

Embracing Art in the Movement: Bridging Art and Advocacy to Drive Culture and Narrative Change

Lessons from Ohio | Fall 2023

Like any systems-change effort, the fight to reimagine the existing criminal justice system requires a multitude of strategies designed to address the unique socio-political landscape of specific communities and the broader state. It requires a strong ground effort (i.e., community organizing and advocacy), legislative action, inside-outside government strategies, and—what often gets overlooked—**attention to cultivating conditions for change**. And while policy change is an essential component to ending mass incarceration, meaningful social change requires more than just a shift in policymaking. It requires cultural transformation, which begins with people confronting beliefs and values that hold intractable issues like mass incarceration in place.

This case study explores the role art can play in supporting social change by exposing the dark history and racial bias in the carceral system, creating compassion and empathy, and shifting harmful narratives that surround incarceration. It is based on lessons learned from grantees and partners of the Art for Justice Fund (A4J). While advocacy efforts in the decarceration movement have typically employed policy change strategies, A4J shone a light on the power of art to complement these efforts by shifting the broader culture and narrative around incarceration. Perspectives from grantees and partners working in Ohio exemplify efforts to bridge art and policy advocacy to reimagine what is possible and help create the cultural change needed to make progress.

While the integration of art was nascent, movement leaders in Ohio recognized that policy-centric strategies alone were not enough to achieve sustainable change.

The road to statewide criminal justice systems change is a long and arduous fight for the broader ecosystem of organizations and leaders working in conservative states, especially Ohio. While there have been notable policy victories, particularly in the area of sentencing reform, leaders described broad level change as “incremental” at best. Indeed, when compared to the more liberal states of New York and Illinois highlighted in this brief, Ohio has seen smaller decreases in its prison incarceration rates over the last decade. One former leader from the **Ohio Transformation Fund** soberly acknowledged that “certain policy changes appear insurmountable at the state level, particularly around policing and public safety” and that it is “challenging to maneuver and advance equitable policies” in a state with a substantial conservative opposition. This is why many organizations across the state are also looking to impact change at the local and regional levels.

At a Glance:

A4J Grantees Focused on Shifting the Culture of Ohio Through Art and Advocacy

- [Ohio Justice & Policy Center's](#) (OJPC) mission is to create fair, redemptive criminal justice systems through advocacy, innovative policy change, and cross-sector community education. OJPC partnered with ArtWorks to produce the [Time Served vs Time Saved](#) mural in Cincinnati, OH.
- [Ohio Transformation Fund](#) (OTF) is a collaborative fund developed by local and national funders advocating for healthy communities and an equitable democracy across Ohio. It builds and supports networks to drive a statewide criminal justice systems change strategy.
- [Ohio Organizing Collaborative](#) and [Ohio Student Association](#) are grassroots organizations focused on criminal justice and use culture/narrative change strategies. The Ohio Student Association partnered with Pretrial Justice Institute and other creatives to host a [virtual learning event tailored for Ohio artists](#) on the intersection between pretrial justice and racial equity.
- [JustLeadershipUSA](#) (JLUSA) and [Pretrial Justice Institute](#) (PJI) are national organizations working in Ohio to reduce the number people incarcerated through leadership development and policy change. Pretrial Justice Institute partnered with Ohio artists to produce the [Artful Souls + Liberated Voices](#) exhibit.

“A4J does advocacy and culture work. They see both as equal parts of the strategy for change... Its unique approach starts from redemption, dignity, and power. It has an integrated cultural component because it understands that if we want to move the needle on policy [change], people have to believe differently.”

-Ohio Organizing Collaborative

Given the challenging socio-political climate in Ohio, movement leaders recognize that a focus on policy advocacy alone is insufficient to increase the political and public support needed to advance criminal justice systems change. Instead, what is required is a robust effort to shift narratives about incarceration that is coupled with strong policy advocacy. This is essential for gaining the bipartisan support that was so critical for attaining prior policy wins, where advocates had success advancing a narrative that spoke to both legislators on the inside and everyday Ohioans on the outside. Reflecting on previous campaigns, a leader from the [Ohio Transformation Fund](#) explained that achieving bipartisan support involved helping legislators see that “[incarceration] just isn’t safe nor is it effective to fix the issues in the community, and it is costly” and “helping Ohioans turn inward [to see that incarceration] is not a problem that is happening to people out there, but to people in our life [that are] deserving of dignity and support.”

With the understanding that shifting the conditions for change are just as important as pursuing policy strategies, A4J came into the picture at a pivotal time to elevate the question, *How might art be used as a tool and a vehicle to drive culture and narrative change to address mass incarceration in Ohio?*

A4J helped shift mindsets around the value of art and artists in the movement.

While the general operating grants provided by A4J were critical for supporting organizations and the broader movement in Ohio, the A4J approach itself – one that operates at the intersection of art and advocacy – had a transformational impact on grantees. It deepened their understanding of and capacity to engage with art as a strategy to fight for change. Leaders reflected on the role A4J played in opening up, shifting, and reinforcing mindsets about the critical role that culture change plays in achieving their goals. While grantees like the [Ohio Student Association](#) had a closer relationship with such efforts¹, this was new territory for other grantees. For more traditional criminal justice reform organizations that tend to favor policy-centric strategies, using art as a complementary internal strategy might not have been seen as a viable approach until A4J made a clear case for it. A leader from the [Pretrial Justice Institute](#) explained, “I would credit A4J with having a significant impact on us organizationally, shifting our openness to approaching how we do systems change work. There’s a greater awareness that artwork, storytelling, and advocacy works. It moves things along.”

