



Congruence CULTURAL STRATEGIES

by
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Congruence Cultural
Strategies

Mural Arts Institute
and Strength Through
Solidarity Leaders

Sarah Branch
Ellissa Collier
Priscilla Bell Lamberty
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Accra Zuberi

Initiative Cohort Members

Little Village Environmental
Justice Organization
Chicago, IL

South Baltimore Community
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Baltimore, MD

VietLEAD
Camden, NJ

Lead Artist Advisors

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To learn more about the
Strength through Solidarity
program, please visit:
<https://muralartsinstitute.com/strength-through-solidarity/>

A publication celebrating
the program participants is
forthcoming and will be
published on the above
website.

STRENGTH THROUGH SOLIDARITY 2023–2025 LEARNINGS



The Strength Through Solidarity cohort attend a workshop during their program orientation

Photo courtesy of MAI

The Speed of Community: What (re)Granters Can Learn from the *Strength Through Solidarity Environmental Justice Co-Learning Initiative* About Supporting Frontline Organizations

Background

Strength Through Solidarity: the Art & Environmental Justice Co-Learning Initiative was an initiative of the Mural Arts Institute (MAI) that provided funding, mentorship, and training to three environmental justice organizations rooted in frontline communities. It was designed to help environmental justice organizations leverage the power of participatory art practices to increase local and national awareness of environmental justice issues and strengthen connections between community residents. The South Baltimore Community Land Trust (Baltimore, MD), Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (Chicago, IL), and VietLead (Camden, NJ) each received \$290,000 in funding, alongside technical assistance and project management assistance, to design a community-based arts project or program with their community's needs at the forefront. For twenty-four months, the Mural Arts Institute team supported each environmental justice organization's team and their selected artists through customized training, conversations, and visits as they worked toward their identified goals. MAI developed and facilitated a cohort of leaders from the three organizations. The cohort convened in Philadelphia at the beginning of the initiative, and members visited each other several times throughout the grant period. They also gathered online on a regular basis, as well as for a final celebratory gathering. This iteration of the program built on learnings from two previous similar programs.



“There are a lot of environmental justice organizations that could benefit and would love this experience. This is a success in my eyes.”

Program Participant

Participant Organizations:

Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (Chicago, IL), founded in 1994 and based in the Little Village neighborhood on Chicago’s west side, is an accomplished leader in the field of environmental justice. Little Village is a predominantly working-class Mexican and Mexican American neighborhood that has more than its fair share of environmental hazards and less green infrastructure investment than other Chicago neighborhoods. LVEJO’s mission is to “organize with our community to accomplish environmental justice in Little Village and achieve self-determination of immigrant, low-income, and working-class families.”

South Baltimore Community Land Trust (Baltimore, MD) was founded in 2009 after over a decade of research, reflection, and action initiated by high school students and residents in South Baltimore. They began a successful five-year campaign to oppose the siting of a new waste incinerator in their neighborhood, which already registered as having the country’s highest quantity of toxic air emissions due to all of the hazardous waste sites. Its vision is “that people directly impacted by environmental, economic, and racial injustice must be in the lead to create development that regenerates our communities and our planet. Building on this belief, we take land out of the extractive speculative sector and put it into the hands of the community to advance a proactive vision for development without displacement and zero waste.”

VietLead (Camden, NJ, and Philadelphia, PA) is a grassroots organization that serves Vietnamese and Southeast Asian communities in Philadelphia and southern New Jersey through civic empowerment, community defense, farm and food sovereignty, health and healing, and youth development. Founded in 2015. It is “creating a vision and strategy for community self-determination, social justice, and cultural resilience.” For this project, VietLead worked with Camden FireWorks, an arts center that opened in 2016. Camden Fireworks has a vision of “a more vibrant Camden through equitable, inclusive access to the creative community” and “uses art to create social change.”



