

Performing Arts Program

ARTISTS STRATEGY

JUNE 2024



The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation invests in creative thinkers and problem solvers working to ensure people, communities, and the planet can flourish. Together with our partners, we are harnessing society's collective capacity to solve our toughest problems — from the existential threat of climate change to persistent and pervasive inequities and to attacks on democracy itself. A nonpartisan philanthropy, the Hewlett Foundation has made grants in the U.S. and globally for nearly six decades, based on an approach that emphasizes long-term support, collaboration, and trust.

The Performing Arts Program makes grants to support meaningful artistic experiences for communities throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. Its goal is to ensure Bay Area communities honor and support their own and each other's artistic and cultural vibrancy, and the power of the arts and artists to advance individual self-expression and collective self-determination. The program pursues three interrelated strategies to make progress toward its goal, supporting Communities, Artists, and Youth. In each of these strategies, its work is guided by the foundation's guiding principles, and the program's values: leadership, the expansive power of the arts, equity and justice, and community self-determination.

The team of Hewlett staff that informed this updated strategy included: Carla Aguirre, Amanda Artru, Jaime Cortez, Tom DeCaigny, Adam Fong, Lori Grange, Aleina Hammonds, Larry Kramer, Vidya Krishnamurthy, Nathan Jae-Sun Large, Jessica Mele, Emiko Ono, Leeanne Oue, Elizabeth Peters, Lalitha Rajan, Pooja Raval, and Heath Wickline. We have made this strategy public to partners, funders, and the arts and culture field at large to promote collaboration and shared understanding, and as part of the foundation's commitment to openness, learning, and transparency. A memo detailing this updated strategy was shared with the Hewlett Foundation's board in March 2024.

Acknowledgments

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COVER PHOTOS (L to R)

Zawaya, Aziz Isaiyah Abbatiello performing a Sufi dance for the Aswat Ensemble's Sufi Music Concert at the Islamic Community and Cultural Center of Northern California in Oakland

CREDIT *Najib Joe Hakim*

Youth Speaks, Performer at the Brave New Voices Festival

CREDIT *Daniel Schaffer*

CounterPulse, Jose Abad in "This Is What I Want"

CREDIT *Robbie Sweeny*

Youth Speaks, Performers at the Brave New Voices Festival

CREDIT *Desirae Lee*



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Artists Strategy Summary

Hewlett Foundation Performing Arts Program

Artists and culture bearers are the authors and facilitators of creative acts, education, and experiences that deepen our understanding of ourselves and the world. Artists have always been of utmost importance to the arts ecosystem of the San Francisco Bay Area, and supporting the needs of artists is one of three key pillars to the work of the Hewlett Foundation Performing Arts Program.

At the same time, the nature of artistic labor and production is not well understood. This lack of understanding has led to misalignment between artists' needs and the shape of the region's cultural sector. These challenges are particularly acute for performance-based artists and culture bearers, as their work often transcends the ideas of products, commodities, and financial value that drive modern consumers. As a result, persistent economic devaluation and political marginalization of arts and culture communities in the Bay Area has been accelerating since the early 2000s, and we believe has now begun to outstrip the resilience and adaptability of the region's cultural foundations.

The dangers of this situation are evident to any practicing or aspiring artist. Scarce resources and precarious working conditions lay the groundwork for disturbing inequities within the sector. These challenges have been amplified over time by the broader economic, political, and social realities of life in the Bay Area. The sector's challenges around wages, labor protections, social safety nets, housing and space affordability, transportation, and more, accumulate into a constant threat to both the economic viability and the creative agency of artists.¹

In response to these challenges, the Performing Arts Program is updating its Artists strategy to include a more holistic approach to artists' well-being and a significant increase in the strategy's budget. We will broaden the kinds of support we are providing, strengthening the ability of artists themselves to shape the creative and economic conditions that enable their work and livelihood in the Bay Area.

UPDATED GOAL

Bay Area artists and culture bearers shape and benefit from the services, policies, and practices that most impact their creative agency and economic well-being.²

The program's updated goal is intentionally open-ended about which services, policies, and practices deserve the greatest attention or are the highest priority at this time. This openness will help the program partner with creative thinkers and leaders to support artists in the critical processes of building understanding, engaging in communication, and encouraging coordination in the field toward shared priorities.

