

# Cross-Sector Strategies for Civic Infrastructure and Community Cohesion

**NASAA** NATIONAL ASSEMBLY of  
STATE ARTS AGENCIES

Knowledge ▲ Representation ▲ Community

# Introduction

Artists, arts organizations and government arts agencies all contribute toward strengthening multiple dimensions of place such as well-being, economic opportunity and community cohesion.

State and jurisdictional arts agencies (SAAs) strive to engage communities and to provide opportunities for arts participation by all residents—from densely populated cities to the most remote expanses within states. SAAs also provide unique value across sectors through their perspectives, connections, expertise and resources. They are well-equipped to address barriers to community building and engagement.

As government agencies, state arts agencies are well-placed to collaborate with other departments to improve the work of state governments.

Increasingly, state arts agencies and regional arts organizations engage in working partnerships to realize the unique value of the arts and creativity across sectors. Arts agencies collaborate with agencies working in health and human services, transportation and community development—alongside extensive programming in education, the humanities and economic development.

This Strategy Sampler is [part of a series](#) that highlights state arts agency and regional arts organization initiatives to partner across sectors—and to leverage the arts and creativity for solving community challenges.

In collaboration with the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), NASAA has developed these tools to share emerging practices in cross-sector programs, policies and practices that invoke the arts. This knowledge is aimed at helping state arts agencies and regional arts organizations to proliferate positive and impactful programs and to refine ongoing work in these areas. For more cross-sector strategy samplers and other resources, visit NASAA's [Cross-Sector Collaborations](#) web page.

## What Are Civic Infrastructure and Community Cohesion?

In the context of community development, the role of infrastructure traditionally refers to physical structures and spaces. The term *civic infrastructure*, however, refers to both the physical places and the social processes we use to change our community. As defined in a recent federal Interagency Community Investment Committee [action plan](#), civic infrastructure "refers to the assets, services,

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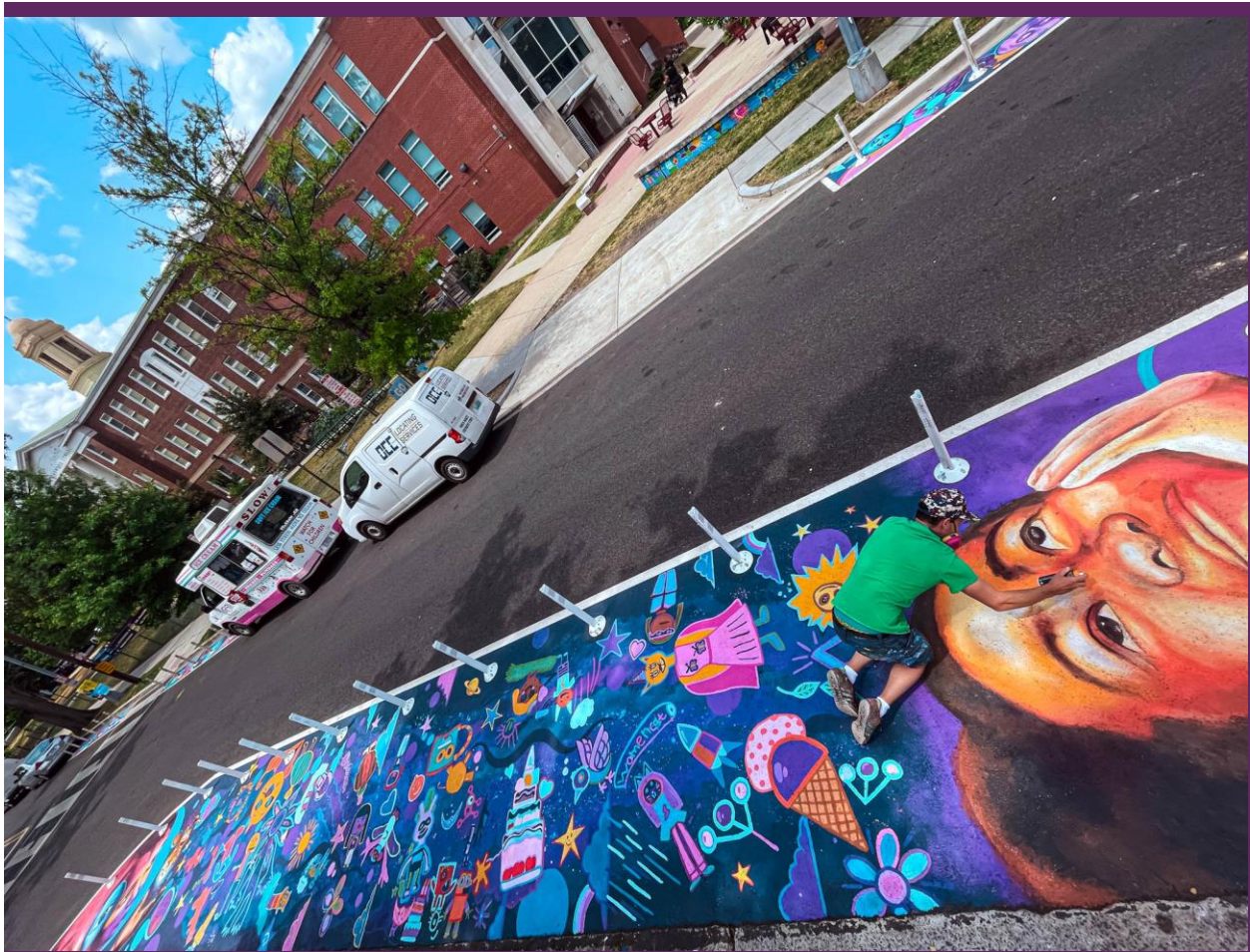
and amenities that support a community's social, economic, and civic well-being." It is the spaces where we practice civic engagement: our libraries, schools, common grounds and government halls.

