

**ART FOR  
JUSTICE  
FUND**

November 2023

# **TRANSFORMING CRIMINAL JUSTICE THROUGH ART, ADVOCACY, AND PHILANTHROPY**

**A Retrospective Assessment of the  
Art for Justice Fund, 2017-2023**

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

# Learning Through Developmental Evaluation

Founded in 2017 by the visionary philanthropist and art collector Agnes Gund, **Art for Justice Fund (A4J)** emerged from a profound belief in the transformative power of art and advocacy to reshape the criminal justice system. In partnership with the Ford Foundation and Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, the time-limited Fund set out to support artists and advocates in their movement to dismantle mass incarceration, directly push for justice reinvestment, and mobilize widespread public support for transformative change. With a founding gift of \$100 million, A4J quickly established itself as one of the nation's foremost supporters of criminal justice reform in the United States. It exhibited a unique commitment to partner with artists and advocates to change policy, leverage art to alter narratives, center the voices of those most affected by incarceration, and galvanize support from other allied donors (i.e., those committed to using their power and privilege to advocate for and with directly impacted people). As a time-limited, freestanding venture, A4J had more latitude to take bold actions and set ambitious goals than most foundations pursue, charting new possibilities for philanthropy. When the Fund ended in June 2023, it had granted over \$127 million to over 200 artists, advocates, and organizations.

Recognizing that its funding approach set it apart from traditional philanthropic efforts to support criminal justice reform, A4J saw the opportunity to both learn from and document its efforts. Starting in 2018, the Fund partnered with Engage R+D and the Center for Evaluation Innovation to conduct a developmental evaluation of A4J. The overall goal of the evaluation was to understand what it takes to bring together arts, advocacy, and philanthropy to disrupt mass incarceration. Developmental evaluation is a responsive learning approach well suited for initiatives like A4J that are highly innovative and evolving within dynamic and emergent contexts. In contrast to traditional evaluations that focus on compliance and measuring impact, developmental approaches position the evaluator accompanying initiative partners on their journey—gathering information, creating opportunities for reflection, and sharing learnings that can support those implementing innovative approaches to social change.

Based on initial conversations with the Fund and grantees, the evaluation team identified three learning areas that emerged as topics of greatest interest to participants (Exhibit 1). While these areas are interconnected, our evaluation approach explored topics individually so as to understand how grantees approached their work and track progress and impact.

### Exhibit 1. A4J Learning and Evaluation Focus Areas

Topic	Questions
Arts & Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How did A4J's approach to bridging arts and advocacy evolve over time and why?</li><li>• To what extent did A4J support and connect grantees as individuals and collectively?</li><li>• How can A4J's experience as a time-limited funder inform funders' efforts to seed lasting communities and partnerships among artists and activists?</li></ul>
Narrative Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How did A4J's approach to supporting narrative change evolve over time and why?</li><li>• To what extent did A4J support grantees to make progress on narrative change?</li><li>• What can A4J's experience tell us about what is possible when it comes to further narrative change efforts in the movement and what it will take to achieve it?</li></ul>
Policy & Incarceration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How did policy and incarceration rates change in A4J focal states?</li><li>• How did A4J support progress in this arena, and what other factors of conditions were at play</li></ul>

during this time?

- What can A4J's experience tell us about what it takes to support change on the local and national level?
  - What has A4J demonstrated about the role of: (1) artists, (2) proximate individuals, (3) advocates, (4) allied donors/funds (c3/c4)?
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## About This Report

Over the past five years, the evaluation has yielded a wealth of reports, presentations, and discussions. All of these materials can be found on A4J's archival website: [www.artforjusticefund.org](http://www.artforjusticefund.org). These resources have been regularly disseminated to A4J staff, board members, and grantees. This culminating report by Engage R+D offers a retrospective summary of A4J's wide-ranging contributions to change and distills lessons for funders, donors, and movement actors. It synthesizes findings from numerous evaluative efforts conducted from 2018 through 2023<sup>1</sup>, including:

- **Grantee surveys**, including those from A4J's 2018 grantee convening in New Orleans and in 2020 and 2023 to understand the development, benefits, and potential of A4J network relationships.
- **Interviews with A4J stakeholders**, including selected grantees, staff, donors, and allies, that took place in summer of 2019, fall of 2021, and fall of 2023. They explored what makes A4J unique and impactful, as well as challenges, successes, and evolving thinking.
- **Case studies** from Ohio, Illinois, and New York based on 2022-23 interviews with A4J grantees and partners, including artists, activists, and allied donors, some of whom were directly impacted by the carceral system.
- **Bellwether methodology** of interviewing high-level thought leaders who were not A4J grantees and were unaware of the interview being conducted for A4J until the end of the conversation. These 2022 interviews sought perspectives on the movement's progress, influential players, and the contribution of philanthropy.
- **Analysis of A4J listserv** in 2020 to explore how this virtual community was facilitating information sharing, networking, and collaborative relationships, among other types of connections.
- **Review of A4J documents** from the full A4J lifespan, including internal meeting notes, memos, grantee proposals and reports, board dockets, and planning and strategy documents.
- **Review of secondary sources**, including incarceration trend data and media coverage of A4J and efforts of its grantees.
- **Conversations with A4J staff**, including frequent informal conversations as well as facilitated learning and journey mapping sessions.

As with any evaluation, there are some limitations to note. While our evaluation was designed to include diverse perspectives across multiple contexts, those who ultimately chose to participate in our evaluation may not fully reflect the full range of viewpoints held by grantees, staff, and others involved in and aware of A4J. Additionally, both interview and survey data may be subject to recall bias, as we asked participants to reflect on their progress since the start of the Fund. Lastly, many factors influence changes in social movements and the criminal justice system making it challenging at times to determine A4J's unique contributions from other movement funders (i.e., Ford, Justice and Mobility Fund, and other pooled efforts). Despite these limitations, we believe the evaluation design is appropriate given the overall learning goals for the Fund and the desire to lift up lessons for others supporting movement work.

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<sup>1</sup> This report includes quotes from grantees, A4J staff, partners, and thought leaders which are sourced from a variety of methods (interviews, surveys, public reports, etc.). Where appropriate, quotes are attributed directly to individuals/organizations. Quotes throughout this report have been edited slightly for clarity and brevity.

