



**SAN DIEGO LOCAL ARTS LEARNING NETWORK:
A Network Approach to Capacity Building
"Achieving Change – Together"**

Introduction

Established in 1989, [San Diego Art Matters](#) is a trusted resource and advocate for San Diego's individual artists, cultural practitioners, and nonprofit arts and culture organizations. We serve as a central coordinator and mobilizer to build connections, leverage capacity, and amplify voices to achieve greater collective impact within creative communities across the region. We identify emerging trends of concern within San Diego's creative sector, share proven practices, and develop solutions to benefit those we serve.

Through our networks, we:

- Promote a positive policy environment so that the creative sector can survive and thrive;
- Provide information and training so that the creative sector can advocate for their needs and advance their missions, and;
- Produce educational materials that focus on capacity-building topics, including e-newsletters and special reports that inform those who work within and support the creative sector about the important roles and contributions individual artists, cultural practitioners, nonprofit arts and culture organizations, and local arts agencies play to enrich and improve lives, solve problems in communities, and provide a nonpartisan space for individuals to engage in a creative life.

Post-pandemic, San Diego's creative sector has seen an increased demand for services. As demand increases and financial resources stagnate, nonprofit arts and culture organizations must build their capacity to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their operations.

For many nonprofits, building their capacity is operationalized by leveraging relationships with other organizations in a network. This (network approach to capacity building) offers an antidote to the challenges of limited funding by providing access to vital resources, expertise, and peer support.

(National Council of Nonprofits)

CAPACITY BUILDING



Although the concept of capacity building emerged as a field of practice in the late 1950s, it remains relatively new in the nonprofit sector. As a result, there is no universal definition of the term. We suggest that capacity building is defined as what is needed to bring a nonprofit to the next level of operational, programmatic, financial, or organizational maturity to advance its mission more effectively and efficiently into the future. Capacity building is not a one-time effort to improve short-term effectiveness but a continuous improvement strategy toward creating a sustainable organization.

Local Arts Agencies

This proposal targets explicitly local arts agencies for capacity-building intervention. A local arts agency (LAA) is a community, city, or county government agency that provides financial support, services, or other programs for various arts and culture organizations, and/or individual artists and the community. Known by various names – community arts council, arts center, arts commission, art association, cultural alliance, art league, or office cultural affairs, LAAs operate in over 4,000 communities across the country. The particular form an agency takes—not-for-profit private corporation, public agency, or department of local government—reflects the particular interests, resources, dynamics, needs, and dreams of each specific community.

LAAs serve areas as small as a neighborhood or as large as part of three states. Often, they encompass a county, several counties, a city, an extended city, or an urban metropolitan area. Frequently, they follow the established divisional lines of government, school districts, transportation systems, or natural human traffic patterns to determine their service area. They serve populations of all sizes and exist in urban, rural, and suburban areas.

The determining features of a local arts agency are its mission and goals. What a particular LAA will do at any given time depends upon the needs of a particular community, determined through an assessment of the community's cultural needs and resources – its organizations, financial resources, people, and receptivity to LAA activity.

The San Diego LAA Cohort

San Diego has several LAAs, with at least eight known agencies serving the following cities: the City of San Diego, Carlsbad, Encinitas, Chula Vista, Oceanside, Coronado, Imperial Beach, La Mesa, and one overseeing the entire San Diego County. The two oldest have been in operation for over three decades (City of San Diego and Carlsbad) and the newest (San Diego County Arts and Culture Commission) only a year.



These LAAs recently formed an informal network under the leadership of Jonathon Glus, executive director of the City of San Diego Commission for Arts and Culture, whose local arts agency is the designated [State Local Partner of the California Arts Council](#), a state agency established to support local arts infrastructure and activities through grants, programs, and services. The network, called the "CONFAB," meets virtually to share information, build relationships, and learn from each other.

In 2022, several CONFAB members collaborated to participate in the [Arts and Economic Prosperity 6](#), a study sponsored by Americans for the Arts that measured the economic impact of arts participation in their communities. By working together, and with the financial support of the City of San Diego Commission for Arts and Culture, the project administrator, the group was able to achieve a large project they could never have accomplished alone. With that project complete, the CONFAB members want to continue to develop their network and expand their purpose to focus more intentionally on capacity building so that they can individually and collectively increase their impact on the community and ensure long-term sustainability.

The San Diego cohort of LAAs has already demonstrated that learning together is better and that an economy of scale can be reached when capacity building is delivered through a network approach. Leveraging connections and available resources through a network is a resource-efficient way for each organization in the CONFAB to move to the next stage of organizational development.