Civic infrastructure is not only the place, but how we work together to make the place.<sup>1</sup> It reaches beyond the built environment into the programs, practices and human resources that facilitate community engagement and participation. As described in the Arts, Health, and Civic Infrastructure interagency working group [statement of work](#), civic infrastructure is "the set of processes, systems, and norms that enable individuals and communities to communicate and understand needs, manage differences, and address community issues, often in partnership with government, business, and community-based organizations as a way to improve community wellbeing." At its core, civic infrastructure encompasses the ways in which we create belonging, provide a sense of ownership for one's own public space, and convene to solve public problems.

If civic infrastructure is the *how* of building community, then community cohesion is the *why*. For this Strategy Sampler, a community's cohesiveness is defined as the ability of its disparate individuals and groups to successfully navigate its civic infrastructure—both its agreements and disagreements—in a fashion that ultimately reinforces the bonds of the community.

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<sup>1</sup> [Defining and Measuring Civic Infrastructure](#), Rand Corporation, November 2022



Installation of Joel Bergner's Color the Curb mural. Photo courtesy DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities

## Why the Arts?

The arts are undeniably [engines of economic growth](#) and [drivers of prosperity](#) for communities that for all too long have remained underserved. Not only do the arts strengthen our economy, but they play a [significant role in enriching the lives](#) of many individuals and families. These benefits became increasingly vivid as we kept each other safe during the COVID-19 pandemic for a sense of community, expression and healing. Almost uniquely, the arts foster meaningful connections, helping us weave together the multiple threads of our communities.

In its selection of examples, this Strategy Sampler shows how arts and culture can strengthen the bonds of our communities. They are the mortar of our civic infrastructure. Theatres, festivals and all arts venues provide opportunities for us to create with our neighbors, just as public art programs that involve community members can help us to reimagine the spaces we share.

In Kansas, civic infrastructure is the mural and arts program that engages local grocers and community to lift up culturally based food systems that promote community cohesion.

In Massachusetts, New Jersey and Virginia, it is the state programming that provides free and discounted access to cultural life found in museums, theaters, music halls, art galleries and festivals.

In Pennsylvania, it is the state arts council's work with community development financial institutions to ensure that local creative businesses can remain in place while driving community revitalization in areas of economic distress.

In Vermont, it is a "crowd matching" grant program that actively engages citizens in imagining new infrastructure and new ways of creating local connections through arts and culture.

And in Washington, D.C., it is two programs, one that partners with schools to improve transportation safety through student-led artwork, and another that provides for community-driven ownership of public spaces through murals and large-scale artwork.

## The Power of Cross-Sector Partnerships

Communities are not homogenous. They consist of diverse people and systems in which individuals interact, share space and compromise with one another. For example, individual well-being, public safety, food systems, educational opportunities and cultural experiences all contribute to the fabric of a community. The arts and culture are powerful mechanisms that state and local governments can engage across sectors to address the civic and community components of well-being. State arts agencies are well-positioned as government experts in community arts services and can meaningfully partner across sectors to improve public goods and services.

### The Value of Cross-Sector Partnerships for State Arts Agencies

State arts agencies attested to the following opportunities and benefits of building relationships across sectors:

- Increased agency network capacity, such as reaching never-before-served constituents
- Access to technical expertise and issue knowledge in other sectors such as transportation, food systems, economic development, community development, and health and human services
- Shared capacity that allows each agency to specialize in its work and reduce individual agency strain

- Program sustainability that grows through cross-agency communication and commitments that go beyond administration by an individual staff member
- Increased community engagement and experiences of government responsiveness
- Expanded audiences and stakeholders for arts and cultural nonprofits

## State Arts Agency Cross-Sector Programming

### Kansas Arts Commission: Independent Markets Initiative

In 2021, community based public art organizer Connie Fiorella-Fitzpatrick approached the [Kansas Arts Commission](#) (KAC) with an idea: could the Arts Commission "fund a project that didn't seem to fit squarely in one place, a crossroads initiative of arts, community and food?" KAC immediately signed on, seeing the potential to support community cohesiveness through equitable food systems while organically increasing its ability to serve all constituents within the state.