This report synthesizes what we have learned throughout the evaluation and is organized as follows:

- 2** **Theory of Change: The Art of Ending Massing Incarceration.** Describes the theory of change that guided A4J's grantmaking, based on the conversations with the Fund and its grantees and our team's own observations. **Page 4**
- 3** **Outcomes: How the Fund Contributed to Multilayered Change.** Summarizes the Fund's and grantees' outcomes documented during the course of the evaluation. **Page 6**
- 4** **Lessons: Generative Reflections to Strengthen the Future.** Offers lessons for other funders, movement supporters, and for those stewarding time-limited initiatives. **Page 16**



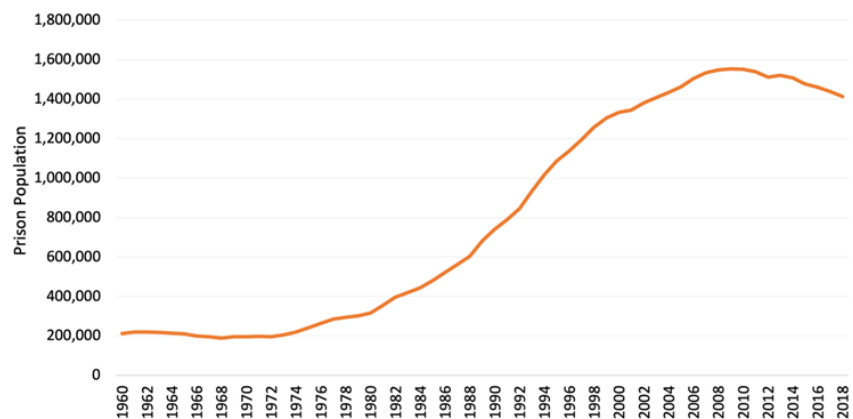
## THEORY OF CHANGE

# The Art of Ending Mass Incarceration

The movement to end mass incarceration arose in response to a decades-long, policy-driven rise in imprisonment in the United States that peaked in 2009 and proved difficult to reverse (Exhibit 2).<sup>2</sup> At A4J’s inception in 2017, the nation continued to hold the dubious distinction of imprisoning its people at the highest rate in the world—far exceeding other countries, especially those with comparable crime levels.<sup>3</sup> In addition, Black and Latinx people remained disproportionately impacted by a criminal justice system deeply rooted in the racialized legacy of chattel slavery.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, public and philanthropic interest in criminal justice issues grew in the mid-2010s, propelled in part by influential creative works such as Michelle Alexander’s “The New Jim Crow” and Ava DuVernay’s documentary “13th”, both of which spotlighted the egregious injustices of mass incarceration.

When A4J began its work, the call for criminal justice reform was increasingly resonating across political divides, opening potential for meaningful policy change. Still, A4J recognized that long-standing public narratives (for example, that jail keeps dangerous people off the streets and that long prison sentences effectively deter crime) reinforced a culture of mass incarceration and did not acknowledge how incarceration undermines a goal of safe communities. A4J not only saw a policy crisis in the country’s extreme and inequitable rates of imprisonment but understood that transformative change would require cultural shifts and public support.

Exhibit 2. US Prison Population, 1960-2018



Source: National Prisoner Statistics Program. US Bureau of Justice Statistics. Available from Vera <https://www.vera.org/ending-mass-incarceration/causes-of-mass-incarceration>

### The Art for Justice Theory of Change

At its founding, A4J set an aspirational goal of safely reducing the prison population in key states by 20% during the lifetime of the Fund. While A4J awarded grants to national groups, including advocacy organizations and artists, in a wide range of states over six years, it provided focused grantmaking and allied efforts in a core set of states representing diverse political contexts and opportunities, including California, Illinois, Michigan, New York, Ohio, and Louisiana.<sup>5</sup>

Rather than operating according to a traditional theory of change at its onset, the Fund recognized that it needed to balance the urgency to achieve impact within a time-limited window with its interest in catalyzing longer-term change by applying an iterative and learning-oriented approach to its work. Through conversations with the Fund, leadership, and grantees, Engage R+D identified the following theory of change that we observed as guiding the Fund’s efforts over time (Exhibit 3).

<sup>2</sup> Vera. Causes of mass incarceration. <https://www.vera.org/ending-mass-incarceration/causes-of-mass-incarceration>

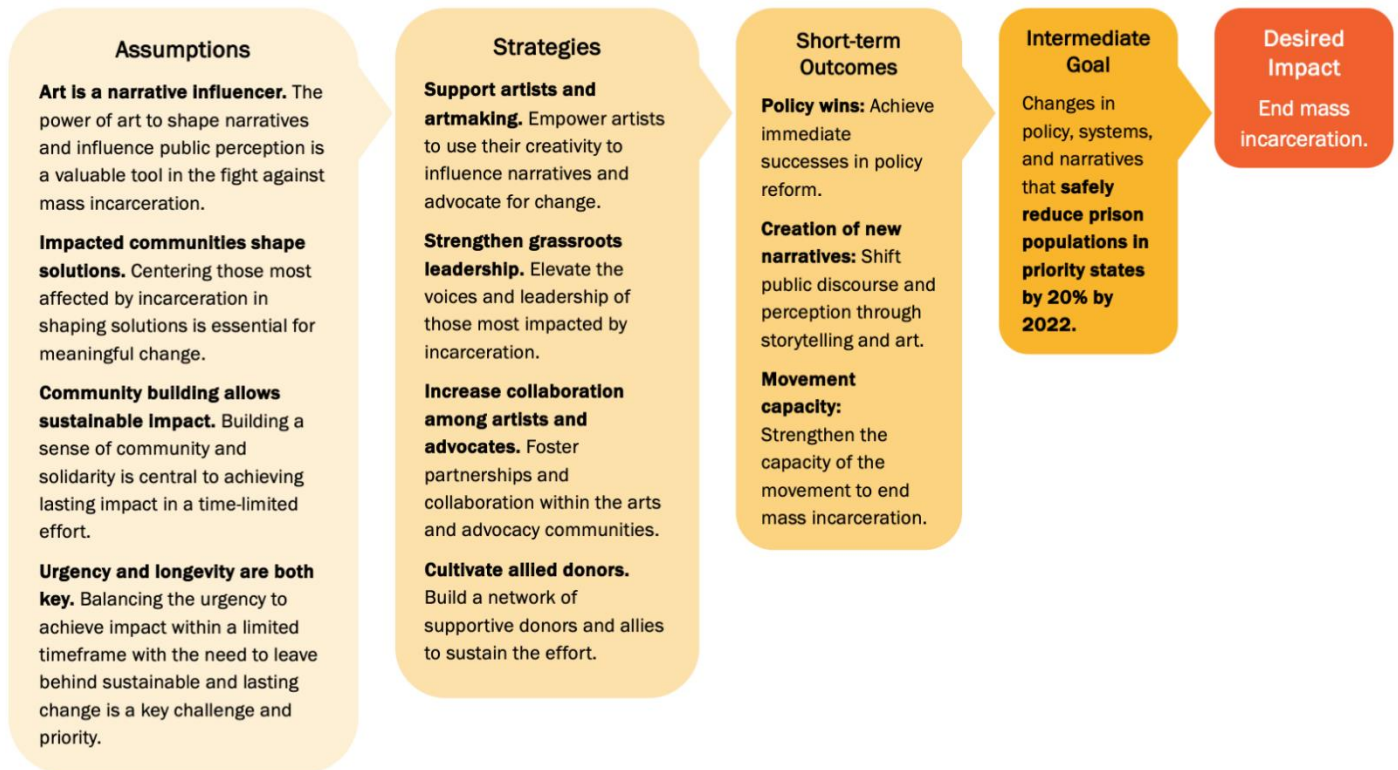
<sup>3</sup> Widra E, Herring T. Sept 2021. States of incarceration: The global context 2021. Prison Policy Initiative. [www.prisonpolicy.org/global/2021.html](http://www.prisonpolicy.org/global/2021.html)

<sup>4</sup> Sawyer W, Wagner P. Mar 14, 2022. Mass incarceration: The whole pie 2022. Prison Policy Initiative. [www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2022.html](http://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2022.html)

<sup>5</sup> Initially, A4J prioritized the following eight states with high prison populations, political opportunities, and local infrastructure: California, Texas, Louisiana, Florida, Georgia, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and New York. Over the years, it adjusted its focus to include three mid-western states—Illinois, Ohio, and Michigan—where there was opportunity to leverage greater philanthropic support for criminal justice systems change effort.



