



Inspire! Grants for Small Museums

Sample Application IGSM-249269-OMS-21
Project Category: Community Anchors

Los Angeles Poverty Department (Skid Row History Museum and Archive)

Amount awarded by IMLS:	\$50,000
Amount of cost share:	\$31,000

The project description can be viewed in the IMLS Awarded Grants Search:
<https://www.ims.gov/grants/awarded/igsm-249269-oms-21>

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Narrative
- Schedule of Completion

When preparing an application for the next deadline, be sure to follow the instructions in the most recent Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program and project category (if applicable) to which you are applying.

Justification

Need *The people and history of these 50-square blocks of Skid Row have so much to teach those in the other 500-square miles of the City, if only they would look, listen, and not turn away.* –Gary Blasi, Professor of Law Emeritus, UCLA [remarking on the collections in the Skid Row History Museum and Archive]

Contrary to its popular portrayal as an urban wasteland, in reality, Skid Row in downtown Los Angeles has a rich tradition of grassroots civic engagement and innovative community-generated solutions to intractable social problems that encompass even its unsheltered community members in efforts to ameliorate the extreme challenges of daily living on the street.

This project designs Skid Row History Museum (SRHMA) programs in collaboration with Skid Row community members and partners. Its importance is underscored by the unique and historically significant urban context in which it resides. Because of planning decisions made by the City of LA in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, this 50-block neighborhood has unique properties that have contributed to its survival, unlike other skid rows in America (e.g. New York City’s Bowery) that have been bulldozed into non-existence or subsumed by gentrification. In 1973, a community plan defined the neighborhood, stipulating that no market-rate housing could be built within the area: all housing, whether renovated or new, had to be subsidized for people with the lowest incomes. Three of LA’s largest missions as well as many social services were concentrated in the area. As a result, thousands of people who arrived here homeless went through the neighborhood’s missions and programs and ended up becoming permanent tenants of its single-room occupancy hotels (SROs). These residents became invested in the community and active in promoting its betterment. For example, a sophisticated recovery community formed here with more than 53 weekly meetings facilitated by residents for their housed and un-housed neighbors. While numerous forces have since worked—through oversight and by design—to thwart community engagement, the city’s plan that defined this neighborhood more than four decades ago has made it amazingly active and resilient to this day. Many more of its residents (8,000 of 11,000) are living in SROs and transitional programs than on the street. Many among them are highly visible leaders, long-term residents with a deep sense of community, whose empathy for their neighbors leads to innovative and effective grassroots initiatives that defy conventional wisdom about how to make a viable and vital community.

Too often, however, the strengths and assets of Skid Row leaders, visionaries, and community groups are ignored; solutions that emerge from the community itself are met with huge resistance; lessons from the neighborhood’s history go undiscovered; and critical opportunities for generating lasting, systemic change from the ground up are lost.

With this project, Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) addresses the need to counteract the dominant narrative, to help “normalville” (i.e. city leaders, journalists, academics, and the general public) recognize and value Skid Row’s strengths and assets. This need has been identified, time and again, throughout LAPD’s deep engagement with Skid Row community members over 35 years, through an artistic practice that interweaves community-based research, creative workshops for community members, and ongoing dialogue with Skid Row leaders, organizations, and individuals who live, work, and make art in the neighborhood.

For example, in 2018, General Jeff Page, quoted in a *Los Angeles* magazine article, said, “I hear a lot about progress, but the progress has not been made on Skid Row, only around Skid Row. And that’s exactly why Skid Row wants to have the chance to represent itself.” Page, a Skid Row leader, was explaining the impetus behind LAPD’s exhibition in its Skid Row History Museum and Archive (SRHMA), *Zillionaires Against Humanity: Sabotaging the Skid Row Neighborhood Council*. The exhibition revealed, according to *Los Angeles* magazine, “how a group of downtown power brokers secretly thwarted an effort by anti-poverty activists to form an

independent political entity within the historic boundaries of Skid Row. Little known outside Skid Row, it has become a cautionary tale in the battle for the future of L.A.” The article also quoted Malpede, who, in decades of experience working side by side with community members, has observed: “To dismiss a whole community that has real insight into the needs and cares about the people in the street, to stifle their voice is really a disingenuous way to claim you want to solve anything.” (See *Supporting Document 1. Media Coverage.*)