¹ Creative agency refers to a person's ability to act freely, make independent creative choices, and impact their own creative or cultural milieu; it is both the ability to express one's own creativity, and the ability to do so on one's own terms.

² Economic well-being refers to both present and future financial security. This includes the ability to meet basic needs, to have control over day-to-day finances, to make economic choices with a sense of security and satisfaction, to absorb financial shocks, to build assets, and to maintain adequate income throughout the life span.

In order to make progress toward the updated goal, the program will continue partnerships with organizations that concentrate on these areas:

- Providing **essential artist services**
- Strengthening and enlarging **formal and informal artists' networks**
- Providing **artists with financial support**

In addition, the program will focus on improving three key factors:

- **Stakeholder understanding** of the issues impacting creative agency and economic well-being, including artists themselves as well as partners such as local organizers, policymakers, and service providers
- Artists' and culture bearers' **influence on relevant policymaking**
- The creation and propagation of **accessible pathways to economic well-being** for artists

Working with grantee partners that engage artists in shaping systems will help spur shifts in the policies, structures, and dynamics that have material consequences for the creative and economic potential of local artists.

In a few years' time, the program expects this work to result in the following:

- Increased assets for Bay Area artists and culture bearers to advocate for their needs, such as cross-sector alliances, stronger internal organizing, new policy and advocacy entities, and access to new revenue streams
- A robust network of support for innovative ideas that build the financial and political capital of local artists
- Durable models of self-governance, evidenced at a variety of levels relevant to artists, such as within organizations, within peer networks, within advocacy and policy groups, and in the communities with which they most closely identify

These improvements should help to ensure **artists and culture bearers are positioned as the individuals best equipped to identify priorities for their cultural work**, informed by the community relationships they value.

Overall, the revised Artists goal aims to transform conditions for artists and culture bearers in the Bay Area, fostering a more inclusive and properly resourced operating environment. If our local environment can provide steady services and help artists secure control over their own creative lives, it will enable them, as a group, to more fully realize their creative and cultural potential. It will affirm that the region values and supports its artists, and that it does so by acknowledging that artists themselves are the ones best equipped to govern their fields of practice.

As artists and culture bearers gain better control over their own creative lives and working conditions, what policies or practices might shift? What new forms of cultural infrastructure might grow? The resulting changes to the local arts ecosystem will depend upon the ability of those artist leaders to effectively distinguish, govern, and inspire through their creativity and wisdom.

Over time, we expect this work to enable artists and culture bearers to realize their full potential within our communities. If the strategy is successful, artists will be free to leverage all of their creative abilities, skills, and resilience to navigate the interrelated opportunities and challenges that come with life in the Bay Area.



Youth Speaks, Performer at the Brave New Voices Festival

CREDIT *Daniel Schaffer*

Artists Strategy

June 2024

PROGRAM OVERVIEW AND INTRODUCTION

PERFORMING ARTS PROGRAM GOAL

Bay Area communities honor and support their own and each other's artistic and cultural vibrancy, and the power of the arts and artists to advance individual self-expression and collective self-determination.

The Hewlett Foundation Performing Arts Program works to strengthen and support the performing arts ecosystem in the Bay Area for the benefit of people and communities throughout the region. Since 2020, it has pursued this goal according to a [*strategic framework*](#) with three interrelated strategies, each named for the intended beneficiaries: Communities (40% of our budget), Artists (15% of our budget), and Youth (25% of our budget). In addition, our approach has included a fourth body of work dedicated to bolstering the arts sector's advocacy capacity and supporting infrastructure. Dedicated to improving conditions critical to the sector's long-term vitality, "systems change" investments comprise 20% of the program's budget.

Our approach to "systems change" sought to address concerns stemming from the cumulative effects of changes in arts participation, economic inequality, and a chronically undercapitalized field — which were only exacerbated by the pandemic. Our exploratory work led us to the conclusion that these systems-change investments would be more effective if they focused on and were incorporated into a revised Artists strategy.