About this paper

This document is written for funders, intermediaries, and re-granters—as well as grassroots organizations that are taking part in similar initiatives. It is intended to reflect on the initiative’s program design and structure such that others can learn from and build off this initiative to support environmental justice and other frontline organizations to better advance their work using cultural interventions.

Congruence Cultural Strategies was embedded as a reflection and learning partner for the duration of the program. To support our reflection process, we surveyed all cohort members, staff, and advisors at the start of their participation in the program; attended all online cohort meetings as well as the initial in-person gathering in Philadelphia; and conducted mid-program interviews. We had planned to conduct final site visits and a final survey. However, recognizing the stress and capacity challenges faced by frontline organizations—including program participants—at the time of the writing of this report, we decided (in collaboration with MAI staff) to reduce the burden on participants’ time. Instead, we invited written and verbal reflections from all participants and MAI staff at the conclusion of the program. We analyzed our observations and the reflections shared over time to develop this summary of learnings and reflections.



Group photo taken at November 2023 cohort orientation
Photo courtesy of MAI

Program goals

The goals of the initiative, which were largely accomplished, were to:

1. Support three environmental justice organizations to develop capacity and knowledge to engage arts and cultural practices as a catalyst for change;
2. Support artists in using creative strategies and practices that support communities engaged in the movement for environmental justice; and
3. Help build a network of people and organizations able to strategize, experiment, learn, and share arts-based practices that advance the work of environmental justice.



Achieving the program's goals

Based on the data collected, the key areas of achievement and learning about the program fall into four categories, and one additional area of reflection:

- Combining significant funding with co-learning
- Building organizational and creative capacity
- Strengthening networks
- Responsive program design and management
- Creating an internal foundation to achieve goals (Additional reflection)

“We created a space where people felt safe and heard. I hope somebody else mirrors this somewhere, somehow.”

Accra Zuberi, Initiative Manager

Combining significant funding with co-learning

Financial support that substantially recognizes and compensates for the labor required to participate in activities that support learning is a critical element in supporting the success of frontline organizations. Money supports wages and stipends, materials and travel costs, food and childcare costs, and more. This iteration of the program nearly doubled the amount of direct funding for each organization, with fewer deliverables and restrictions.

As *Strength Through Solidarity* included artmaking and project management, access to the MAI’s network and knowledge was crucial. Participants felt that their teams of mentors were tailored and highly impactful. Specific skill-building sessions with hands-on learning and tools were especially useful; these sessions included mural making, budget building, and project management. The initiative also struck a balance that honored the self-determination of program participants without creating unnecessary work for them by developing and delivering individualized work plans and skill-building sessions for each participant organization based on initial surveys and conversations.

Like many multi-year initiatives, *Strength Through Solidarity* was challenged by turnover in the program staff team. Muralist and administrator Priscilla Bell Lamberty, who had previously served the program as an advisor, was hired as the final program manager. Her knowledge across the areas of their work—especially as an artist—allowed her to support organizations and artists in every aspect of their projects. This made clear a need to have artists as part of the management team.



Building organizational and creative capacity

Participants frequently lauded the deliberate, unhurried pace of the program, beginning with a collective convening that prioritized relationship development; staff-led conversations that clarified what participating organizations wanted to learn and prioritize; and site visits to each organization by MAI staff to learn about local communities and facilities for artmaking.

Participants specifically identified the importance of time to make art with each other, the opportunity to share meals with each other, and the ability to introduce one another to their local communities. This generosity of time for growth, creation, and trust-building extended to the time team members at individual organizations were able to spend with one another on site visits and during other in-person and virtual gatherings. Funding supported this intentional use of time, providing resources to allow team members to dedicate the time needed to be fully engaged in the program.

The program included individualized learning sessions for each organization, specific to their needs and goals, and five facilitated full-group reflection sessions that gave participants time and space to learn and reflect in conversation with one another. Program staff and consultants provided frameworks for these sessions, but the comfort the participants had developed with one another over time and through site visits supported lively conversations and vulnerable sharing.

