



## **How Art Nonprofits Came Together to Create Systemic Change**

Nonprofits who typically instruct art classes for incarcerated youth designed a full day of professional development training for the Los Angeles County probation staff who work with their students. For the 2016 staff training, 80 probation staff worked together to act and learn in improv skits, poetry development, drumming circles, and participate in many more activities.

These workshops were coordinated by a collaboration of arts-based nonprofits that later formed the Arts for Incarcerated Youth Network (AIYN). In 2014, executive directors of six nonprofits, who work with incarcerated youth, informally met once every three months as a means to support each other and their work in arts and juvenile justice. They all agreed that their relationship with probation staff at the detention facilities was challenging — from teaching artists having trouble booking rooms, to probation staff not bringing the same kids to class every week, to pulling kids out of class for substance-abuse testing.

The members wished probation staff could experience their classes firsthand to see how art is improving the student's educational and behavioral outcomes. Kaile Shilling, who at the time was the executive director of the Violence Prevention Coalition, brought in a probation deputy and helped brainstorm professional development for staff.

“We were expecting them to say it was amazing and all kids should have these programs,” says Shilling. “What we weren't expecting was that they said all staff needs this training because it really helps us understand the programs better and helps us see the value of what you are doing, see the young people differently.”

These bi-annual workshops for probation staff have continued since the first professional development training. Shilling, who is now executive director of AIYN, refers to this result as a systemic change. While systemic change in this field is usually defined by a change in legislative policy, Shilling emphasizes that supporting a change in culture is an equally important way to think about systems change – focusing on implementation and practice.

“That was one of the main reasons we felt inspired to help create the Arts for Incarcerated Youth Network,” says Chris Henrikson, executive director of Street Poets. “We realized that there was more we could be doing collectively than in our own organization silo.”

The nonprofit executive directors were looking for more ways to collaborate than an informal support group when they came across the Nonprofit Sustainability Initiative (NSI). The NSI is a

funding collaborative that provides grants to help organizations form strategic partnerships to be more sustainable.

For the group, restructuring meant the nonprofits would come together to create an external network, AIYN. While each nonprofit has its own history and art disciplines, each nonprofit still maintains its own organizational structure and programming. The nonprofit members work through the network and also independently as their own organization.

“The group felt there needed to be a neutral entity, a structure that sat outside of any one of the members. The job of the entity was to look at the collective good and not be invested in the strengthening of any one organization,” says Shilling.

During the NSI application process, one of the original six nonprofits dropped out because they needed to focus on their own internal growth. The collaboration to create AIYN took additional work and time outside of the daily operation a nonprofit. But membership *is* the right fit for the nine nonprofits that are part of AIYN today, some of which include the Actor’s Gang Youth Project, The Unusual Suspects Theatre Company, Bold Ink Writers and Write Girl.

AIYN conducts two-hour meetings every month with each organization’s program directors and teaching artists. They talk about how the programs are going and what opportunities the members want to take to further the programs. It’s Shilling’s job to figure out how to implement and fund member goals for their collective organization.

Members wanted to push for art programming for all youth in L.A. County detention facilities. Some sites were easy to bring programming to, while others were not because their distant loctions. AIYN budgeted 12-week programming and approached the L.A. County Arts Commission (LACAC), who was already working with the probation department to integrate art in a new model of residential youth facilities. AIYN has helped implement LACAC’s and the probation department’s work in 10 out of 12 L.A. youth facilities so far.

AIYN members are also able to work with each other instead of competing. Even though more than one organization focuses on the same art discipline, they share curriculum and best practices. The network hopes to further establish their members’ work with other partners in the future, such as the L.A. County Library. They also hope to access funding that the individual nonprofits weren’t able to obtain on their own.

“It’s been an amazing ride to watch this collaborative network take flight. The NSI was the thing that got us off the ground,” says Henrikson. “It was hugely impactful for us as an organization and for the other partners in our network.”