The initial pilot program relied on a [2019 Ethnic Food Retail Study](#), written by the Center for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas, to understand the ways independent grocers and markets support their communities. The study, which Fiorella-Fitzpatrick helped design, demonstrated that local ethnic retailers provide diverse, healthy and culturally connected food and function as local hubs that celebrate and reinforce community based culture. As the report highlights, celebrating cultural heritage is inextricable from local food promotion.

KAC and Fiorella-Fitzpatrick began the initial pilot project to develop large-scale public art projects at five different markets in Lawrence, including the Mexican market La Estrella Tienda Mexicana, the Asian market F-Mart, the African Caribbean Grocery, the Mediterranean Market & Café, and Cosmos Indian Store & Cafe. Through the [Independent Markets Initiative](#), they worked with all market owners and the local community to codevelop meaningful and place based artwork that would further highlight the markets as cultural centers while promoting the benefits of access to familiar and healthy food.

Throughout the pilot project and afterward, the Independent Markets Initiative (IMI) met with several partners to develop a cross-sectoral and holistic approach, including:

- Garden City Downtown Vision
- Garden City Arts
- Lawrence Douglas County Sustainability Office
- Kansas Healthy Food Initiative
- KU (Kansas University) Small Business Development Center
- Kansas Department of Commerce, Office of Minority and Women Business
- Equity and Inclusion for the City of Lawrence

Through partnerships with the Kansas Healthy Food Initiative and KU Small Business Development Center, the IMI was able to provide both technical assistance and space for small independent grocers to network. Kansas Healthy Food Initiative's previous work with rural grocers was especially useful because of the similar role that rural grocers play in serving as cultural hubs, offering space for music and public gatherings and as the point of contact for connections to local cultural organizations. As an example of the mutual benefits from such partnerships, this one helped create the impetus for the Kansas Healthy Food Initiative to expand beyond serving rural grocers alone.

***"The more KAC can embed the arts in other sectors, the more KAC can demonstrate how intertwined arts and culture and all aspects of healthy living and community are."***

— Kate VanSteenhuysen, KAC Deputy Director

Before all else, the IMI requires community involvement. This directive empowered retailers, shoppers and the local community to envision and create public art that represented what was important to them. Community involvement enabled each of the independent markets to become part of the overall civic infrastructure, providing a place for the community to creatively shape the world around them.

The initial pilot program is currently expanding, relying on local consultants investing in long-term relationship building and connecting KAC to partner with additional markets, arts organizations and municipal agencies. This iterative process of growth has assisted the IMI in identifying additional community based artists. Now in its third year, the program has expanded to two additional retailers and worked with 18 local artists across Lawrence and Garden City.



Grand "reveal" of the La Estrella Tienda Mexicana mural, funded through the Independent Market Initiative. Photo courtesy Kansas Arts Commission.

For the Kansas Arts Commission, the initiative provided a novel avenue for reaching new and underserved communities. Involving and recognizing organic cultural hubs allowed KAC to serve ongoing creative experiences and provide better access to its programs and services.

## **Massachusetts, New Jersey and Virginia: Access to Culture Programs**

Beyond cross-sector partnerships, state arts agencies often rely on the expertise and practical experience of other SAAs when designing new programs. For Mass Cultural Council, the New Jersey State Council on the Arts and Virginia Commission for the Arts, this cross-state communication proved essential in developing cross-sector partnerships that can increase arts access for constituents within their respective states. By doing so, these SAAs empowered community residents to come together and create belonging through shared arts experiences.

As part of Mass Cultural Council's initiatives to [promote health and well-being](#), the agency designed an arts access program in collaboration with the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance. This collaboration inspired the New Jersey State Council on the Arts and the Virginia Commission for the Arts to develop their own programs aimed at constituents that typically face barriers to arts engagement. Each of the programs and their partnerships is detailed below.

### **Mass Cultural Council**

For [Mass Cultural Council](#), inspiration for the [Card to Culture](#) program came from one of its grantees, Boston Children's Museum. Seeing the museum offer discounted admission to electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cardholders, Mass Cultural Council realized that the program offered a vital route to accessing arts and culture venues.

Determined to scale the program to a statewide level, Mass Cultural Council reached out to the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA), the state agency responsible for administering the EBT card<sup>2</sup>. In partnership with DTA, Mass Cultural Council launched [EBT Card to Culture](#) in 2017. The initial program featured 100 arts and culture organizations that guaranteed free or discounted access to their programming for EBT cardholders. In 2022, nearly 15% of the population using Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits and more than 33% of working families<sup>3</sup> were eligible for discounts on arts and cultural programming at museums, theatres, music halls, art galleries and festivals.

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<sup>2</sup> Electronic benefit transfer cards provide access to benefits from various state programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and Emergency Aid to the Elderly, Disabled and Children.