There were, at times, tensions between a desire not to overburden participants and an inclination to further support their skill-building. For example, we (the reflection consultants) made ourselves available to support the participant organizations in augmenting their own internal monitoring and reflection processes, but no organizations ended up working with us on this. In the future, rather than requiring participants to take initiative, we would recommend that each participant organization have an initial required one-on-one with consultants providing this offering and then decide whether to continue.

“...[It was a] breath of fresh air for a funder to listen, extend care, not rush, give space. Feeling seen and heard by a funder is rare.”

Program Participant



Strengthening networks

To support the program's network-building goal, *Strength Through Solidarity* included funds for participant groups to visit one another. Funding groups to visit each other without presence or intervention by intermediaries or funders provided one of the greatest benefits for the groups. These conditions allowed groups to learn from each other on their own terms, without an intermediary or grantmaker dictating the terms of the knowledge transfer. It also eased interactions, as the funder's presence complicates power dynamics and tends to add pressure, even if unintentional. The small size of the grantee pool and the explicit intention and funding behind these visits made the prospect of visiting and hosting just two other organizations over the course of twenty-four months less burdensome.



Little Village Environmental Justice Organization visits
South Baltimore Community Land Trust
Photo by Dr. Meleny Thomas

“It truly did not feel like we were rushed to complete a deliverable and check a box, but rather, this program encouraged us to develop meaningful connections across state lines...”

Program Participant



Responsive program design and management

Strength Through Solidarity prioritized participants in its design and implementation. In response to reflections and learnings from previous iterations, this program had a higher budget than previous art and environmental justice programs at MAI. This shift impacted multiple program areas that ultimately benefited program participants. It allowed for more adequate compensation for the organizations, as well as the community members and artists they engaged for their projects. The increased budget also added staff capacity on the MAI team, which resulted in more support for grantees. Finally, the budget increase allowed for more supports—like paid advisors, a reflection partner, and a group of artist mentors selected specifically to meet the unique needs of each participant organization and those organizations' locations and communities.

“This was the first time in my professional career that I have seen funders see the humanity in their grantees.”

Program Participant

From the beginning of the program, staff favored transparency in communication and plain-language contracting that sought to explicitly detail expectations, requirements, and optional program elements. With its focus specifically on building knowledge, developing artistic practice, and growing networks, this program prioritized process at least as much as product. There was a desire for the final artwork to be impactful, but even that was viewed in service of artist and community development rather than a desire for the organization administering the program to have a point of pride or to legitimize the existence of the program.

Beyond contracting, program staff offered additional resources to relieve administrative burdens. For example, examples of budgets, checklists, and a suite of other administrative tools were shared with program participants for engaging artists and other contractors and planning and implementing their projects.

There are other ways *Strength Through Solidarity* staff sought to honor participants' time limitations. For example, participants indicated a preference for meeting just one hour per quarter, so full-cohort meetings followed that schedule.



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Full-cohort meetings were not heavily programmed. Instead, they focused on giving participants an opportunity to share openly with each other—which participants had requested. These group meetings were supplemented with a tailored series of one-on-one check-ins with each organization designed to support regular communication with the organizations and align with their individual learning agendas.

The program's administrators aimed to develop relationships with participant organizations and artists that bred a culture of openness and honesty. When program staff were made aware of needs arising at participant organizations, they were able to offer pivot points and seek solutions collaboratively.

Indeed, the specific personnel were a critical element of this program. Though the amount of turnover was a challenge (there were ultimately three program managers), one of the initiative managers, Accra Zuberi, was a constant presence for the duration of the program and offered steady support to participant organizations' staff members—a consistency that participants acknowledged regularly. The team prioritized and brought high degrees of open communication, protecting participants' time, and clarity.