Therefore, this document details the evolution of our Artists strategy based on what we have learned. The updated Artists strategy introduces a more holistic approach to artists' well-being and a significant increase in the strategy's budget. Our revised strategy will broaden the kinds of support we provide to strengthen the ability of artists themselves to shape the creative and economic conditions that enable their work and livelihood in the Bay Area. That is, we will increase our support for advocacy and infrastructure efforts toward helping artists, specifically.

To do this, we plan to combine our Artists strategy budget with funds currently dedicated to our advocacy and infrastructure investments, totaling 30% of the program's annual budget. We believe this strategy update will significantly strengthen the program's positive impact on the Bay Area arts ecosystem by supporting the leadership, knowledge, and vision of its most critical resource: its artists and culture bearers.

REVISED GOAL

The Artists strategy that was launched in 2019 envisioned a broad array of supports for artists, with particular attention to addressing economic and geographic disparities.

As the authors and facilitators of creative acts, education, and experiences that deepen our understanding of ourselves and the world, artists continue to be of utmost importance to the regional arts ecosystem and our strategic framework. However, the COVID-19 pandemic made the needs and concerns of artists and culture bearers more tangible, and exposed the paucity of resources for artists whose labor is often unreported or misunderstood.

By adding systems-level shifts to the goal and setting our focus on both creative agency and economic well-being, the program will be better positioned to support artists. Specifically, the revision of our goal encompasses supporting grantees that engage artists and culture bearers to influence the policies, practices, and fundamental conditions that help sustain artists' ability to create and thrive long term.

ORIGINAL GOAL

Artists throughout the region have equitable access to services, networks, and supports that are relevant and responsive to their priorities.

UPDATED GOAL

Bay Area artists and culture bearers shape and benefit from the services, policies, and practices that most impact their creative agency and economic well-being.



CounterPulse, Jose Abad in "This Is What I Want"

CREDIT Robbie Sweeny



There are three elements of the revised goal to note:

- 1 **Expanded commitment to artists:** We will continue to promote services, including our support of networks and financial supports for artists, and we will also direct investments to grantees that engage local artists to understand and influence systems in ways that improve their creative and economic conditions.
- 2 **Flexible and responsive approach:** Instead of naming specific issues or areas of impact, our refined goal is intentionally open-ended about which services, policies, and practices deserve the greatest attention or highest priority at this time. It is a directional goal that enables local artists and culture bearers to set the plan, acknowledging they are best positioned to identify priorities for their work. The revised goal allows the program to support the important process of building understanding, engaging in communication, and encouraging coordination in the field toward prioritization.
- 3 **Inclusion of culture bearers:** We explicitly name culture bearers acknowledging their role in preserving and transmitting creative forms of cultural expression and knowledge. They are healers, storytellers, makers of instruments and textiles, and preservers of language. Culture bearing is a full-life tradition that includes intergenerational transmission and preservation. Examples include those who maintain and impart Native American dance, regalia, basketry, and language, or those that practice dance, song, and ceremony with religious or regional roots such as Filipino subli, Latine Carnaval, Oaxacan Guelaguetza, and Tibetan Guozhuo. While these individuals do not always self-identify as artists, they are critical to thriving cultural ecosystems.

Overall, the revised Artists goal aims to transform conditions for artists and culture bearers in the Bay Area, fostering a more inclusive and properly resourced environment. By focusing our systems-oriented work on artists, the program will be better equipped to more holistically consider artists' needs and achieve lasting improvements.

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

In 2022, the Performing Arts Program developed a draft “systems change” strategy to address the interconnected policies, practices, and structural dynamics that threaten the long-term vitality of the Bay Area arts ecosystem. The strategy aimed to enhance the program’s existing commitment to bolster the arts sector’s advocacy capacity and supporting infrastructure. It considered the underlying causes of key phenomena that weaken the Bay Area’s performing arts ecosystem as a whole, including displacement, racialized inequities in the arts, and the conditions that make artists particularly vulnerable to economic insecurity.