Many of the challenges the members seek to address have been shared, such as developing leadership skills, strengthening advocacy practices and deepening their understanding of cultural policy; strategic

planning and community cultural planning; board development; fundraising; grantmaking best practices; program development; community engagement; cultural tourism marketing, fundamentals of program evaluation; equity and accessibility.

Their shared goal is to accelerate learning together to achieve greater change together.

The Project: The San Diego LAA Learning Network

In the project's first phase, a start-up grant from the Prebys Foundation in the amount of **\$260,000** will enable San Diego Art Matters to facilitate the planning and implementation of the San Diego Local Arts Agency Learning Network, with a program launch tentatively scheduled for **September 2024**.

The program will be grounded by the following criteria:

Criteria

- Participation will be by invitation only and will include the LAAs who participate in the CONFAB, including the San Diego County Arts and Culture Commission as well as a few cities that have expressed interest in establishing a local arts agency and have been working in that capacity for several months or years.
- Each city must designate a representative to participate who must be in a leadership/decision-making position within the LAA along with a volunteer, such as a member of their board or Commission.

Learning Goals

- Exchange information and learn best practices in the local arts agency field with a particular focus in the areas of cultural advocacy, cultural planning, arts and the economy, arts and cultural policy, board development, cultural tourism, community outreach, arts education, program development, and arts marketing,
- Share practices that generate equitable public and private sector policies and collectively strengthen local public support for arts and culture
- Act as advocates on arts issues on local, state, and national levels to bring awareness to issues of local concern, demonstrating the added value of working and learning together

Program Activities

The Network's inaugural program year will be intentionally simple as we establish a baseline for future growth and development. The Network members will commit to meeting in person approximately every other month, sharing the responsibility of hosting the meeting in their neighborhood or at their facility.

The meeting agenda will typically include the following:

- Opportunities for relationships and team building;
- an opportunity for the members to report on the progress of their work – challenges and opportunities, wins and setbacks, with time for feedback from the participants;
- a special guest presenter on a topic of interest;
- a workshop on a technical assistance issue (how to set up a grantmaking program or CRM basics)
- news from the LAA field – state and national

- Networking, meal breaks, and potentially facility tours, depending on where the meeting is held

Each meeting will convene for no less than a half day with the potential for full-day sessions if the participants can commit to the time.

Capacity Grants

A pool of funds will be established to provide each participant with a capacity grant in the range of **\$10,000 - \$20,000** to implement a project within their city government that would advance their local arts agency. The participant will encourage their City to match the grant for increased impact, but matching is not required. Each participant must develop a proposal to be approved by the program facilitator and write a report on the grant's outcome upon completion. While individual grants are envisioned, participants may wish to pool their funds to implement a larger project that would benefit all of their agencies.

Coaching

Each LAA can access individual coaching to focus on specific questions and needs that can't be addressed in a group setting.

Timeline

May 2024 – Program Planning

December 2024 – Cohort Orientation

January 2025 – Program Launch/First Convening

February – Virtual Convening

March – In-Person Convening – Capacity Grant Proposals Due

April – Virtual Convening/Field Trip to Sacramento for Arts Advocacy Day

May – In-Person Convening

June – Virtual Convening

July – No Meeting

August – In-Person Convening

September – Virtual Convening

October – In-Person Convening

November – Virtual Convening

December – In-Person Convening/Wrap Up

Next Step

The next step in this process will be to engage the members of the CONFAB and other cities and solicit feedback regarding this proposal. While some have already indicated an interest in capacity-building support, it was only through informal conversation. Now, with a proposal in hand and the real possibility of investment to support such efforts, they can respond to more concrete ideas. We believe engagement at this level will ensure buy-in and greater participation should this program come to fruition. We are particularly interested in involving Jonathon Glus at the City of San Diego Commission for Arts and Culture, whose early leadership kick-started the CONFAB as part of his responsibilities as a CAC State Local Partner and in his role as a member of the San Diego ART Matters board of directors. He has agreed to serve throughout the project as an advisor.

Looking to the future, we hope to launch a second program phase that will continue the Network for the original group and open participation to the remaining incorporated cities that have yet to establish local arts agencies as part of their operations.

We welcome feedback from the Prebys Foundation while we are in the ideation stage of this proposal to give it a greater chance for funding success. We look forward to scheduling a time to discuss the proposal at your earliest convenience.

Felicia W. Shaw, Executive Director
director@sdartmatters.org