

What Movements Need to Advance Social Change: Art for Justice in Action

Case Study Series | Fall 2023

About Art for Justice Fund

Between 2017-2023, 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. The Fund concentrated on three major policy areas: bail reform that reduces the number of people needlessly detained in jail; sentencing reform that eliminates the excessive and disproportionate punishment of young people and people of color; and the creation of meaningful reentry opportunities for formerly incarcerated individuals to support themselves and their families.

Under the philanthropic vision of Agnes Gund and with institutional support from the Ford Foundation and Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, A4J provided over 450 grants to over 200 artists, advocates, and organizations. When this time-limited fund ended after six years on June 30, 2023, it had granted over \$127 million. In its final year, A4J sought to leave behind a lasting legacy, embodying a model wherein art becomes the very means by which justice is secured. By leveraging partnerships and impact, A4J elevated the power of art to end mass incarceration, inspiring future reform efforts while building a foundation for lasting change.

Learning from Context: What Movements Need to Advance Social Change

Within philanthropy, critical questions exist about what movements need to make progress and how funders can best support them. To this end, A4J partnered with [Engage R+D](#) to document the Fund's impact and share lessons with the field through a series of case studies focused on where A4J supported movement-related change efforts across distinctive socio-political landscapes. The series is based on lessons learned from A4J grantees and partners across three states—[Ohio](#), [Illinois](#), and [New York](#). The series also presents insights and recommendations from directly impacted artists including takeaway [lessons for funders](#) and others involved in the movement to end mass incarceration. Across A4J grantmaking strategies, the Fund embraced flexibility, trust, and honoring the expertise of those working on the ground. Each case study delves into a core principle fundamental to A4J's approach to supporting movement work. These principles, described below, worked together and were central to how A4J expected change to happen, along with policy and practice change. The case studies explore each principle individually to unpack lessons that can be shared with others working to support movements including the movement to end mass incarceration.ⁱ



- 1 Bridging art and advocacy to drive culture and narrative change.** While advocacy efforts in the decarceration movement have typically employed policy change strategies, A4J has shone light on the power of art to complement these efforts by shifting the broader culture and narrative around incarceration. In [Ohio](#), A4J grantees and partners have helped movement leaders elevate the idea of using art for social change.
- 2 Centering people directly impacted by incarceration.** A4J grantees and partners have contributed to a broadening recognition that people from BIPOC communities and people with lived experience in the carceral

system are essential to changing the narrative and culture of mass incarceration. Examples from [Illinois](#) illustrate A4J's work to center people directly impacted by the criminal justice system and the benefits of that work.

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Practicing movement allyship as a funder. 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. [New York](#) is one state where the movement has experienced ongoing tensions, but A4J's commitment to allyship—using its power and privilege as a funder—supported the movement with responsiveness and strategic risk-taking.

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Supporting directly impacted artists to advance social change. A4J's approach was grounded in the understanding that artists in particular play an important and unique role to advance new narratives in the public sphere through art. This [piece](#) 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.

Key Takeaways and Lessons Learned

Collectively, these case studies helped to affirm key A4J principles—bridging art and advocacy to drive culture and narrative change; centering people directly impacted by incarceration—especially artists; and practicing movement allyship as a funder. Each case also points to the need for greater support and investment in these areas. Working alongside grantees in Ohio, Illinois, and New York, A4J learned lessons offered here in the spirit of peer learning with other funders supporting the movement to end mass incarceration and social movements more generally.

- **Build cross-sector connections and partnerships.** The case studies underscore the value of partnerships and communication among the varied groups working to disrupt mass incarceration, including links between affected community members, artists, organizers, and legal and policy advocates. Making space for art in the movement means funders must provide network-growing opportunities by stepping into their roles as conveners and funding the work and time required for groups to develop effective partnerships.
- **Invest in those directly impacted by the carceral system.** The decarceration movement recognizes that leaders with lived experience in the carceral system are central to credibly and meaningfully challenging the status quo. A4J supported movement leadership in a number of ways, including prioritizing directly impacted-led organizations for funding, amplifying their leadership through communications, providing funds to support wellness (recognizing the emotional burdens of this work), and creating spaces that allowed these leaders to show up authentically and be in community with one another.
- **Recognize and normalize tensions in allyship.** While tensions that funders face can be difficult to navigate, being an ally to movement leaders requires awareness of common tensions and finding the right balance for funders' actions. A4J navigated multiple tensions—also known as polarities—as an allied funder, balancing when to cede power or own and leverage its power as a movement funder, stay neutral or take a stance, and seek unity or support divergence. As allies, funders and movement leaders must be able to manage through the uncertainty, inconsistency, and ambiguity of such situations as part of their ongoing movement work.

¹ Engage R+D, in partnership with A4J, selected three states for this case study—Ohio, Illinois, and New York. While there are substantive decarceration efforts taking place across all A4J priority states, these states were chosen for a combination of reasons, specifically: (1) A4J has made significant investments in these states, (2) the states present a contrasting range of socio-political contexts, and (3) movements in each state were gaining traction in unique ways. Beginning in spring 2022, Engage R+D interviewed a total of 23 grantees and partners working in Ohio, Illinois, and New York to better understand the impact of A4J's grantmaking to end mass incarceration through art and advocacy. Participants included a mix of state and national advocacy groups (n=12), art organizations and artists (n=8), and partners supporting A4J advocacy efforts (n=3). Quotes throughout the series have been edited for clarity and brevity. In addition to interviews, Engage R+D reviewed grant reports and proposals and secondary data on incarceration and key policies across the three states. Collectively, these methods informed the overall approach for this brief.