The initial draft goal was “to strengthen the economic agency of artists, culture bearers, and cultural communities.” We hypothesized that purposeful support for research to elevate critical issues, foster multisector advocacy capacity, and strengthen exemplary models would spur adaptations that would improve conditions affecting the region’s arts ecosystem.

The program engaged a group of field leaders to refine our approach and identify names of potential grantee partners. The process resulted in more than 115 potential partners, but only a fraction were 501(c)(3) charitable organizations and those doing the most compelling work were not headquartered locally. Furthermore, the variety of potential partners was vast, ranging in organizational structures, motivations, approaches to power building, and goals. It became apparent that core concepts, such as “economic conditions” and “multisector advocacy,” were broad and encompassed a wide range of interpretations. The draft invoked myriad areas — including real estate, labor, and technology — where change is needed (and work could be undertaken), due in part to the dependency of the arts and culture sector on a variety of policies and practices embedded in related industries.³ With limited staff capacity, it was clear that the path we defined — stronger economic agency for a broad set of beneficiaries — would be enormously complex, even when constrained within our service region.

Nevertheless, the nascent state of systems-oriented work in arts and culture is part of what makes systems-level change efforts appealing at this time. Our research showed that artists and culture bearers are broadly valued, even if the nature of artistic labor and production is not well understood. This sentiment is reflected in a short but compelling list of “wins” for the interests of artists over the last few years. For example, widespread relief funding for artists has been supported by government, public sentiment, and many philanthropic institutions. There is new openness to employing artists in novel ways, such as in service to public health or as a meaningful test group for guaranteed income pilots.⁴ These investments do little to change the economic and political abilities of artists, culture bearers, and communities to control the resources they need for their work. However, they demonstrate a basic understanding and openness to the power of the arts, with artists as the key human resource to protect or employ.

Our research also showed that the misalignment between artists’ needs and the region’s cultural economy is governed and reinforced in broader economic, political, and social spheres. Artists and culture bearers engage with many different types of resources, relationships, platforms, structures, and policies, all of which shape artistic and cultural expression. Recognition of this reality — and the resulting inequities and access challenges — set the stage for the program’s original Artists goal, as defined in 2019. However, persistent economic devaluation and political marginalization of arts and culture communities in the Bay Area has been accelerating since the early 2000s, and we believe has now begun to outstrip the resilience and adaptability

³ Examples of issues that the program’s current grantees have encountered: the “speed” disadvantage that low-capital arts organizations face in a competitive real estate market; the lack of wage and benefits standards for gig workers; and the terms of compensation for digital distribution, which often do not account for research, development, and production costs.

⁴ California Creative Corps is a \$60 million effort, led by Governor Newsom, to increase public awareness related to topics such as water, climate mitigation, and emergency preparedness. YBCA in San Francisco provides two guaranteed income programs for artists, funded by the San Francisco Mayor’s Office, Jack Dorsey’s StartSmall initiative, and MacKenzie Scott. Creatives Rebuild New York, which offers an artist employment program and guaranteed income program for artists, is the largest statewide guaranteed income program in the United States.



Shotgun Players, Mikee Loria in "Wolf Play" by Hansol Jung, directed by Elizabeth Carter
CREDIT Ben Krantz

of the region’s cultural foundations.⁵ To combat these trends, we will continue to fund essential services that help artists navigate these conditions. The revised goal then adds support for organizations that can increase the level of control that artists exert over the key resources required for their activities, including the policies that most affect them.

Even with limited staff capacity and funds, the program has an opportunity to provide leadership and encouragement in an area of deep interest and profound need in the arts sector. Philanthropic funding for the arts is waning overall, but several new funders are emerging with an interest in how support for artists can serve broader community concerns or align with other social change efforts. As this new arts field of cross-sector and multi-issue engagement develops, the program’s updated strategy can ensure that artists’ work, ideas, and power to influence are nurtured, in alignment with our long-term goal.

OUTCOMES AND PROPOSED GRANTMAKING

Providing steady services and securing artists’ control over their own creative lives will enable them, as a group, to more fully realize their creative and cultural potential. It will affirm that the region values and supports its artists, and that it does so by acknowledging that artists themselves are the ones best equipped to govern their fields of practice.

