

Webinar Focus

The Partners for Advancing Health Equity Collaborative hosted the webinar, *Arts as Activism for Health Equity Action* on May 21, 2024. Panelists engaged in discussions about the role of arts-based activism to advance health equity, highlighting the power of art and its messages. This report provides a synthesis of key takeaways, solutions, and action steps identified from the webinar.

Webinar Voices

- › **Andrew Anderson**, Assistant Professor, Department of Health Policy & Management, [Johns Hopkins School of Public Health](#)
- › **Jasmine Blanks**, Executive Director, Center for Social Concern, [Johns Hopkins University](#)
- › **LeConté J. Dill**, Associate Chair/Director of Graduate Studies, Associate Professor, Department of African American and African Studies, [Michigan State University](#)
- › **Avis Gray**, Health Equity Leader, [Ashé Cultural Arts Center](#)
- › **Joy T. Williams**, Founder/Executive Director, [Hope to Thrive](#)

Key Resources

- [Community-Based Arts for Health](#)
- [Art as Part of the Evidence Ecosystem](#)
- [Cross-sector Collaborations at the Intersection of Arts and Public Health](#)

Your Voice

P4HE values collaboration. If there is a resource on this topic that you would like to share with us, provide it [here](#).

Key Takeaways

Art conveys powerful messages in ways that inspire change through touching the hearts of various audiences. Exploring art as a form of activism illuminates creative and impactful ways to center community voices and highlight critical health issues and the [systemic oppression and racism that caused them](#). Organizations across sectors should work together to engage in and uplift arts-based activism efforts to mobilize communities, call in decision makers, and drive change in pursuit of health equity.



Webinar participants shared the roles that art can play in advancing health equity, including **raising awareness; building empathy and compassion; telling stories; promoting self-expression; opening a dialogue; being an accessible form of communication; creating stronger connections with others; and inspiring innovative ideas and solutions.**

Call To Action



“How do I make a difference through art? How do I shift the ways my peers are thinking about health?” Jasmine Blanks,

Executive Director, Center for Social Concern, Johns Hopkins University

Arts as Activism for Health Equity Action Webinar Summary and Call to Action



Below we've summarized immediate action steps shared by the panelists and identified by webinar participants to be taken to advance health equity.

› Consider the role of art in humanity and self-expression in pursuit of health equity.

Art is an expression of the human experience and embodies one's thoughts and feelings towards humanity. By creating and witnessing art, we think and feel deeper as it inspires us to emote and challenge preconceptions about the world. Art can have a tremendous impact on human beliefs and actions. Employing art as a tool for activism can help to reshape our mindset to change the systems that affect health and drive inequities.



"Take a step back and just look at us as humans first and the role art plays in humanity. Throughout time, we need art, we need creativity, we need to be able to express ourselves." Joy T. Williams,
Founder/Executive Director, Hope to Thrive

Often, art illustrating health issues focuses on the experiences of marginalized groups affected by such disparities. Use arts-based activism to evoke the [histories of these groups and the oppression they have faced](#), including those with [intersectional identities](#) who encounter even further obstacles to health equity. Create and display art pieces to [memorialize significant people and events](#) to tell the stories of health inequities and their continued legacy in the present day. Arts-based activism must center the lived experiences and perspectives of communities to prioritize their health needs. In doing so, work together across sectors to uplift the importance of valuing humanity and self-expression, especially for historically marginalized populations, so that arts-based activism is taken seriously. Seek out the knowledge of communications personnel and other experts to learn how to best communicate the messages that the artists hope to convey.

"The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers."

– James Baldwin

› Use non-traditional approaches and mediums to communicate health activism messages through art.

Activists have long called for changes to health policies and programs to address health disparities. Some efforts have been successful while others have fallen short of their goals to persuade people in power to act. While existing activism for health equity should still be pursued and supported, it is

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worth considering non-traditional approaches to activism through the arts. Use art to portray messages in innovative ways, in unexplored spaces, and with unlikely partners.



“Use non-traditional avenues [of activism] because we see historically that what has been utilized has not worked.”

Avis Gray, Health Equity Leader, Ashe Cultural Arts Center

Another effective and constantly evolving medium for arts-based activism is technology and [social media](#), especially TikTok to reach young audiences. With these examples in mind, there are many opportunities to incorporate art into health activism in uncharted ways, seeking to bring light to and reduce the barriers to health equity. To get started, work alongside creative, likeminded people from various sectors to provide necessary expertise and with experienced activists who can help guide arts-based activism to have an impact. Such non-traditional forms of activism require buy-in and resources to grow and sustain the work, so [leverage funding from organizations](#) that are committed to promoting health equity through art. Create mechanisms to solicit feedback from community members and partners on the efficacy of arts-based activism initiatives so that activists may continue to improve their approaches to reach and influence wider audiences with their messages. Innovative activism, such as the arts, should involve partners from different sectors to unite over their shared goals and to develop and implement creative strategies to convey inspirational call-to-actions for the advancement of health equity.

