



Musicians playing at the 15th Annual Celebrating Words Festival produced by Tia Chucha's Centro Cultural and Bookstore. Photo by Giovanni Solis.

By **ANU YADAV**

*“When we’re caught up in a crisis, creativity is a path out of it.”*

— **Luis J. Rodriguez** (*Mixcoatl Itztlacuiloh*)

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**Anu Yadav** is the 2019–2020 Creative Strategist Artist-in-Residence at the Los Angeles Department of Mental Health, funded by Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture. She is an actress, playwright, educator, organizer, facilitator and a member of the Actor’s Equity Association, Alternate ROOTS, the Dramatists Guild, Network of Ensemble Theaters, the California Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival and the University of the Poor. She is a graduate of Bryn Mawr College and holds an M.F.A. in Performance from University of Maryland, College Park.

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply thankful to all the people who agreed to be interviewed:

**Jacqueline Alexander-Sykes** *St. Elmo Village*

**Joel Garcia** *Meztli Projects*

**Daisy Gonzalez** *Garment Worker Center*

**Jeremiah Gordon  
& Kenneth Spencer** *Los Angeles Black Worker Center*

**Guadalupe Chavez  
& Melanie Griffin** *Dignity and Power Now*

**Jen Hofer  
& Alexia Veytia** *Antena Los Angeles*

**Pharaoh Mitchell** *The Community Action League*

**Luis J. Rodriguez  
& Trini Rodriguez** *Tía Chucha's Centro Cultural & Bookstore*

**Sophanarot Sam** *Southeast Asian Community Alliance*

**Manuel Villanueva** *Restaurant Opportunities Center—Los Angeles*

**Sarah Williams** *Women's Center for Creative Work*



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**DEPARTMENT OF  
MENTAL HEALTH**  
hope. recovery. wellbeing.



This toolkit was funded by the Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture through the Creative Strategist Artist-in-Residence program<sup>†</sup> which places artists as creative strategists in County departments to work alongside staff, project partners and community stakeholders in a collaborative process to develop, strategize, promote and implement artist-driven solutions to civic issues. It is part of the Cultural Equity and Inclusion Initiative,<sup>‡</sup> which aims to “ensure that everyone in Los Angeles County has equitable access to arts and culture, and to improve inclusion in the wider arts ecology for all residents in every community.”

With thanks to my Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health *Connectors* Angel Baker, Mimi McKay and Keris Jän Myrick for their partnership and vision in this project. Thanks to Robin Garcia, Kimberly Glann, Pauline Kamiyama and Elaine Waldman whose guidance and support was instrumental to my residency. Additional thanks to: The Creative Strategist Artist-in-Residence Cohort made up of Deborah Aschheim, Clement Hanami, Olga Koumoundouros, Sandra de la Loza and Alan Nakagawa, Camila Alvarado, Julio Alvarado, Michael Centeno, Sandra Chang, Kate DeCiccio, Daniel Estrada, Hilda Eke, Natalie Godinez, Tracy Gregory, Alexa Kim, De'Andrea Lottier-Ross, Leda Maliga, Bernice Mascher, Betty Marín, Soraya Medina, Pinki Mehta, Kumar Menon, Kevin Muir, Brian Navarro, Marissa Nuncio, Mirtala Parada-Ward, Dr. Jorge Partida Del Toro, Lamia El Sadek, Yosi Sergeant, Allison Smith, Michael Rohd, Destiny Walker, Sunnie Whipple and Jacqueline Wilcoxon. Thank you to the Alliance of California Traditional Arts, Anti-Recidivism Coalition, Bacup, The Center for Performance and Civic Practice, Khmer Girls in Action, Korean Immigrant Workers Alliance, Instituto de Educación Popular del Sur de California, Los Angeles Tenants' Union, Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, ProjectQ and Self Help Graphics.

I would also like to thank other people and groups whose work is woven into my own practice and this toolkit. They include: Alternate ROOTS, Appalshop, Asian Arts Initiative, Back on the Block Theater Company, Willie Baptist, Augusto Boal and the Center for the Theater of the Oppressed, Friends and Residents of Arthur Capper/Carrollsborg, Kairos Center for Religions, Rights and Social Justice, Rhodessa Jones, Dan Kwong, Living Stage Theater Company, Jennifer Nelson, John O'Neal and Junebug Productions, the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, Poverty Initiative, Michael Rohd, Gary San Angel, Oran Sandel, Sojourn Theater, James Thompson and In Place of War, and the University of the Poor.

Editing **Trini Rodriguez, Maxine LeGall & Q.T. Jackson Jr.**

Graphic Design **Joshua Gamma**

With additional consultation from

**Joel Garcia, Q. Terah Jackson III, Rebecca Gomez, Jen Lemen, Patrick Masterson & Luis J. Rodriguez**





Skyline view from We Rise 2019. Photo by Vienna To.

## FOREWORD

In times of crisis, artists can hold hope. They imagine possibilities, thread unseen connections and design futures. With support, we can all draw out the creative artist in us to do the same.

I come from the C/S/X (Consumer/Survivor/Ex-Patient) Rights Movement, as one of the many people who are recipients of mental health treatment who organize to transform the larger world of mental health rights. I recognize creativity as the ability to see past limitations while reaching for an unshakeable vision of something more. In fact, I believe we need artists and art woven into every facet of civic life to foster true inclusion and equity in our society.

No surprise then that I was thrilled when our Department of Mental Health, in partnership with the Department of Arts and Culture, hired its first Creative Strategist Artist-in-Residence last year. My thinking was that an Artist-in-Residence would be able to offer an outside perspective and fresh approaches, all the while creating beauty along the way. I am happy to note that Anu Yadav has done this and more.

During her time here, Anu has bridged two worlds often removed from each other—civic institutions and grassroots groups. At DMH we understand how art is a powerful tool for wellness and recovery as demonstrated by the many arts and music groups in our clinics. Anu was instrumental in expanding our scope beyond its individual rehabilitative benefits to include how arts-based methods can be part of larger social and organizational change, aligning with our strategic plan to deeply engage communities as leaders in healing. Through this toolkit she provides paradigm-shifting practical exercises and grounded community stories. Taking in the powerful knowledge of these stories, our task is to build upon creative and holistic methods like these towards meeting our mission with communities at the center.

In a society of such scarcity in the midst of abundance, an artist's lens can offer needed insight, encouraging us towards solutions however impossible they may feel. The imagination and spirit embodied in art are powerful catalysts that help us breathe new life into our ability to keep creating solutions for the world we all deserve.

Thank you Anu for getting us started on our journey of moving **Heart Forward**—our DMH pledge to make services inviting, comfortable and respectful—with this toolkit. Its active use can transform our Artwork into **Heartwork**.

**KERIS JÄN MYRICK**, M.B.A., M.S.

Chief of Peer and Allied Health Professions  
Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health



# INTRODUCTION

As I write this, our world is experiencing a global health pandemic laying bare the chronic inequalities many communities have faced for generations, a pandemic that is also exacerbating existing mental health needs. This toolkit is about how sharing stories can be a powerful tool for healing. In the midst of our current public health crisis, practices such as these can allow us to remember our connection and promote well-being. They can help people process the fears and sudden realities that many are facing. They can also support communities in addressing the greatest challenges in our world today. These tools are timely and timeless.

Many grassroots networks recognize the power of story. These networks provide emergency response and arts-based healing and organize in communities as hubs of deep connection. They serve as a moral compass for our larger society in offering models of community care.

As an actress, playwright and community organizer over the past 18 years, holding space for people's stories is at the heart of my artistic practice. And I begin my work by listening.

## A Listening Tour

This past year I worked at the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health as Creative Strategist Artist-in-Residence, the institution's first position of this kind. DMH's 2020–2030 Strategic Plan<sup>1</sup> focuses on community needs. In alignment with that vision, I conducted a *listening tour* of grassroots organizing and arts-based healing groups in LA County to:

- \* *Map where grassroots networks function as trusted wellness centers*
- \* *Understand their approaches to healing as part of addressing systemic inequalities*
- \* *Identify new ways DMH can support community-informed models of mental health care*

As *civic practice*, methods from my community-based theater practice can be applied in non-arts settings to build trust and catalyze dialogue to advance empowerment, outreach, strategic planning and organizational/systems change.

## Stories as Knowledge

Sharing stories is a powerful tool for transformation. Communities, particularly Indigenous communities, have always used stories to heal, transfer knowledge and organize for their needs, rooted in connectedness and respect. This toolkit invites us to also center our connection through storytelling and listening.

These approaches support DMH's mission to strengthen outreach and engagement tactics, expand holistic paradigms for healing<sup>2</sup> to meet evolving needs, and expand its commitment to community partnerships.

**PART ONE** *STORYTELLING METHODS* can support professional development and community outreach in alignment with DMH's Strategic Plan goals, including:

- \* **Education and Awareness (1a.1)**  
*Storytelling can be integrated as part of mental health education and awareness conducted by facilitators, peers or community members.*
- \* **Early Identification and Engagement (1a.2)**  
*Storytelling can help identify needs and/or be used within programming that builds coping skills and promotes community healing.*
- \* **Social Support: People and Purpose (1b.2, 1b.3)**  
*Storytelling can be part of community support and meaningful activity for recovery and wellbeing.*



**PART TWO STORIES** includes interviews from 11 grassroots entities grouped according to three areas of the strategic plan:

- \* **Culture** *Cultural space as healing* (1a.2)
- \* **Community** *Organizing as healing* (1b.2, 1b.3)
- \* **Crisis Response** *Grassroots networks* (2.1)

Each shared story is accompanied by questions for further reflection.

