

Links Hall

The Equity Report: Summer 2021

Chicago, Illinois

It is not lost on Links Hall that our country, city, and performance communities continue to face a reckoning. This reckoning came at the height of a global pandemic which paused the presentation of the performing arts, numerous uprisings to fight for Black liberation and put an end to anti-Black systemic violence, a surge in hate crimes against Asian communities across the country, a robust and polarizing election attempting a shift in power in our national government, and continued voter disenfranchisement. We understand the changes affecting our artist communities do not erase harm, trauma, or need. Links Hall remains dedicated to building up artists that inquire and/or move in our spaces especially those who lack resources, platforms, and opportunities.

Links Hall has been in a state of recharging our mission while maintaining work to be in service and collaboration with our local community members and resident artists. Over the last year we adjusted our Co-MISSION residency programs to align with COVID-19 protocols as well as our shrunken budget and staff capacity. This, in turn, pushed us to focus more on our resident artists and curated opportunities, and press pause on rentals that would require us to keep our doors open seven days a week. In order to offer more transparency and accountability to our community of artists, audiences, funders, and employees, Links offers this check-in as a vehicle for continued conversation.

The Past Few Years

Leading up to the historic 40th Anniversary season (2018-2019), the Links Hall team worked diligently to benefit our Black and Brown artist communities that received underwhelming aid in pay equity and rehearsal/performance opportunities. Successes included: establishing an Arts Leaders of Color Network; establishing a Puppeteers of Color Incubator and producing their work on an ongoing basis; promotions of BIPOC staff members; and ongoing commitment to artist-curated and self-produced programs and festivals.

With Links Hall's full-staff transition in 2019, the expiration of several grant-funded initiatives and administrative positions, and the loss of a prospective grant proposing rental subsidies for artists of color, some of the aforementioned initiatives faltered. A complete shift in duties could not be adequately inherited by a smaller staff with a smaller budget. We were faced with distinctive feedback to both improve the work of the previous team while also pushing their legacy forward.

In Fall 2020, Links staff crafted an artist survey and evaluation to determine some of the improvements we need to make, while also inquiring about things we've done (and still do) that seem to work for our community members. The survey results echoed conversations staff and board had been having with artists over the previous year, as well as research from local and national artist organizers such as

Creating New Futures: Working Guidelines for Ethics & Equity in Presenting Dance & Performance and Chicago's Movers & Makers Addressing Performance Systems (MMAPS).

Here's what we've learned about needed improvements:

- **Assessing Capacity:** right-sizing Links Hall's commitments to artists and partners; ensuring we don't over-commit to projects without the funding, time, or staff capacity to adequately support programs and people
- **Enhanced Production:** offering consistent, quality technical production support that meets the needs and expectations of artists
- **Administrative Support:** improving producing and "back office" support to artists, including communication response time, greater clarity in the contracting process, space availability, defined expectations in partnership/co-presentation agreements, organization, follow-through on commitments, and timely financial and box office reporting
- **Pay Equity:** alongside capacity issues, pay equity for artists, crew, administrators, and other culture workers is a leading priority to dismantle systemic burn-out and extractive labor practices

Current Team

Links Hall has largely avoided the arts presenting model of a singular Artistic Director or Director of Programming, a practice which has historically led to majority-white gatekeepers making programmatic and financial decisions. Artist-curated festivals have been at the forefront of programming for decades. In 2016, 70% of artists performing at Links Hall were white. Today, over 70% of artists performing at Links Hall are artists of color. The programming jury responsible for selecting artists for Links Hall's flagship Co-MISSION residency and fellowship program is majority artists of color.

Thoughtful and intentional Board development efforts contributed to the current Board composition, which is 2/3 artists and 50% BIPOC leaders, including those at the leadership level (executive officers, committee chairs, etc.). Many of our board members work for nonprofits, arts and culture or humanities organizations, or academic institutions. 50% of our staff are BIPOC. 74% of our professional consulting budget this year will go to women of color-owned businesses (61% specifically to Black-owned businesses). While these numbers are not the entire story, they are an important part of our story.