Charles Porter, Prevention Coordinator of United Coalition East Prevention Project (UCEPP), a drug prevention program in Skid Row, has 20 years of experience working in Skid Row. Porter is one of the experts whose perspectives on the community’s needs have been recorded and archived by LAPD. Porter explained the importance of “being able to highlight the advocacy and the vision, the genius, the passion and the resilience of the community.” Discussing LAPD’s ongoing *Walk the Talk* project that since 2012 has honored, documented, and archived the achievements of community members, he explains, “There are many unsung heroes that are part of the fabric of the community. The honorees tell you stories of movements. They’re connected to people. They’re connected to a neighborhood that cares, a neighborhood that wants to see improvement, a neighborhood that wants to thrive, a neighborhood that is resilient. And that’s why we have to continue to tell these stories, because the media portrayal is not what *we* know.” (See *Supporting Document 2. Archive.*)

Another community leader interviewed and archived by LAPD is Pastor Cue, founder of the neighborhood’s “Church Without Walls.” A former Virgin Records rapper, Pastor Cue left the music industry in 1994 to become an evangelist and activist. He is an organizer with Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE), co-lead organizer of the Black Jewish Justice Alliance (BJJA) and the “We Will Live” coalition, a “Black n Brown Clergy and Community Coalition.” As Pastor Cue explained, “The key is always to hear people. I think one of the problems our elected officials have is that they don’t hear, and they don’t hear because they don’t wanna listen, even with those they disagree with... People don’t need anyone to speak for them. They just need us to amplify their voice.”

Benefit This one-year project launches a multi-year series of multi-disciplinary artworks, *State of Crisis/Community of Resilience*, which will be developed and presented by LAPD and Skid Row community members at SRHMA. As with all of LAPD’s work, its realization will encompass several public and artistic outcomes: an exhibition/installation, activated by performances and public conversations, as well as archival documentation. By showcasing the ways people across the neighborhood’s history have translated their experience into activism and successfully ignited change in perception and policy, this project benefits a dual audience: participants and audience members from the Skid Row community, as well as audience members from outside the community, including scholars, policymakers, journalists, and the general public.

LAPD’s artistic practice collaboratively creates and produces artwork with Skid Row community members that document and disseminate the unknown stories and histories of their own—marginalized and misunderstood—community. Similarly, this project expands the involvement and ownership of the art making process by identifying community leaders in Skid Row with vast experience and expertise to serve as “community curators,” and then providing them with the resources and a platform to explore and transform a contemporary community concern into an expansively visible artistic realization. Across the three-year series, LAPD will invite three such leaders to serve as curators and surround them with the artistic expertise to dramatically realize their projects in a multiplicity of forms: visual art exhibitions, theatrical and musical performances, and public conversations. IMLS funding will support the first project of the three.

In addition to drawing upon the personal experience of the community curator, the project draws upon historical community knowledge by mining the extensive holdings of the SRHMA community archive. Comprised of

hundreds of thousands of items focused on the history of Skid Row, the archive includes recorded interviews with Skid Row residents, activists, service providers, and visionaries; primary source materials in various media; and audio-video documentation of LAPD public events and performances. The archive is generated by issues-oriented, community-based research that has been core to LAPD's artistic practice across its decades-long history. Broadly, the archive reveals that creating community is the way to link people to one another and to resources to help solve the crises associated with homelessness and extreme poverty. Materials in the archive will provide both a jumping off point for creative explorations of the curatorial team, and also be augmented by new documentation generated during this project's activities.

Strategic Plan This project advances core goals articulated in LAPD's strategic plan to: "Create multifaceted projects and make accessible its archive to build and activate community and inform local, national, and international dialogue on both artistic practice and the activist history of Skid Row" and to "Educate, inform, and raise awareness to make an impact on public policies."