### Who is this Toolkit For?

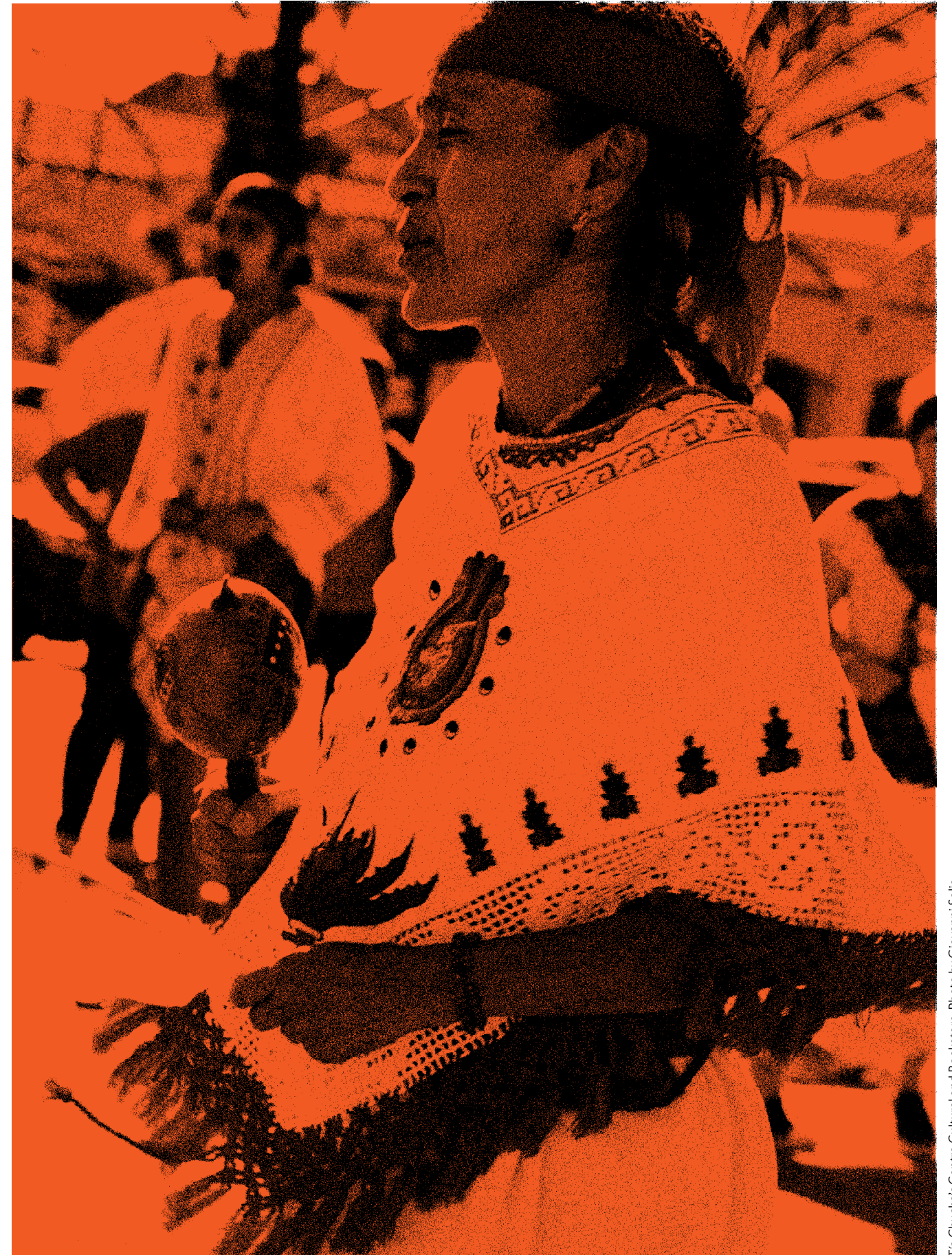
This resource is for DMH outreach and engagement staff, *promotores*, peers and others seeking additional tools for community empowerment work. It is for artists, facilitators, educators, organizers, cultural workers and others whose work also involves community and civic engagement. It is for anyone interested in learning how to do a story circle and other story-based methods where they live. They are for anyone seeking to nurture holistic solutions in and with communities.

### Reach Out!

Use this toolkit however it serves you best. It is made of practices I have found useful and stories from which I have learned. Feel free to reach out to me to share your own learning, questions, comments or suggestions with this kind of work. I'd love to connect!

## ANU YADAV

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Tía Chucha's Centro Cultural and Bookstore. Photo by Giovanni Solis.





Peer Resource Center masks at We Rise 2019. Photo by Vienna To.

## PART ONE STORYTELLING METHODS

Storytelling can promote awareness, identify needs and offer social support. The process involves both a storyteller and a listener. How we listen affects how well we receive the stories people tell and how much they choose to share.

This section covers arts-based facilitation, storytelling methods and ideas. This work is traditionally done in-person within communities but it can also be done by video or phone conferencing. I have included a section specifically on how to adapt these methods to virtual space. I have also included other interactive exercises designed to increase participation in meetings and create opportunities for trust and collaboration.

### On Listening

We all are experts in our own experience. My experience and teachers have taught me that people directly impacted by harmful policies and practices are best positioned to guide the transformation of those very policies and practices. Listening is a way to support the development of all our leadership abilities in a healing way.

Particularly with the methods of shared listening and story circle, the focus is on listening without comment or interruption and in reciprocal confidence. It isn't about offering advice but rather about being present for the speaker, so they are allowed the space and time to notice their own ideas and solutions. These methods rely on mutuality. Everyone has a turn to listen and be listened to as equals. We all bring unique insight and intelligence to the world. These methods are about giving and receiving. Listening and being listened to develops our capacity to listen across differences and respond flexibly to new challenges.

The exercises in this section offer containers for listening. Having clear agreement and structure can help create and maintain a safe and useful space for everyone.

### Arts-Based Facilitation

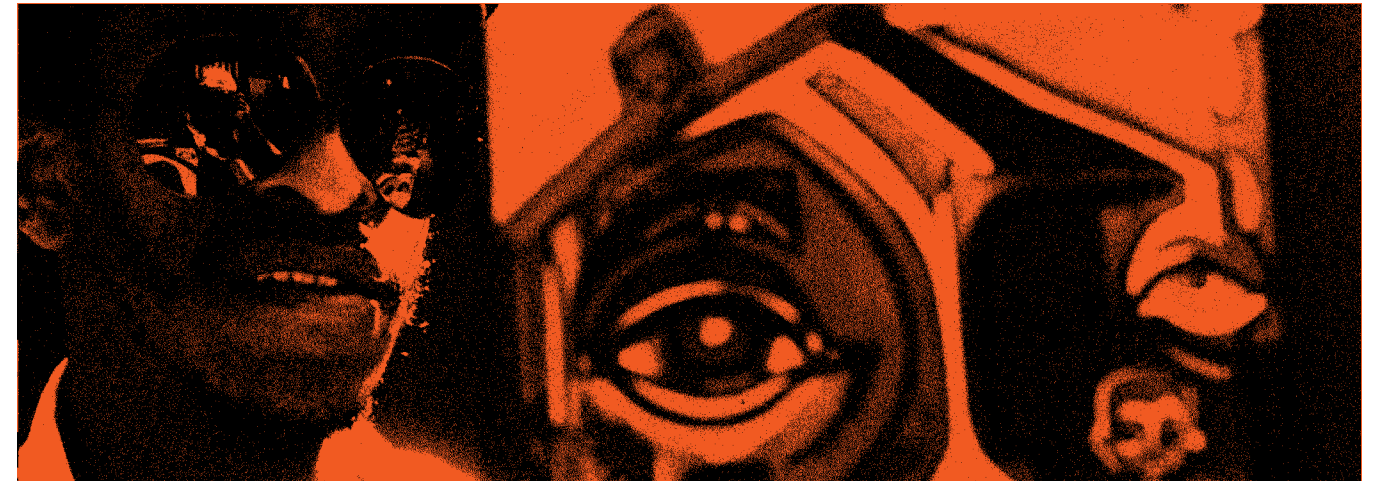
Facilitation is used in many areas of society for different purposes. I define *facilitation* as a process of helping a group of people identify and reach shared goals. *Arts-based* facilitation is a kind of facilitation geared towards fostering collaboration through creative work. It is a cornerstone of my civic and community-based theater experience. For this guide, I am focusing specifically on storytelling and listening-based methods but know that it sits within a larger field that includes many other practices and artforms.

Facilitation can help surface and build upon the best thinking of all members of the group. Arts-based facilitation is about how to *hold space* that invites people to bring their full authentic selves, creativity, identities, heritages and intelligence. The facilitator is in a leadership role, learning from others while also bringing their experience and analysis to bear in creating space for reflection. Facilitation can become a microcosm for democracy, inclusion, and equity in action.



## Principles

- \* **Welcome** *The facilitator sets the tone for the group, modeling generosity, compassion, trust, confidence and enthusiasm.*
- \* **Respect** *To respect means to have due regard for the feelings, wishes, rights or traditions of others. Assuming good intentions and affirming people as they are can encourage fuller participation and possibly transform how people engage in the space.*
- \* **Honesty** *The facilitator does not need to have all the answers. In fact, not knowing what to do in a moment can be a powerful opportunity to facilitate ideas from the room on how to move forward together.*
- \* **Accountability** *The facilitator is responsible for guiding the group process in a way that addresses the needs and expectations of the group. It can mean apologizing when a mistake has been made as well as correcting the mistake.*
- \* **Support** *It's best to facilitate in pairs or teams, or if that is not possible, with additional support and consultation. No one person can be aware of, nor should they have to completely handle, all the challenges that may arise in a group during a process. Even in teams, this can be difficult depending on group needs and the resources available. Having others thinking with you can be instrumental to shifting what is possible and deepening your own learning.*



Roderick Sykes: Director, St. Elmo Village. Photo by Clyde Gillett.

## On Bias

The facilitator functions at the center of a group while also being outside of it at the same time. Any judgments or biases on the part of the facilitator will be unconsciously reflected in the room. The same is true for anyone, but the role of the facilitator—or anyone in a position of power—can and will amplify how bias shows up.

For all of us engaged in community work, connecting across differences of any kind requires a degree of reflection on our own experiences, identities and heritages. It's useful to build our own processes to reflect on biases, fears or defenses that tend to operate in the background but are thrown into sharp relief when working in stressful situations. Personally, I have relied on practices of shared listening and story circles for years. It has built my capacity to connect in more and more inclusive ways with other people and communities.

The reality is we all hold biases because we are human, living in a world with biases. It's impossible to not absorb them ourselves. If we are lucky, we have people around us who lovingly hold us accountable to the values we aspire to live by. But biases and privileges are all informed by histories and systems of racism, classism, sexism, disability discrimination and other inequities.

Project Coordinator Rebecca Gomez of Tía Chucha's Centro Cultural & Bookstore offers this observation:

*“Those in privilege are taught and encouraged their whole lives to share their thoughts and take up space while others are taught to be silent or are silenced. I've seen people and experienced folks listening to and taking more seriously the opinions of cis-men<sup>1</sup> who just reworded the same statement that a woman or someone without as many privileges said earlier in the conversation.”*

How systemic injustices and biases cause trauma is an important issue and deserving of more attention than the scope of this toolkit. Still, these concerns are worth mentioning as something to be mindful of.



## MAPPING

The following exercises are for self-reflection on how our identities and communities shape our connection to others. It is crucial we do this kind of work to better understand ourselves and deepen our capacity to listen. The following mapping activities only require paper and a pen or pencil. You can also make use of other drawing supplies. They can be done at one sitting or expanded as a series of workshops.