<sup>3</sup> Center for Budget Policy and Priorities, February 13, 2023, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/a-closer-look-at-who-benefits-from-snap-state-by-state-fact-sheets#Massachusetts>





Visitors at the New England Aquarium, a Card to Culture program participating organization. Photo courtesy Mass Cultural Council

Drawing on the initial success of working with DTA, Mass Cultural Council developed two additional partnerships, with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health's Women, Infants, & Children Nutrition Program (WIC) and Massachusetts Health Connector, which is the state based health insurance marketplace. The resulting [WIC Card to Culture](#) and [ConnectorCare Card to Culture](#) programs have [increased the number of participating organizations](#) to over 400 and provided at least 1 million people with free or discounted admissions. Combined, the

programs facilitate access to cultural infrastructure for populations with low income on their own terms and encourage engagement with community institutions.

The Department of Transitional Assistance, the Department of Health's WIC program and the Massachusetts Health Connector all are essential to the success of Card to Culture. Each department provides expertise on participant demographics and best practices to Mass Cultural Council, ensuring that program participants are respected throughout the process. For instance, the partnerships across both health and transitional assistance departments help ensure attention goes toward addressing stigmas linked with economic access and welfare programs.

For Mass Cultural Council, the partnerships are also crucial for assisting a program that requires the network to reach millions of state constituents. Each department can tap into a centralized and existing communication platform to message cardholders about the new program, thereby reducing the need for marketing from both Mass Cultural Council and the participating arts and cultural organizations.

The strength of the partnerships allowed Mass Cultural Council to focus on enrolling and administering organizational participants. By bringing in previously unserved nonprofit cultural-sector organizations into Mass Cultural Council's network, the program further expanded the spheres of civil society and facilitated greater participation in civic infrastructure.

## New Jersey State Council on the Arts

For the [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#), economic access to arts and culture is provided through the [Families First Discovery Pass](#). At its core, the program seeks to improve everyday quality of life by reducing economic barriers to participating in arts and culture. Through an arts council-led partnership between the New Jersey Department of Human Services (DHS), New Jersey Department of Health (DOH) and New Jersey Historical Commission, the arts council was able to develop a win-win program that increases arts and culture access for populations with low incomes while expanding audience engagement at organizations across the state.

For the Families First Discovery Pass program, the division of labor is split between partners so that each can capitalize on its existing work structure and networks. DHS markets the program directly, in both English and Spanish, to over 450,000 families on state assistance; DHS and DOH provide expertise on appropriate language use and state assistance program guidelines; the New Jersey Historical Commission provides additional support and marketing; and the arts council communicates with participating organizations and enrolls new organizations.

As of November 2024, 175 organizations across 20 of the state's 21 counties have enrolled to participate. Data collection is difficult due to the sensitive nature of gathering personal information from program participants. However, cultural organizations report that the program encourages:

- new and increased attendance
- integration of economic access with equity plans
- examination of whether organizations are serving their immediate communities
- greater understanding of which programming options best serve local populations

## Virginia Commission for the Arts

In 2023, the [Virginia Commission for the Arts](#) (VCA) launched the Passport Program, a new initiative in partnership with the Virginia Department of Health (VDH). The Passport Program focuses on providing access to arts and culture opportunities, including events, performances and classes, for

*"I am especially proud of the Families First Discovery Pass program—not only as a model partnership of government agencies working together to better serve our communities, but also a fantastic example of the vital role that arts and culture play in our everyday lives."*

— New Jersey Lt. Gov. Tahesha Way



Youth and audience members participate in an Indian Mela celebration at Perkins Center for the Arts, a Families First Discovery Pass participating organization. Photo: Maia Fernandez Montana

Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) participants and their families across the commonwealth. Access to the arts for overall health and well-being is at the program's core. Inspired by and drawing upon the expertise of Mass Cultural Council and the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, VCA modeled the Passport Program on the best practices and lessons learned from these exemplary agencies, which lead the charge in unifying a patchwork offering of free and reduced-price arts engagement activities for underserved populations.

VCA recognized the great benefit of exploring interagency collaborations, and VDH had an existing infrastructure and was eager to partner. After several planning meetings, VCA did a soft launch in November 2023. The number of WIC participants fluctuates between 100,000 and 130,000 across the commonwealth at any given time. VCA grantee participants provide free or reduced-price access to the WIC community. VDH has an established communication network of 35 health districts that disseminate information via WIC coordinators and various social media platforms. After presenting at the WIC coordinators annual conference in fall 2024, VCA learned that providing resources in both English and Spanish would better serve WIC recipients and their families. VCA created extensive toolkits for both WIC coordinators and VCA grantees to streamline communication and resources aligning messaging and Passport Program opportunities.

The Passport Program reaches and connects more families than either agency could in isolation. VDH brings both the expertise required when working with populations with limited incomes and the imprimatur of a state health agency, while VCA provides structure, arts knowledge and coordination of the program to engage and connect arts organizations to new audiences.

