC initiative of the South Carolina Arts Commission and is directed by Maven Matt Mardell, who also is the executive director of the Colleton Museum, Farmers' Market and Commercial Kitchen. Photo courtesy of SC Lowcountry Tourism.

## About NASAA

The National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) is the nonpartisan membership organization representing the state and jurisdictional arts councils of the United States. NASAA is a clearinghouse for research about government support for arts and culture in America, providing statistical data, policy analysis and information on exemplary practices.



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