### Identity Mapping

I learned a version of this exercise from Los Angeles-based performance artist and educator Dan Kwong as well as Washington, D.C. based theater artist Patrick Crowley. You can do it alone or with 4–12 people you are in community with. (15 minutes plus discussion)

#### Instructions

- \* *Draw a circle in the middle of the page. Draw a line extending from that circle like the ray of a sun. At the end of the line write a word for an identity you hold or a group you identify with. Keep drawing more lines for as many identities as you can think of, writing a word for an additional identity at the end of each line.*
- \* *After you are finished, notice if you wrote identities connected to any of the following: race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, language, ethnicity, geography, citizenship, age. Feel free to include others not listed here. Add your identities in those categories as well.*
- \* *Pick one identity. Write three things you like about being part of that group and three things you don't. You can do this for other identities too. At some point do this exercise specifically for race, class and gender, but all identities are important to think about.*
- \* *Free write for seven minutes on what you noticed about doing the exercise.*

#### Questions

- \* *What did you observe or feel?*
- \* *What was comfortable or uncomfortable?*
- \* *Which identities of the list in step two did you already write before seeing that list? Which did you not think about? Why or why not?*
- \* *Which identity did you choose to write about? Why? If you chose one you felt drawn toward, choose another one you do not feel drawn toward and write about it. Note what you observe and learn in doing that.*

When doing work on our identities, it's crucial to create safety. We have all been impacted differently by our experiences in society. A general guideline is that people first reflect in groups according to shared identities. Depending on the trust in the room, as well as people's self-awareness and curiosity, you can vary this somewhat. But more often than not, without this parameter, it can be challenging to have enough safety for everyone. If you have a diverse group, it's useful to begin with the mutual agreement of what identity you will focus on, making sure each person has someone of the same or similar background for smaller group reflection.



## Community Mapping

There are many ways to do community mapping. This exercise is more for personal reflection on where our personal social support and community networks exist in relationship to the communities in which we work. For this exercise I define community to mean neighborhoods, geographies, family, cultural identity, religious, and other forms of social support. (30 minutes)

### Instructions

- \* *Free write on your definition of community.*
- \* *Draw a map of your community and social support. Include healing practices you enjoy.*
- \* *Write brief responses to the following:*
  1. *What challenges do you face?*
  2. *Where do you go for support and for what purpose? Where could you use more support?*
- \* *Now map the communities you work with:*
  1. *Where is there overlap or difference between both maps? Why?*
  2. *What are steps or resources that could bring the maps in closer overlap if they are not already? How would this be an improvement?*
  3. *What communities are not included in both maps? What are possible steps to expand the maps to include some or all of those communities? Would that be better?*
  4. *Free write your observations, feelings and/or takeaways after doing this exercise.*

These exercises are a sample of the many tools people can use to understand how our own sense of belonging guides our ability to listen both within our own communities and to other communities as well. It's important to construct and refine our own spaces for reflection, renewal and rigor so that we cultivate generosity, respect, curiosity and open-heartedness with everyone we engage with where we live, work and play.



St. Elmo Village. Photo by Lillian Kalish.



## ICEBREAKERS

Below are short activities that can be used in a group to increase engagement. Think about the purpose of the meeting and how these activities can be used while honoring group agreements and expectations.

- \* **Opening Question** *If it's a small enough group size, ask people to share something like, "What is something new and interesting in your life?" or, "What's something you have appreciated lately?" or even, "What did you do last weekend?"*
- \* **Popcorn of Values** *Ask the group to think of a word for a core value important to them. Ask everyone to say their value aloud at the same time. This helps break the ice of who talks first. Then, have a few people share one at a time. Repeat what you hear in case some responses were not heard. Connect the exercise to the shared purpose of the meeting.*
- \* **Paired Listening** *When in a large group, have people pair up and share something about themselves with another person for a few minutes. One example is "think of a story connected to the value you shared earlier," if following the popcorn exercise. Afterwards, invite brief responses in the bigger group on what people heard.*
- \* **Show of Hands** *Ask a series of yes or no questions pertaining to the subject of your meeting, and ask participants to respond by gesture.*
- \* **Breakout Groups** *Divide into smaller groups. Give specific prompts or questions. You can assign a notetaker to each group who will briefly report back to the larger group.*

## SHARED LISTENING

Shared listening is a method of listening without interruption or comment and noticing what can happen when all we do is listen attentively and warmly. It can be guided by a question from the facilitator, or whatever is on the participant's mind. This activity can take as little as 15 minutes or be adapted for a longer workshop.

### How to Begin

- \* **Gather the Group** *It helps to have two facilitators, one main facilitator and one assisting. Gather everyone in a quiet space where the group can be uninterrupted. Make sure it is accessible with comfortable seating for varying body types and abilities. It might be useful to prepare the space beforehand to facilitate connection and ease.*
- \* **Introduce Purpose** *Connect the listening activity to the shared purpose of the group. You can ask people to describe qualities or actions from a time they felt truly understood.*
- \* **Introductions** *If not everyone knows each other, do introductions with names, pronouns<sup>2</sup> and something positive in their life. If it's a larger group, ask people to keep it short — one sentence — or ask people to introduce themselves to someone next to them.*



Wellness Wednesdays. Photo by Self Help Graphics.



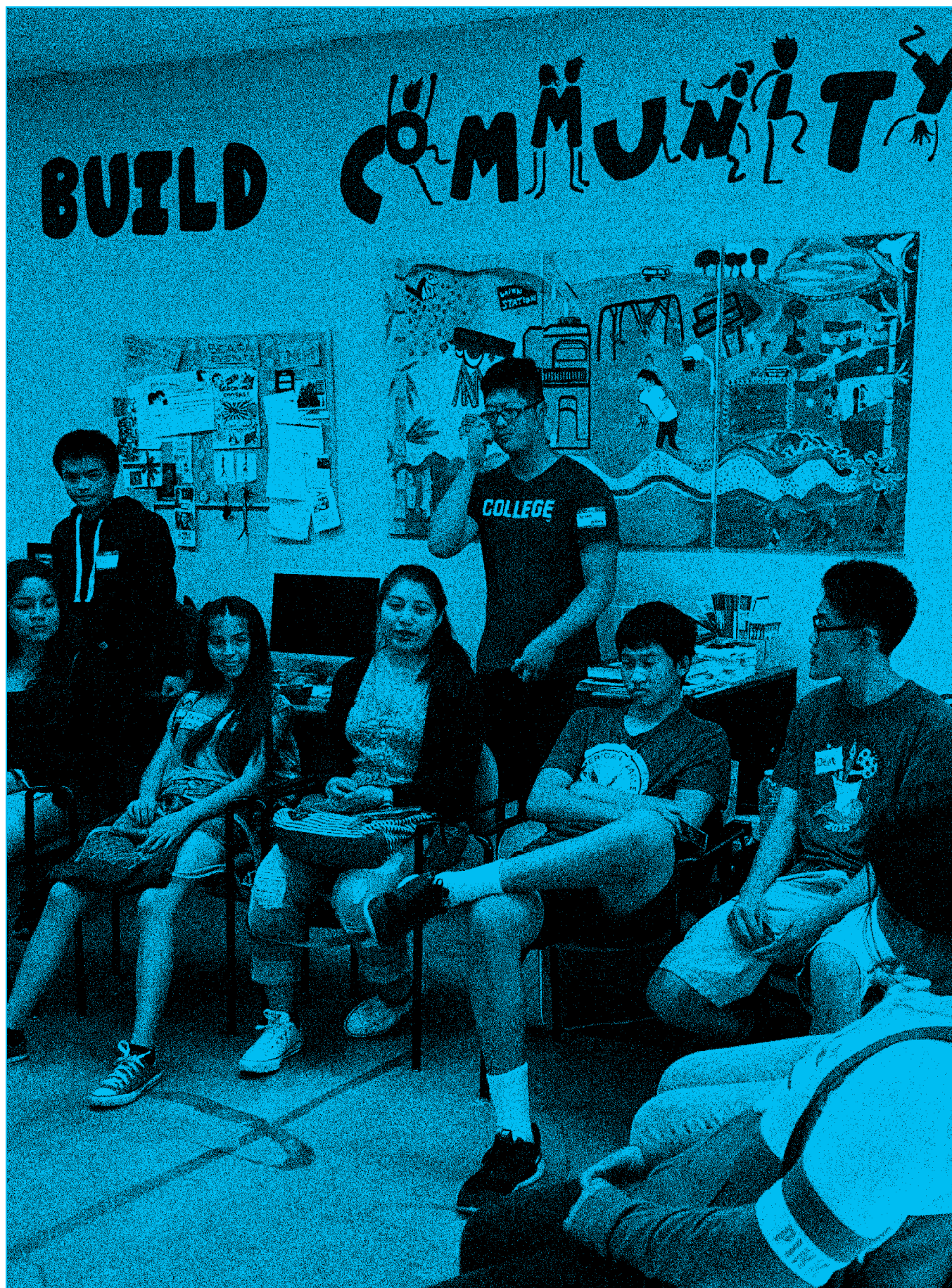


Photo courtesy of SEACA.

\* **Shared Listening** Have people in groups of two or three. They decide who speaks first, with three minutes each in a two-person group, or two minutes in a three-person group. The listener's only job is to listen without comment or question, focusing all their attention on the speaker. The facilitator keeps time and indicates when to switch roles between speaker and listener. Acknowledge it might feel odd or uncomfortable at first, but to just try and be curious. Share the following guidelines:

1. **Confidentiality** We agree to not refer to what a speaker shares outside of their time to speak. This helps people to have control over what they share, especially if it brings up emotion. If a listener wants to, they can ask, "May I ask you about what you shared?" But the purpose is to be present to what a speaker shares rather than our own curiosity as a listener. When it's time to switch, the person who was previously the listener agrees to not refer to what the other person shared. Instead they just speak from their own experience.
2. **Listening is as Important as Talking** Instead of planning in advance what you will say, be present as a listener.

\* **Reflection** After the exercise, invite discussion. Remind participants not to refer to the content of what others shared. Below are sample questions:

1. Was it easier to listen or to speak?
2. What was it like to listen and to speak?
3. What was interesting? What was challenging?
4. What did you learn or appreciate?
5. What could be the application of this work in other settings?

This activity can be adapted to fit longer workshops, organized around group goals and integrated with activities beyond this toolkit.



## STORY CIRCLE

*“If you trust the circle, when it comes your turn to tell, a story will be there.”*

— **John O’Neal** *Junebug Productions*

A story circle is made up of people sharing stories from their own experience. It is like shared listening, but more specifically about telling stories with a beginning, middle and end.

Just like shared listening, story circles can also be powerful bonding experiences within communities and allow people to heal. They are traditionally done in-person but can be adapted to video or phone conferencing when necessary.

I learned about story circles from Roadside Theater<sup>3</sup>, founded in 1975 in the coal fields of Appalachia as part of the media, arts and education center Appalshop. But this method was developed by many other cultural workers too, such as the late John O’Neal<sup>4</sup>, and the Free Southern Theater<sup>5</sup> during the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. These instructions come from their work.

### What’s a Story?

A story can be a dream, a moment or an experience that has a beginning, middle and end with definable characters, purpose and actions. For the story circle, it’s helpful to think about it as your lived experience versus an argument, debate, or theory.

### How to Begin

I encourage you to try this first with people in your own community or social support network. Before crossing divides of community and institution, connecting in our own communities can help us be clear, mindful and more present in other spaces.