### **Key Program Considerations**

Because of the unique nature of arts access programs that do not offer grant funds to participating organizations, it is important to consider the following tactics when designing the program:

- Provide incentives that encourage organizational participation.
- Prioritize simplified program sign-up and reduce capacity burden for participating organizations.
- Create flexible program requirements that encourage any level of organizational participation.
- Train the organizations' staff to address stigma surrounding the use of state benefit cards.
- Understand that quantitative data collection can be difficult when working with protected health and income information.

## Pennsylvania: Creative Business Loan Fund

The [Pennsylvania Council on the Arts](#) (PCA) partners with regional community development financial institutions (CDFIs) to support the growth and sustainability of creative small businesses through its [Creative Business Loan Fund](#).

This unique public-private partnership extends the ability of PCA to assist creative small businesses that do not typically have access to flexible capital. Creative small businesses are a vital component of main street and business corridor revitalization.

To shape the initial program, PCA drew on staff expertise. PCA executive director Karl Blischke previously served in Florida's Governor's Office of Tourism, Trade and Economic Development, which promotes job creation and community development in rural communities. Program manager Sarah Merritt drew on her expertise in real estate and arts based community and economic development when considering how to shape a loan program.

Seeking to invest in community vibrancy and competitiveness through access to loans and financial assistance for underserved populations within the creative economy, PCA looked toward economic development partners already working in the field—specifically, those that could provide the mechanism for funding. This desire to serve underfunded populations aligned with the goals of CDFIs [Bridgeway Capital](#) and [Community First Fund](#).

The original Creative Business Loan Fund program was seeded with \$500,000 from PCA and matched with \$1 million in capital from each CDFI. The program funds creative small businesses including craft manufacturers, arts schools, architects and media companies. The loans are flexible, with eligible uses including working capital, equipment, renovation and building acquisition. Importantly, the Creative Business Loan Fund prioritizes businesses in low-income communities, businesses owned by and/or serving Black, Indigenous and/or people of color, and businesses located in small and rural communities. The CDFIs then provide flexible, low-interest loans up to \$250,000 to better support the unique business cycles and operations of small creative businesses.

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***"Ownership is the antidote to displacement."***

— Sarah Merritt, PCA Director of Creative Communities and the Creative Economy

In 2023, PCA added the Rising Tide Community Loan Fund to its CDFI partnership to increase access to funds and better serve all 67 counties. Additionally, after a recent report demonstrated that rural communities are suffering from a lack of access to CDFI funds, PCA has begun working to identify additional lenders.

Each CDFI brings expertise and leverages its extensive networks when working with the private sector, enabling the growth of statewide and regional partnerships to serve loan applicants and other creative entrepreneurs. For example, Bridgeway Capital and PCA have partnered to establish the [Alliance for Creative Rural Economies](#), which develops cohorts of creative businesses and provides professional development training geared toward successful business practices and community relationships. PCA relied on this networking to assist in developing its [Creative Entrepreneur Accelerator Program](#), which was devised in partnership with the agency's statewide regional [Partners in the Arts](#) and [PA Small Business Development Centers](#).

The Creative Business Loan Fund program has been instrumental in supporting creative enterprise, community revitalization and community cohesion. As program manager Sarah Merrit discussed, nearly one-third of the loans have been used for real estate acquisition, indicating that creative small business owners are committed to remaining in their communities. This means that small businesses in places like Wilksburg, which is undergoing regrowth and commercial investment to restore it to



Creative Business Loan Fund recipient Dominique Scaife, founder of Kool Image Dolls. Photo courtesy Pennsylvania Council on the Arts

## PCA Creative Communities

Pennsylvania Council on the Arts also supports community and economic development and cross-sector collaboration through its [Creative Communities Initiative](#) (CCI). CCI, which requires at least two community partners per application and facilitates projects that work to address community challenges through deep community engagement, authentic inclusion of artists and culture bearers, and strong community partnerships. Previously funded projects have included the creation of a [community fabrication lab](#), the transformation of [vacant lots](#) into green space, support for [public art and affordable housing](#), and programming that addresses [poverty alleviation, housing and quality of life](#).

a vibrant neighborhood center, can stay in place and serve its community even as changing economic tides may increase costs associated with capital in the area.

For communities, the Creative Business Loan Fund has provided an alternative economic development pathway that taps into available creative resources. For rural Rust Belt communities that have seen the deleterious effects of brain drain and the shuttering of traditional industries, creative entrepreneurs are helping communities rewrite the narrative of economic development while making their towns more vibrant and resilient places to live.

## Key Program Considerations

State arts agencies often play a large role in supporting a state's creative economic development. As a [recent study shows](#), the creative economy is a vital ingredient of overall economic recovery. In addition to grant making, state leaders should consider the following complementary measures:

- Explore alternative funding models outside traditional state arts agency grant making.
- Prioritize new partnerships that fill geographic gaps and reach underserved communities.
- Supply working capital for community based creative endeavors, including enterprises outside the nonprofit arts ecosystem.
- Analyze who benefits from economic development and how capital flows can displace or disrupt an existing community.