Current grantees in the program’s Artists strategy provide a range of resources to local creatives, including essential services, formal and informal networks, and financial supports. This work is heavily reliant on intermediary partners, a subset of the sector’s resource providers for Bay Area artists. A 2021 evaluation of our intermediary partners showed that their knowledge and resources are highly valued and help absorb risks and mitigate constraints that have been ratcheting up for decades. Therefore, the expected outcome of this work — that a broad array of resources is available for artists to develop and share work, engage with communities, and evolve their practices — will not change. Moving forward, the program will continue to support **essential artist services**, strengthen and enlarge **formal and informal artists’ networks**, and provide **artists with financial support**, all while prioritizing equity and access.

The revised goal incorporates a new outcome: increasing artists’ control over key resources and policies impacting their creative agency and economic well-being. We will focus on improving three key factors: **stakeholder understanding** of the issues affecting creative agency and economic well-being, including artists themselves as well as partners such as local organizers, policymakers, and service providers; artists’ and culture bearers’ **influence on relevant policymaking**; and the creation and propagation of **accessible pathways to economic well-being** for artists. To work toward this new outcome, as well as develop new relationships and support our learning, the program will orient its Artists portfolio around those who can improve these three factors. To be clear, the program is already engaged in some of this work through its previous grants supporting advocacy capacity and new forms of infrastructure, including commissioned research on artist labor classification issues.⁶ Working with grantees that engage artists in shaping systems, and aligning these grants within a more focused Artists strategy, will more holistically serve artists by spurring shifts in the systems — policies, structures, and dynamics — that have material consequences for the creative and economic potential of local artists.

⁵ For example, the affordable space crisis creates misalignment between where artists are paid to perform and where they can live and rehearse; it also affects the accessibility of peer artist networks, limiting their ability to share knowledge or develop new work together. Technological adaptations and new infrastructure investments help bridge some gaps. In many cases the challenges are also compounded by related issues such as shifts in the arts-presenting business, rising costs in industries like travel and hospitality, or shifting norms in policy areas like intellectual property or immigration.

⁶ Jenny R. Yang, et al., “Arts Workers in California: Creating a More Inclusive Social Contract to Meet Arts Workers’ and Other Independent Contractors’ Needs,” Urban Institute, January, 19, 2021, <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/arts-workers-california>.

Although there are likely to be some shifts and pivots along the way, the program expects to see the following in the medium term: evidence of increased assets for Bay Area artists and culture bearers to advocate for their needs, such as cross-sector alliances, stronger internal organizing, new policy and advocacy entities, and access to new revenue streams; a robust support network for innovative ideas that build the financial and political capital of local artists; and durable models of self-governance, evidenced at a variety of levels relevant to artists, such as within organizations, within peer networks, within advocacy and policy groups, and in the communities with which they most closely identify.

The revised goal qualifies both artist services and artists' engagement on policies and practices around creative agency and economic well-being. In many cases, resources and policies relating to artists involve economic considerations such as wage standards, labor protections, and access to affordable living and working spaces. Importantly, many dimensions of artists' work are unacknowledged by both economic and social structures: forms of labor, working conditions that are eccentric or antithetical to most other industries, and relationships rooted in cultural practices that are vital to artistic expression.⁷ The unique circumstances, needs, and abilities of artists and culture bearers demand a more expansive view of agency, one that is inclusive of both creative and economic agency. Creative agency — a person's ability to act freely, make choices, and impact their own creative or cultural milieu — is vital to artists and culture bearers being able to shape their own creative lives. Economic well-being means artists are able to realize present and future financial security. Our refined approach to driving positive systems-level changes concentrates on both creative agency and economic well-being, and creates solid directional guidance for the field as it evolves.



⁷ For example, artists require a high level of independence when it comes to work production and creative ownership, and tend to prefer project-based engagements. This can be at odds with many laws aimed at narrowing what qualifies as contract work. Another example is how the ability to practice certain work or forms hinges on cultural relationships or lineages that are developed over years and are inherently uncompensated (e.g., apprentice and elder).

