

ARTS BUILD COMMUNITY INITIATIVE

An Overview & Summary of Initial Learning

February 2019

Planned and launched with the support of the Barr Foundation, Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation's Arts Build Community (ABC) initiative combines research, grant support, nonprofit network and capacity building, and donor engagement to increase levels of involvement in the arts and creative process among year-round residents and organizations in Berkshire County.

WHY FOCUS ON THE ARTS?

Involvement in the arts and creative process plays a unique role in inspiring residents to engage with each other, to be innovative problem-solvers and to foster visions for a better future. Field research over many years has consistently pointed to the relationship between participation in the arts and the promotion of community connection. Arts and creativity can help to build social capital by providing opportunities for inviting community interactions, fostering collective decision-making and building empathy and trust.

What is more, studies show strong relationships between arts participation and civic engagement practices. For example, people who attend performing arts programs are more than twice as likely to volunteer in their communities as those who do not, and active involvement in artmaking appears to have an even more significant effect on civic participation than merely being an audience member. And for children and youth, in addition to helping them find their voice, develop their critical thinking skills and more fully realize the range of their potential, involvement in arts activities (in and out of school) have helped to lower drop-out rates, boost college graduation and reduce juvenile crime rates—particularly for lower-income students.

These findings should not be surprising considering what often sparks an interest in the arts: openness and curiosity, a desire to feel connected or experience something meaningful, a fueling of imagination and a sense of adventure. These are exactly the qualities required to build more vibrant and cohesive communities and harness the full range of residents' capacities to address local issues together with commitment and creativity.

KEY ASSETS & CHALLENGES

BTCF's broader community assessment process conducted in 2016-2017 provided a research base for knowledge-building and planning. Expanding on the themes identified in the assessment, BTCF received grant funding from the Barr Foundation to assess the region's arts assets, challenges and promising efforts underway, as well as resident attitudes and engagement related to the arts, through surveys, interviews and focus groups. Together, these efforts shed light on issues particularly related to access to and participation in the arts in Berkshire County:

- Berkshire County has an **abundant and robust arts and culture sector**. An estimate by DataArts suggests the county is home to nearly 150 arts and culture organizations. They remain a significant resource to year-round residents, but more so as a major draw for tourists and seasonal residents.
- The vitality of the creative economy presents strong possibilities for growth, as cultural activities and assets stimulate tourism and set the Berkshires apart from other rural areas in the Northeast.

- The **increasing foreign-born population and growth in communities of color** are trends that require renewed attention to cultural competence and the relevance of school-based and other services to help integrate new English-language learners and minority populations.
- Growing **income disparities**, particularly between year-round and seasonal residents, the **growth in the percentage of the senior population**, and the **geographical dispersion** of urban, suburban and rural subpopulations are demographic trends that also necessitate unique responses to engagement in the arts.
- Interviews with members of the arts community highlighted concerns about the **reduction of networking opportunities** that in the past have facilitated collaboration, information sharing and increased visibility for the sector. Those interviewed expressed a desire for **more shared learning opportunities** to better understand what is preventing robust participation in the arts among community members.
- Arts organizations have been reaching out to underserved populations in a number of ways, particularly through **free programming**, but focus groups revealed that financial cost is not the whole story. There was a sense in the arts community that there was a **complex intersection of circumstances for those residents who experience barriers** to participation in the arts.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

To understand these voices and dynamics more thoroughly, BTCF commissioned community-based participatory research (CBPR) as a method for engaging and reaching underserved populations, and hearing directly from residents about how they experience the arts in Berkshire County. CBPR is a collaborative inquiry method that engages stakeholders in the research process and brings a mix of perspectives informed by lived experience to an issue and its possible solutions.

A commitment to equity and inclusion drove the decision to work with community partners to recruit and hire a diverse group of year-round residents from Pittsfield to join this endeavor. The research process focused on Pittsfield, since it is the largest city in Berkshire County with a relatively high population density and poverty rate, as well as greater racial/ethnic diversity, compared to the rest of the county. Highlights include:

- Over 450 year-round Pittsfield residents participated, 75% of whom were surveyed in-person by community researchers; the remainder completed the survey online. The vast majority of the surveys were taken in English, with a handful in Spanish.
- When asked how they were conceptualizing the arts, most respondents talked about specific mediums such as dance and theater. Others, meanwhile, discussed the impact of art in their lives and how they bring relaxation, opportunities for recreation and leisure, peace and serenity.
- To find out how residents learn about arts activities in the region, survey respondents were given a list of possible information sources. Top choices were: social media, friends, word of mouth, local displays and the internet.
- Asked whether they felt included in the arts in the Berkshires, 52% of respondents said “no”. There were significant differences by race/ethnicity and nativity. While 36% of white/Caucasian respondents did not feel included, the rates were much higher for Hispanic (86%), Black/African-American (67%) and multiracial (62%) residents. Furthermore, 83% of foreign-born residents, compared to 53% of U.S.-born residents, reported feeling not included.
- Only 18% of those surveyed felt connected or very connected to the arts. Non-white and foreign-born participants were also more likely than white participants to report not being connected to the arts, at 63% and 67% respectively, as compared to 37% of whites.
- About 70% of the respondents mentioned specific arts venues and activities or recreational places in general that they have visited. Museums were the art space that participants reported visiting most, with the Berkshire Museum ranking first. Additional top-ranking venues and events included the Clark, MASS MoCA, Third Thursdays and Barrington Stage.

- The 60% of respondents who noted there were things that prevent them from participating in the arts were given the opportunity to enumerate the barriers. Cost rated highest as a concern, often coupled with other factors. Time constraints, distance/transportation/parking issues, lack of information about events, health/ disability/age, family-related responsibilities and not knowing people to go out with also received notable numbers of mentions. The researchers also identified a constellation of barriers related to social discomfort, including not feeling welcome, lack of engaging cultural content, language access, and a lack of family-friendly programs and audience diversity.
- Despite barriers and the lack of feeling strong connectedness to the arts, nearly 80% of respondents expressed a desire to have the arts or creative expression be more a part of their lives.



MOVING FORWARD

As this learning phase has demonstrated, Berkshire County is well-positioned with robust arts assets and the strength that comes with increasing cultural diversity. There are significant socio-economic disparities regarding engagement in the arts, as well as high levels of interest among residents—especially people of color, foreign-born and lower-income residents—for being more involved in creative pursuits. These findings and considerations reinforce some ways that BTCF can promote and support good ideas and innovative problem-solving together with the arts sector and the community:

- *Providing Resources:* Through the ABC initiative, BTCF will provide flexible forms of funding that encourage new ways of working—whether small experiments to test innovations or efforts that require a more substantial commitment, such as collaborations.
- *Building Networks:* The arts community is calling for opportunities for networking, learning, information sharing, partnering and arts advocacy. ABC will foster coalition-building and offer convenings, seminars and workshops to help build capacity in and across sectors. The goal is to open doors for identifying issues, sharing ideas and practices, raising awareness of inequities, and learning more deeply about the assets and challenges of our communities.
- *Engaging Donors and Other Funders:* BTCF is building more awareness of the importance of community engagement among foundation donors and other funders committed to the arts for the purpose of leveraging resources for strategic investments in new program development and capacity building.

Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation is committed to acting on these findings, testing and funding new ideas, and continuous learning as it expands this collective inquiry into the role that arts and culture can play in strengthening communities.