Current Work

As COVID-19 shocked and halted many systems, both individually and structurally, we evaluated what we'd accomplished since the 2019 staff turnover, shedding light on challenges and pitfalls. Some of those challenges addressed our relationship to artists living and working on the South & West sides of Chicago. We recognized direct barriers in geographic accessibility to Links Hall and reliable transportation for artists and audiences. The city of Chicago continues to perpetuate disparities through segregated infrastructure and communities. Too many of our neighbors on the South & West sides do not have access to affordable rehearsal spaces, paid residencies, and/or opportunities to present

new/process works. Artists and arts workers citywide and nationwide are cobbling together contract work that does not meet standard living wage rates.

To bridge the gap, Links Hall decided to realign our annual budget to allocate monies for higher monthly stipends and financial aid for artist transportation. Additionally, work has been done to begin right-sizing staff salaries and benefits, in recognition of the need for equitable compensation for the working artists on our team who manage and run the organization. We recognize that it is time to move beyond one-off project grants supporting diversity programs or hires, and begin addressing issues of systemic inequity embedded in our organizational structure. A revised budget pushes us in the direction to pay our Co-MISSION artists and staff more equitable wages, while figuring out how we can be more accessible to artists not in our general geographical and socio-economic position.

Progress to date:

- In the 2018-2019 & 2019-2020 seasons: Resident Artists were paid monthly stipends of \$200 per month; Fellowship Artists were paid monthly stipends of \$500 per month
- In spring 2020, all Co-MISSION Fellows and contract technicians were paid in full for performances and residencies cancelled due to COVID-19. Artists' rental deposits for cancelled engagements were refunded in full.
- In the 2020-2021 season: Resident Artists were paid monthly stipends of \$350 per month
- In the 2021-2022 season: Resident Artist will be paid monthly stipends of \$400 per month; Fellowship Artists will be paid monthly stipends of \$600 per month

Additionally:

- Previous to the pandemic: Resident and Fellowship Artists split box office sales with each other and Links Hall, in lieu of performance fees. In the 2020-2021 season: Resident and Fellowship Artists received guaranteed performance fees for the Co-MISSION Festival of New Works, to safeguard artists against the dramatic reduction in audience attendance/ticket sales for virtual programs. (Guaranteed performance fees will continue in 2021-2022.)
- In 2021, additional funds were raised to ensure no artist would be required to volunteer their time or labor for Links programs, including: THAW 2021: Abundance art party & fundraiser (performers & designers), Co-MISSION jury panelists, guest speaking engagements, etc.
- Starting in the 2021-2022 season: Transportation stipends will be offered to Resident and Fellowship Artists who request support traveling to Links Hall for weekly rehearsals. An amount totalling 24% of the total CoMission artist fee budget has been earmarked for transportation.
- Average hourly wages for staff have increased 25% between 2018 and 2021 (with the lowest increase at 23%, and the highest increase at 32%)
- Production technicians have received an 18-25% increase in hourly wages, and have been reclassified from contractors to employees
- Contracts are being re-written to incorporate more equitable pay schedules, force majeure and cancellation policies, and protections for both artists and Links Hall

Future goals & strategies:

- Building toward a \$15/hour minimum wage rate for Co-MISSION Resident and Fellowship Artists, accounting for studio hours in residence.
- Wherever possible, Links adheres to guidelines set by Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.), required for National Performance Network Projects. At the moment, our Residency and Commissioning programs exceed minimum W.A.G.E. rates; and we are reviewing co-presentation and producing agreements that may fall short.
- Continued discussion about compensation for collaborating artists (ensemble members, etc.)
- Assessment of transportation stipends and/or additional strategies to provide greater access to Links Hall programs and services for artists not living on the North side of Chicago.
- Investment in capacity-building projects and infrastructure, including building Links Hall's first database, new point-of-sale systems (box office, rentals, donations), a website upgrade and redesign, and administrative solutions—enabling greater efficiency and effectiveness in serving artists. (Funding secured through the Walder Foundation; work began in summer 2021, in partnership with Ahsek Innovation.)
- Significant funds have been earmarked in the 2021-2022 budget for working with Black and artists of color-led EDIA (Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Accessibility) firms, to continue defining Links Hall's strategic work around racial and social justice.