Spotlight on Arts-Based Activism

- [Ashé Cultural Arts Center](#) and the [New Orleans East Hospital](#) collaborate through the [I Deserve It! Program](#) in which artists help to connect the community to resources and services to better their health.
- The [Poetry for the Public's Health](#) section of the [Health Promotion Practice journal](#) publishes peer-reviewed poems
- The [Transforming MSU Playwriting Fellowship program](#) at Michigan State University trains students across disciplines to learn playwriting and incorporate messages of the intersectional oppressions that occur on campus.

> Allocate funding to arts-based initiatives to drive activism and promote change.

Art programs and initiatives have long been underfunded and underappreciated as a viable means to have an impact; it is crucial to expand funding, leveraging resources from [philanthropies](#), [government agencies](#), or the private sector, to allow for more creative and informative expressions of health activism. When considering funding, [allocate funds for young artists](#) and [youth arts initiatives](#) as they have valuable insights and contributions to arts-based activism too. Through cross-sector collaborations, partners must integrate the concepts of humanity, self-expression, and systems in arts-based activism to raise awareness of pressing health concerns and their root

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causes, presenting the humanistic need to make systemic change for health equity. Identify and allocate funding for more participatory arts-based activism to amplify the collaborative efforts being pursued to raise awareness of health issues and to persuade people in power to make change.

> **Make arts-based activism a participatory activity to push collective goals of health equity.**

In pursuit of health equity, make arts-based activism a participatory activity so that individuals realize that they are not alone in their health experiences and concerns, bringing *“the ‘we’ into what started as a ‘me’ problem,”* suggests Joy T. Williams, Founder and Executive Director of Hope to Thrive. Sometimes, people view creating art as an individualized activity in which one person’s ideas and artistic techniques are encompassed in the piece. This outlook limits the potential that art can have on society. To combat this, [art should be an interactive, collaborative activity](#) in which many different people participate in the artistic process. This collaboration will allow for the different participants to listen to each other’s perspectives and proposed approaches for developing a piece of art that conveys their collective vision, especially in activism where the goal is to make widespread change. You cannot be a great member of society if you are not actively listening others, just as *“you can’t be a great musician in an ensemble unless you’re listening to others,”* notes Jasmine Blanks, Executive Director of Center for Social Concern at Johns Hopkins University. The act of [coming together to cocreate art](#) is powerful to merge ideas to portray community health needs accurately and effectively, incite [political engagement](#), build relationships, and form a strong, united alliance dedicated to improving health.



“The participatory nature of [some] art allows us to be better together...and that is what can drive the way our society approaches some of the biggest challenges we face...[with] really important implications for health equity.” Jasmine Blanks, Executive Director,

Center for Social Concern, Johns Hopkins University

Allow [community activists and artists to lead participatory arts-based activism](#) since they have experience and knowledge of how to build coalitions and to create concepts for art projects that can be worked on as a group. Such collaborative art projects may include [performances](#), poetry, [large visual art pieces](#), and digital art. In addition to communities, ensure that [partners from various sectors](#), such as health care providers, nonprofit organizations, philanthropies, and researchers, can contribute to arts-based activism so their priorities, strengths, and expertise may be reflected in the art as well. Arts-based activism for health equity action must be participatory and cross-sector in

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order to have the greatest potential for reach and impact, inspiring systemic change to improve health outcomes for all.

> **Employ arts-based activism to call in people of power to make change toward health equity.**



