

# Practicing Movement Allyship: Leveraging the Power of Philanthropy

## Lessons from New York | Fall 2023

Movement allyship means using power and privilege that comes with being part of a dominant group to support and advocate for and with people in marginalized and oppressed groups. Today, there is growing recognition that in order to truly transform the current carceral system, the movement requires multiple strategies led by a diverse set of actors spanning people directly impacted by incarceration, policy advocates, community organizers, and funders. As challenges and tensions emerge with movements, funders must be able to manage through the uncertainty, inconsistency, and ambiguity of such situations. While tensions that funders face can be difficult to navigate, being an ally to movement leaders requires developing awareness of common tensions and finding the right balance for funders' actions.

This case study explores how funders can use their power and privilege to support movement building work, persevering through periods of setbacks and impasse. It is based on lessons learned from grantees and partners of the Art for Justice Fund (A4J). A4J's approach to allyship was one that is anchored in building authentic relationships with leaders, navigating and holding tensions, leveraging resources, and quickly and nimbly responding to emerging needs. Perspectives from grantees and partners working in New York provide lessons for funders interested in supporting social movements.

### **A4J demonstrated commitment to the movement through setbacks and tensions.**

New York grantees have made hard-fought progress towards advancing bold policy wins, pushing the field to imagine changes that were not possible decades ago. But, what does it look like for a funder to practice allyship when a movement is in a period of backlash? With the fallout from the pandemic, rising crime rates, and cooling public support, grantees experienced notable setbacks that have dampened some of the momentum. As an explicit time-limited fund, A4J was committed to deploying its assets and resources as fully as possible in the moment to protect and advance reforms. This included continuing to support its core grantees, recognizing that success cannot be solely measured by policy wins, but by the resiliency of the movement to withstand pendulum shifts and push through.

As one leader from the [Katal Center for Equity, Health, & Justice](#) shared, A4J continued to invest in grassroots organizing work necessary to ensure a continued presence at the state capitol to fight against bail reform rollbacks: "A4J stayed in the fight and to their credit they stayed supporting groups and efforts up in Albany." While A4J's investments alone were not enough to prevent rollbacks, partners and grantees credit A4J's ongoing investments

### At a Glance: A4J Grantees and Partners Working Towards Decarceration on the Inside-Out

- [Katal Center for Equity, Health, & Justice](#), [A Little Piece of Light](#), and [JustLeadershipUSA](#) support grassroots organizing and policy advocacy to advance key policy wins, such as bail and parole reform, and closing the Rikers Island Jail Complex.
- [Women's Community Justice Association \(WCJA\)](#) is leading the movement to close the Rose M. Singer Center (Riker's jail for women and girls), divert the majority to women-centered services, and create a stand-alone facility for healing for those who will continue to be confined.
- [Dana Kaplan](#) has partnered with movement leaders through her time at the NYC Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice and currently as an A4J Fellow.
- [Vincent "Vinny" Schiraldi](#) has supported systems change as the Commissioner of the NYC Department of Corrections (DOC) and as a researcher with the Columbia University Justice Lab.
- [Pinkerton Foundation](#) and [Galaxy Gives](#) partnered with A4J to establish the "Fund for Safe & Just DOC," which focused on transforming the culture of violence at Rikers by partnering with DOC staff, community groups, formerly incarcerated people, and others.

*"[A4J] is weaved into the fabric of the movement. You're a part of this movement, but you're also in a position to fund this movement, and the two have met."*

*-Women's Community Justice Association*

in grassroots organizing to building grantees' capacity to achieve even bolder policy change, such as the Less is More Act, which will impact 35,000 people on parole (see box).

While grantees succeeded in forming a broad coalition of actors across criminal justice change efforts to support parole reform, A4J grantees also have grappled with tensions internal to the movement. The fight to close the Rikers Island Jail Complex reached a boiling point in 2019 as tensions emerged between various groups' proposals to close the notorious jail complex. While all plans agreed on the need to close Rikers, they differed on implementation plans, including conditions of confinement, whether new jail facilities should be built, location, and other specifics. The Ford Foundation was criticized publicly for its leadership's support of a plan to close Rikers which included the siting of smaller borough-based detention facilities. This escalated into an organized protest outside of the foundation. One partner reflected how the field, including A4J, had not fully anticipated these challenges: "In retrospect, we should have as a field and movement better anticipated that there would've been tensions on this. You could get 150 organizations to sign on to close Rikers, but in trying to go forward... all of a sudden, it became this huge fractious thing. Perhaps we were all more surprised than we should have been."

Despite these challenges, A4J remained steadfast in its commitment to movement leaders in its grantee community. It came to more fully appreciate the need to hold space for divergent perspectives among those operating along the spectrum of reform to abolition, and to advocate for the best path toward safely closing Rikers. In reflecting on the ongoing dynamics within the movement, one partner emphasized the importance of acknowledging and working through these tensions: "At the end of the day, you still want everyone to be in relationship with each other... In the best-case scenario, you would have... those types of spaces where people can understand that there's going to be disagreement on certain things, and see that ultimately those things don't have to be in opposition and that we still view each other as comrades."

