

The Pennsylvania Council On The Arts Creative Communities Initiative

Evaluation of Pilot Grants
2020-2024

Metris Arts Consulting

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Pennsylvania Council on the Arts' Creative Communities Initiative provides multi-year funding for creative placemaking and placekeeping projects in Pennsylvania communities. Often carried out by diverse teams of artists, non-arts organizations, and city agencies, these projects catalyze positive change in communities by facilitating social connection and a sense of place, highlighting diversity, and advancing community and economic development.

Between 2020 and 2024, Metris Arts Consulting worked with the Creative Communities Initiative's four pilot grantees – the communities of Meadville, Lancaster, Sharon, and Southeastern Philadelphia, Pennsylvania – to evaluate their projects and build teams' capacity for evaluation and reflection on practice. In partnership with project teams, Metris sought to document and understand how the four projects unfolded in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, identify successes and lessons learned, and assess projects' emerging impact on their communities.

Each of the four projects was unique in its goals, activities, audiences, and products. In all four cases, non-arts organizations played leadership roles.

- ★ In Meadville, The Arc Community Greenspace enlivened a previously vacant lot into an artistic testament to community and nature. An inclusive gathering and event space, the Greenspace is complete with murals, native plants, WiFi, seating, a performance stage, and a walkway painted to evoke an historic stream that runs beneath the site.
- ★ In Sharon, the Valley Fab Lab brought a dynamic makerspace and cutting edge creative fabrication tools to community residents. The Fab Lab is available for use by local entrepreneurs, students, and disabled clients of partner organization Whole Life Services, and offers tours, workshops, fee-for-use tools, and work for hire.
- ★ In Lancaster, Seed Project brought the creativity and experiences of BIPOC Lancaster residents and artists to the center of a participatory, community-driven creative process. The team created murals highlighting community assets and facilitated workshops, events, and a virtual support and discussion group focused on BIPOC artists and residents of Southeast Lancaster and its diaspora.
- ★ In Southeastern Philadelphia, community-based organization SEAMAAC highlighted the incredible diversity of its local immigrant community via cultural celebrations and cleanup events. SEAMAAC also installed decorative lighting and painted trash cans, as well as sidewalk and crosswalk murals, that highlight the imagery and cultural traditions of its local community.

Grantees' projects had tangible impacts on their local communities. The Lancaster team successfully made the case for the **arts and culture as a component of community development** by integrating creative strategies into the ongoing work of a community development organization and catalyzing additional infrastructural improvements in its focal neighborhood.

Multiple projects **increased residents' attachment to place** and their **sense of community ownership**, and **created social capital** by fostering relationship-building and social connections between residents and artists who participated in project activities. All four Creative Communities projects **facilitated connection across difference** – opportunities for people from distinct walks of life to interact, work together, and learn from one another. This impact was especially pronounced in Meadville and Sharon, where Creative Communities projects meaningfully impacted individuals with disabilities via core project partners that are disability service organizations. All four communities also **created opportunities for residents to exercise their creativity and creative skills**, and to take themselves seriously as artmakers.



The Pershing Avenue Mural in Lancaster, PA. Photo courtesy of Seed Project.

The Creative Communities pilot also yields lessons for the practice of creative placemaking that can inform future iterations of the program and other practitioners' work.

- **Rural community investments generate clear impacts.** While all four Creative Communities projects showed impact on their local communities, rural projects were disproportionately visible – and therefore celebrated – compared to projects in more urban locations. The paucity of funding for creative work in rural places contributed to these projects' status as focal points for community pride.
- **Ephemeral vs. physical space projects: affordances and challenges.** While two Creative Communities projects took the form of new physical spaces, the other two projects were more ephemeral collections of activities and installations. These two project types had distinct challenges and benefits. Ephemeral projects allowed teams to adapt according to changing community needs, while for physical space projects, such shifts were more difficult. However, ephemeral projects could become overwhelming to team members managing multiple elements, and it was more difficult to assess the impact of such projects, given their distributed and temporal nature.
- **Insights for building buy-in to creative strategies in high-need communities.** Creative Communities projects in urban contexts illuminated challenges in and strategies for building buy-in to creative work in high-need communities. While SEAMAAC struggled to maintain the arts and culture as a focus in the context of skyrocketing pandemic-related community need and subsequent staff turnover, the Lancaster team succeeded in integrating the arts into a community development organization. In the process, the latter team learned that creative work is most powerful when it is combined with other interventions to address community challenges.
- **Partnership size, structure, and capacity matters.** The size and capacity of Creative Communities project teams had an important impact on project outcomes. While large teams were able to maintain institutional memory despite staff turnover, they also suffered from competing objectives and a lack of clear roles and responsibilities, which created tension. Conversely, smaller teams were nimble and able to move quickly to advance projects, but they were also vulnerable to lost momentum when staff turned over. Across both large and small teams, establishing clear roles and responsibilities and securing buy-in from partners with shared goals and objectives were crucial to project success.
- **Communities have limited capacity for evaluation.** Creative Communities teams were spread thin across many project components, and had limited capacity for evaluation activities. In this context, easy-to-use and customized tools were most effective in both capturing the nuances of projects and doing so in a way that was actionable for team members.
- **Teams benefit from cross-community connection.** Project teams both appreciated and benefitted from opportunities to come together with their peers in other places – both to build networks and camaraderie, and to exchange lessons learned and successful strategies for doing creative work in community.

These findings inform several recommendations for the future of the Creative Communities Initiative:

1. Continue investing in creative projects in Pennsylvania communities to weave a web of impact across the state
2. Continue to require local government support for projects, and encourage municipalities and community development organizations to incorporate creative strategies into their plans
3. Maintain a focus on rural communities in grantmaking decisions, along with projects in more urban locales
4. Intentionally create space for flexibility within Creative Communities grant and reporting requirements to allow for project shifts and pivots
5. Ensure that grants and budgets are ample enough to allow for sufficient capacity on teams, and encourage grantees to design projects that are well-scoped for available capacity
6. Provide technical assistance to successful and prospective grantees in areas that commonly present challenges, including project design, sustainability planning, community asset mapping, conducting evaluation, communication strategies, finding and cultivating partners, defining roles and responsibilities, working with artists and city agencies, and building community trust
7. Create opportunities for project teams from different communities to connect and come together, and consider facilitating a broader community of practice to support related work statewide



Family Movie Night at The Arc Community Greenspace, September 10, 2022.

Photo courtesy of The Arc of Crawford County.