

How Funders Can Support Directly Impacted Artists to Advance the Social Change

Recommendations for Funders | Fall 2023

The Art for Justice (A4J) Fund aligned artists, advocates, and allied donors to transform the criminal legal system and create awareness and empathy, envisioning a future where shared safety is available to all. Through the work of its grantees, the Fund sought to end mass incarceration and shift the narrative around criminal justice reform through art. A4J's approach was grounded in the understanding that those with lived experience with the criminal legal system are often best positioned to imagine a justice system that ensures accountability while treating people with dignity and compassion. Moreover, artists in particular play an important and unique role to advance new narratives in the public sphere through art. As one artist who is formerly incarcerated shared, A4J “provided an impressive platform for artists to trumpet and extend their thoughts, themes, and works to the world at large...To have that type of reach is invaluable when trying to widen and enlarge the amount of people who care about an issue, as well as their consciousness.”

This brief explores how funders can make space for artists in movement work by spotlighting the contributions of artists with lived experience, facilitating their opportunities to create, and bringing artists and advocates together to maximize their collective impact. Funders can also use their platforms and connections to other funders and influential groups to spread the idea (and a wealth of examples) that art can influence cultural and narrative change in a way that complements and strengthens advocacy and social policy efforts. With growing public recognition of the need to reform and reimagine the criminal justice system, the time is right to turn to artists' insights to help shape public understanding of what is possible. A4J's art grantees and partners shared the following recommendations for funders interested in supporting artists in the movement. While these recommendations are centered on directly impacted artists, many of the recommendations are relevant for funders who support directly impacted movement leaders.¹

Recommendations	What Artists Said
<p>1. Center formerly incarcerated artists as experts and artists. Valuing and positioning formerly incarcerated artists not just as voices from the system, but as experts of the system. Moreover, it's important to support them in ways that allow them to bring their identity as an artist to the forefront and to not let their experiences as a formerly incarcerated person supersede that. This is critical for gaining access to what is still an exclusive art community and unlocking the power of their art to communicate bold messages.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>“I’m very keen on paying attention to who’s speaking and who’s being leveled as the expert. I always get mad when I’m introduced as a directly impacted voice rather than an expert. I spent 37 years in corrections. I’m an expert on the madness and the trauma that people deal with every day. I’m not just a directly impacted person.”</i>• <i>“This is the first time there has been a push to change the narrative by enabling people to be seen as artists first and formerly incarcerated second and that art is the key aim. Art is often used to convey messages or ideas of the social, cultural, and political times that we live in. So, [we’re] trying to develop opportunities for artists who have been incarcerated to be seen as equals to other artists who are conveying messages of the social, cultural, and political times we’re in [is of utmost importance].”</i>

¹ The quotes included in this brief have been edited for clarity and brevity. We would like to thank the following A4J grantees and partners whose insights and recommendations helped to shape this brief: Kate Fowle, Gwendolyn Garth, Maria Gaspar, Renaldo Hudson, Ian Manuel, and Brandon Wyatt.

Recommendations

What Artists Said

2. Open up spaces for formerly incarcerated artists. The art world is largely an exclusive system where formerly incarcerated artists have challenges gaining entry. Opening up spaces requires inside strategies to break down barriers faced by system-impacted artists. Furthermore, more work is needed to advance the topic of mass incarceration as a consistent theme in art spaces, rather than just a special, time-limited exhibit.

- *“If [museums] are serious about using the arts to advance people’s changed minds and hearts, then here I am, someone with direct lived experience with the criminal justice system and someone that is also an artist. [Museums] don’t take advantage of the situation. Sometimes it makes me wonder how serious these institutions are about the inclusion of Black voices...It’s frustrating when you tell me one thing, but your actions are showing me something different.”*
- *“In mainstream art institutions, I’m thinking about how to make the topic of mass incarceration a thread that is consistently in the program rather than just doing one exhibition that’s based on a theme. It’s like, ‘Well, we’ve shared with our audience about incarceration, now let’s move on to the next thing.’ It’s trying to think about how to create a thread. I think it’s possible.”*

3. Foster connections and collaboration. Funders can be intentional about building a community of formerly incarcerated artists and expanding their networks. Meeting of like- and different-minds helps create community, learning opportunities, and can spark collaboration.

- *“[A4J] brings so many different people together and that has been really important for my personal stimulation and growth to see different people with different ideas and approaches brought together in a collaborative space...A lesson that I would use for the rest of my life is creating spaces with people that I normally wouldn’t collaborate with... I met people that I wanted to collaborate with in the future beyond this.”*
- *“Being able to contribute to their many projects, series, and productions, as well as bringing other creatives into the fold, has given me a renewed sense of belonging and commitment, where I have never had to question their genuineness, dedication, nor their efficacy in challenging mass incarceration. And ultimately, it feels like I have bonded with and gained more than allies, but like they’ve become family.”*

4. Continue to invest time and resources into bridging artists and advocates. While there’s a long history of art being used in advocacy efforts, this is still a new strategy in the mass incarceration space. To truly unlock the power of this strategy, more work is needed to align and build collaborative efforts between artists and advocates.

- *“A lot of artists just want to focus on creating, not necessarily the political part of having their art arranged for public consumption. There is room for putting heads together, pooling resources, and really becoming allies.”*
- *“It’s become apparent that there is still a gap between advocates and artists as to how to actually get skills, expertise, and desires to really mesh...As this movement progresses, it’s about trying to get the two sides to hear each other and to spend time together when they’re both working quite urgently and 24/7 to think about ways in which the arts and the issues that need to be advocated for can come together. There’s a lot of work that needs to be done around that.”*

5. Like all organizations engaged in systems-change strategies, formerly incarcerated artists also need meaningful, long-term funding and support. Furthermore, artists emphasized that (1) direct funding from foundations can affirm their value and legitimacy as an artist, (2) funding that supports autonomy and creative freedom is vital, and (3) funding needs to be more accessible to the many systems-impacted artists that do not have the notoriety of more established artists.

- *“We're trying to undo hundreds of years of oppression. We're trying to undo systemic racism...We're chasing policies that oppress people of color and people that are directly impacted. That requires a lifetime of collaboration and giving space to voices. I hope to use the rest of my life to advocate on the behalf of those that are still incarcerated who have voices, but don't have platforms.”*
- *“Make the [funding] process more accessible to people that may not be as popular or talented as [some artists]...I think Art for Justice and other philanthropy organizations need to turn to people like us who know people that are talented and are artists that can benefit and have us nominate them for these types of grants so it could be a continuum and it's not a one-and-done type of thing.”*
- *“When you give artists a substantial amount of money, they stop worrying about money...They start to have very different conversations, and they start to dream in different ways, and they start to test the boundaries that are their own boundaries...You take away the constant fear of scarcity that stops creativity.”*
- *“[A4J] gives artists latitude to create and develop as they see fit. As any artist knows, creative control is everything...That freedom is what brings forth the most creative pieces and expressions.”*