## Vermont: Better Places Vermont

For the [Vermont Arts Council](#) (VAC), partnering across different sectors is a core strategy for expanding the reach of arts and culture. In 2017, VAC partnered with the Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), the Vermont Community Foundation, and the Vermont Chapter of AARP to develop [Better Places Vermont](#), a statewide program that promotes community-driven creative placemaking.

The Vermont Arts Council assisted in convening nearly 40 people across the arts, commerce, community development, health, agriculture and aging services sectors to discuss ways to advance placemaking across the state. The resulting pilot program, Better Places Vermont, was supported through \$130,000 in funds from the partners, with VAC contributing \$10,000. Out of the 63 applications, 8 were selected for funding. After seeing [the success of the pilot program](#), where applicants requested a total of nearly \$1 million, as well as the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on communities and civic engagement, the partners advocated for additional funding. As a result, the legislature responded with a \$1.5 million investment in 2021.

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***"The more that people work together, the less they become siloed and the more they build a shared sense of connection to and pride in their communities."***

— Michele Bailey, Vermont Arts Council Senior Program Manager

The next phase of the program was administered by DHCD and Vermont Community Foundation, with the original partners providing support, such as informal advising, networking and outreach. Patronicity, an online crowdsourcing platform that specializes in placemaking, was brought into the project to support crowdfunding, a grant model that prioritizes and empowers community participation. The Better Places Vermont program created a vehicle for social cohesion by requiring community buy-in and advocacy as a first step, including:

- community members proposing an initial project and receiving technical assistance from Patronicity, and
- communities raising an initial 33% of the project's funding goal, which was then matched 2:1 by the Better Places program.



Lamoille Art & Justice Project mural. Photo Courtesy Vermont Arts Council

Although the Better Places Vermont program is not limited to arts and culture projects, a large cohort of communities have chosen to pursue creative placemaking, with the Vermont Arts Council noting the power of creative placemaking to promote tourism and economic development. This is



reinforced in the [2024 Vermont Better Places Program annual report](#), which shows that the program has leveraged nearly \$6 million in private funding across 38 projects, including:

- [a community-led creative maker space and tech innovation hub](#)
- [a community mural to beautify public space](#)
- [free outdoor concerts](#)
- [a public outdoor plaza with a stage and community gathering space](#)
- [student art street banners](#)
- [interactive exhibits about local culture and ecology](#)
- [a film festival to educate community members about sustainable food systems](#)

Importantly, the Vermont Arts Council sees the Better Places Program as part of an ecosystem of cross-sector partnerships and initiatives that holistically support communities at different stages of development and buy-in. VAC's [Animating Infrastructure grants](#), AARP's [Community Placemaking](#) grants and Vermont Community Foundation's [Spark Connecting Community](#) grants all offer access points for communities to undertake creative placemaking and familiarize themselves with both the requirements of grant programs and the partner organizations.

Hyde Park, a small village in Vermont, is a powerful example of the cascading effects of grant support, strengthened community infrastructure and social cohesion. The town received a grant from the Vermont Agency of Transportation to develop a plan to [connect the town](#). It was then awarded an Animating Infrastructure grant to design and fabricate [art for the head of the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail in the village](#), and applied for a Better Places grant to complete [public art that reflects a deep connection to the history of the community](#). Each of these projects created space for community members to meet and engage in planning their shared future.

## Key Program Considerations

Alternative grant models represent new avenues for engaging communities in the grant-making process and creating buy-in at the local level. State arts agencies should consider the following tactics for both existing and new grant programs:

- Embed the arts into larger community development programs and find right-sized roles for the agency.
- Prioritize a democratization of the grant-making process that puts community members in control of the grant (e.g., through crowdfunding techniques).
- Pilot an initial project and document successful stories to build support for larger investments.
- Find public and private partners that share goals involving community development.

- Create an ecosystem of grants that provide an on-ramp for applicants and a pathway for scaling toward larger projects.

## Washington, D.C.: Color the Curb and MuralsDC

For the [DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities](#) (DCCA), public art means more than just beautifying space; it is a multipronged strategy for engaging community members and developing a shared sense of ownership over public areas. To activate the elements of space and community through public art, DCCA offers two grant programs: [Color the Curb](#) and [MuralsDC](#).

### Color the Curb

Color the Curb is an initiative of DCCA, DC Public Schools (DCPS) and the District Department of Transportation (DDOT). The grant program supports student creativity and safety by having students work with muralists to literally paint curbs near elementary schools. Painted curb extensions improve visibility and have been shown to slow traffic.<sup>4</sup> Each partner brings a necessary component of work to the program:

- DCCA assists with determining the artists and funding the murals and artists.
- DDOT funds the curb extension and provides technical expertise on asphalt mural sustainability.
- DCPS facilitates contact with schools and access to teachers and students.



Installation of Joel Bergner's color the curb mural.  
Photo courtesy DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities.