**\* Gather People** *Gather everyone in a quiet uninterrupted space. Often this can happen after sharing a meal. There should be at least one main facilitator and one support person to assist.*

**\* Introduce the Idea** *Talk about the reason for calling a story circle, explaining what you are trying to do and allowing people a chance to agree. If they don’t, that’s useful information too. You will be able to gauge the agreement of the room, adjusting to what works in different environments.*

### \* Introductions

1. *Invite everyone to introduce themselves, tell how they feel about the purpose of the exercise and what they’d like to accomplish. Give people a chance to share their name and pronouns.*
2. *You can start by introducing yourself and model the process for the story circle itself by looking to the person on your left to go next. This helps the group think in terms of taking turns and knowing who goes next. This arrangement provides opportunity for those less inclined to talk.*

**\* Talk About the Circle** *Next, the facilitator can talk about the democratic and inclusive nature of the circle, i.e., we are all equal. It’s important to adjust everyone’s physical place in the circle so they can all see each other. If others join, adjust again.*

**\* Mutual Agreements** *Have a brief discussion on people’s expectations of how to interact with each other to get the most out of the story experience. A story circle works best if people give their full attention, with cell phones turned off. Below are guidelines:*

1. **Confidentiality** *We agree to maintain confidentiality, not referring to or sharing people’s stories after the story circle session ends. Like shared listening, this helps people to have say over their own story.*
2. **Listening is as Important as Talking** *Instead of trying to plan your story in advance, be present to the stories before you.*
3. **No Cross Talk** *No commenting or responding to anyone’s story during the circle.*
4. **Everyone has equal speaking time** *If someone takes less time, be present to their silence. Some silence in between sharing is okay. They might say more before their time is up. Use a timer.*

5. **Speakers Can Pass** *People can choose not to speak when it's their turn. The facilitator can give them another chance to speak at the end of the go-around.*

6. **Everyone Has a Right to Their Story** *As John O'Neal says, you don't have to like someone's story, but "respect their right to tell it."*

\* **Decide the Theme** *People discuss and agree upon a shared theme of the story circle. For example, "courage," or "grace," etc. It doesn't have to take long. You can facilitate this process by asking for a word that captures a value important to people in the circle. After hearing a few, pick one that everyone can agree to and continue.*

\* **Keep Track of Time** *If it is a large group, divide into smaller groups of five or six people with three to five minutes of speaking time each. Plan for enough discussion time afterwards.*

\* **Share Stories** *Someone begins by sharing a story with a beginning, middle and end from their experience connected to the theme.*

\* **Reflection** *Invite people to discuss what stood out to them about what was shared, without repeating what other people said.*

\* **Closing** *You may close the story circle with each person sharing one thing they appreciated and one thing they are looking forward to. If you have a very large group, for the sake of time, have each person share a one-word appreciation.*

## FACILITATING IN A VIRTUAL SPACE

It's one thing to do these practices with a group in person. It's another to do it through a screen.

The same exercises can be done through video conference. The platform Zoom allows for breakout rooms which means people can breakout into smaller groups through virtual 'rooms.' Below are some suggestions.

### Designate a Tech Person

Someone familiar with the platform can be in charge of putting people in rooms or fielding any technical glitches.

### Using Virtual Rooms

Particularly for Zoom, this function allows for smaller group or paired discussions. Assign groups ahead of time or allot time in the meeting to organize it. If separate rooms are not possible, people can use their phones while muting the video conference — provided everyone has phone access and contact information.

### Speaking Order

Establish a speaking order or *stack* by just calling a few names either as you see them on the screen or choosing people who don't tend to talk first and most. Calling on people shortens the silence that can follow open-ended questions like, "Who wants to go first?" This order can be the *circle* of the group. Invite people to talk with clear time limits. Designate someone to keep track of time.

## PHONE CONFERENCE CALLS

Not everyone is able to participate in video calls. Below are ideas to facilitate phone conference calls with a large group from Michael Rohd, Lead Artist of Civic Imagination at the Center for Performance and Civic Practice<sup>6</sup>:

### Structure

Give people space to reflect by integrating quiet moments into the call. Every 10–15 minutes invite people to take a 30-second breather to think about what they are hearing, then continue moving forward together.

### Texting

Invite people to text or tweet any questions or comments.

### Real-time Document Sharing

Share an online document during the call.

### List of Names

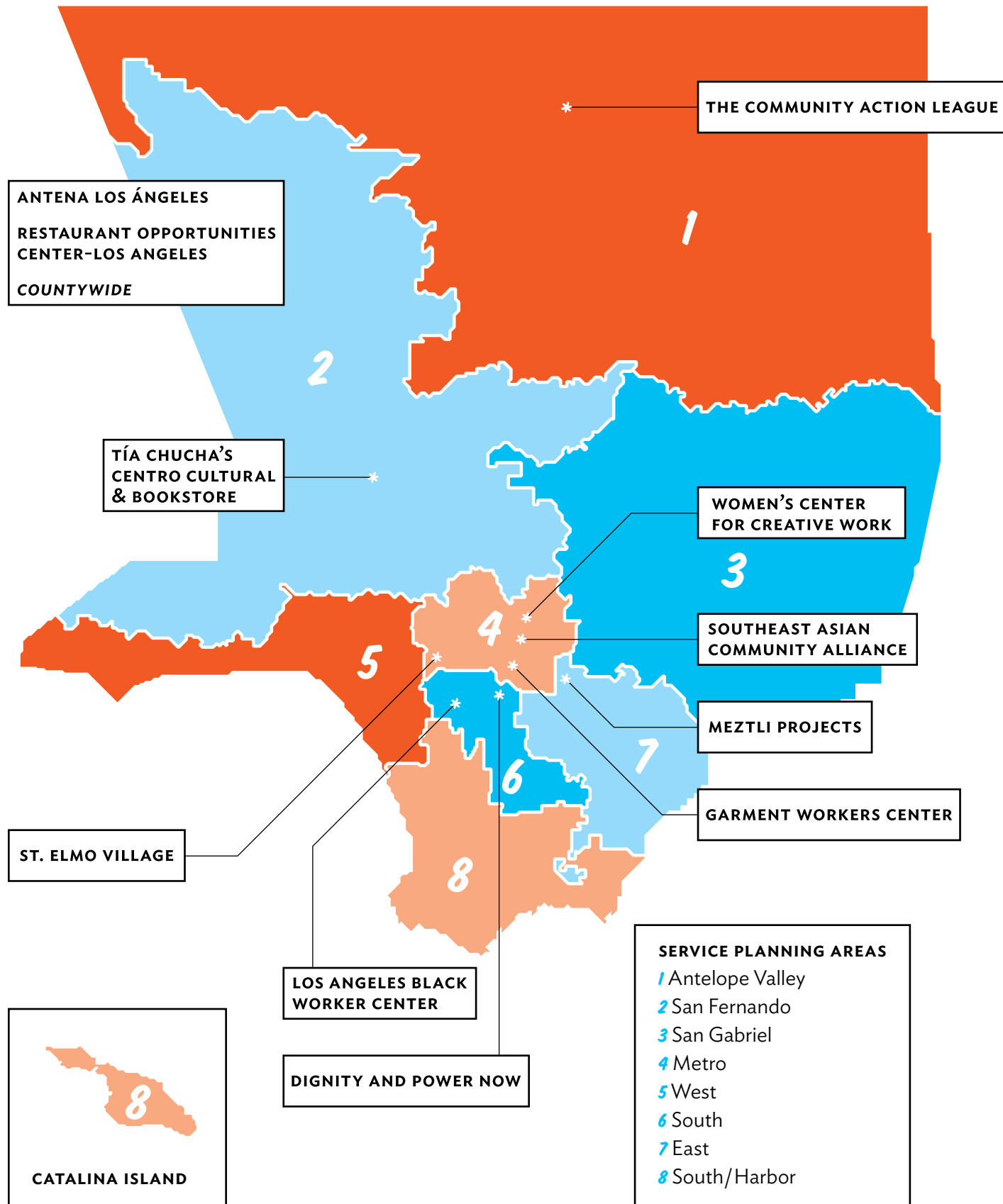
Have everyone's name in front of you on a list for reference.

### Acknowledge the Challenge

Admit upfront this will be messy and not everyone will feel heard, but we will try to make this work together.



# LOS ANGELES COUNTY



## PART TWO STORIES

In this section are stories from a few grassroots groups throughout Los Angeles County on their work as connected to healing. I interviewed them in March 2020 just as LA County issued a safer-at-home order in response to the COVID-19 public health pandemic. The crisis only emphasized even more the critical importance of their work.

Many of them didn't know about the Department of Mental Health's Strategic Plan, yet their work overlaps with many of its goals point by point. This fortunate coincidence reveals how communities often meet the challenge of addressing their own healing and can offer valuable perspective on policy, programs and models of care. It also demonstrates how communities are in a perfect position to inform DMH's organizational structure, process and outcomes.

But beyond DMH's strategic considerations, I invite you to use this section to also reflect on your own experience. I've included discussion questions about challenging issues in society as well as asking you about your personal histories. They are meant as an offering, not as a requirement. Since we are all experts in our own experience, we always get to choose how we share ourselves and in what settings that are safe for us.

Use everything in this section as a point of departure in whatever way best serves your own journey of learning and self-reflection. You can read them slowly with time for discussion with another person or a group or journal on your own. The stories here are so rich and packed with lessons they are best absorbed a story or two at a time.

As a community-based theater practitioner engaged in the art of radical listening for the past 20 years, I hold each story and the people who honored me with them as sacred. Ideally, sharing stories is part of a longer-term process of building trust with communities, particularly those that have historically been hurt by institutions not of their making. As people we strive to reach each other across divides, institutional or otherwise. It is useful to notice how you personally connect to the stories in this section and the communities they represent. Michael Rohd, Lead Artist of Civic Imagination at the Center for Performance and Civic Practice, talks about *window* and *mirror* moments. For each story, consider asking:

- \* *What's a 'window' moment where you saw and connected to the experience of someone you didn't expect to relate to?*
- \* *What's a 'mirror' moment where you saw your own experience reflected back? What does it remind you of from your own experience?*

Reflecting on our experience strengthens our potential for empathy and capacity for building trust and listening across differences.

Accompanying each story is:

- \* *A short description about the storyteller and their organization*
- \* *Contact information*
- \* *Themes and connections to strategic plan goals*
- \* *Discussion prompts*

The purpose of this section is to support reflection and draw lessons that show how people, regardless of where we are all positioned, can partner as equals towards healing justice for all.

## CULTURE

### Cultural Space as Healing

*“It just changes you”*

**St. Elmo Village**, founded in 1969, provides free arts workshops, festivals, programs, gardening, housing and a polling location. It is where Alexander-Sykes has been doing community arts work for over 40 years. She talks about how St. Elmo Village transforms people across generations.

— **Jacqueline Alexander-Sykes**

Director and Administrator  
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Service Area 4

*“People will walk down the street and everybody’s in such a hurry. But when they almost get to the property, they slow down a little bit. It just changes you. We have a pond the children built. They were five to 12 years old. They just started and it took them a year, and in that process, somebody complained to the Department of Building and Safety. And so, the [inspector] guy is walking down the driveway and he’s a little hostile, like, ‘I’m going to get these people.’ You know, child labor or whatever he’s talking about. And he saw these kids learning and working as a team and having fun and learning how to recycle water and so forth that he just — that negativity or that anger just dispersed. He wound up putting a green mark on his pad and giving a \$100 donation to the workshop because negativity may enter, but what we’re doing is so organic and good that it just kind of disperses it. So that’s how we heal ourselves with what we do.”*



### Questions for Reflection

- \* *Have you had an experience where an interaction went from negative to positive in what felt like an instant? What happened and why?*
- \* *What activities or cultural spaces in your community promote healing?*
- \* *What qualities do community spaces offer that contribute to healing? Can institutions offer these same qualities? How?*



50th Anniversary celebration of St. Elmo Village. Photo by Lillian Kalish.