“I think about how our organization has changed. [A4J] has been a really good and important validator in the power of the medium of art. Using art in the way that we’ve been able to do, has shown that it’s a powerful mechanism for driving change.”

-Ohio Justice and Policy Center

Even for those deeply engaged in narrative and culture change work, A4J reinforced this notion that, as one leader from the [Ohio Student Association](#) put it, “culture eats policy and politics for brunch” and that art, as a culture change catalyst, should play an equal role in the decarceration movement. Art was recognized by leaders as an important tool capable of reaching the hearts and minds of various audiences, even across the diverse perspectives held in communities throughout the state. Reflecting on the power of A4J and the medium of art, one leader from the [Ohio Justice and Policy Center](#) commented, “It’s going to reach people on that emotional level...and it’s all coming back to taking down mass incarceration and systematically pulling it apart, just like it was built layer upon layer over generations. A4J reaches people at a very different level than almost any other criminal legal system reform work that I’ve seen.”

A4J grantees partnered with artists to integrate art into their strategies.

What does it look like to integrate art and artists into the movement to end mass incarceration? Grounded by the belief that art can expose injustices, elevate the voices and experiences of those who often go unheard, and create compassion and empathy, grantees looked for creative ways to integrate art and advocacy to shift narratives and build a culture in their communities that supports change efforts.

The [Ohio Justice and Policy Center](#) partnered with ArtWorks to create a mural— [“Time Served vs Time Saved”](#)—in Cincinnati that uplifts women living in Ohio communities who are now movement leaders after previously being incarcerated. It not only features two A4J grantees – Tyra Patterson (OJPC) and DeAnna Hoskins (JLUSA) – it was also designed by Tyra Patterson and Russell Craig, another A4J grantee. The goal for the mural was to breakdown the stigma surrounding those with criminal records who have re-entered communities. Reflecting on the wider impact that the

¹ The Ohio Student Association has a [“Cultural Organizing”](#) strategy that includes an artist-activist fellowship.

mural might have in Ohio, a leader from the [Ohio Justice and Policy Center](#) described art as a “beautiful language” that can not only spark conversations among and shift perceptions of community members about incarceration, it can draw the attention of funders and compel them to operate in this space. This leader shared, “This could generate conversation about why we need to allow people to be our neighbors and have the right resources. The mural and the other exhibits that we have done with OJPC have turned that narrative around.”



Another vibrant example of the bridging of art and advocacy was a virtual exhibit created by the [Pretrial Justice Institute](#). The exhibit entitled “[Artful Souls + Liberated Voices](#)” was completed in partnership with 16

Ohio artists, writers, and filmmakers to explore pretrial justice through a racial equity lens and reimagine wellbeing in their communities. While the exhibit aimed to challenge the public to reflect on their values and shift the narrative around pretrial justice, it also had a profound effect on advocates and artist involved in the project. A leader from the [Pretrial Justice Institute](#) reflected, “the art and advocacy bridge doesn’t just impact the work [itself], it actually impacts the people in the work.” This leader further explained

that this was a shared learning experience between their organization and artists. Not only did partnering with artists expose them to the systems-change strategies of PJI, it exposed PJI to what was present in the lives of artists and how to truly center, rather than just engage, artists in the movement to end mass incarceration.

What’s possible: Expanding art as a strategy in Ohio

After engaging with the larger A4J community over the years, grantees embraced the idea that art is a powerful tool and that artists’ roles in the movement must grow. While it is still too early to understand the depth of the impact this strategy can have on shifting harmful narratives and supporting policy change, leaders are optimistic that, with time and intentionality, bridging art and advocacy will collectively bring more power to the movement. Leaders see opportunities to deepen this work in Ohio where, as one leader from the [Pretrial Justice Institute](#) noted, “so much culture work still needs to happen” to cultivate favorable conditions for change. They recognize that Ohio and the Midwest, compared to the urban centers on both the west and east coasts, are behind the curve on leveraging art as a strategy. Furthermore, they elevated the need to be intentional about integrating art strategies in ways that bridge various communities and avoid reinforcing the exclusive nature of traditional art/cultural institutions. In their own words, grantees working in Ohio identified the following opportunities to leverage the arts in service of the criminal justice movement.

Deepening the Integration of Arts with Advocacy

Grantees and partners identified opportunities to engage more artists, expand the use of art in other regions across the state, and build a local funding infrastructure to continue the momentum generated by A4J.

“[We must consider] how we actually engage artists at the onset of a policy opportunity. Artists can think about ways to tell stories to communities that we often don’t reach, who are not a part of the conversation of trying to win a political outcome.”

-Ohio Organizing Collaborative

“There’s so much opportunity to have an even bigger impact...The Columbus art scene is very ripe for the partnership. It’s ripe for the moment of using art for the kind of change we want within the criminal legal system.”

-Ohio Justice & Policy Center

“We could replicate [A4J] and create an art and advocacy community within most states. Maybe it’s creating an arts fund through the Greater Cincinnati Foundation that supports the work to change the narrative locally... [A4J] can talk about how donors can come together and build a fund.”

-JustLeadershipUSA