By explicitly working toward more robust artist governance, artists and culture bearers are positioned as the individuals best equipped to identify priorities for their cultural work, informed by the community relationships they value. The program's opportunity is to support and provide capacity for the processes by which artists and culture bearers identify and utilize shared aspirations and needs to strengthen the policies that impact artists' lives. The resulting shifts will depend upon the ability of those artist leaders to effectively distinguish, govern, and inspire through their creativity and wisdom. Over time, we would expect to see those leaders exhibiting the skills and resilience to navigate the interrelated opportunities and challenges that come with commingling their creative interests with the systems and structures that govern other facets of life in Bay Area communities. We anticipate being able to scaffold our investments toward these ends.

In its early stages, the program may learn best through one-time investments. Recent examples include grants to support research and communications in the cities of Berkeley and Watsonville to better highlight artists' needs related to affordable art space, artist housing, and public art programs. In both cases, the agency of artists and culture bearers was strengthened, resulting in better design and execution of municipal support for the arts. The program will support one-time projects that build toward a more robust ecosystem of partners, particularly those that can repeat or scale responsive and opportunistic projects systematically. Progress will only be accomplished by enabling local leaders to facilitate information sharing between Bay Area artists more effectively, and to steward relationships with leaders from other sectors more actively.

Some inputs needed to improve the three key factors (stakeholder understanding, policy influence, and economic well-being) already exist. Several of the program's current Artists and Advocacy and Infrastructure grantees bring information, relationships, and resources that will be vital to the effort. For example, the program currently supports a regional coalition, brought together by a multistate service provider, that facilitates communication and coordination among artist advocates, helping them explore their priorities and assess how those priorities fit with their advocacy capacities. We plan to leverage both new and existing relationships to create a strong set of partners and projects, as exemplified by this nascent regional coalition.

In recent years, new organizations have emerged, locally and nationally, that could contribute to the program's key factors. Locally, these include artist-driven land trusts and community development groups implementing novel solutions to the space affordability crisis, helping reduce a major economic strain. The program will help these groups to evolve or scale, enabling the most significant impact for the local arts ecosystem. More broadly, there are national efforts the program can help ensure are both informed by and benefit Bay Area artists, such as those highlighting connections between artists' needs and alternative economic paradigms. We plan to target our investments to raise awareness and build stakeholder understanding in the Bay Area, leading to more advanced discussions of potential policy shifts.

To achieve its aims in this context, the program will use both grantmaking and communications tactics. As described above, grants will accelerate practices and exchanges that build the financial and political capital of Bay Area artists and culture bearers. Equally important will be a set of communications projects to ensure that opportunities for improving the creative agency and economic well-being of Bay Area artists and culture bearers are well understood. While much of this work may be achieved through grants to existing partners, it will also require utilization of the foundation's own communications and convening capacities.

We anticipate the observable change in the sector will be evolutionary and modestly paced. As a leading and long-standing supporter of the arts, the foundation is well positioned to ensure that transformational ideas are guided toward practical and measurable progress. This means the program will seek to balance its investments by encouraging the alteration of existing policies and practices, as well as the development of new models.



Zawaya, Aziz Isaiah Abbatiello performing a Sufi dance for the Aswat Ensemble's Sufi Music Concert at the Islamic Community and Cultural Center of Northern California in Oakland

CREDIT *Najib Joe Hakim*



EVALUATION

With a newly refined goal for the Artists strategy, the program will take a developmental approach to evaluation. In the first implementation phase, the most critical question will be: What policies or practices are most impactful to the creative agency and economic well-being of Bay Area artists and culture bearers? In the short term, it is unlikely that consensus or prioritization among local artists will emerge. However, as the field gains a clearer sense of how impacts of various policies and practices might be measured, our ability to assess opportunities for strategic investments, both short-term and long-term, will improve.

Early on, we will also inquire into what impacts Bay Area artists and culture bearers are experiencing as a result of unequal or inequitable access to resources. The relationships between the systems that drive these inequities and the creative capacities of artists are at the forefront of artists' concerns. Our evaluation processes will point to causal relationships as well as how those relationships and impacts are shifting over time. A developmental process will help the program monitor key changes in the field and consider whether pivots are needed in how it prioritizes its work toward the goal of the Artists strategy.