Exhibit 3. A4J Theory of Change



The theory of change identifies assumptions and strategies that support ending mass incarceration by way of short-term outcomes and the specific goal of reducing prison populations. The assumptions offer a rationale for the Fund’s defining approaches of emphasizing the role of art in narrative change, centering impacted communities, and leveraging the qualities of a time-limited fund to take bold action toward lasting change. While A4J did not initially see itself in the role of community builder, the assumption about community building in the theory of change reflects their responsive listening to grantee requests to build community early in the Fund’s work.

The strategies in the theory of change encompass A4J’s work as both a grantmaker and allied funder. A4J’s approach to allyship was anchored in building authentic and trusting relationships with grantees, using its voice and influence to amplify movement leaders and encourage other funders/donors to support decarceration efforts, and simultaneously taking immediate actions to respond to evolving grantee needs. A subset of grantmaking strategies (keeping people out of jails and prisons, shortening sentences, promoting reentry, and changing the narrative through art) complement the broader strategies outlined in the theory of change. Altogether, the strategies target short-term outcomes of policy wins (specifically in bail reform, sentencing reform, and reentry), narrative change, and expanded capacity of the movement. With its interest in being responsive and bold, A4J did not turn to its theory of change as a prescriptive plan but held strongly to its underlying guiding principles of bridging art and advocacy to drive culture and narrative change, while centering people directly impacted by incarceration, and practicing movement allyship.

# 3

## OUTCOMES

# How the Fund Contributed to Multilayered Change

Movements evolve and make progress through the work of numerous and often unconnected actors, including activists, artists, funders, policymakers, social commentators, media, and others. They also operate within a dynamic context. During the lifetime of A4J, the landscape dramatically shifted with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police. These events placed systemic issues of racism and police brutality at the center of global discourse, amplifying the urgency for change to the criminal justice system, particularly within communities of color. Then, as the pandemic waned, A4J navigated new complexities of wavering support for criminal justice reform, political polarization, and public concerns about rising crime.

When examining a social change movement operating within fluctuating sociopolitical circumstances, attributing progress to a single funder or the set of grantees they support is difficult at best. Instead of trying to credit the Art for Justice Fund with achieving specific outcomes, this assessment points to ways that the actions of A4J and its grantees made notable contributions to the movement to end mass incarceration. These contributions fall into five areas that are explored in further detail below: policy reform, advancing new narratives through art, building an art and advocacy network, centering directly impacted people, and engaging allied donors and funders.

### Policy Reform

Art for Justice grantees supported key policy wins across multiple states.

In its policy change efforts, A4J focused on: (1) bail reform to reduce needless jail detentions; (2) sentencing reform to stop excessive and disproportionate punishment of young people and people of color; and (3) creation of meaningful reentry opportunities along with mitigation of collateral consequences of incarceration. A4J funded a mix of national and state-based grantees working on policy reform, supporting wins in multiple states and at the national level. In a 2023 survey, nearly all of the more than three dozen respondents, who were grantee advocates, credited the Fund with supporting policy advancements to promote reentry (94%) and reduce jail and prison populations (95%). In addition, seven out of nine interviewed thought leaders who were not associated with A4J reported substantial progress of the movement during the lifetime of the Fund, noting specific areas of policy progress, such as new laws in New Jersey, New York, and Illinois that drastically reduced jail populations, as well as a winning ballot measure in Florida that re-enfranchised formerly incarcerated people (see Reentry Reform, below). Alongside its grantmaking, the Fund served as an allied funder, supporting grantees in local and state reform efforts, including its strategy to close the Rikers Island correctional facilities, providing 501(c)3 and 501(c)4 support as well as organizing peer funders and communications in support of grantees.

**“[A4J] helped to support the narrative and organize campaigns that led to major victories for rights for returning citizens in Florida, New Orleans, and other places.”**

**- A4J grantee**

## Examples of Reforms Achieved with A4J Support

### Bail Reform

Landmark **cash bail reforms** in New York, California, and Illinois, and the cities of Houston and New Orleans have kept tens of thousands of people from being unnecessarily detained. For example:

- In January 2021, with advocacy by A4J grantees, **Illinois** passed the **Pretrial Fairness Act** to end a discriminatory cash bail system that incarcerated people based not on risk to the community but on their ability to pay. After legal challenges, the Illinois Supreme Court upheld the new law, which went into effect in September 2023.
- In March 2021, the **California** Supreme Court **ended cash bail for defendants who are unable to pay**, a decision expected to substantially cut the number of people serving pretrial jail time.<sup>6</sup> Civil Rights Corps, an A4J grantee, was central to the case.

### Sentencing Reform

- In 2018, the **First Step Act**, a bipartisan federal law, helped reform criminal justice. Among other effects, the act **reduced excessive sentences**, leading to over 3,000 people being released from federal prisons. A broad group of advocates, including A4J grantees, worked for years to bring about this law.
- In its spring 2020 COVID response, A4J grants **expedited the release of over 10,000 elderly and vulnerable people** from prisons and jails in California, New York, and Louisiana.
- **Bans on juvenile life without parole** won in nine new states during the life of A4J, bringing the total to 33 states. For example, in January 2021, Ohio's governor signed SB 256 into law, banning life without parole for minors. According to the Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth, an A4J grantee, this bill makes reentry possible for hundreds incarcerated in Ohio who were sentenced as children and will shift the state toward rehabilitation and reintegration.<sup>7</sup>
- In 2021, Michigan passed a large jail reform package to **safely reduce jail populations** by decreasing use of jail time for low-level offenses. A4J grantees, including Alliance for Safety and Justice, Michigan ACLU, Michigan Criminal Justice Initiative, and Detroit Justice Center, led advocacy efforts. The reforms provide a model for other states.