The program strengthens overall community cohesiveness by providing the space and means for purposeful connection among local community members and youth. To prepare the local community for the new road artwork, DCCA works with DC's local officials (Advisory Neighborhood Commissions) and school employees to spread awareness of the new artwork and build community buy-in. The contracted artists then work with students to design the mural, forming connections with students around what makes them feel safe and part of their community. In addition to this collaborative design process, original artwork created by students has been included in the murals.

Artists in the program, who often have a historical or family connection to the school with which they are working, have furthered the goal of centering

<sup>4</sup> <https://assets.bbhub.io/dotorg/sites/43/2022/04/Asphalt-Art-Safety-Study.pdf>

community involvement by inviting local neighbors to assist in painting the mural. DCCAH conveyed that constituents have often responded positively, reporting a renewed sense of community ownership over the space and the feeling that local government had heard their calls for improved safety.

## **MuralsDC**

For [MuralsDC](#), DCCAH contracts with the Department of Public Works (DPW) to support community-driven murals in public spaces. MuralsDC originally started as a graffiti abatement program, with DCCAH and DPW providing grant funding to create public art at locations that previously had been heavily tagged. As part of the program, experienced artists offer technical assistance to develop local artists' skills in mural work. The program has evolved over time into a nationally recognized mural grant program and is currently undergoing another change as DCCAH and DPW consider alternative mural and public art mediums and gather input from previous artists, business owners and community members.

Currently, the program starts with DPW issuing a "call for walls" to gauge interest from property owners and to determine suitable walls on public buildings. At the same time, DCCAH and DPW work to establish a [call for artists](#), seeking applications from muralists who will:

- positively demonstrate the culture and techniques of graffiti art to the District,
- promote respect for public and private property, and
- heighten community pride through public art.

After the property owner signs on as a partner, MuralsDC sends representatives to the local Advisory Neighborhood Commission meeting to present the plan to community members and gather suggestions and ideas to forward to the artist. Although artists are not necessarily D.C. residents, the grant program strongly encourages communication between the artists and community. Moreover, although the wall owner is granted final selection of the mural, DCCAH works to ensure that community feedback is incorporated into the design process by including, when possible, an Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner and other community representatives in the design review process.

The success of both programs ultimately relies on the strength of the relationship between DCCA and its partners. The initiatives' prioritization of transparency and communication with the communities they serve helps transform the murals beyond beautification and into a social process of civic engagement and togetherness.

### **Key Program Considerations**

Public art and its creation go far beyond the beautification of space. State arts agencies can play a special role in supporting and facilitating the active process of public art making. States should consider these actions:

- Evaluate the variety of benefits public art can provide to physical space and community relationships, such as safer streets and civic engagement.
- Engage community at all levels of the artistic process to build buy-in.
- Empower community members to envision a world that reflects them and their stories.
- Select local artists and other creatives with ties to the community.
- Involve local elected officials and other community leaders.
- Strengthen ties between private businesses and local community members.

### **Further Reading**

Arts and creativity are powerful tools that can integrate with every part of our society, connecting us to each other and to our local and state governments. As each of the examples above demonstrates, state arts agencies are integral to improving the civic sphere of our lives, promoting community cohesion and empowering us to shape the world in which we live.

Examples of such work extend far beyond the states represented in this Strategy Sampler. Experiments in arts, civic infrastructure and social cohesion are arising throughout the country, benefiting many towns, cities, states and regions. For more inspiration, we recommend consulting the following additional state program materials.

#### **[California Impact Project](#) and [California Creative Corps](#)**

The [California Arts Council](#) supports cross-sector investment and community collaboration through its [Impact Project](#) grants. These grants facilitate collaborations between artists and community members that address local social issues—such as systemic marginalization, access to education and housing insecurity—through creative practice.

The [California Creative Corps](#) is a pilot program designed to support public health initiatives, increase awareness related to conservation and emergency preparedness, bolster civic engagement, and promote social justice and community cohesion. Fourteen administering organizations have designed their own versions of the program to serve their respective regions in California.

### **[California, North Dakota and Wyoming Arts and Parks Programming](#)**

State arts agencies are increasingly cultivating partnerships with their state departments of natural resources. These cross-sector collaborations can promote public access to the arts and employment opportunities for artists while also boosting public enjoyment of park lands. The [California Arts Council](#), [North Dakota Council on the Arts](#), and [Wyoming Arts Council](#) all have strong partnerships with their respective state parks departments to provide grant funding that ties together community, creativity and the great outdoors.

### **[Colorado Arts in Society](#)**

[Colorado Creative Industries](#) supports collaborative and cross-sector grant-making through its [Arts in Society](#) grant. The grant program offers \$5,000 to \$35,000 for projects that center the arts in promoting social justice and community welfare. Colorado Creative Industries partners with the Colorado Health Foundation, Bonfils-Stanton Foundation, and Denver Arts & Venues to fund the program, which is administered by RedLine Contemporary Art Center.