IMLS Goals The project builds upon LAPD's longstanding history as a Community Anchor, and on SRHMA's history of providing a safe and radically inclusive space for people of all backgrounds who would not otherwise have interacted, to connect and learn from each other. This project reaffirms SRHMA's core purpose of being a trusted space for learning and dialogue about the strengths, assets, and wisdom of the Skid Row community.

Work Plan

Activities 1) Research and planning. Planning is underway. For this proposed project, the first artwork in the *State of Crisis/Community of Resilience* series, LAPD has selected Charles Porter to be the community curator and has candidates under consideration for subsequent project years. In addition to his position at UCEPP, Porter is a prime force behind the Skid Row Community Improvement Coalition that worked with the City to establish The ReFresh Spot, a much needed and highly successful 24-hour hygiene center staffed by Skid Row residents and used by over 1,000 people each day. Porter's project will elucidate the history of social determinants of healthcare and recovery approaches that are the precursors to today's trauma-informed care. (See *Supporting Document 3. Letters.*)

Research and planning will continue during the grant period.

- LAPD's leadership will work closely with the community curator to develop his projects' artistic vision and focus its themes.
- LAPD will identify other members of the curatorial team, who will be chosen to supplement the competencies of the community curator. The team will include scholars whose expertise with the topic at hand will help inform the project's direction and implementation and artists whose creative collaboration can help bring the community curator's vision to life through artworks, exhibitions, and performative elements, including an LAPD theatrical performance.
- The community curator will be supported by a research team of LAPD staff archivists. SRHMA's archive will provide a rich resource for the community curator to inform project development. The research team will help him mine material from the archive that makes connections between contemporary conditions and community-generated initiatives throughout Skid Row's history of self-aware development. By way of example, Porter's project may include a digital media installation of video interviews with Leslie Croom, the visionary behind the VOA Drop-in Center (2000) in Skid Row—a precursor to today's ReFresh Spot—and with her collaborators, many of whom are on the front lines of recovery work today. Or, exhibition audience members can explore the archive on their own to find relevant interviews. For example, a search of "community mental health" will pull up interviews

with activists and social service providers across several years who talk about the Drop-In Center and related initiatives like the Downtown Women’s Center and Los Angeles Men’s Place.

2) Implementation. Artworks, activities, and public conversation events developed during the research and planning phase will be created and exhibited during the project’s implementation. The core artwork will be a SRHMA exhibition/installation, on view for six months at SRHMA, activated by performative elements, including a theatrical work devised by LAPD company members/Skid Row community members during a six-month workshop process. The exhibition will also be activated by a series of public discussions with experts and scholars, alongside Skid Row community members with lived experience, to help contextualize the themes addressed by the artworks.

3) Evaluation and Sharing Results. Evaluation will be conducted by LAPD’s Artistic Director and Associate Director to synthesize the documentation and data collected throughout the project. Following the project’s conclusion, they will conduct an informal group interview with the community curator, curatorial team members, and select audience members who represent the range of stakeholders to gain insights about whether the project succeeded at increasing awareness of the neighborhood’s history and altering perceptions about its people. We will assess how longstanding partnerships have been strengthened, reaffirming SRHMA’s role as a community anchor. These results will be shared with IMLS and all project funders, used to strengthen the next iteration of programming in the *State of Crisis/Community of Resilience*, and communicated to prospective funders and participants in subsequent years of the larger project.

Risks In the era of Covid-19, the only certain thing is uncertainty. Any project being planned now for implementation many months from now must be envisioned with flexibility in mind. While we are optimistic that SRHMA will reopen prior to the start of this project, we are also well prepared to adapt to the possibility that it may not. In that case, we will transition activities to an online format, as LAPD has done with projects over recent months, including the first-ever hybrid iteration (virtual and live from Skid Row’s Gladys Park) of our greatly anticipated annual celebration of the community’s creativity, the Festival for All Skid Row Artists.

Planning/Implementation/Management The project will be led by LAPD artistic leadership and supported by LAPD’s archive staff, working in collaboration with the community curator and the assembled team of partners.