**Themes** Arts, Community, Families, Housing, Youth

**Strategic Plan Points** 1a.1 education, 1a.2 engagement, 1a.3 follow up, 1b.2 kin, 1b.3 purpose, 1c.3 outpatient care, 2.3 restorative care, 4.2 organizational process, 4.3 organizational outcomes





Photo by David Rosales.

## “Find the Medicine”

### Tía Chucha's Centro Cultural & Bookstore

is the only bookstore and cultural center in the Northeast San Fernando Valley, an area with a population of 500,000. Run by community members, the center focuses on transformative healing through ancestral knowledge, the arts, literacy and creative engagement programs and experiences.

### — Luis J. Rodriguez (Mixcoatl Itztlacuiloh) & Trini Rodriguez (Tlazohtteotl)

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Service Area 2

Luis:

“As Indigenous people we understood healing was in everything and everywhere. It’s knowing how to find the medicine yourself, in however you imagine the divine. We intentionally organized Tía Chucha’s to be guided by the ancestral knowledge that allows us to tap into this understanding. A lot of healing is going on there even though it may not be recognized as such, particularly what you would call emotional psychological healing. Trauma is pretty evident in this community. There’s a half a million people in the Northeast Valley and 80% are Mexican and Central American. Pacoima, one of the poorest communities in L.A. county, is there. It’s a community with a lot of need, but we brought in the arts as a way to get people to understand that in times of chaos, when we’re caught up in a crisis, creativity is a path out of it. In turn, [it] brings in the kind of order that meets the challenges of what people are facing. And to me, that’s important. To let people understand that healing is something that we have within our grasp.”





## “See the Beauty”

Trini:

“At a writing circle, for instance, you think, oh, you’re just going to write poetry. But of course, what comes out in the writing is all the things you’re contending with, whether it’s personal or financial or just past experiences. In the process, people share their stories and see themselves in each other. So, it really breaks down the isolation and alienation that a lot of times our communities find themselves in, either because of policies that exclude them or misinformation that scapegoats them as the reasons for our society’s issues. Sharing experiences shows the humanity of what we’re all trying to deal with. And that’s what the space primarily does. It creates a community environment to share and to see each other and to see the beauty that we all have regardless of the kind of challenges that we face day to day.”

### Questions for Reflection

- \* How have challenges or experiences in your life increased your understanding and empathy across differences? How have they acted as barriers or limits? How have you created community because of or despite these experiences?
- \* How has ancestral knowledge been a form of healing for communities?
- \* What of your cultural traditions have promoted healing in your life?
- \* How have policies that excluded or scapegoated communities impacted community healing?

**Themes** Arts, Families, Incarceration, Indigenous, Youth, Latinx

**Strategic Plan Points** 1a.1 education, 1a.2 engagement, 1a.3 follow up, 1b.1 housing, 1b.2 kin, 1b.3 purpose, 1c.1 assessment, 1c.2 service coordination, 1c.3 outpatient care, 2.3 restorative care, 4.2 organizational process, 4.3 organizational outcomes



Self Help Graphics workshop at Tia Chucha's Centro Cultural and Bookstore. Photo by Giovanni Solis.



Kalpuli Temachtia Quetzalcoatli from San Fernando. Photo by Giovanni Solis.



“Somebody sees something in you”

**Meztli Projects** is an Indigenous-based arts & culture collaborative centering Indigeneity into the creative practice of Los Angeles by using arts-based strategies to support, advocate for, and organize to highlight Native/Indigenous Artists and systems-impacted youth. Meztli Projects operates out of Apachianga (East Los Angeles) in Tovaangar (Los Angeles County) lands stewarded since time immemorial by families and villages now known as the Acjachemen, Chumash, Tataviam and Tongva Tribal Nations.

— **Joel Garcia**

Founder  
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Service Area 7

“I grew up in the projects here in East LA. It wasn’t until a series of killings that Ruben Guevara<sup>1</sup>, who is this LA icon of Chicano culture, launched an organization ‘Arts 4 City Youth’ to do arts programming. Ruben commissioned Paul Botello to do a mural at the projects. That’s how I began my apprenticeship with him. But beyond that, there was no arts programming. So, for me it took one person to advocate for resources to then hire this one artist that then eventually hired me. Very quickly my apprenticeship with Paul revolved around murals and that was in high school. I graduated and then went straight into Otis College of Art and Design. While I was at Otis, I got shot during my first semester. It was pretty traumatic for my family, but it was probably the best thing that could have happened because it made me slow down and redirected my creative practice to focus on ‘artivism’ and culturally based work. I wasn’t out running around aimlessly. And so, in the two months that I was stuck at home, I learned Photoshop and Illustrator.

At the same time, my friend’s band had gotten signed to Epitaph Records. I had been doing T-shirts, flyers for them and covers for their tapes. I delivered the album design and art to the record label. They liked what I did and then they kept bringing me back. I went from working with backyard artists to international artists. And so that idea of nurturing people comes from that path of, okay, somebody sees something in you and they’re going to do their best to provide a whole ecosystem of resources — holistic, in every sense of that word. And I just thought, ‘This is great if everybody has this.’”



## Questions for Reflection

- \* Garcia’s community invested in him and he invested in his community. What are the life-saving and life-sustaining activities in your community?
- \* How did Garcia respond to different crises with creativity? How do you and those around you respond to crises with creativity?
- \* Map the life lines or social support networks in your community. What are the ways they use art, culture and/or creativity to promote healing?
- \* In the map of your community life lines how are relationships across generations nurtured? If mentorship relationships are in place, what qualities make them successful?



Meztli Projects Drum making workshop. Photo by Joel Garcia.

**Themes** Arts, Indigenous, Systems-Impacted Youth

**Strategic Plan Points** 1a.1 education, 1a.2 engagement, 1a.3 follow up, 1b.1 housing, 1b.2 kin, 1b.3 purpose, 1c.1 assessment, 2.3 restorative care, 4.2 organizational process, 4.3 organizational outcomes



“Housing justice is healing justice”

## Women’s Center for Creative Work

is a publishing house, co-working space and cultural center with programming in activism, wellness and the arts in Elysian Valley of North-east Los Angeles.

### — Sarah Williams

Executive Director  
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Service Area 4

“There’s just such deep financial inequity in LA County and we’re seeing now how people are feeling deeply, deeply panicked about how they’re going to pay rent. From a feminist agenda, I am thinking about how we rewire systems of inequality so they can be more equitable. Something that we try to embody is offsetting some of those deeply inequitable systems. How are we making sure that our pay scale is really fair? So, things like women and women of color being paid chronically less, how can we fix that at least within our own organization and safeguard that it’s not happening? How do we deeply change these horribly inequitable systems to support people in more equitable ways? We’re seeing the stark reality now when people really need a break in their rent for the next couple months. But developers and landlords are being privileged over everyone else. I think housing justice is healing justice.”

### Questions for Reflection

- \* What is your vision of equity within society? Within your community? Start a conversation with someone else on how your responses to this question might be similar or different. Consider what responses might be for other groups and communities.
- \* Williams identifies how chronic conditions are exacerbated by crisis. Note the chronic inequities she mentions. What strategies address these conditions in your work?
- \* Who gets privileged during a crisis and why? How can equality be found and maintained during a crisis?
- \* How is healing impacted by poverty and lack of affordable housing?



WCCW staff with fall programmer Dez Davis. Photo courtesy of WCCW.

**Themes** Culture, Equity, Feminism, Housing

**Strategic Plan Points** 1a.1 education, 1a.2 engagement, 1a.3 follow up, 1b.1 housing, 1b.2 kin, 1b.3 purpose, 1c.1 assessment, 2.3 restorative care, 4.2 organizational process, 4.3 organizational outcomes



## Section Discussion Questions

- \* *How do cultural spaces serve as sites of healing for historically under-represented communities? What are examples from your experience?*
- \* *What constitutes healing? Can healing be facilitated outside of government-run settings? In what ways are alternative cultural options for healing easier to access?*
- \* *Where have cultural spaces successfully collaborated with DMH? What have been challenges? How could partnerships expand and deepen?*



Installation at St. Elmo Village. Photo by Lillian Kalish.





Antena Los Angeles w/ Cocina Abierta & Restaurant Opportunities Center-Los Angeles: Food Labor Justice + Language Justice: A Bilingual Exchange, 2016. The Hammer Museum. Photo by Barbara Katz.

## COMMUNITY

### Organizing as Healing

*“How deeply our stories live within us”*

#### Antena Los Ángeles

is a collective dedicated to language justice advocacy and organizing. Language justice includes the idea that we have a right to communicate in our own language(s) and a right to participate fully in all the spaces in which we work or live. Language justice is based on a shared commitment to practices of equitable communication across languages and a belief in the language rights of all people. Antena Los Ángeles supports groups and organizations through interpreting, translation, consulting, training and facilitation.

#### — Jen Hofer & Alexia Veytia

Collective Members

Antena Los Ángeles

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Countywide

In 2012, Jen Hofer was part of an interpretation team working with the Caravan for Peace with Justice and Dignity<sup>2</sup> led by Mexican poet Javier Sicilia and others to raise awareness about the impact of the violence from drug wars. Hofer recalls a moment when they felt the power of language justice work as healing.