### Reentry Reform

- Floridians' 2018 vote to **restore voting rights to over 1.4 million formerly incarcerated people** boosted momentum of criminal justice reform and lent credibility to the Fund, which had supported key advocacy behind the measure. A4J staff termed the vote's result, which was far from certain, "a miraculous win." By June 2019, however, Governor Ron DeSantis and legislators who opposed the amendment had enacted new barriers to voting, for example requiring that returning citizens pay outstanding court fees in order to vote.<sup>8</sup> The Florida Rights Restoration Coalition continued its efforts, paying fines and fees for more than 42,000 people, freeing them to vote.
- A4J's New York grantee partners helped advance parole reform, advocating for the **Less Is More Act**, which passed in 2021 and achieved thousands of early releases from jail, prison, and parole.
- 501(c)4 support from A4J contributed to Oregon's 2020 passage of Measure 110, **decriminalizing drug possession in favor of health-based treatment and recovery**. Although implementation has not succeeded as proponents hoped, many see it highlighting the need for better-funded drug treatment, not criminalization.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Shapiro, Ari. Mar 29, 2021. *California does away with cash bail for those who can't afford it*. [radio broadcast]. NPR. [www.npr.org/2021/03/29/982417595/california-does-away-with-cash-bail-for-those-who-cant-afford-it](http://www.npr.org/2021/03/29/982417595/california-does-away-with-cash-bail-for-those-who-cant-afford-it)

<sup>7</sup> The Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth. Jan 2021. *Ohio passes SB 256, banning life without parole for children in the state*. [cfsy.org/ohio-passes-sb-256-banning-life-without-parole-for-children-in-the-state](http://cfsy.org/ohio-passes-sb-256-banning-life-without-parole-for-children-in-the-state)

<sup>8</sup> Brennan Center for Justice. May 2019, updated August 2023. *Voting Rights Restoration Efforts in Florida*. [www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-rights-restoration-efforts-florida](http://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-rights-restoration-efforts-florida)

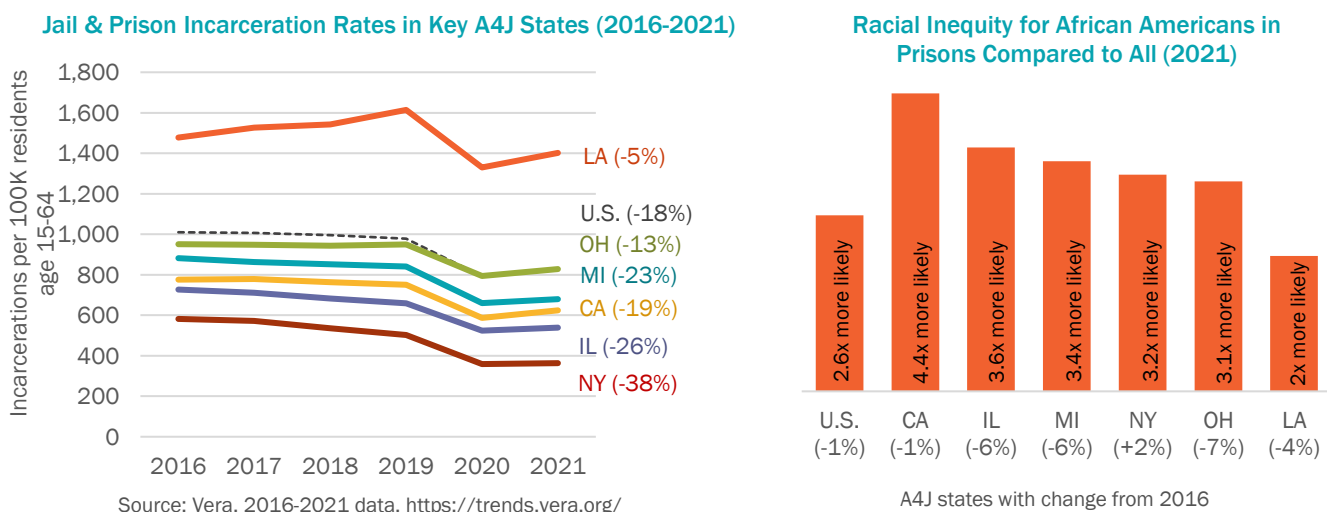
<sup>9</sup> Hinch, J. Jul 19, 2023. *What Happened When Oregon Decriminalized Hard Drugs*. *The Atlantic*. [www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2023/07/oregon-drug-decriminalization-results-overdoses/674733/](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2023/07/oregon-drug-decriminalization-results-overdoses/674733/)



**The Fund’s work coincided with declining incarceration rates.** No single funder or organization alone can move the needle on incarceration rates. From its inception, A4J worked in concert with a network of criminal justice funders and allied donors at national and state levels. To be sure, mass incarceration remains pervasive in the US. Recent data reveals that a full 1.8 million people were held in US jails or prisons in summer 2021.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, incarceration rates in jails and prisons went down during the tenure of A4J, both in the US as a whole and specifically in the following six states where A4J had supported numerous efforts: California, Illinois, Michigan, New York, Ohio, and Louisiana.

Exhibit 4 shows that from 2016 to 2021, rates of incarceration declined overall. Rates vary from state to state due to many factors, such as widely ranging policy differences and state-specific political and social climates, and progress has thus been mixed. The percentage of incarcerated people fell more in Michigan, California, Illinois, and New York than in the US overall, and these states surpassed or neared A4J’s goal of a 20% reduction in their prison populations. Ohio and Louisiana oversaw more modest declines. Across the board, rates decreased notably in 2020, reflecting the efforts of advocates demanding releases when COVID was rampant in jails and prisons. While most of the priority A4J states continue to have worse racial disparities for African Americans in prison compared to the national average, there were notable improvements in Midwestern states such as Ohio, Illinois, and Michigan.

**Exhibit 4. Incarceration Trends During the Lifetime of Art for Justice**



Because public sentiment and policy have focused on curbing crime more recently, experts generally expect to see an increase in incarceration as post-pandemic numbers become available. Indeed, a 2023 report from the national research and advocacy nonprofit Vera notes that “the decarceration trends seen over the last few years are increasingly fragile” as new prisons, and especially jails, are being built, jail populations are growing, and many counties and states are putting punitive policies in place.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, while some policymakers have blamed bail reforms for rising crime, mounting research refutes such claims. An article from the Brennan Center for Justice reports that “broadly, there is no evidence that bail reform drove post-2020 rises in violence,” including from studies of post-reform crime rates in Illinois and New York.<sup>12</sup> While A4J and other movement allies have faced a considerable challenge of countering persistent narratives that support incarceration, evidence that bail reform and other strategies are effective encourages continued action.

<sup>10</sup> Vera. Incarceration Trends (updated Feb 14, 2023).