Program participants complete an artmaking activity during their program orientation

Photo courtesy of MAI

Creating an internal foundation to achieve goals

Several internal pieces of infrastructure helped pave the way for the aforementioned goals to be accomplished. Lessons were also learned that may be instructive for other intermediaries and funders seeking to be responsive to participants. For example, having a clear, transparent, and structured selection process is critical to ensuring the selection of aligned organizations. Additionally, program administrators would benefit from articulating with clarity at the start of the application process what is expected from grantees. Many participants observed that organizations that had one central organization managing the project—and especially those that had their artists on board earlier—got more out of the program, though there were other factors at play that may have strongly contributed to this as well.



Programs built to support frontline organizations need to be facilitated with trust, care, time, and understanding. Empowering the program staff closest to the participants to have full access to the central functions of its organization is critically important to implementing trust-based programs smoothly. An intermediary or funder may be a larger organization with more degrees of bureaucracy than the grassroots organizations they are supporting, so there needs to be adequate internal support for those program leaders to write checks, align supportive resources, and share key learnings with funders. Those working most closely to the frontline organizations need power and agency to move program-critical tasks forward within the organization to be truly responsive. In the case of regranting programs, ensuring adequate communication between the funder and the intermediary is recommended so the funder can feel connected to the program and excited about it continuing—assuming the intermediary and participant organizations think it should. This also requires that funders make themselves available and prioritize communications with program staff as part of their workflows.

“Funders and intermediaries who have a more active management role need to be very clear about their own objectives and motivations so that grantees can understand what is being asked of them.”

Program Participant

Conclusion

Especially in this time of extreme devastation for frontline environmental justice organizations and the communities they serve, support for them to learn, lift each other up, and sustain creative work in their communities could not be more critical. We hope that funders, intermediaries, and regranters can learn from the motivations behind *Strength through Solidarity*, as well as its programmatic accomplishments and challenges. Among other things, it is clear that intermediaries and regranters who seek to create learning alongside funding should be intentional about their program structures, communication, and internal organization so that they can be as responsive as possible to participant needs.



About the Mural Arts Institute

The Mural Arts Institute (MAI) was established in 2017 as an initiative of Mural Arts Philadelphia, the nation's largest public art program dedicated to the belief that art ignites change. As part of Mural Arts Philadelphia, the Mural Arts Institute is dedicated to sharing knowledge, ideas, and experiences that have shaped Mural Arts' approach to community-centered artmaking. At its core, MAI seeks to build connections, sustain relationships, and share skills about the practices that have been instrumental in creating works of public art with Philadelphians. MAI works with artists, arts administrators, and community leaders across the world to align knowledge, amplify voices, empower change, and distribute resources that move us all toward a more inclusive and equitable future of socially engaged public art. www.muralartsinstitute.com

About Congruence Cultural Strategies

Congruence Cultural Strategies is a collaboratively owned and operated consulting firm providing consulting services to arts and social sector organizations across the U.S. Congruence specializes in learning, strategy, and facilitation that support our clients to better serve their communities. After eight years of working together in increasing capacities, Congruence was co-founded by Deidra Montgomery and Danya Sherman in 2024. Congruence is committed to working in transformative ways to build the world we want to live in, starting with a distributed leadership model that cultivates the power and purpose of each member. Services include values-based strategic planning, program design, expertise with creative community development, research and evaluation, and facilitation and coaching. www.congruencestrategies.com

About Mural Arts Philadelphia

Mural Arts Philadelphia is the nation's largest public art program, dedicated to the belief that art ignites change. Mural Arts has united artists and communities through a collaborative and equitable process, creating over 4,000 artworks that have transformed public spaces and individual lives. Mural Arts aims to empower people, stimulate dialogue, and build bridges to mutual understanding through projects that attract artists from Philadelphia and around the world and programs that focus on youth education, restorative justice, mental health and wellness, and public art preservation. Popular mural tours offer a firsthand glimpse into the inspiring stories behind Mural Arts' iconic and unparalleled collection, earning Philadelphia worldwide recognition as the "Mural Capital of the World." Philadelphia was recently named the number one city for Best Street Art by USA Today. www.muralarts.org.