



Community Control

The Los Angeles Poverty Department performed 'I Fly!', after a yearlong collaborative process. Photo by Steve Gunther

Artists stewarding creative initiatives give communities the fuel and tools to keep themselves safe

Historically, public safety initiatives, while intended to protect the public, have not been led by communities. Instead, they are generally instituted in top-down approaches that can both overlook the idiosyncratic needs of each specific community, and in some cases may decrease rather than improve public safety—for example, when outside entities are brought in to “patrol” the communities. What could it look like for a community to control the protocols that promote its safety? This section features arts and culture-based initiatives led by artists and community members that put the community in the driver's seat in determining how to keep itself safe.

Too frequently, when the community is not at the table determining how to maintain its own safety, historically marginalized groups—especially groups that have been targets of violence and/or neglect, like womxn, BIPOC, LGBTQ, and/or those who aren't able-bodied—have had their specific safety needs overlooked. Their concerns range from physical safety to the need to feel socially and culturally welcomed.

The Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund (CELDF) points out a larger and more fundamental problem: our current democratic system minimizes community rights instead of basing itself on them. CELDF is building a method of community rights work that proposes a paradigm shift “away from coercive top-down forms of government and unsustainable practices that harm communities and towards protective forms of local self-government in line with higher-level change to the purpose of the law.” This is similar to approaches that some communities in the US are already adopting, and in many of those communities, artists play a central role in enacting these new visions. They're doing community safety work that engages those most impacted by the current system—in order to reimagine it.

In this section, we explore initiatives that provide immediate resources to artists responding to safety issues in real time in their own communities; that use performance to share a new vision for community safety; and that formally designate cultural districts that are socially and culturally welcoming for marginalized groups.

I Fly / Public Safety For REAL

Reclaiming “public safety” through performance in a skid row

Location: Los Angeles, CA

Artist Role: Creating and performing *I Fly! or How to Keep the Devil Down in the*

Hole Partner Organizations: Los Angeles Poverty Department, Skid Row

Community Improvement Coalition, United Coalition East Prevention Project,

Studio 526, Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, and the Los Angeles

City Planning Department



The show brought together stories about how the community has worked to enact their own vision of public safety, often in ways that challenge dominant narratives of security and control. Photo by Steve Gunther at REDCAT, courtesy the Los Angeles Poverty Department.

Since 1985, Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) has been working to make Los Angeles' Skid Row visible as a community instead of, as founder John Malpede puts it, a "non-place." That kind of erasure leaves its residents vulnerable to neglect, predatory development, and over-policing.

"There is a vibrant community in Skid Row, and that's something we have to keep reemphasizing over and over," says Malpede. He notes that if the neighborhood's value isn't respected, it could become the victim of predatory development. "Skid Row is in the very center of Los Angeles, and many millions of dollars could be made by getting rid of this community," he says.

In April 2020, LAPD performed their show *I Fly!* after a yearlong collaborative process of "improvisation, writing, and layering." The show brought together stories about how community members have worked to enact their own vision of public safety, often in ways that challenge dominant narratives of security and control.



The Los Angeles Poverty Department performed *I Fly!*. Photo by Steve Gunther at REDCAT, courtesy the Los Angeles Poverty Department.

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— John Malpede, founder, Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD)

“There’s a long history of over-policing in Skid Row, culminating in the police shooting of a man in his tent in 2015. This was really devastating for many people, and out of that we started thinking about what public safety means,” says Malpede. “If you Google ‘public safety’ it’s all about police and government, not people and communities. But we believe that a strong community is what makes people feel safe. We aim to show that the community can govern itself when it’s being listened to and not attacked.”

Public Safety For REAL highlights a few examples of what this means in practice, including the creation of the ReFresh Spot (a 24-hour shower, bathroom, and laundry facility open to all residents), and how LAPD approached the unique challenges of hosting its annual festival.



A yearlong collaborative process informed the Los Angeles Poverty Department's performance. The show brought together stories about how the community has worked to enact their own vision of public safety, often in ways that challenge dominant narratives of security and control. Photo courtesy the Los Angeles Poverty Department.