<sup>11</sup> Kang-Brown J, Jones S, Tagal J, and Zhang J. June 2023. People in jail and prison in 2022. Vera. [www.vera.org/publications/people-in-jail-and-prison-in-2022](http://www.vera.org/publications/people-in-jail-and-prison-in-2022)

<sup>12</sup> Grawert A and Kim N. May 9, 2023. Myths and realities: Understanding recent trends in violent crime. Brennan Center for Justice. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/myths-and-realities-understanding-recent-trends-violent-crime>

A4J supported the role of artists in humanizing issues of mass incarceration, recognizing the power of art to challenge and shift narratives, bear witness, and inspire new pathways to shared safety. From its inception, the Fund invested in building narrative change capacity of artists and art institutions to spread new ideas about the harms of mass incarceration. In spring 2022, staff noted that President Biden, in the face of public concern about crime rates, had walked back his promises to reform the criminal justice system. A4J took this circumstance as a call to shift its narrative change approach. Staff recognized an unmet need to focus on identifying and promoting strong, clear alternatives to incarceration so that public narratives would no longer consider incarceration to be the only criminal justice solution. “We need to connect those dots so much better than we are,” a staff member commented. In response, the Fund devoted its final year of grantmaking (2022-2023) to supporting artists and advocates to help the movement and the public imagine new solutions for public safety and envision a future free of mass incarceration.

**A4J-supported artists and advocates helped to shift narratives about mass incarceration.** In its grantmaking, A4J sought to fund artists and advocates whose work challenged conventional thinking about incarceration, but without limiting their creative process. A4J advisor Le Anne Alexander reflected that having open support from A4J to continue to work as they normally would allowed artists to flourish, with many becoming recognized with MacArthur Fellowships (sometimes called “genius grants”) and other prominent awards. As some grantee artists gained prominence, tensions periodically arose among members of the A4J artist community as feelings of competition, jealousy, and personal disagreement surfaced. Fund staff realized they could play an allied role of setting an expectation of respect within the community and working closely with grantees who had established credibility and trust in the community to navigate these challenges. By striving for a healthy balance between offering equal and inclusive opportunity while curating excellence, A4J worked intentionally to avoid harm and support all of its grantees to continue their narrative change pursuits.

Among many other funded works and exhibitions that worked to shift narratives, a few highlights include:

- Poet Reginald Dwayne Betts’ 2019 collection, *Felon: Poems*, earned him a multi-year book tour and over a million books printed. It tells first-hand stories of the **effects of incarceration**. Betts was one of three grantees to receive 2021 MacArthur Fellowships.
- Artist Jesse Krimes’ 2019 immersive *Voices from the Heartland* aimed to evoke the maze of **barriers to successful reentry**, infused with the experience of being formerly incarcerated.
- Curator, author, and researcher Nicole Fleetwood’s acclaimed MoMA PS1 2020 exhibit *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* featured justice system-impacted artists’ work that **challenged stereotypes** about incarcerated people. Fleetwood won a National Book Critics Circle award and a MacArthur Fellowship.
- Playwright Lynn Nottage’s Tony-nominated Broadway play, *Clyde’s*, was broadcast in 2022 in prisons and jails and was deemed the “most-produced play in the country” in 2022.<sup>13</sup> The play **takes on the topics of incarceration, race,**

### A4J’s Support of Narrative Change

According to grantees surveyed in 2023:

- 97% grantees A4J increased the visibility of the **human impact** of mass incarceration through art.\*
- 94% grantees A4J **shifted old narratives** to those that better reflect the priorities and solutions of those most affected.\*
- 82% grantees A4J helped grantees and their organizations **influence public perception**.

\*Percent of responses indicating that this had occurred to a great or moderate extent.

<sup>13</sup> Paulson M. Sep 23, 2022. Lynn Nottage’s ‘Clyde’s’ Is the Most-Staged Play in America. *The New York Times*.

and healing through a comedic lens.

- Illinois Humanities' *Envisioning Justice* initiative, ongoing since 2017, supported numerous artists affected by the carceral system in advancing narratives on **injustice and alternatives to mass incarceration**.

Exhibit 5 gives a snapshot of narrative changes that some grantees were pursuing during the first half of A4J's work, based on grantee reports in 2020. Narrative work through the Fund continued to evolve after 2020.

Exhibit 5. Examples of Desired Shifts to New Narratives by A4J Grantee Partners, 2020



**High-profile media coverage publicized A4J grantees and the narratives they advocate.** The prominence of Agnes Gund and the Ford Foundation brought attention and credibility to the Fund's grantees and enabled them access to new audiences, including exclusive art spaces. In addition, A4J's novel approach of harnessing the power of art in the

**“There have been significant efforts to shed light on the injustices within the most marginalized of communities and the need to dismantle a system that causes harm and exacerbates trauma.”**

**- A4J grantee**

movement to end mass incarceration—and the powerful works of the artists and advocates they supported—garnered press attention that itself helped to broadcast new narratives. A4J's origin story and that of its grantees were featured in arts and culture outlets.<sup>14</sup> They also captured the attention of mainstream media outlets, including—among others—an appearance by Alec Karakatsanis of grantee Civil Rights Corps on *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*, articles in *WSJ Magazine* and *The Atlantic*, and multiple pieces in *The New York Times*.<sup>15,16,17,18</sup> A4J staff tallied 178 stories in the press to date. This coverage reached a wide audience with

<sup>14</sup> E.g., Gomez-Upegui S. Winter 2022. The Bigger Picture: Artists Against Mass Incarceration. *Gagosian Quarterly*; Glasgow A. Sep 23, 2022. When Art's Against the Carceral State. *Cultured* magazine; and Fleetwood N. Jun 19, 2022. While the U.S. Celebrates the End of Slavery on Juneteenth, Incarcerated Artists Depict the Harsh Reality That Forced Labor Persists in Prison. Op-Ed. *Artnet News*.

<sup>15</sup> Alec Karakatsanis - "Usual Cruelty". Aug 2, 2022. *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*. Season 27, episode 117.

<sup>16</sup> Wallis S. Sep 7 2022. Hank Willis Thomas Sees His Art as a Call to "Loving Action". *WSJ Magazine*.

<sup>17</sup> Jamison L. Mar 2021. The Breathtaking Ingenuity of Incarcerated Artists. *The Atlantic*.

<sup>18</sup> For example, Bellafante G. May 14, 2022. What Would a Feminist Jail Look Like? *The New York Times*; and Sheets HM. Sep 22, 2022. From Prison to the Art Gallery. *The New York Times*.

perspectives from within the carceral system, challenging societal assumptions about justice and incarcerated people, and ideas about new pathways toward safety and justice. A4J advisor Holly Sidford remarked that the Fund “got coverage of a lot of artists and a lot of narratives, which do change public opinion and mental models about who’s in prison and why.” The media attention showed a greater segment of the public that, as Adam Bradley’s 2022 article in *T, The New York Times Style Magazine*, stated, “More and more art is challenging long-held assumptions about the criminal justice system.”<sup>19</sup>

Grantees and field leaders see narratives changing. In a 2023 survey, A4J grantees reported observing evolving narratives in the field. Specifically, they noted seeing **increased public recognition that mass incarceration is unjust and that incarcerated people are human**. “The normalizing—and mainstreaming—of looking critically at the history, context, and structural forces behind mass incarceration has been striking,” remarked one grantee. In 2022, influential leaders not affiliated with A4J agreed that the Fund’s support for art and artists had helped the movement see **alternatives to the existing system**. Looking at the movement as a whole (not at A4J specifically), they reported that the movement has elevated public attention to incarceration, is actively developing a vision for an alternative system, is starting to show that public safety and justice reform are not incompatible, and is showing that the current system is costly and harmful. All of these field-wide trends line up with A4J’s actions and goals. Although governments at many levels are currently rolling back reforms, progress on the narrative front gives the movement a foothold to mitigate backsliding and work to secure more policies that reduce incarceration.