Onward

It is important to note that these changes are not the result of an increase in the overall Links Hall operating budget. In fact, we have seen a reduction in our total budget and staff size due to shifting priorities of private funders and significant pandemic-related earned income losses. An anonymous artist responding to the recent MMAPS research initiative notes, "... I feel that several arts organizations in Chicago are perceived to have a lot of resources, but it's actually the opposite case. The budgets of several long-standing organizations (I'm thinking of Links Hall for example) are a fraction of their peer organizations in other cities. Similarly, other organizations are only able to function because they're attached to larger institutions (like programs at U of Chicago, or even, the Dance Center). I don't know whether artists realize how precarious organizations' finances also are — this isn't to excuse things but rather to call for more honesty and transparency about the situation and then action — how do we advocate?"

We continue to seek new funding sources for this work, and acknowledge that the underpinnings of equity and justice reach every corner of our budget: salaries and benefits, artist fees, technological investments, administration, and even rent—which is paid to a Black-owned business, Constellation. We recognize that budgets are moral documents. In order to achieve greater equity we are *doing less*, we are slowing down our planning and implementation process, we are prioritizing community care, and we are deeply considering the sustainability of our programs, people, and organization. There is much work left to do. Burn-out is no longer an option.

Contact Us

Have thoughts or ideas about Links Hall's current Equity work? Contact us at equity@linkshall.org. We review this email account once per week and look forward to hearing your vision for a more equitable Links Hall. Correspondence can also be mailed to: Links Hall, 3111 N Western Avenue, Chicago, IL 60618.

Visit us on the web at: www.linkshall.org

Resources

The ideas, challenges, and strategies in this document are not unique to Links Hall. In this work, we are indebted to the following resources, individuals, and organizations—and many other arts leaders of color—for their continued research and advocacy on the front lines of racial equity and social justice:

- ["A Letter I Hope in the Future Doesn't Need to be Written,"](#) Emily Johnson, 2021
- [Chicago's Movers & Makers Addressing Performance Systems](#) (MMAPS), including Aaliyah Christina, Alyssa Gregory, Amanda Maraist, Anjal Chande, Courtney Mackedanz, Erin Kilmurray, Felicia Holman, Gina Hoch-Stall, Jenn "Po' Chop" Freeman, Joanna Furnans, Josh Anderson, Kara Brody, Maria Blanco, Nora Sharp, & Lizzie Leopold, 2021
- [Creating New Futures: Working Guidelines for Ethics & Equity in Presenting Dance & Performance](#), 2020
- [Creating New Futures'](#) Force Majeure Workgroup, especially Ben Levine & Sarah Greenbaum of [Dance Place](#) and Sandy Garcia of [Pentacle](#)
- [DANCE USA](#) Equitable Contracts Workgroup, especially Sandy Garcia of [Pentacle](#) and Sophie Myrtil-McCourty of [Lotus Arts Management](#)
- [Decolonization Rider](#), Emily Johnson/Catalyst
- [Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds](#), by adrienne maree brown, 2017
- [Field Foundation Chicago Heat Maps](#)
- [Healing Forward: Journey Into Allyship](#) Retreat, hosted by Marc Bamuthi Joseph & Rika Iino, SOZO Vision, 2021
- [Job Gap Economic Prosperity Series: Waiting for the Payoff](#), Allyson Fredericksen, People's Action Institute, 2016
- [MIT Living Wage Calculator](#), Dr. Amy K. Glasmeier, Massachusetts Institute of Technology
- [National Performance Network](#)
- [What Does It Take to Achieve A Living Wage....](#), RVC Seattle Changemakers Blog, 2017
- [Working Artists and the Greater Economy](#), W.A.G.E. rate calculator