



DC COMMISSION ON THE ARTS & HUMANITIES

DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Aaron L. Myers II, Executive Director

December 18, 2023

The following is a summary of the agency's activities and operations.

1. Staff Updates

The interviews for a new Program Analyst to assist our Resource Allocations Officer have been completed and we are hoping to have a candidate in place by the first of the year. We are welcoming

2. New Mexico Update:

This was a very interesting and enlightening experience. One of the biggest takeaways I had from this meeting was that I am not alone. Actually, as Executive Director of CAH, I am in a better position than several of my counterparts, but also share some of their pain-points.

- I learned from some of the other agency directors that they are operating with a budget of only \$2 million.
- CAH is fortunate to have a Chief Equity, Inclusion and Diversity Officer while some other agencies in the country are unable to even use the term diversity and inclusion.
- CAH is fortunate to have in-house General Counsel but shares in the pains of procurement setbacks as with every other agency in the Country.
- Many do not have a direct line to their top Executive whether it is the Mayor or Governor.
- Staff/Community mental wellness was of great concern. We as a country are dealing with a mental health crisis and our grantees are looking to us in many ways to help.
- We are all seeking effective community advocates (or advocacy groups) that can help communicate the needs of the agency but moreover help us (the agency) understand the needs of the public even more.

Those are only a few of the restrictions that other agency directors across the country are facing in their respective positions. Interestingly enough, some of the things that we have expertly executed at CAH, a few of the EDs expressed their intention to implement

in their offices. Both Michigan and Tennessee are reviewing our G.A.A.P. program and have expressed plans to use it in the future.

In my discussions with the other EDs, there are some suggested initiatives that I would work to establish at CAH. Next year, when we announce the grant awards, we will reach out to the Mayor, Councilmembers, and Commissioners who will personally call the individual or head of the organization to inform them they will be awarded a grant from CAH.

Also, I am considering a CAH initiative that would address the space issues that many of our grantees currently face. This initiative would pair grantees with the DC Building Improvement District (BID) leaders, Main Streets, and members of the Council of the District of Columbia.

The goal is to create a space for artists to meet and collaborate, with each other, landlords, brokers, and government entities. Additionally, grantees will be presented with information explaining upcoming grant awards and future grant opportunities. This is also a rare opportunity for CAH grantees to learn the impact of the creative economy in the District as well as linking them with businesses and entrepreneurs. This initiative would also be designed to assist the mayor with her revitalization efforts of making the District an bustling economic center.

Winding up the New Mexico update is a dinner I attended hosted by the Mid-Atlantic Arts. I believe that future partnerships with Mid-Atlantic will allow CAH to shape arts programs that benefit both the agency and District taxpayers.

When returning from New Mexico, I stopped through Boise, Idaho to meet with some musicians discussing the payment complexities they face due to the popularity of streaming content. I learned the following:

- For our grantees, it takes 18 million streams annually for them to break out of the U.S. poverty line, i.e., \$14,580.
- Sixty-four percent of professional musicians considered leaving the profession as of October 2022.
- Nearly 8% of every \$10.00 paid to those who hold the rights to their compositions is compensated to the large streaming companies. Only 12% of all revenue generated by the music industry is paid to the artists.

- Those are simply staggering statistics and not great for the thousands of musicians across the country.

3. FY24 Color the Curb: School Safety Program Request for Applications (RFA) The Request for Applications is now live on the CAH website. The grant will remain open until December 29, 2023, at 9:00pm. The Color the Curb: School Safety Program is a collaborative design and placemaking project created through a partnership with CAH, the District Department of Transportation (DDOT), and DC Public Schools (DCPS). The program's goal is to increase pedestrian safety by painting ground murals in curb extensions outside or near District schools.

4. Black Cat Networking Event:

Thank you to everyone here who attended the CAH grantee networking event at the Black Cat. There were more than 100 people who came through for the opportunity to meet and greet local artists, members of the Council of the District of Columbia, and CAH commissioners and staff. Thank you to the Events team who worked extremely hard.

5. Getting to Know Grants Mixer:

Last week's first Getting to Know Grants Mixer was widely attended with nearly 60 artists who met with CAH Grant Managers and Grant Awardees. This event was specifically designed for those artists who have never applied for a CAH grant. I had the opportunity to speak to several of them and encouraged these artists new to CAH to apply for the available grants.

6. Grants Update

With 1242 grants awarded, we have now entered the period where each grant is routed for approvals and pushed out for payment. There are some extra steps that both staff and the public must consider this year when completing the process. From the public's side, whereas last year you submitted your invoices into the old Vendor portal, now you will go into DIFS, and submit your invoice there. Your grant manager will contact you via the email that is on your grant agreement. It is important to note that the email on your grant agreement and the email that you've registered via DIFS may not be the same. In that instance, you would reach out to the help desk from DIFS to rectify the issue, so that you are then able to submit your invoice.

Internally, this is my first Grant experience with an awards' cycle (from this vantage point), and I would like to update the commissioners and public on some procedures we will be implementing based upon my observations. This is an effort to make this portion of our future grant cycles more expedient and streamlined.

It is important to note that CAH is currently operating on a manual paper system. Each award is individually reviewed, approved, and pushed forward for payment. The errors

that are discovered are noticed during one of the two-to-three stages of the review process (these include expired insurance, clean hands, address mismatches, absence of EIN numbers, or other things). During these stages, the grant managers have an opportunity to use their familiarity and understanding of each awardee to help rectify most issues. This often consists of a back and forth of emails/phone-calls in an attempt to obtain proper information from the grantee, before CAH can push for payment. This stage is the most cumbersome, but it is a crucial part of the current process, because it allows us to catch and rectify the errors on our end, making the process of payment much smoother.

I've observed three areas where there seem to be a lag in the process or "bottlenecks." First, the number of data/forms that must be scanned, printed, and placed in a folder; second, the number of people who are required to approve and to help push the awardees toward purchase orders; last, payment Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) that are understood agency-wide to prevent system failures. In my initial meetings when coming onboard, the staff stated their concerns about the agency's continued use of paper, with an exorbitant amount of that paper usage involved in the grant award process. Our Senior Grant's officer identified a few other systems that provided examples of processes that would not be belabored with a paper. Meanwhile, other team members spoke with their counterparts at other agencies who have grant making authority to identify what systems they're using that affords them the opportunity to operate in a paperless format. These concerns were reiterated in our Grants reassessment meeting, and our team has moved forward, taking the next steps in transitioning to a digital system. Additionally, Our Office of General Counsel has been working agency-wide to codify SOP's so that we can readily identify the point in which our systems display vulnerabilities. These were not updated and/or available beforehand. Ironically, while in discussions with my fellow state art agency directors in New Mexico, I learned that some of them have faced similar issues.

For future grants committee updates, our timeline will be provided to route folders routed for the necessary approvals (understanding that there will be some awardees with issues that we'll continue to work with past that date). After we've completed our SOP's and confirmed the vulnerable areas in our systems, provided solutions, and worked with our Chief DEIA Officer to ensure any automation or streamlining will not sideline our efforts in being fair and equitable, we hope to have a more efficient system for the public in our next awards cycle.