**“[The movement to end mass incarceration has] actually normed community violence intervention and alternative responses to policy as a credible response and a public safety option.”**

**- Thought leader**

## Arts & Advocacy

Art for Justice connected arts and advocacy through an effective grantee network.

During its early years, A4J actively shaped its approach to bridging arts and advocacy. While at first, the Fund did not see itself as a convener or community builder, grantees’ wishes to connect presented an opportunity to responsively facilitate relationship building. A4J Project Director Helena Huang noted, “A4J did not start out with the goal of demonstrating that alliances between artists, advocates, and donors could accelerate policy and narrative change to end mass incarceration. Initially, we were almost entirely focused on moving dollars to the movement – period. Community building between these stakeholders was not a goal we set for ourselves early in the initiative.” In 2018, though, A4J hosted a seminal convening of grantees in New Orleans, bringing together over 100 artists, advocates, and donors to imagine the possibilities that would open by working together. As the findings below attest, the convening and continued efforts to build a community of grantee partners became a key strength of the Fund.

**“The A4J network is unlike anything else in which I have had the opportunity to participate. Not only do we benefit from the funding itself, but the commitments that A4J shows to community building and the crucial role of the arts in making change are all transformational.”**

**- Arts grantee**

**A4J initiated and supported growing cross-disciplinary connections among grantees.** The 2018 convening in New Orleans marked the Fund’s first event that brought artists and advocates together—and it paid off. On a survey at the close of the convening, “connected” was the word participants most commonly used to describe their experience. The majority (71%) said making new connections was a useful benefit of the convening and most said they would build on those connections beyond the event. At participants’ request, A4J started a listserv following the convening to enable grantee partners to stay connected to each other. Particularly in the charged atmosphere of widespread public attention to police brutality in 2020 and 2021, the A4J community became a pivotal hub for advocacy and action, with

<sup>19</sup> Bradley A. Aug 11, 2022. The Artists Taking on Mass Incarceration. *The New York Times*.

the A4J listserv serving as a vital platform for grantees sharing resources and strategies. Staff reported that by 2023, a strong representation of over 350 artists and advocates had joined the listserv, many actively making connections and sharing inspiration.

In addition, A4J moved to foster and fund collaborations among its grantee partners through a supplemental program, Art & Advocacy Grants, funding 121 collaborative projects for a total of \$4.5 million through 2023. Artists and advocates came together to partner on projects aimed at changing the narrative on mass incarceration. These partnerships involved working toward a deep level of trust and commitment to achieve shared goals. Projects ranged from public art exhibits to murals, youth projects, and collaborative spaces focused on challenging how Americans think about incarceration and public safety. While not every partnership resulted in strong, eye-to-eye connections, many grantees reported positive relationships. For example, in grantees' own words:



“The partnership between **Youth First** and **Performing Statistics** has enabled youth organizers to explore and express their vision of a world without youth prisons, to see their ideas and dreams literally come to life through virtual reality artistic installations, to share with their communities what it means to support young people and believe in their potential.”



“**[Mural Arts Philadelphia's]** work with **Fair and Just Prosecution** led to an ongoing artist in residency in the DA's office. When James Yaya Hough did his series on the search for justice, it had incredible power to not just break down walls between the DA's office and the public, it brought people together, in respectful conversation, on all sides of the criminal legal system.”

The Fund embraced the role of community builder in other ways as well, innovating new ways to connect and support collaboration among grantees, including cultivating a growing network of justice-focused artists, hosting online and in-person convenings, and engaging in intentional matchmaking. A 2023 grantee survey affirmed that advocates and artists had commonly made new connections through A4J, reporting over 40 new partnerships with each other since the start of the Fund. Both artists and advocacy organizations gained more visibility from their peers, with artists in particular becoming better known among the group.

**A4J successfully persuaded grantees that arts and advocacy together could create transformative change.** As it brought arts and advocacy together, A4J and its growing community were better able to articulate the potential of the arts world to influence the movement to end mass incarceration. Artists could inject fresh thinking into policy advocacy with their inherent flexibility and insightfulness about disrupting norms, shifting perspectives, and valuing beauty, joy, and care. Arts had the ability to more broadly appeal to hearts and minds, challenging problematic narratives pervasive in society. As one of A4J's donors and allies said in a 2019 interview, “You can't legislate yourself out of racism.”

“Artists have a special way of building a common understanding of how communities are impacted by mass incarceration.”

- Le Anne Alexander, A4J advisor

Interviews with grantees in 2022 showed that more traditional criminal justice reform organizations that tend to favor policy-centric strategies might not have seen art as a complementary internal strategy until A4J made a clear case for it. One such grantee explained, “I would credit A4J with having a significant impact on us organizationally, shifting our openness to approaching how we do systems change work. There's a greater awareness that artwork, storytelling, and advocacy



works. It moves things along.” Another commented, “My views about what and how to make change [have] grown tremendously.”

**The community has a plan for sustained connection going forward.** In 2022, A4J grantee and formerly incarcerated artist Jesse Krimes founded the Center for Art and Advocacy, a nonprofit committed to sustainability and equity for artists directly impacted by the criminal legal system. In its response to grantees’ desire to maintain their listserv community beyond the sunset of the Fund, A4J handed over control of the listserv to the Center for Art and Advocacy to hold and manage going forward. The Center’s website states that the organization is a legacy project of A4J and also receives support from the Mellon Foundation, a peer funder with aligned interests in arts and reducing incarceration.

## Directly Impacted People

The Fund worked to center artists and advocates directly impacted by the justice system.

Increasingly during the lifetime of A4J, the Fund sought to center the expertise of artists and advocates who were directly impacted by the justice system. A4J grantees and partners contributed to a broadening recognition that people with lived experience in the carceral system are essential to changing the narrative. Directly impacted artists gained

**“A4J has created a path where we as directly impacted people are seen as human.”**

**- A4J grantee**

access to exclusive echelons within the national art community and unlocked the power of their art to communicate bold messages more broadly. A thought leader in 2022 identified A4J’s support of directly impacted people as one of its strengths, saying, “While A4J funded many known and long-term actors in the movement, it also helped to increase the prominence of formerly incarcerated leaders and artists as central actors.”

