



CREATIVE STRATEGIST PROGRAM EVALUATION

DECEMBER 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Los Angeles County
Arts & Culture



Artist Deborah Aschheim sketched voters as part of a #365DaysOfVoters social media campaign for the Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Los Angeles County Creative Strategist-Artist in Residence (Creative Strategist) program places artists in County departments to work alongside staff, project partners, and community stakeholders. Through a collaborative process, creative strategists work with their host departments to develop, strategize, promote, and implement artist-driven solutions to complex civic challenges.

The program originated as part of the LA County Cultural Equity and Inclusion Initiative (CEII), a public process that generated 13 recommendations for actions the County could take to ensure that every resident has equitable access to arts and culture, and to improve inclusion in the wider arts ecology for all.

This evaluation places municipal-run artist residencies in the context of the historical relationship between government and the arts in the United States. While the US has generally left funding of arts and culture to the private sector, there have been two notable exceptions: New Deal investment in the arts in response to the Great Depression of the 1930s, and use of arts and culture to win “hearts and minds” during the Cold War period. A third major period of significant federal investment in the arts occurred during the recession of the 1970s, when the arts community found ways to utilize funds set aside to help unemployed workers in the US to support artists and arts nonprofits at a significant scale.

Today, 59 percent of public funding for the arts comes from local government, 30 percent from the state, and 11 percent from the National Endowment for the Arts. Public funding for the

arts is dwarfed by philanthropic funding. In 2018, the 1,000 largest arts philanthropies invested \$3 billion in the arts, more than twice the total of all government investment.



Creative strategist Sandra de la Loza (right) and a community member at Walk for Wellness at Earvin "Magic" Johnson Park.

In recent years, local governments have begun to launch artist-in-residence programs, seeking to harness their creativity to find innovative solutions to public sector problems. While an artist residency connects artists with a municipal agency, each functions differently and responds to the needs of the agency as well as the community. Some programs have been initiated by arts and culture departments; others are shaped by public-private partnerships between a city and a separate organization. Many have grown out of public art divisions and draw on funding from percent for art programs. Literature on artist residencies in government is also beginning to emerge.

This evaluation of the pilot phase of LA County's Creative Strategist program was conducted by an evaluator who also provided administrative support to the program as it was designed and implemented. Data collection for the evaluation was both formal and informal. Most data collection for the evaluation was integrated into program activities, and included participant observation, regular check-in meetings with artists and host agency staff, cohort meetings, and exit interviews.



Youth design traffic safety messages as part of Clement Hanami's residency with the Department of Public Health's PLACE Program.

For this pilot phase, the evaluation centered on two main questions:

Were the goals of the residencies achieved?

In each residency, there came a point at which both the creative strategist and department connector realized it would take much more time to achieve their original goals than a one-year, part-time residency would allow. In spite of the challenges faced along the way, each residency had tangible results. Moreover, nearly all creative strategists continued work beyond the end of their residencies, though sometimes in other spaces and with other funding sources. In fact, each host department said they would keep the creative strategist on in their residency if they had funding to do so.

Was progress made toward the vision for the residencies?

From its inception, this program attempted to explore how art could be used as a tool to make government more equitable. All of the residencies focused in some way on community engagement and participation. Nearly all of them included public programs or events. Many identified cultural and community assets during their research phase that paved the way for their final projects. There was some limited creation of new public artworks or beautification projects, including books and guides to using storytelling. Each project launched by the creative strategist had some continuation post-residency, and these new iterations were as varied as the residencies themselves.

A significant amount of **art-as-process** occurred across the residencies, with many of the creative strategists doing work engaging communities,

especially those historically underserved by local government. At the same time, some of the **art products** that were created could have been achieved through a creative services contract. This is notable in light of the fact that most of the creative strategists spent a significant amount of time early in the residency expanding the view of their host departments from thinking about art products to thinking about art as a process that could help them achieve their mission.

Did the residencies increase equity and inclusion in the arts? Did they help to make progress toward transformational change in their host departments? It became clear early on that there was not a shared understanding of “equity” or “transformational change” among all parties involved. In spite of that, and because of the emergent and process-oriented nature of the program, these residencies did bring to the surface gaps in the operational culture of the host departments and old habits of thinking about relationships with community.

It became clear early in each residency that artists and government workers have very different ways of working in the world. They speak different languages, even when they are talking about the same things. This led on occasion to frustration, misunderstandings, and even moments of distrust. While these may play out as interpersonal conflicts, they may in fact reflect systemic differences. The “productive frictions” produced by these residencies turned out to be opportunities for reflection, learning, and improvement for both the artist and their host department.

If the ambitious goals laid out in its original vision are to be met, much more work is necessary at the beginning of each residency to create a shared

vision and understanding of the needs of the host department, and to bridge gaps in knowledge and practice between each creative strategist and their host department. What was learned in the pilot phase also raises critical questions: What role can and should the Department of Arts and Culture play in driving change in other County departments? Whose equity goals are paramount in these residencies, Arts and Culture’s or those of the host department? How can Arts and Culture use the Creative Strategist program to build relationships with other County departments toward achieving equity goals? It will also become important to better understand what unique skills and benefits artists bring to these residencies that subject matter experts, consultants, or community organizers do not.



Images from Alan Nakagawa's residency with the LA County Library.



This report offers 13 recommendations to improve program structure and administration, which fall into three categories: program management, staffing, and artist placement. These would be important considerations for any local government seeking to create similar artist residencies. Five are highlighted here:

1. Residencies should be longer than a year in order to meet goals of both the residencies and the Creative Strategist program and to achieve meaningful long-term impact.
2. A formal program to guide and train both sides through the residency should be established and a professional development curriculum created. Topics could include orientations to social practice and civic practice art, organizational change, learning to listen across difference, how County government works, using arts-based strategies to work in communities, and cross sector collaborations toward equity.
3. The structure of the program requires that Arts and Culture staff administering it have a wide array of skills including program administration, varied types of arts practices, knowledge of County government functions and practices, experience in diversity, equity, and inclusion as practiced in the arts, and an understanding of how LA County's diverse communities have been impacted by systemic racism. Ideally, program staff will reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of LA County. Therefore multiple staff are recommended to staff this program for it to achieve its full vision.
4. Creative strategists should be placed with direct access to executive level managers in departments. If this is not possible, the department executive should provide clear, visible support for the residency.
5. The creative strategies should leave behind a maintenance plan so that when the residency ends, changes in the department's new approaches to community and operations can continue.

These residencies opened up space for new ideas and practices in six divisions of LA County government. The creative strategists modeled innovative approaches to working with community, but were restricted by time, by gaps in knowledge between the creative strategists and their host departments, and by varying and loose definitions of equity. Structural changes to staffing, budgets, and administration created other challenges. In many ways, these residencies were the beginning of conversations that did not have time to come to fruition. Time will tell whether what was learned and what changed will continue to have a transformational impact on the operations and mission of each host department.

Pilot Period Creative Strategist Residencies

Clement Hanami: Department of Public Health, PLACE Program

Alan Nakagawa: LA County Library

Deborah Aschheim: Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk

Olga Koumoundouros: Office of Violence Prevention

Sandra de la Loza: Department of Parks and Recreation

Anu Yadav: Department of Mental Health



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