Over the long term, the program might also consider to what extent the work of Bay Area artists and culture bearers exerts power in the collective cultural and economic self-determination of their communities. On its own, the Artists strategy may achieve a more equitable and responsive sector that benefits local artists and culture bearers. However, assessing the strategy's place in the program's overall framework will help elucidate and distinguish work that benefits artists from efforts that benefit our other strategies, Communities and Youth. It might also help to validate or more richly inform the program's approach to integrating systems-level thinking within each strategy.

The field has few ready-made indicators that can help the program track progress toward its Artists goal. As such, establishing benchmarks will be a critical step. Such processes, if designed to encourage the leadership of artists and culture bearers, can also contribute to increased awareness of the program's key concerns more generally and prompt buy-ins to future activities.

Although there are no easy solutions to benchmarking the ability of artists to shape policies and practices, the program isn't starting completely from scratch. Its investments in artist services — which in the past decade has relied heavily on intermediary regrantees — provide a base of knowledge and were evaluated in 2021. The general size and scope of services provided by those existing grantees can be summarized and monitored through existing internal processes including program officer assessments, community engagement, and periodic third-party evaluations.

Communications-oriented efforts will be a relatively new line of work for the program, starting with our new strategic communications plan, established in early 2023. More specifically, within the Artists strategy, the program will invite grantees to help gauge understanding of key issues among various stakeholders, establishing a perceived baseline. Possible stakeholders include artists and culture bearers themselves, specific segments of the public, existing arts leaders, corporate leaders, public officials, and arts funders. Grantee or cohort leadership will be critical in order to build a shared analysis of stakeholders and who among these entities are most able to influence positive change for artists.

The practices of many of these stakeholders, including some artist services organizations, may not currently be well-aligned with our desired outcome. While they may not be our partners, their behaviors and expressed interests can help the program understand what tactics might be needed to effect change. This information will be gathered through grantees and communications, as described above. Over time, the strategy's support for its three factors (stakeholder understanding, artist influence, economic pathways) is meant to strengthen the key levers for positive impact. This theory will need to be tested over time. Does improving these particular factors create more favorable conditions for artists? Are there missing ingredients, or ways to reframe what's most important to help position artists for success? These questions will take time and research to answer, so in the short term it will be important to monitor even those stakeholders whose operations reflect different values, in order to accelerate our learning and analysis.



Los Luperos de San José performing Yoremadas Sierreñas from Sinaloa Mexico, Folkloreada
CREDIT SOAC Production Team

RISKS

This revision to the Artists strategy introduces and strives to address a few different forms of risk. The goal seeks to improve two measures: creative agency and economic well-being. While these are clearly related, it is much easier to quantify the latter. And, because much of the field’s advocacy has been built on descriptions of economic impact, more attention to financial resources reinforces narrow, income-driven or professionalized definitions of who qualifies as an artist. As such, there is a risk that the field, even if it better supports artists in general, will favor more tangible and measurable impacts, leaving behind the notion of creative agency.

As described above, much of the Bay Area region’s artistic vibrancy is indebted to cultural practices that are not well-understood or easily integrated into mainstream economic systems. This reality is what informs the continued inclusion of “services,” including networks and supports in the current Artists goal. Even if the program staff holds an expansive understanding of who qualifies as an artist, the existing field’s assumptions of who deserves the moniker are likely to exclude many of the people and groups we hope to prioritize.

Similarly, the program’s strategic framework does not deeply explore the relationship between artists and communities. In discussions with grantees and other field leaders, program staff have heard many arts workers conflate the two, arguing that they see themselves as part of “the local arts community.” While true, this is only one view of how artists relate to communities. Thanks to our community-driven work and partnerships serving several locales, including Healdsburg, Vallejo, East San José, Gilroy, and Watsonville, the program has observed that while nearly all artists feel connected to a network of peers, their relationships with the broader arts ecosystem and with their communities of interest range from leadership and belonging to alienation and exclusion. Therefore, seeking to improve the standing of artists risks affirming only those who are already well-connected, whose issues are most broadly understood. The program will need to hew closely to its values of equity and justice to avoid reinforcing harmful biases along these lines.