Directly impacted artists and advocates have strengthened the movement with support and care from A4J. As of June 2023, A4J had allocated **over \$50 million in grants to organizations led by directly impacted leaders** (78 in total), representing 44% of all grant dollars allocated. Grantee organizations also hired and engaged directly impacted people in their work. A4J advisor Sue Simon noted that “for A4J, movement building is about formerly incarcerated people doing it for themselves. We’re the money and the support. They advanced themselves and put themselves on a map in ways they hadn’t been before.” Numerous directly impacted grantees and organizations led by formerly incarcerated people are cited throughout this report. These and many others have made important and nationally recognized contributions, including in:<sup>20</sup>

- Policy advocacy and training for formerly incarcerated leaders (examples: Legal Services for Prisoners with Children; Formerly Incarcerated, Convicted People & Families Movement; Voice of the Experienced; Heartland Alliance’s Fully Free Campaign; Just Leadership USA; and Ohio Justice and Policy Center);
- Visual and mixed media arts and advisory work to expand opportunities for more formerly incarcerated artists (examples: Russell Craig, Jared Owens, Tameca Cole, Jesse Krimes, and Gilberto Rivera);
- Music and music theater (examples: National Black Theatre Workshop, Die Jim Crow Records, and Mary Baxter); and
- Poetry, film, and writing (examples: Reginald Dwayne Betts, Kamisha Thomas, Asia Johnson, Faylita Hicks, and Marlon Peterson).

A4J’s support for artists’ and advocates’ work extended beyond dollars, offering care through opportunities to “rest and feel community,” as A4J advisor Le Anne Alexander described it. Alexander went on, “I’ve been proud of how we lifted up individual artists, especially those who are currently and formerly incarcerated. It’s been really beautiful to see how many of our artists have gone on to blossom in their careers... I’ve also been proud of the wellness fund—a small pot of

<sup>20</sup> Listed examples of directly impacted grantees and their impacts are far from exhaustive.

money to support all of our grantees with anything that they considered to help them along their wellness journey.” Advisor Sue Simon added that this fund to enable grantees’ self-care was “one of our best initiatives, giving people money for what they want and need, not what you think they want and need.”

**A4J set a new standard for listening to and working closely with its grantees.** A4J staff and leadership were dedicated to partnering closely with grantees. Agnes Gund, Catherine Gund, and Fund staff engaged in impactful visits to artists and programs, forging lasting relationships with justice-impacted artists and activists that provided fresh perspectives on the fight against mass incarceration and deepened commitment and motivation of all involved. A4J

advisor Holly Sidford asserted, “A lot of foundations give money to artists and then couldn’t recognize them on the street. Helena and her team were deeply engaged with the artists that they supported, [which included] artists who are still incarcerated, as well as numerous artists who are involved in the justice system. That was groundbreaking.”

**“The Fund took artists seriously and art seriously... There’s a real lesson in the humility with which [A4J] approached and engaged [directly impacted] artists. It was really unusual.”**

**- Holly Sidford, A4J advisor**

## Allied Donors

**Art for Justice successfully drew a wide range of donors and funders to the movement.**

Although A4J sought to make transformative change within a limited timeframe, its leaders also saw an opportunity to broaden support for the movement to end mass incarceration that would help it endure and grow beyond A4J’s sunsetting. The leadership and connections of Agnes Gund, the Ford Foundation, and Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors played a central role in drawing major donors. The Fund’s structure also helped position it to draw more resources to the cause. In its partnership with A4J from the outset of the Fund, the Ford Foundation committed to underwriting all of A4J’s staff and administrative costs, a contribution that attracted donors by ensuring their dollars would fully support grantees. The team’s focus on strong media coverage, mentioned above, provided another way for A4J to appeal to donors. According to A4J staff, these media stories not only signified and spread changing narratives, but inspired other donors to invest. A4J also gave potential donors proximity to artists and advocates through events that allowed them to see the work and meet the people behind it. The decision to extend the Fund for an additional sixth year accelerated engagement of new funders and donors for this final year and to set up many grantees with strong funding prospects beyond A4J. Using its strong connections between the art world and the movement, A4J expanded the number and types of financial supporters in the movement, engaging artists, individual donors, and institutional funders.

**In multiple ways, A4J succeeded in expanding the resources available to sustain the work of the movement.** Specific impacts included the following:

- As of June 2023, A4J had **raised \$27 million** through more than 300 donations to extend its grantmaking and double down on its focus to support directly impacted artists and advocates.
- A4J attracted more **support for criminal justice legal reform from artists and art institutions** such as Mark Bradford, Julia Mehretu, and Christie’s Auction House. A4J advisor Sue Simon remarked, “The idea of mobilizing artists to contribute to other artists in this context was new and exciting.”
- A4J **collaborated on local funding efforts**. Where the Fund invested in local campaigns, it helped to coalesce collective support. In NYC, for example, A4J partnered with local funders to establish a fund to support new leadership to close Rikers Island correctional facilities.
- The Fund **promoted a unique model of allyship** to unite artists, advocates, and donors around ending mass incarceration. They shared this model at the Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO) May 2023 Learning Conference in an

**“You’re seeing philanthropy invest a lot more in organizations led by people directly impacted by the justice system.”**

**- Advocacy grantee**

effort to encourage other funders to take on related work and inspire creative roles for philanthropy in social change.

### A4J Attracted Additional Funding

According to grantees surveyed in 2023:

94%  
grantees

A4J attracted **new donors** to the movement.\*

71%  
artists

A4J helped artists attract **new funding** for their work.\*

\*Percent of responses indicating that this had occurred to a great or moderate extent.

### A4J worked actively to become an allied funder for its grantees.

Beyond providing dollars, the Fund supported and built capacity of artists to write grants and fundraise. Recognizing that securing funding can be a steep barrier for some artists, particularly if they are formerly incarcerated or impacted by the justice system, A4J offered technical assistance and support with its application process—encouraging the creation of materials that artists might be able to use with other funders as well. In one application letter, for example, the Fund offered supportive consulting on writing proposals, crafting artist statements, and submitting a portfolio. Furthermore, A4J produced media materials to support grantee fundraising and hosted donor briefings and events to bring artists, activists, and potential donors together. Staff reported that in the Fund’s last year alone, fundraising support brought grantee partners **more than \$12 million** beyond their A4J grants. One grantee spoke of the difference that A4J made in bringing much-needed funder attention to the intersection of arts and justice:

“When we started working in prisons, there was not a network of people we could turn to. The press never wrote about the work, there were few funders supporting the work—and this went on for a long time. **Art for Justice was able to breathe light and life into the fact that those behind bars not only have extraordinary talent but have stories to tell and their narratives matter.**”

# Generative Reflections to Strengthen the Future

Art for Justice Fund left a strong mark on the movement to end mass incarceration. In the space of just six years, A4J: 1) mobilized its initial \$100 million gift to resource and expand connections between art and advocacy; 2) shifted narratives among donors, advocates, incarcerated artists, and the general public; 3) achieved important policy wins; 4) expanded and diversified funders and donors in the movement, including raising another \$27 million for A4J grantmaking; and 5) demonstrated leading edge philanthropic strategies like funder allyship and policy advocacy support. Steering this time-limited philanthropic endeavor involved ups and downs, requiring resilience from all participants. The Fund's journey through a dynamic external context and its determination to push boundaries presented unique priorities and challenges for the Fund's team and offers lessons for other movement supporters and for those stewarding time-limited initiatives.