Ultimately, Malpede hopes that projects like this one help to tell the real story of Skid Row's vibrant community. "Because this is a neighborhood where people come from many places, for many different reasons," he says, "most people have a really sophisticated sense of how to deal with difference, with people who may have different capacities. I'd call it compassion, empathy, and wisdom. That's safety."

Fund for Safe Communities Microgrants

Gatherings and activities to address community trauma and promote wellness among Minneapolis residents following the anniversary of George Floyd's murder

Location: Minneapolis, MN Artist Role: Varies



Partner Organizations: 48+ grantee organizations Cost: \$204,000 distributed as of May 2021

Participants in a Million Artist Movement (MAM) quilt-making event. MAM is a recipient of a Minneapolis Foundation microgrant. Photo courtesy Million Artist Movement.

As many of these examples illustrate, successful efforts to create community safety must be responsive to the immediate needs of a particular city, neighborhood, or population. The community safety microgrants offered by the Minneapolis Foundation sprang out of this understanding, putting resources directly in the hands of people who were already working to respond to urgent needs with creativity and deep understanding.

Earlier this year, the Minneapolis Foundation announced this round of funding as an effort to support the local community around the one-year anniversary of George Floyd's murder and during the trial of Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis. The microgrants were intended to "support gatherings and activities to address community trauma and promote wellness among Minneapolis youth and adults," as described on the Foundation's website. Since then, as of May 2021, the Foundation distributed more than \$200,000 to more than 48 organizations, including several focused on promoting healing and seeking justice through art.

Grantees included The SEAD Project, which received funding for outdoor storytelling and the development of a community mural in North Minneapolis; Aeon, an organization that creates and preserves homes for those who need them, and will create a tenant-led art showcase in the Elliot Park neighborhood; and Million Artist Movement (MAM), a collective of self-described "Black-Brown-and-Radical Artist Revolutionaries and Activists" which will use the funds for its ongoing quilt-making project. MAM's quilt-making events provide the opportunity to share stories, honor loved ones, process grief, and imagine a world free of racist, oppressive systems.



MAM's quilt-making events provide the opportunity to share stories, honor loved ones, process grief, and imagine a world free of racist, oppressive systems. Photo courtesy Million Artist Movement.

San Francisco's Transgender Cultural District

Creating a space of safety and celebration for transgender residents of San Francisco

Location: San Francisco, CA

Artist Role: Lead neighborhood placemaking efforts, art exhibitions, informative and topical panel discussions

Cost: In 2019, the City of San Francisco allocated \$300,000 in seed money to the district

What does it mean to create a space for cultural memory while also serving the current, ever-changing needs of a community? Ask the activists and leaders who pushed for the establishment of Compton's Transgender Cultural District in San Francisco.

The District covers six blocks of San Francisco's Tenderloin neighborhood, the location of the 1966 Compton's Cafeteria riot, a groundbreaking moment for transgender and queer people in the United States. It's a neighborhood full of meaningful locations for queer and trans people, and also a place where the city's income inequality is clearly visible. As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, the city's transgender residents felt its effects in particularly devastating ways. The founder and executive director of the District, Aria Sa'id, described the reality for many transgender people in 2020 in an article in *them*. "Many of our folks are experiencing the abrasive, harsh realities of being economically unstable in a pandemic," Sa'id writes. "Many are doing survival sex work during a pandemic. Folks are compromising their safety to eat."

The Transgender Cultural District has made it possible to create solutions by and for the transgender community, including meeting immediate needs like food and protection and also providing ongoing mental health and cultural resources. The district is a place where trans people are celebrated and respected.

Models Christian, Destiny, Eli, and Ivory hold their portraits for the [KnowOurPlace initiative](#), a public awareness campaign that "promotes historic placemaking and Trans resilience through public and social media streams." Photo courtesy the Transgender District.

Forecast is a nonprofit arts organization