### **A4J coordinated funders on leveraging political influence to support change from the inside out.**

When former A4J grantee **Vincent Schiraldi** became Commissioner of the city's Department of Corrections (DOC) in June 2021, A4J saw a strategic opportunity to support a trusted ally by employing an inside-outside strategy. A4J, along with other local funders, established the Safe & Just DOC Fund to address the dysfunction and violence at Rikers and help to safely close Rikers before the city's 2027 timeline. With support from this new fund, the DOC, under Commissioner Schiraldi's leadership, brought in outside experts who co-designed a process for changing the culture, engaging incarcerated individuals as well as correctional officers to ensure buy-in. Rikers' young adult units, in particular, had the highest rates of violence within the complex. After a three-month period, Mr. Schiraldi noted the promising results: "There were no fights. There were fights every day before. No assaults on staff."

The election of Mayor Adams in fall 2021, however, elevated concerns within the movement that the DOC Commissioner would be replaced and progress would be stalled. A4J and the Safe & Just DOC Fund launched a campaign to recruit other philanthropists to urge Mayor Adams to retain Schiraldi as Commissioner. A partner from the Pinkerton Foundation explained, "We knew that six months wasn't enough time to transform a system that had been half a century of chaos" but, they were eager to show progress was possible. Ultimately, the effort to retain the Commission failed due to several factors, including multiple deaths of people detained at Rikers, rising crime due to the pandemic fallout, cooling public support for reform, and a lack of cohesive grassroots coalitions to push from the outside. A4J Project Director, Helena Huang, reflected, "We had a movement ally on the inside, but our outside game and political will wasn't sufficient to meet the moment, and in the end, the forces against us were too great to

#### **Key Policy Win: Less is More Act**

A4J grantees **Katal Center for Equity, Health, & Justice**, **A Little Piece of Light**, and **Vincent Schiraldi** played a role in advancing parole reform through the **#LessIsMoreNY** campaign. Signed by the governor in 2021, as of June 2022 nearly:

**12K**

people discharged early from parole, reducing the total number of people on parole by more than one-third.

**2K**

people released from jails and prisons.

Source: The Katal Center for Equity, Healthy, and Justice (A4J listserv email, June 2022).

overcome.” While the effort to retain Schiraldi was unsuccessful, partners praised A4J and the Safe & Just DOC Fund for engaging in strategic risk-taking. A partner from the Pinkerton Foundation shared, “Had Vinny gotten reappointed... we would’ve been able to look back with more success, but it was one of those things where we just seized advantage of an opportunity in a moment. We knew it was going to be a risk... but it was worth our efforts to try.”

### A4J’s responsive funding enhanced grantees’ capacity to expand the movement to close Rikers.

With the change in DOC leadership and the conditions at Rikers deteriorating, A4J quickly responded to a growing movement of formerly incarcerated women led by the **Women’s Community Justice Association (WCJA)** calling attention to the unmet needs of women and gender-expansive people housed at the Rose M. Singer Center on Rikers Island. Even though women are less likely to offend while incarcerated, news reporting said that “Rosie’s” would be the last jail to shut down. WCJA’s campaign director shared, “In the movement to close Rikers, it’s been really male-dominated... Women have often been treated as an afterthought and they’re a small population but are so central to our families and communities in New York.” A4J acted quickly to secure both c3 and c4 resources, including strategic communications and lobbying, which enabled WCJA to expand the **#BEYONDrosies** campaign that seeks to divert the majority of Rosies’ incarcerated people to community-based services, and create a stand-alone facility for healing for those who will continue to be confined. A4J’s resources have helped WCJA keep pressure on the governor and mayor to honor previous commitments and broaden the movement’s supporters, who included incoming new members of the NYC City Council, including the new speaker, Adrienne Adams.

*“Whether or not the women get a standalone facility to create a different model of what it means to detain women, they’ve made an impact. Not just the funding, but the strategic engagement with [A4J] will have changed the [movement] landscape. It will have strengthened nonprofit organizations. It will have empowered advocates and supported them to do their good work... Even if we don’t win, it made a difference to the better.”*

*-Pinkerton Foundation*

A4J continued to work closely with WCJA to navigate emerging political dynamics by joining weekly strategy calls and connecting WCJA to the other leaders in the broader A4J community. While this work is still underway, leaders underscored that A4J’s investments, coupled with its thought partnership, capacity-building efforts, and commitment to grassroots organizations, will be one of A4J’s most impactful legacies.

### Reimagining what’s possible: Funders as movement allies

A4J showed up in the movement in various ways that have expanded previous notions of the role of philanthropy in supporting movement work. Participants viewed A4J as more than a grantmaker, but as an ally to leaders of the movement and those directly impacted by mass incarceration. Grantees and partners noted how A4J seamlessly embedded itself in the movement. As more funders examine their role in supporting movement building and leveraging their own power and privilege, grantees and partners shared a few ways in which A4J’s approach has been effective, as illustrated in the box below.

#### Perspectives on How Funders Can Support Movement Leaders

Grantees and partners see opportunities for funders to support movement building by investing in grassroots organizing, offering thought partnership, and embracing flexible funding strategies.

“One of the things that was important about A4J is that it was supporting straight up organizing or advocacy that was connected to organizing. There was a lot of other money on the table that was not.”

-Katal Center

“A4J has been an actual partner with us every step of the way... A4J understands immediately strategy, how many twists and turns there are, and then how it needs to change.”

-WCJA

“[A4J] can be nimble in terms of the types of grants they give, but also in the ability to be responsive and say, ‘Okay, we need this. Let’s put some funding there.’” There’s a ton of value in that.”

-Dana Kaplan, A4J Fellow