Partners Artistic collaborators are integral to this project. As in past multi-disciplinary projects, LAPD will identify one or more individual visual artists to help develop an installation for the exhibition. One analogous recent example is *The Back 9*. With artist Roston Woo, LAPD created a playable miniature golf course installed in SRHMA, which served as the set for LAPD’s theatrical performance. With its connotations of behind-the-scenes-power-plays, golf is an apt means for examining the power structures and policies that have built LA and defined Skid Row. (See *Supporting Document 1. Media Coverage.*)

Another artistic collaborator will be LAPD’s theater group, comprised of Skid Row community members, who will devise and perform a theatrical work to activate the exhibition. In thrice weekly performance workshops led by the artistic directors of LAPD, the community members will interact with the community curator and generate a performative response to the curator’s contemporary issues and concerns. Musical performances will also be developed by existing LAPD partners, such as the Skid Row nonprofit music organization Street Symphony, run by former LA Philharmonic violinist Vijay Gupta, which has shared SRHMA’s space. With its inclusion of a public conversation series, partnerships with scholars and experts are also integral to achieving the project’s goal to help inform and educate various constituencies—city leaders, journalists, academics and the general public—about Skid Row’s strengths and assets. Additionally, the curatorial team’s usage of the

archive will be supported through a partnership with UCLA's Community Archives Lab and its students. (See *Supporting Document 3. Letters.*)

Resources This project will not be possible without IMLS funding to compensate the community curator and artist collaborators who will be contracted to create and perform new work as part of the project. Support is also needed for honoraria for expert panelists in the public conversation series, and to cover LAPD staff time. This request also includes funding for installation materials and marketing.

Tracking Progress Participation by collaborators and attendance at public events will be tracked by LAPD's Associate Director, who will also oversee the documentation and archiving of project activities.

Results

Intended Results/Change The project seeks to continue to change the narrative about the Skid Row community, as LAPD has successfully done across its body of work created and produced with the people of Skid Row. Key measures of success will focus on the extent to which the project increases knowledge about the neighborhood's past and present assets. We seek to both strengthen the community by increasing its awareness of its own history, while also impacting public perceptions, in particular among such influential groups as the media, scholars, and policy makers, as well as among the general public.

Data Collection LAPD staff will collect: 1) attendance figures of participants in artistic activities and attendance at public events; 2) post-project interviews with the community curator and artist collaborators, scholars, and select audience members; 3) increased usage of the archive and dissemination of its materials as a result of by engagement with the project by participants, community members, scholars and the media. Prior examples of this impact include: Carla Green, an award-winning radio journalist researched a podcast for 99% Invisible. The print version of her piece was then cited in a study by the UCLA Luskin Center for History & Policy, "People are Simply Unable to Pay the Rent;" Amy Fogelson, of Street Symphony, used the archive to better understand the history of the organizations Street Symphony is working with, such as Midnight Mission and Downtown Women's Center; Ananya Roy, Professor and Meyer and Renee Luskin Chair in Inequality and Democracy at the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, has used material from the archive to better understand the history of residential hotels in Skid Row. (See *Supporting Document 2. Archive.*)

Long-term, LAPD will collect observational data on individual community members, who, as a result of this project: 1) are encouraged and inspired to advance ongoing or launch new community-based initiatives aimed at improving the community's well being; 2) get connected to Skid Row's resources and social services; 3) become civically engaged because they have begun to see that they are not the solely responsible for their often-traumatic experiences; 4) become active in future LAPD projects.

Tangible Products All public activates will take place at SRHMA, assuming COVID-19 protocols allow it. Otherwise, they will be online. One (six-month) exhibition; three public conversations; three LAPD performances; two musical performances; and archival documentation.

Sustainability This year-long project is designed to extend far beyond the life of this grant period. In the short term, it is the first of three multi-disciplinary artworks that will be produced by LAPD in collaboration with community curators. Longer term, the documentation generated by the project will be publicly accessible via the SRHMA archive, which continues to draw attention and gain usage from journalists, scholars and community members. More broadly, *Community of Resilience* extends LAPD's commitment to supporting the Skid Row community's engagement with and investment in its own vitality.