*“There was something about that evening that the folks on the caravan who were so passionately talking about the loved ones they had lost and the feelings that came up in that. [As interpreters] normally you’ll go fifteen to twenty minutes and then you’ll switch with your partner. We were switching every three to five minutes because we would then walk around the back behind the place where people were presenting, to weep and then come back and switch with the other person. We didn’t even have time to communicate with each other about it. We just saw how the other person was feeling and had an interpreter-intuitive sixth sense. So, in terms of self-care and community care to keep ourselves able to interpret well — it’s not about what those stories bring up in me. I want to be compassionate, but I want to allow that person’s story to come through. It just encapsulated so many different things about the connection between healing work and language work and how deeply our stories live within us and how deeply they live in language. Stories go beyond language, but they’re also part of the texture of language.”*



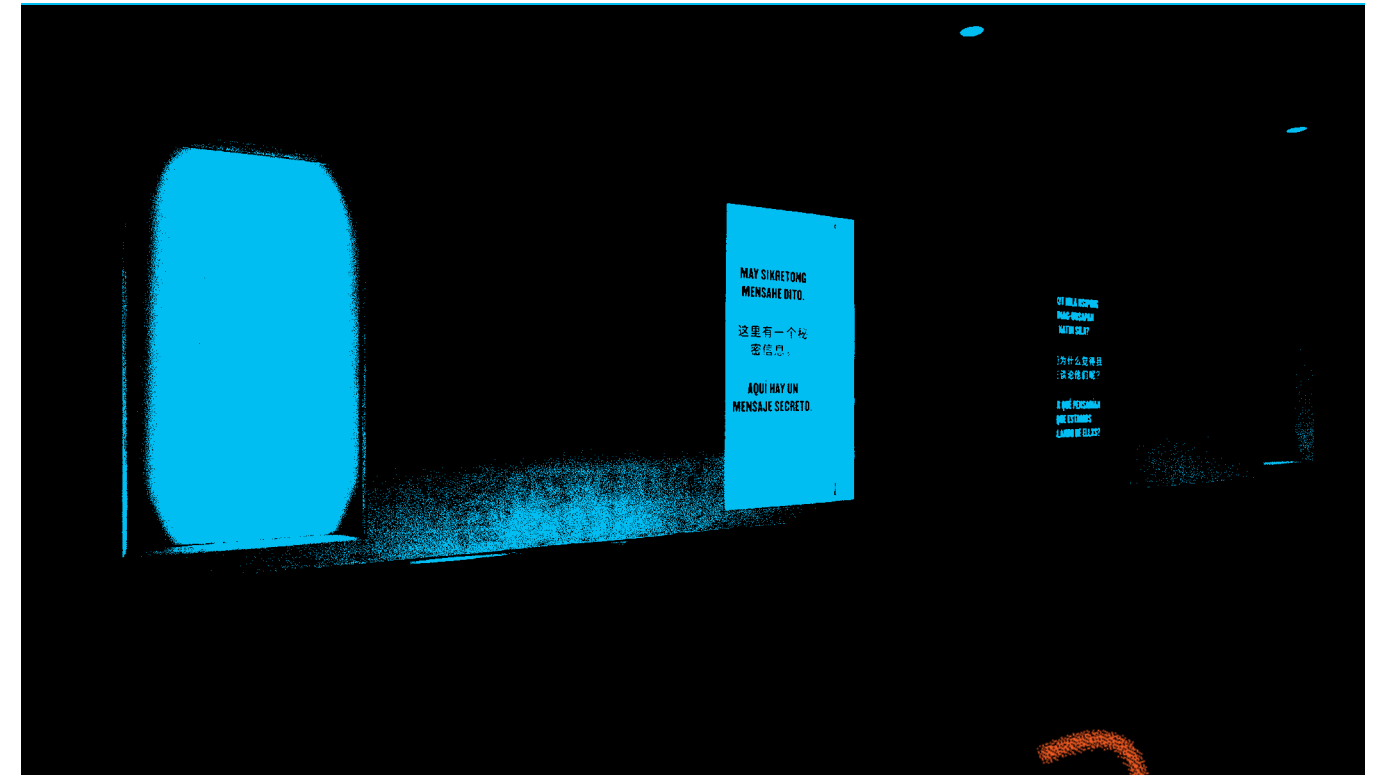
## “It’s revolutionary to be able to connect”

Veytia recalls a meeting with the organizing group Korean Immigrant Workers Alliance<sup>3</sup> as part of a simultaneous language interpretation team in Korean, Mandarin, English and Spanish.

“Something that I think about a lot, even for myself, is healing from isolation. That isolation is something so embedded in the system [we live in]. I was interpreting and someone made a joke. And as we were doing relay [interpretation across multiple languages], you could hear people starting to laugh at the joke within a nanosecond of difference. And it was the most beautiful thing. People were looking at each other who otherwise wouldn’t have been able to share this laugh. Laughter is something so universal and so necessary for connection and people listening to the stories. That for me, that was just incredible. It was truly something revolutionary to be able to connect in this moment and not be isolated anymore.”

### Questions for Reflection

- \* Hofer talks about how “stories go beyond language, but they’re also part of the texture of language.” What do you think this means? What does it remind you of in your own experience of language and stories?
- \* What were the language(s) in your household growing up and how is that different from the languages in your life now? What are the languages in your community?
- \* Have you experienced “relay interpretation” as Veytia shared? If so, what did you notice? If not, in what situations could it change how people relate to each other?
- \* How can it be “revolutionary to be able to connect”?
- \* Both Hofer and Veytia speak of language as a bridge to access emotional connection. How is language used in your community to facilitate various emotional interactions?



Atentamente / 敬上 / Sumasaiyo, 2016. The Hammer Museum.



**Themes** Community, Cross-Language Communication, Organizing, Storytelling, Violence

**Strategic Plan Points** 1a.1 education, 1a.2 engagement, 1a.3 follow up, 1b.2 kin, 1b.3 purpose, 1c.1 assessment, 1c.2 service coordination, 1c.3 outpatient care, 2.3 restorative care, 4.2 organizational process, 4.3 organizational outcomes

“This job literally saved my life”

— **Manuel Villanueva**

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 Countywide

**Restaurant Opportunities Center-Los Angeles** organizes restaurant workers throughout Los Angeles County to improve wages and working conditions. It is part of ROC United, a national organization activating thousands of restaurant workers, employers, allies and consumers. Villanueva worked in the restaurant industry for 10 years and he describes the healing power of organizing.

“I became unemployed and I was looking for a job for over three months. My dad got sick and we were about to lose our apartment. I’ve been taking care of my parents for over 12 years now. And I said, you know what? Every job that I go to, it’s either I’m too dark or I’m too old and not as pretty to be on the front [as serving staff]. That was the feedback I used to get at every restaurant that was hiring. That was my breaking point. I was ready to take my own life. That lie I heard over time that I was disposable wasn’t a lie anymore. When I finally found employment again, I understood that certain conditions I needed to adapt to in order for me to stay employed were not okay. And so after finding out about ROC-LA and getting involved — first being a volunteer and learning that my voice had power and weight in society — that was when I realized that there were a lot of people feeling the same way and they were more isolated. I said, ‘You know what? I wouldn’t want anybody to go through the same situation. If I have this knowledge now, it is my responsibility to share it with others so they don’t feel that they should just settle for scraps.’ Seeing the power that the members have and how they push themselves. They push you to move forward and they take that responsibility on their own. So that’s what keeps me going every day. [As an organizer for ROC-LA now] this job literally saved my life.”



### Questions for Reflection

- \* How can discrimination impact a person’s mental health? How can others support an impacted person?
- \* Do you have personal experiences of being marginalized? What helped you?
- \* Why is employment often connected to one’s mental health?
- \* How do community connections sustain us through crisis?

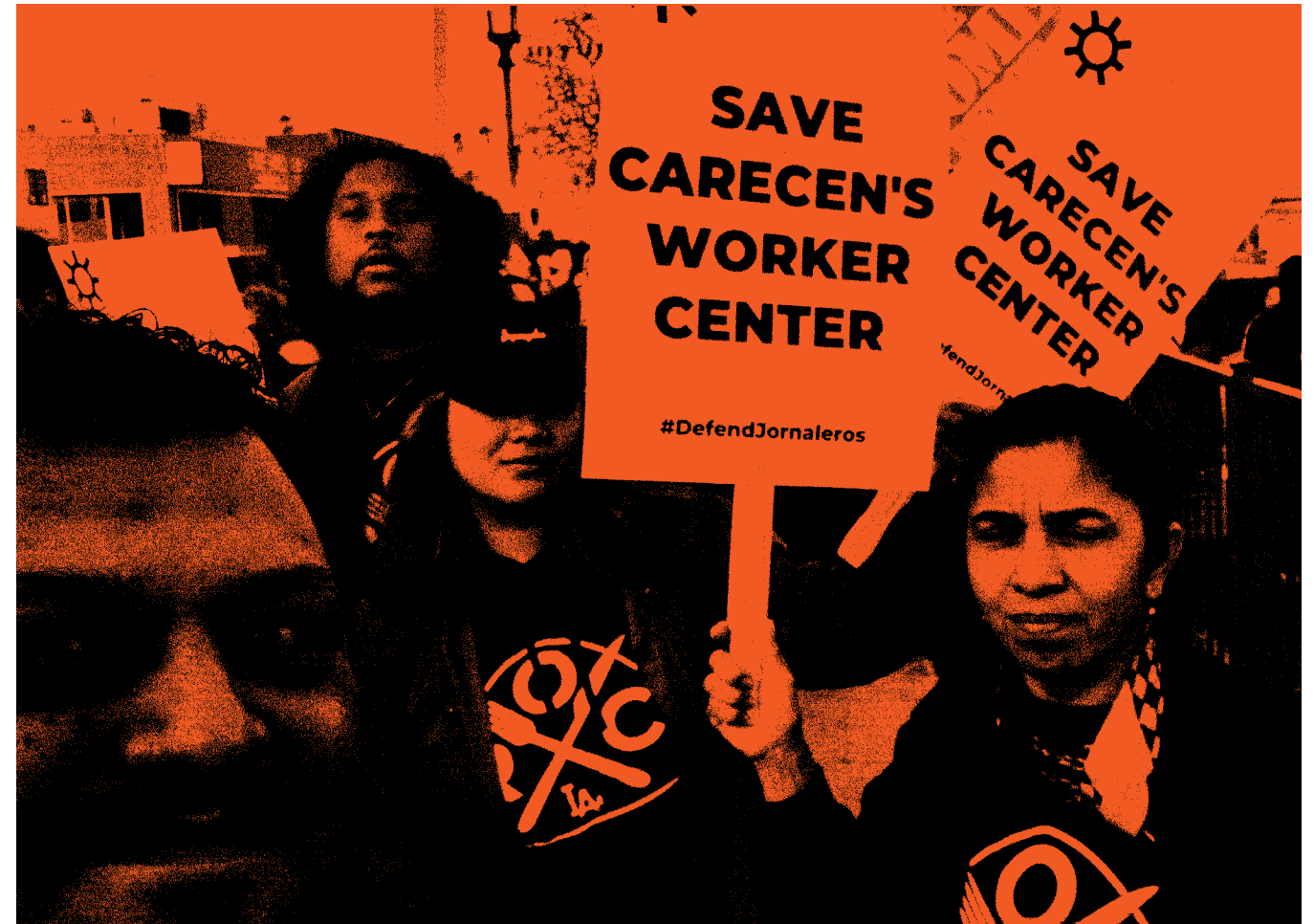


Photo courtesy of Restaurant Opportunities Center-Los Angeles.

**Themes** Housing, Labor, Organizing, Suicide, Racism

**Strategic Plan Points** 1a.1 education, 1a.2 engagement, 1a.3 follow up, 1b.2 kin, 1b.3 purpose, 4.2 organizational process, 4.3 organizational outcomes



“What keeps me going”

## The Community Action League

is an organizing group addressing the social and economic needs of communities throughout Antelope Valley. Mitchell talks about the power of healing from trauma.