## Key Lessons from A4J's Experience

**Movements need flexible support.** The Fund demonstrated why having the capacity to pivot and learn from ever changing external conditions was critical for success. A4J leaders recognized that because the Fund was time-limited, it was vital that it use its leverage to attract more donors who could continue and sustain the work of movement building over the long-term. A4J offered a model to other donors, embodying creativity, compassion, and a bias toward action.

**“By being too prescriptive, one runs the risk of missing what matters most.”**

**- Helena Huang, A4J Project Director**

**Narrative is essential to shifting hearts and minds.** A4J's experiences show that funders can support narrative change work by:

- **Dedicating resources to narrative change and communications as well as general operating support.** Providing unrestricted funding to individuals and organizations to be creative and responsive appropriately shares power with the experts on the ground. Movement actors also agree that funders' support can better effect narrative change when it avoids being prescriptive about specific policy solutions.
- **Recognizing artists' roles as drivers of narrative change.** When it comes to public narratives, artists are uniquely gifted in reflecting and challenging our assumptions, telling a new story, and capturing hearts. Many barriers persist in particular for BIPOC and formerly incarcerated artists whose direct experience must inform solutions for public safety. Funders can make a difference through support of mid-sized arts institutions, further attention to linking arts with advocacy to end mass incarceration, and funding BIPOC-led organizations and artists of color.
- **Supporting learning and cohesion.** Funders can create opportunities for grantees to come together with other thinkers and strategists to reflect on what is working, what is not, and what is needed to advance helpful narratives. They can also connect with and organize other funders to build field cohesion.

**Community building is powerful.** The A4J community, initiated through in-person convenings and maintained largely through a listserv, exposed participants to new ideas and inspiration, enabling them to embrace unexpected roles that led to enhanced collaboration, stronger connections, and a renewed sense of communal commitment toward transformative change. The importance of A4J's investment in creating opportunities for meaningful connection and community building among artists, advocates, and donors became unmistakably clear as the community grew into a crucial network for support, resource-sharing, and collective action. Because of the time-limited nature of the Fund, A4J's community building efforts necessitated planning for ongoing support from allies after the initiative ended, an important consideration for any initiative that will sunset.

**Opportunities for policy change may arise at local, state, and/or national levels.** The A4J team made inroads on supporting grantees' work on advancing policy reforms in key states by familiarizing themselves with local and state-level work in various states to stay abreast of timely advocacy opportunities for priority reforms. Pairing this work with support for core grantees that worked across the nation strengthened an A4J network of expertise in which grantees and A4J staff could share information and strategies, as well as find connection and collaboration on common goals in different localities.

**Funders can be bolder allies but should understand the risks.** A4J forged an identity as a funder that, far from being a passive observer, actively allied with its grantee partners, used its connections and platform for policy advocacy, and rallied diverse actors to its cause. The Fund set an example of using 501(c)4 funding for political advocacy activities as well as providing partnership and allyship well beyond conventional philanthropy, all of which can serve as a model for other funders. An advisor to A4J, Holly Sidford, described its use of 501(c)3 and 501(c)4 funding:

*"It was brilliant that they figured out how to do c3 and c4. That was an essential element of success. They were really smart in targeting certain states where the tide was moving and getting behind certain initiatives where wins could be made. They were very strategic about where they put those c4 dollars and then complemented them with c3 money... If you're really trying to change policy, you have to engage in the political process."*

At the same time, funders and donors must understand that bolder action brings higher reputational risk. Engaging more deeply than conventional philanthropy may put the funder in uncharted waters. While not all of A4J's political efforts led to outright wins (for example, a ballot measure campaign to reduce prison sentences for drug offenses in Ohio failed badly in 2018, although important related policies later passed in 2023 as part of legislation), the Fund learned to vet potential grantees and achieved meaningful advocacy wins on numerous policy fronts. Its role as an allied funder raised the profile of key policy issues and grassroots campaigns. Nevertheless, as philanthropy's role in progressive movements has come under scrutiny in recent years, funders and donors need to understand what is at stake and proceed with intention and care.

## Specific Considerations for a Time-Limited Fund

Time-limited funds, such as A4J, differ significantly from foundations designed for perpetual existence.<sup>21</sup> These distinctions manifest in strategy and implementation approaches, offering valuable insights for funders seeking to cultivate enduring communities and partnerships among artists and activists. Based on the experience of A4J, the following ingredients contribute to success within a time-limited fund:

**A clear North Star and guiding beliefs.** A4J maintained a steadfast North Star—ending mass incarceration—that provided unwavering direction. Guiding beliefs, including the transformative power of art, the importance of centering those most affected by incarceration, the role of solidarity in achieving lasting impact, and the delicate balance between urgency and sustainability, formed the foundation of the Fund's approach. Together, these principles served as a reliable compass, providing direction, purpose, and adaptability in navigating myriad challenges and opportunities during the journey.

**Alignment with donor vision and values.** A pivotal lesson emerged in aligning closely with the founding donor supporting the initiative. A shared vision and values with the donor remained central throughout A4J's lifecycle. This alignment ensured a mutual commitment to the initiative's objectives, bolstered the donor's enthusiasm, and facilitated sustained support. Effective communication, characterized by regular updates and feedback, played a pivotal role in aligning expectations and adapting to evolving donor priorities.

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<sup>21</sup> Honig H, Behrens T, Martin V, Brenner E. 2021. Time-limited foundations: Lessons from a CEO peer group. Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University.



**Managing the complex nature of staffing.** A4J's journey underscored the intricate and vital aspects of staffing within a time-limited philanthropic endeavor. Initially marked by role ambiguity and capacity challenges, the recognition of the value of integrated leadership—cultivating a team with diverse yet complementary skills—became a linchpin for success. This approach not only fostered creativity and innovative problem-solving but also drove organizational growth and impact by harnessing a spectrum of perspectives and expertise. Over time, staffing needs evolved, new positions were established and filled, and adjustments were occasionally required to ensure effectiveness. While it was not always easy to navigate these changes, the Fund was able to do so successfully.

**Valuing strategic learning.** The Fund's commitment to strategic learning through a developmental evaluation played a pivotal role in making informed adjustments during a highly dynamic initiative. The developmental evaluation approach facilitated deliberate decision-making, a deeper understanding of the rationale behind programming choices, and a structured method for effective feedback tracking—a complex task in philanthropy. The insights gleaned from this process were instrumental in supporting the project director's role and advancing the Fund's mission.

**Cementing a lasting legacy.** A key takeaway from A4J was the importance of documenting and celebrating its journey. By preserving the insights and impact achieved, the initiative ensured that its work continued to inspire and inform future endeavors. Documenting the legacy serves as a valuable resource for the broader community, enabling others to build upon the initiative's experiences and lessons learned.