

How Supporting Chicago's Creative Workers Builds a More Vibrant Community

June 4, 2026 [Perspectives](#) [Chicago Commitment](#)
[Culture, Equity, and the Arts in Chicago](#)



Ravi Coltrane performing his mother Alice Coltrane's music in Rockefeller Chapel during Chicago's Hyde Park Jazz Festival.

Sandra Aponte and Jonathan VanderBrug, Program Officers, Chicago Commitment, write about challenges for creative workers and how MacArthur is investing in arts and culture careers.



Every day, creative workers contribute to the vitality of Chicago. On a summer's day, the sounds of live jazz draw visitors to a [Jazz Institute of Chicago](#) concert in their local park, or a Back Alley Jazz event by the [Hyde Park Jazz Festival](#). Throughout the Pilsen neighborhood, [vivid murals painted by local artists](#) celebrate the community's vibrant culture and history. On the South and West Sides, a teaching artist with [Firebird Community Arts](#) introduces glassblowing and ceramics to Chicago Public Schools students, excited to shape the molten glass and fire their clay creations in a kiln.

Creative workers are essential to the social, civic, and economic health of Chicago, yet too often they are forced to grapple with difficult working conditions. [SMU DataArts](#) recently conducted comprehensive research on the working conditions of creative workers in Chicago. [The 2026 study](#) found overall that careers in the creative sector are marked by disparities and are more precarious than other careers.

In comparison to workers with similar backgrounds, Chicago's creative workers:

- Earn approximately \$18,200 less in annual personal income;
- Are three times more likely to be self-employed, but their self-employment earnings amount to just 70 percent of those of self-employed workers overall;
- Face higher unemployment rates and often must work multiple side jobs; and
- Have less access to employer-provided benefits, such as health insurance and paid time off.

These discrepancies are particularly present for people of color, women, foreign-born creatives, and creatives with disabilities, who typically earn less than their counterparts, reflecting similar disparity patterns in the workforce as a whole.





Participants mingle during a mutual aid fundraiser for families in Gaza hosted by ACRE and the Jewish Museum. Credit: Brittany Sowackle

In March 2026, SMU DataArts, NORC at the University of Chicago, and other researchers presented their initial findings at the [Illinois Creative Workforce Partnership Summit](#), which convened professionals from across the sector to share insights and examine trends. Experts and practitioners also highlighted the tremendous economic, civic, and social benefits of the creative workforce.

Flexible funding... is key to stability, sustainability, and innovation.

The findings in the SMU DataArts study reinforced what we already heard from organizations in MacArthur's [Culture, Equity, and the Arts \(CEA\)](#) program. Our grantees emphasized these realities at convenings we organized in 2021 and 2022, during the COVID-19 pandemic, which further intensified the need to reshape the arts sector in a more equitable way. Arts organizations called on the Foundation to develop an initiative focused on the needs of Chicago's creative workers, especially part-time and independently contracted artists.



Investing in Careers in Arts and Culture

With guidance from our grantee partners, our [Chicago Commitment](#) team launched a three-year, special initiative in 2023 to provide over \$1 million in grants to strengthen Chicago's creative workforce.

Sector Support: 2023-Present

<p>3Arts \$700,000 Financial assistance and professional development for individual creative workers.</p>	<p>Arts Alliance Illinois Advocacy \$150,000 For policies that improve working conditions in the creative sector.</p>
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The overall initiative supported Chicago's creative workforce at both the individual and sector levels and informed our understanding of the issues. For example, [3Arts](#) provided emergency grants to help creative workers navigate economic instability. [Arts Alliance Illinois](#) built momentum in advocating for safe and fair working conditions for creative workers. And [ACRE](#) collected and analyzed survey data from more than 1,200 creative workers through its [Chicago Arts Census](#) and will host a series of town halls on the findings.

The arts spur economic growth, offer innovative avenues for civic engagement, teach students vital skills, and strengthen neighborhood vitality. For our city to experience these benefits, a wide range of interests—corporate, philanthropic, and government—must invest in creative workers. We all have a role to play in supporting the arts and culture that make Chicago special. Through special initiative described above, MacArthur's CEA program sought to strengthen and sustain Chicago's creative workforce at a critical time.



We all have a role to play in supporting the arts and culture that make Chicago special.

And we are not done. As part of our ongoing commitment to Chicago's creative workforce, we will continue to offer multi-year, general operating support to nonprofits that focus on creative workers. Flexible funding, we know, is key to stability, sustainability, and innovation. It enables organizations to invest further in the creative workers that power them.

The CEA program will also continue to host timely convenings. When creative workers and arts organizations connect and work together, they can leverage their collective assets (such as financial resources, creativity, and problem-solving skills) to achieve shared goals. This collaboration can spur public and private partners to invest more in creative workers and raise visibility of their importance.

Learn more about the creative workforce by following [3Arts](#), [Arts Alliance Illinois](#), [ACRE](#), and [SMU DataArts](#) or find resources on creative worker rights at the ["Art is Labor" Campaign](#) by the City of Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events.

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