— **Pharaoh Mitchell**

Chief Executive Officer  
The Community Action League  
(661) 888-3856  
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Service Area 1

“As men we were taught that it’s shameful to show emotions. But now, we as men are realizing that, ‘Hey, we can speak our emotions.’ I was abused as a child. My mother used to beat me so bad I had welts on every part of my body. I got tired of being beat-up so I ran away from home at 14 years old and I was sleeping in the bushes, in the snow in Cleveland, Ohio. I had to struggle out in the streets, homeless. [And] what keeps me going is little Pharaoh [my younger self]. As an adult, I keep little Pharaoh. He stays with me. I make sure he’s happy. I make sure if he wants to go play, if he wants to go to the beach, whatever he wants to do, I make sure he does that. That’s my reward to him and myself. All this work made me who I am today. I raised five step-kids, including my daughter and I literally saved each of these kids’ lives. I will not let a child or a person around me be in any harm’s way. Because I was brought up with abuse, it gave me special abilities to talk to people and help them with their mental problems. The only way we’re going to be able to heal our future generations is if we start healing and taking care of each other right now.”

### Questions for Reflection

- \* How do people heal from abuse? What are ways others can support?
- \* How have challenges you’ve faced increased your understanding and empathy? How have these challenges served as barriers or limits? How have you created community?
- \* What are examples of resilience from your life or community?

**Themes** Childhood, Housing, Men, Organizing, Violence

**Strategic Plan Points** 1a.1 education, 1a.2 engagement, 1a.3 follow up, 1b.1 housing, 1b.2 kin, 1b.3 purpose, 1c.1 assessment, 4.2 organizational process, 4.3 organizational outcomes

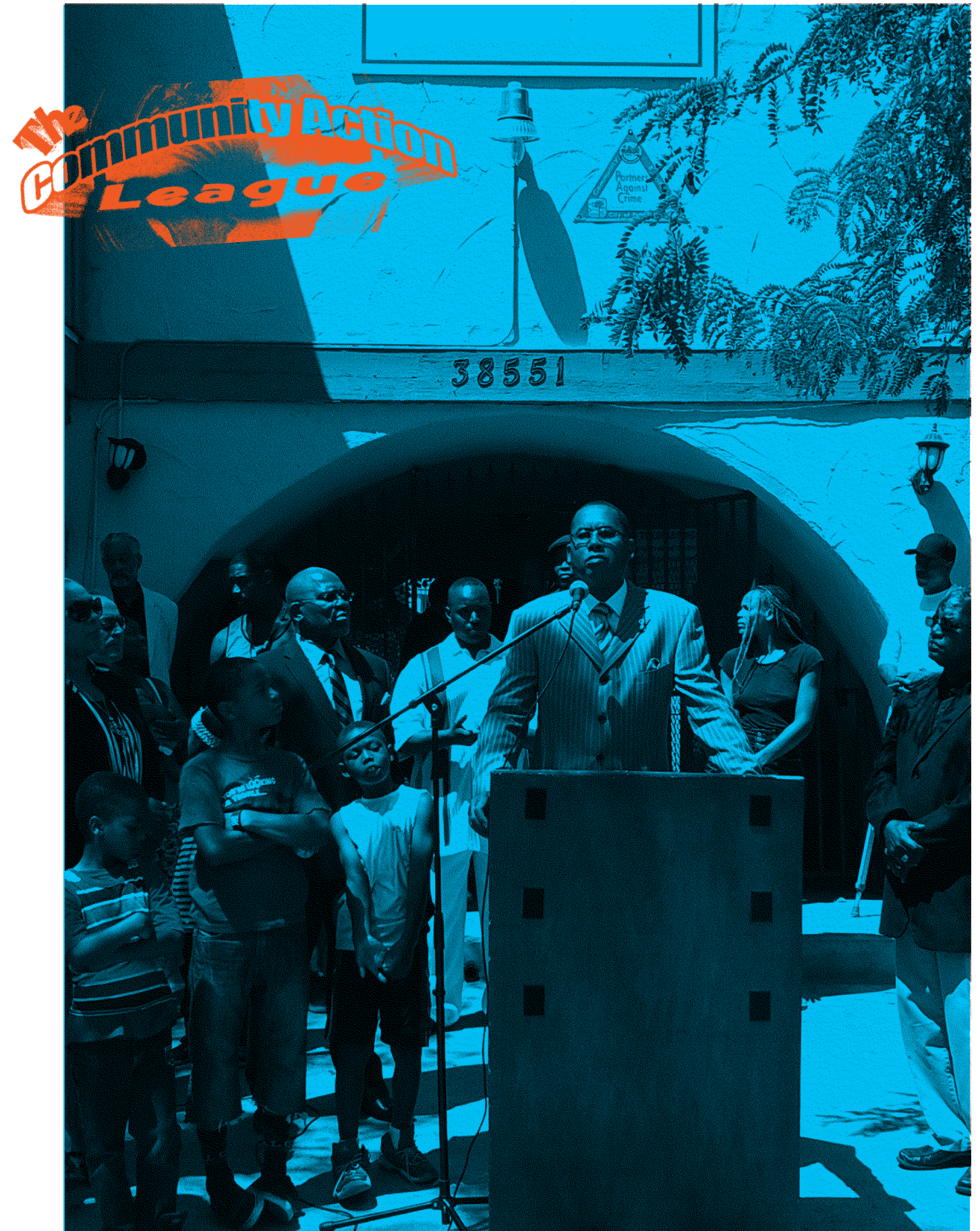


Photo courtesy of The Community Action League.





Photo courtesy of Restaurant Opportunities Center-Los Angeles.

## Section Discussion Questions

- \* *What communities and networks do these groups tap into that DMH seeks to engage?*
- \* *What do these groups demonstrate of the success and methods of social support?*
- \* *What role does imagination and creativity play in surmounting personal and social odds?*



## CRISIS RESPONSE

### From the Grassroots



*“Everybody deserves to heal”*

#### Southeast Asian Community Alliance

(SEACA) is a social justice organization focusing on the leadership development of Southeast Asian youth and their communities in Los Angeles through intergenerational, cross-cultural dialogue and organizing. Sam talks about the impact of the public health crisis COVID-19 on SEACA's youth.

#### — Sophanarot Sam

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Service Area 4

*“Healing for us means being in community with each other and being able to foster a safe enough space for folks to share about what they’re going through. Our students are super swamped right now. They’re like, ‘We’re getting a ton of homework and we’re getting assigned quizzes and tests left and right.’ They’re stressing out because they don’t really have a support system. Their families are working in service industry jobs and a lot of them have lost their jobs. We’re collecting mutual aid funds. We’re trying our hardest to put together these care packages as fast as we can so that we can distribute it directly to our students and their families. We’re practicing healing with our youth and our folks, but we’re not naming it. The hardest place to heal is in the home and with families. I’m really feeling right now for our youth who are stuck in their homes maybe in an abusive family state. How can we support the most vulnerable folks right now? We’re not just training them to become organizers, we’re also training them to learn how to love themselves, love their community and deeply understand how to take care of themselves because there’s just so much work to be done. Everybody deserves to heal.”*

### Questions for Reflection

- \* *In what ways are individuals and communities being pressed to breaking points before and during a crisis? How can these tensions be managed and released in short-term and long-term ways?*
- \* *How is healing as youth different than or similar to healing as adults?*
- \* *What is the impact of an economic and/or a public health crisis on youth in your community?*
- \* *When home is not a safe place, during a crisis what measures can be taken to prevent, disrupt or reduce harm? How can love and connection be promoted?*
- \* *How can youth and other vulnerable populations be engaged as leaders in their own healing and the healing of their communities?*



Photo courtesy of SEACA.

**Themes** Community, COVID-19, Mental Health, Public Health, Youth, Southeast Asian, Violence

**Strategic Plan Points** 1a.1 education, 1a.2 engagement, 1a.3 follow up, 1b.1 housing, 1b.2 kin, 1b.3 purpose, 1c.1 assessment, 1c.3 outpatient care, 2.1 real-time crisis response, 2.3 restorative care, 4.2 organizational process, 4.3 organizational outcomes



“People just start to believe in themselves again”

## Garment Worker Center

is a worker rights organization leading an anti-sweatshop movement to improve conditions for tens of thousands of Los Angeles garment workers through direct organizing and leadership development. Gonzalez talks about how COVID-19 is impacting workers and what motivates her to keep organizing.

### — Daisy Gonzalez

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Service Area 4

“Garment workers are now being seen as essential workers and being called on to help produce personal protective equipment needed to address this crisis. We are concerned with the lack of health and safety that has existed in the industry for many years. We are also extremely concerned about wage theft. Many of the workers are undocumented and so won’t be benefiting from a lot of these [government relief] programs. A lot of workers are afraid to seek support in these situations because of their [immigration] status. Through our leadership development work, we see people come into our center fed up with how they are treated as workers, as immigrants, and they start to believe in themselves again. I think that is 100% part of a journey into healing. Being heard and sharing experiences is the first step to finding the solution to the problems that are not just affecting one person but that we know are affecting thousands. My mom was a garment worker when she first came to this country. It’s really powerful to see people that remind me a lot of my own mom, my grandma, generations of women that hold a lot of trauma, and see them stand up for themselves — it’s what drives me.”



Photo courtesy of GWC.

## Questions for Reflection

- \* What motivates you to do community engagement work?
- \* Gonzalez identifies how chronic conditions are exacerbated by crisis. Note the chronic inequities she mentions in her story. What strategies address these conditions in your work?
- \* Make a rough family map. How does trauma extend across generations? How are relationships across generations nurtured?
- \* Make a rough community map. How has your family and community tree remained resilient in the face of trauma?
- \* How are past inequities impacting the public health crisis of COVID-19?
- \* What are other worker-centered organizations in your community? How might DMH more effectively partner with them?



Photo courtesy of GWC.

**Themes** COVID-19, Labor, Public Health, Storytelling, Women

**Strategic Plan Points** 1a.1 education, 1a.2 engagement, 1a.3 follow up, 1b.2 kin, 1b.3 purpose, 1c.1 assessment, 1c.3 outpatient care, 2.1 real-time crisis response, 2.3 restorative care, 4.2 organizational process, 4.3 organizational outcomes

“Let’s make it happen”

### Dignity & Power Now (DPN)

is a grassroots organization that works towards transformative and healing justice for incarcerated people, their families and communities through health and wellness, activism and leadership building and prison abolition. Chavez explains their wellness approach.

### — Guadalupe Chavez

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Service Area 6



Image courtesy of Dignity and Power Now.

“Most of the families that we work with, their folks were killed inside [the prisons] by the state. And so then [questions arise about] how you become both your own healer for you and your family and how you also become an advocate and an organizer so that these things don’t happen again and again and again. So, our Health and Wellness Department holds the programs that explore these questions. People can heal by talking, by sharing stories, by making art together, by building community and, also by engaging in organizing and campaign work to whatever level they can. We’re not a service organization period. But yet we provide some services because we know that to get a service from the state, most people don’t want to do that because it comes with a lot of consequence that’s negative to the family or to your psyche, [like] if I call my school counselor and then now all of a sudden the police are at my house. We cut that BS out. We’re like, ‘Hey, you need to talk to somebody. You need to make some art. Let’s make it happen.’ And that’s why people keep coming back.”

**Melanie Griffin**, DPN’s Deputy Director of Healing and Wellness, talks about Freedom Harvest, their monthly pop-up arts and wellness event outside LA County jail sites.