Over the long term, maintaining systems-level investments serving artists in particular may conflict with similar investments benefitting communities or local youth. By narrowing this strategy revision to focus on benefits to local artists, the program will be better able to manage conflicts between its strategies. For example, there is potential for artist advocates to conflict with youth or education advocates over limited public resources. As such, the pacing and sequencing of the program’s strategic developments should continue to be monitored in order to minimize confusion, avoid work toward cross-purposes, and to identify opportunities for integration within the overarching framework.

As the program begins to answer the most important open question of identifying the critical priorities and practices that impact artists and culture bearers, it will face several new concerns. Most of these will have to do with balancing breadth and depth. For issues related to existing social movements, how can the program best learn and support grantees without over-promising in the context of those larger efforts? As innovators seek to expand or devise new cultural models, to what extent will the program partner in attracting co-funders? Identifying clear priorities will demand partners who can facilitate meaningful conversation among artists and culture bearers. The feasibility and coherence of the visions for change those groups generate may vary. It may also prove challenging to arrive at shared priorities. How will the program prioritize its own resources among its partners’ diversity of issue areas and approaches? Throughout the life of this strategy, the program will need to communicate clearly with its partners about how it handles these breadth and depth challenges when it comes to its grantmaking decisions, as well as its beyond-the-grant dollar efforts.

Reflecting back to the origin of the program’s intention to establish a stand-alone systems strategy, and the capacity challenges it raised, integrating systems-oriented work into the Artists strategy minimizes risks related to staff capacities. The revision coalesces the program’s most unfamiliar research, development, and implementation tasks under one strategic umbrella. This should ease workload concerns and simplify grantee diversity challenges.

IMPLEMENTATION PLANS

The program currently allocates 15% of its annual grants budget to the Artists strategy, and 20% to its advocacy and infrastructure work. These budget categories will be combined, allocating 30% of the program's annual grants budget toward the revised Artists strategy. The program's budget request for 2024 anticipated this shift, targeting 30% toward the potential revised Artists strategy; the remaining 5% will allow for a handful of opportunity grants that don't fit neatly into the existing strategies, including grants that support a smooth transition as staff implements the strategic change.

The program currently supports about 25 grantees whose work contributes to the goal of the Artists strategy. The modified strategy emphasizes changing conditions and leans away from simply perpetuating long-standing programs. The new portfolio will seek to balance support for existing partners and new ones, with meaningful funds reserved each year for one-time projects such as commissioned research, community engagement, learning opportunities, and communications efforts.

Both evaluation and strategic communications activities will be designed beginning in early 2024, with a rollout in the late spring or summer. The program published [a midpoint evaluation](#) of its overall strategic framework in February 2024, providing a useful opportunity to share staff reflections on our progress alongside an announcement of the strategy revision, and invitations to partners for further engagement.

As with the program's other strategies, grantmaking and related activities to fulfill the Artists strategy will be shared across all program staff. In addition, a single program officer will provide internal strategic leadership and will manage the initial evaluation and communications work.

Beginning implementation in mid-2024 will likely provide sufficient time for the key policies and practices of concern to be ready for a more comprehensive review in late 2026. Though a full refresh of the Artists strategy may be premature at that time, the program's overall strategic framework will be due for a refresh, providing an ideal moment to assess progress and consider pivots as needed.

CONCLUSION

Although the Bay Area arts sector is moving into the early stages of recovery, its ongoing transformation is both fraught with challenge and laden with opportunity. The program's strategic framework continues to guide our grantmaking well. However, both the long-standing and newer versions of inequity, as well as persistently harmful working conditions for artists, demand a rebalancing of our resources and energies. A thoughtful revision to, and deeper investment in, the Artists strategy at this time will help amplify and strengthen the foundation's ongoing investments in the performing arts. We look forward to working in partnership with the many creative thinkers and problem solvers who are ready to confront today's challenges, and work toward the long-term health and vibrancy of the Bay Area's arts ecosystem.