### **[Connecticut Artists Respond](#)**

[Connecticut Office of the Arts](#) offers [Artists Respond grants](#), which began as a virtual COVID-19 response program. Now, the grants fund artist-led, community based projects that respond to community needs, social issues and current events. As part of each grant, artists can partner with nonprofits and/or businesses.

### **[Iowa Great Places](#)**

The [Iowa Arts Council](#) administers the legislatively created [Iowa Great Places](#). The program funds creative placemaking through capital development that cultivates the character and qualities of local communities. The communities, which range from neighborhoods to regions, are designated as "Great Places" for 10 years and receive substantial funding for development. They engage in [extensive strategic planning](#) with multiple public and private partners to develop grant applications and support the long-term sustainability of their projects.

### **[Nevada Basin to Range Exchange](#)**

The [Nevada Basin to Range Exchange](#), developed by the [Nevada Arts Council](#), facilitates rural and metropolitan partnerships by promoting resource sharing, project development, creative placemaking and intercommunity collaborations. By bringing together arts and community

development stakeholders from rural and urban metropolitan regions, the program highlights the strengths, distinctiveness and interdependencies of diverse Nevada communities.

### **[North Carolina SmART Communities](#)**

The [North Carolina Arts Council](#) has designated seven communities across North Carolina as "SmART Communities." Through this program, the Arts Council invests in arts-driven economic development by supporting partnerships across the arts, government and business sectors. The creative placemaking projects are geared toward animating public space, economic revitalization, and connecting community businesses.

### **[South Carolina Rural Libraries Public Engagement](#)**

Libraries are often hubs for civic life in small communities. Recognizing the value of existing community space, the [South Carolina Arts Commission](#) developed the [Rural Libraries Public Engagement](#) grant to further facilitate community arts experiences.

### **[Texas Arts Respond](#)**

The [Texas Commission on the Arts](#) provides biannual [Texas Arts Respond](#) grants, which seek to support short-term projects across the education, health, economic development, public safety and natural resources sectors. For example, a 2023 natural resources Arts Respond grant went to the Puerto Rican Folkloric Dance and Cultural Center, which used it to host a [public ceremony demonstrating the relationship between Taíno traditions and nature](#) via an Earth Day celebration.

## **Additional Recommended Resources**

Kaufman, Julia, Melissa Kay Diliberti, Douglas Yeung and Jennifer Kavanagh. [Defining and Measuring Civic Infrastructure](#). Rand, November 2023.

Greenspan, Elizabeth, and Randall Mason. [Civic Infrastructure: Sustaining and Sharing the Value of Parks, Libraries, and Other Civic Assets](#). PennPraxis, June 2018.

Los Angeles County Arts Commission. [Art as Infrastructure: An Evaluation of Civic Art and Public Engagement in Four Communities in South Los Angeles County](#). May 2018.

Marquis, Bridget. [Infrastructure that Does More: Investing in Public Spaces for a Resilient America](#). Strong Towns, November 2020.

National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, [State Arts Agency Roles in Creative Placemaking](#). August 2020.

National Endowment for the Arts, [How to do Creative Placemaking](#). November 2016.

Springboard for the Arts, [Heartland, Heartwork: A Field Guide to Place and Possibility for Rural Leaders](#). 2024.

Metris Arts Consulting, PolicyLink and University of Florida Center for Arts in Medicine. [WE-Making: How Arts & Culture Unite People to Work Toward Community Well-Being](#). April 2021.

Mayor's Institute on City Design, [Design Library: Arts and City Leadership](#).

Walsh, Elizabeth A., William J. Becker, Alexandra Judelsohn and Enjoli Hall. [Civic Infrastructure and Sustainable Regional Planning: Insights from the Sustainable Communities Initiative Regional Planning Grantees](#). U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Office of Policy Development and Research, 2017.

Cornett, Kelly, Katherine Bray-Simons, Heather M. Devlin, Sunil Iyengar, Patricia Moore Shaffer and Janet E. Fulton. [Creating Activity-Friendly Communities: Exploring the Intersection of Public Health and the Arts](#). National Institutes of Health, September 2019.

The Scenic Route <https://transportation.art/>

ArtPlace <https://creativeplacemakingresearch.org/field-scans/>

## For More Information

For more information on cross-sector strategies for civic infrastructure and community cohesion, contact NASAA Qualitative Research Manager Shaun Harrison, who helped edit this sampler in 2024. This strategy sampler was prepared by Declan Wicks in 2024.

The National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) is a not-for-profit, nonpartisan organization. In collaboration with the nation's 56 state and jurisdictional arts councils, we advance the arts as a powerful path to economic prosperity, rural resilience, good health, education success and strong communities in which everyone thrives. NASAA serves as a clearinghouse for data and research about public funding for the arts as well as the policies and programs of state arts agencies. For more information about NASAA and the work of state arts agencies, visit [www.nasaa-arts.org](http://www.nasaa-arts.org).



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Cover photo: A community vision quilt created by students at Garfield Elementary School in collaboration with professional teaching artist Kate Gorman, funded by the Ohio Arts Council. Photo by Chelsea Dipman.

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