“Organizing can be a way of healing”

“When you have an incarcerated loved one, it’s not just that person that is locked up that suffers. It’s the whole family. We go outside of the jails with a team of volunteers and we have these wellness kits that we put together that have natural medicines, a ‘know your rights’ pamphlet and information about the herbs in the kit. We have water [and] snacks. Sometimes we have hot food and [invite] different healers. We really believe in centering indigenous healing practices. We invite people to learn about the [organizing] work that we’re doing so that they can get involved too. The hope is once they get involved, then they have an opportunity to exercise healing through the organizing by telling their stories at Board of Supervisors meetings and things like that. Organizing can be a way of healing and healing is necessary as a part of movement work.”



Photo courtesy of DPN.



## Questions for Reflection

- \* *What is organizing and how can it be a form of healing?*
- \* *Guadalupe states, “We are not a service organization, period. But yet we provide some services.” What healing work needs to be done to hear and respond to the hurt from those in communities suffering from institutional violence? What stories do we have to share and process among ourselves to effectively hear the stories of others so that we can deliver support and access to those who need care?*
- \* *What are other reasons people might not want to get state services? What are ways services can be made more accessible for people?*

**Themes** African American, Arts, Families, Latinx, Incarceration, Organizing, Wellness, Youth

**Strategic Plan Points** 1a.1 education, 1a.2 engagement, 1a.3 follow up, 1b.1 housing, 1b.2 kin, 1b.3 purpose, 1c.1 assessment, 1c.2 service coordination, 1c.3 outpatient care, 2.1 real-time crisis response, 2.3 restorative care, 4.2 organizational process, 4.3 organizational outcomes





## “Taking big strides”

### Los Angeles Black Worker Center

is a collective of workers, clergy, students and other leaders committed to improving the working conditions and rights of black working-class people throughout Los Angeles County. Gordon talks about organizing and healing during COVID-19.

#### — Jeremiah Gordon

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“It’s in a time of pandemic when people and workers are at their most vulnerable because the employer has to be shut down. We created Google forms that allow the community to be able to respond to ‘What can you do for the community in this time of need?’ but also just asking, ‘What do you need?’ We created a rapid response team of our most dedicated members that can respond to our member base and ask them if they’re okay. And that’s a form of wellness. [We ask things like] ‘Do you need help with your utility bill? Do you need help with getting food or groceries?’ So, it’s a unity we have as black people, but also showing that we really care authentically and genuinely about our people’s health. We’re really taking big strides in responding to COVID-19.”



## “When you’re unified, there’s strength”

Core Member **Kenneth Spencer** is part of Los Angeles Black Worker Center’s COVID-19 rapid response team. He talks about the process and community involvement.

“Yesterday I called four people. Each one of them’s going to call two people. [One person said] ‘Tell Jeremiah I want some more numbers to call.’ So, you got people eager like that and some people, no matter whatever you ask them, even though it’s last minute, they’re still willing to do it. This is my second family. And I appreciate the fact that somebody is looking out for me. My parents are dead. And I don’t have many older relatives that are living. I’m always greeted with love and affection and they let you know that they care about you. And when you feel alone, you’re not alone. We’re unified. And when you’re unified, there’s strength.”

### Questions for Reflection

- \* What are your networks of community support?
- \* How has technology been used to maintain community connections?
- \* Identify the ways Los Angeles Black Worker Center is responding to community needs. What are lessons in their approach that can be applied to your work?
- \* Have you received help from a rapid response team or been part of one? How did it feel?
- \* What contributes to the trust that allows someone to accept calls or answer the kinds of personal-need questions referred to in this story?



Courtesy of Los Angeles Black Worker Center.

**Themes** African American, Community, COVID-19, Emergency Response, Family, Labor, Organizing, Public Health

**Strategic Plan Points** 1a.1 education, 1a.2 engagement, 1a.3 follow up, 1b.1 housing, 1b.2 kin, 1b.3 purpose, 1c.1 assessment, 1c.3 outpatient care, 2.1 real-time crisis response, 4.2 organizational process, 4.3 organizational outcomes





Photo courtesy of SEACA.

## Section Discussion Questions

- \* How are grassroots approaches to crisis response similar or different from institutional responses? What are possibilities for closer partnership? What are challenges?
- \* Identify the grassroots crisis response work in your community. What are the steps you might take to find more of them and form a partnership? How do these stories inform your planning?





Staff member Hana Ward and CoCo Press author Veronica C Ratliff at an arts book fair last year. Photo courtesy of WCCW.

## CONCLUSION

Through stories we can connect and heal. In this toolkit I sought to bridge a gap between civic institutions and grassroots networks. Is it possible for people to connect to each other past thick institutional walls when we are positioned so differently? If connection happens, how can it be honored? And what can that lead to? My hope is that the seeds of human connection find fertile ground for the possibility of larger needed change. If every person, each from their particular position in society, could connect authentically we could transform the barriers of systemic injustices into flourishing sites of healing. And since we are all interconnected, we all gain.

In our society today, communities and people most directly impacted by systemic injustices have the experience necessary to lead healing efforts. Everyone I interviewed recognized that healing is a community endeavor and a form of social justice. It is deeply connected to our economic human rights—the right to housing, healthcare, living wages, dignified employment, food and water as well as a healthy planet, an end to systems of violence like mass incarceration, deportation and more. To reach collective healing, communities are organizing, not as victims of a system but as active agents of change.

The exercises and principles in this toolkit are one piece within a larger field of civic practice. They suggest the need for more nuanced foundational work as part of a reflective process. Listening and storytelling implies trust, community consent and thoughtfulness developed as part of longer-term relationships, goals and commitments. This work happens over years, decades and generations, within and part of communities in reciprocity, respect and generosity.

Holding space is about showing up again and again for each other, doing the necessary work to open our hearts wider and wider. In community we find the path to transform our systems and reach towards the healing of us all.



## ABOUT

### The Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture

advances arts, culture and creativity throughout LA County. They provide leadership, services and support in areas including: grants and technical assistance for nonprofit organizations, countywide arts education initiatives, commissioning and care of civic art collections, research and evaluation, access to creative pathways, professional development, free community programs and cross sector creative strategies that address civic issues. This work is framed by their commitment to fostering access to the arts and the County's Cultural Equity and Inclusion Initiative.

[HTTPS://WWW.LACOUNTYARTS.ORG/](https://www.lacountyarts.org/)

### The Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health

(LACDMH), with a budget of approximately \$2.8 billion, is the largest county-operated mental health department in the United States. Directly operating programs in more than 85 sites, DMH provides services through contract programs and LACDMH staff at approximately 300 sites co-located with other County departments, schools, courts and various organizations. Each year the County contracts with close to 1,000 organizations and individual practitioners to provide a variety of mental health-related services. On average, more than 250,000 County residents of all ages are served every year.

[HTTPS://DMH.LACOUNTY.GOV/](https://dmh.lacounty.gov/)



Public art workshop at We Rise 2019. Photo by Vienna To.



# GLOSSARY

**Arts-based methods:** Methods used within artistic practices that can be applied to non-arts settings or goals.

**Civic practice:** Projects that “bring artists into collaboration and co-design with community partners and local residents around a community-defined aspiration, challenge or vision.” (CPCP: [WWW.THECPCP.ORG/ABOUT](http://WWW.THECPCP.ORG/ABOUT))

**CS-AIR:** Creative Strategist Artist-in-Residence, a program of the Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture

**Cultural Worker:** “...a catalyst, guide, mirror and facilitator of social change, seeking implicit and explicit solutions to collective and individual problems”  
—James Cone,  
*A Black Theology of Liberation*

**DMH:** (Los Angeles County) Department of Mental Health

**Facilitation:** Guiding a group of people through a process of collaboration towards a shared goal. The theater-based facilitation I learned was strongly shaped by the techniques of Brazilian theater director Augusto Boal whose work, in turn, was shaped by educator Paulo Freire’s concept of *popular education*, “a people-oriented and people-guided approach to education. By centering on participants’ life experiences, this approach affirms the dignity of all participants and recognizes that everyone in the room is both a teacher and a learner. This creates horizontal relationships between teachers and students, rather than the more traditional, passive vertical transmission of knowledge from a teacher to students.” (Intergroup Resources: [WWW.INTERGROUPTRESOURCES.COM/POPULAR-EDUCATION/](http://WWW.INTERGROUPTRESOURCES.COM/POPULAR-EDUCATION/))

**Grassroots Groups:** Groups comprised of people addressing a shared social issue, engaging in leadership development of those directly impacted by the issues they seek to resolve

**Healing:** The process of restoring one’s health to a state of balance

**Healing Justice:** “Resiliency and survival practices that center the collective safety and wellbeing of communities” (Astrae Lesbian Foundation for Justice: [WWW.ASTRAEAFOUNDATION.ORG/MICROSITES/HEALINGJUSTICE/INDEX](http://WWW.ASTRAEAFOUNDATION.ORG/MICROSITES/HEALINGJUSTICE/INDEX))

**Hold Space:** An informal term referring to a facilitator or person intentionally creating an environment where people feel comfortable, exchange truths and transform relationships.

**Language Justice:** A set of principles that includes the idea that everyone has a right to communicate in our language(s) and a right to participate fully in all the spaces in which we work or live. Language justice is based on a shared commitment to practices of equitable communication across languages and a belief in the language rights of all people.

**Organizing:** Building the power and resources of a group to advocate for reforms or systemic social changes in relationship to political or economic institutions.

**Story Circle:** A method of listening in community by sharing stories in a group as equals.

# RESOURCES

Below are additional resources for more information

## Center For Performance and Civic Practice

[WWW.THECPCP.ORG](http://WWW.THECPCP.ORG)

## Dignity & Power Now *Healing Justice Toolkit*

[WWW.DIGNITYANDPOWERNOW.ORG/CATEGORY/HEALING-JUSTICE/](http://WWW.DIGNITYANDPOWERNOW.ORG/CATEGORY/HEALING-JUSTICE/)

## Los Angeles County Alternatives to Incarceration Work Group

[WWW.LACALTERNATIVES.ORG](http://WWW.LACALTERNATIVES.ORG)

## Justice LA

[WWW.JUSTICELANOW.ORG](http://WWW.JUSTICELANOW.ORG)

## Poor People’s Campaign *Souls of Poor Folks Audit*

[WWW.POORPEOPLESCAMPAIGN.ORG/RESOURCE/THE-SOULS-OF-POOR-FOLK-AUDIT](http://WWW.POORPEOPLESCAMPAIGN.ORG/RESOURCE/THE-SOULS-OF-POOR-FOLK-AUDIT)

## Junebug Productions *Story Circles*

[WWW.JUNEBUGPRODUCTIONS.ORG/STORY-CIRCLE](http://WWW.JUNEBUGPRODUCTIONS.ORG/STORY-CIRCLE)

## Appalshop *Story Circles*

[WWW.ROADSIDE.ORG/ASSET/STORY-CIRCLE-GUIDELINES](http://WWW.ROADSIDE.ORG/ASSET/STORY-CIRCLE-GUIDELINES)





We Rise 2019. Photo by Tiffany Kyees.