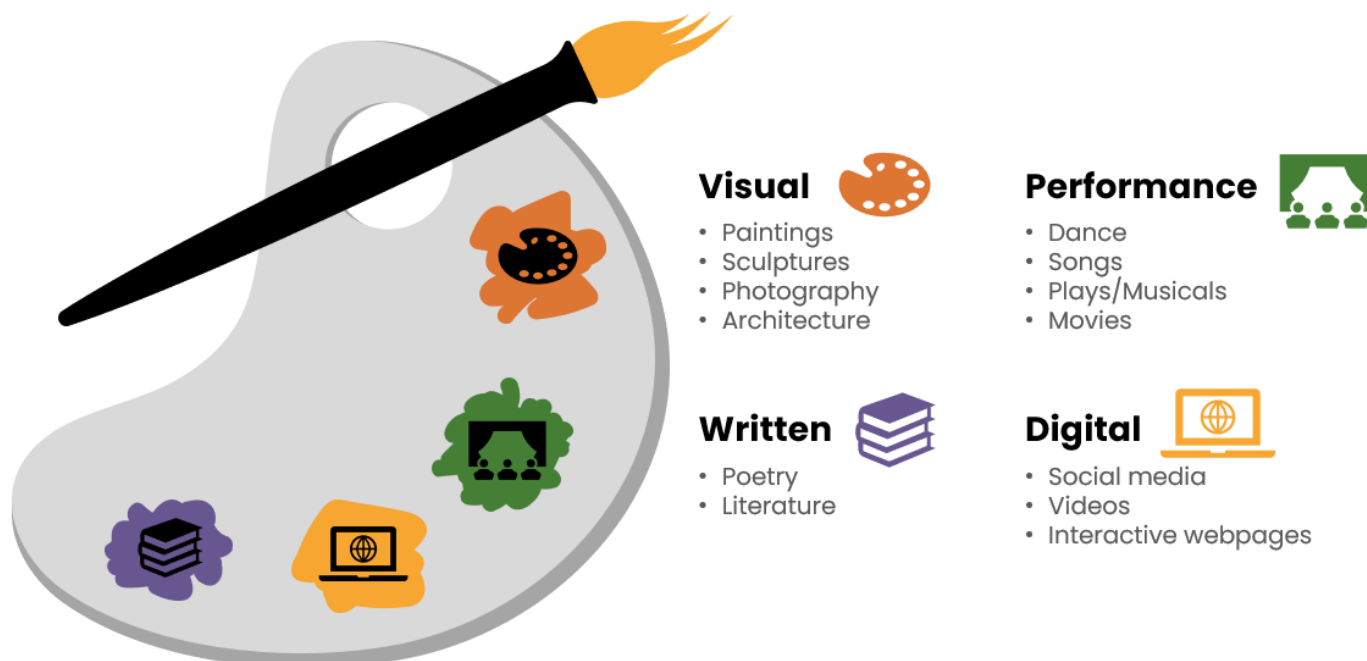
“Art is able to [call people in] because it [pricks] at the heart but also [offers] a not always gentle - sometimes more forceful - nudge that [people in power] need to come to the table and hold themselves accountable. If not, this art is going to hold [them] accountable.”

LeConté J. Dill, Associate Chair/Director of Graduate Studies, Associate Professor, Department of African American and African Studies, Michigan State University

Art is a powerful tool for starting important conversations about pressing issues, including health inequities, that permeate society. When using art as activism, people can creatively illustrate the oppressive policies and systems in place that perpetuate disparities and injustice in an effort to raise awareness and grab the attention of the people in power who create and maintain such policies and systems. Instead of only calling out the people in power for their harmful decisions, “call them in” through arts-based activism to learn, value art as part of the [evidence ecosystem for health issues](#), and be part of the solution. To start, produce art that realistically captures lived experiences and hardships of health inequities that marginalized communities face in order to tap into decision-makers’ sense of humanity and empathy. Reinforce that the unjust policies and systems that they have implemented are the cause of many health issues and barriers to positive health outcomes for marginalized groups. When trying to reach people in power, [publicize the art in spaces where they work and frequent](#). Sometimes, policymakers and other leaders will try to remove messages that they do not agree with or do not want to be associated with, including activists’ art. Remain resilient and committed to activism in response to this suppression. One effective strategy to call in decision-makers is to [garner and leverage support from a few key policymakers](#) who can help to influence their colleagues to join the movement. Encourage these leaders to [publicly amplify the art and voices of community activists](#) for further reach. As with other forms of activism, arts-based activism will not have the fullest impact without [bringing together partners from various sectors](#) to uplift the efforts. Follow the lead of experienced activists to form and educate these coalitions on best practices for activism while also utilizing the resources and strengths of partners to elevate the art and its message. The unity of people and organizations, with different access points to people in power, championing the calls for health equity that arts-based activism can convey will be undeniable for those making life changing decisions that affect communities’ health. Cross-sector collaborations in arts-based activism can serve to hold people in power accountable for their

decisions and inspire them to be part of the movement to make systemic change for the advancement of health equity.

Types of Art to Use in Activism for Health Equity



Deeper Dive

I Deserve It! Program

The [I Deserve It! program](#) is a collaborative initiative between [Ashé Cultural Arts Center](#) and [New Orleans East Hospital](#) in which community artists serve as community health workers to help Black residents through health messaging, resources, and education. The program name represents the proclamation that marginalized communities deserve to thrive and lead healthy, long lives. In New Orleans, [Black residents face disproportionately high rates of chronic conditions](#), including diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure, and poor mental health, which are exacerbated by the legacy of systemic oppression and disinvestment in these communities. Artists work alongside the hospital to help connect these communities with essential supportive services, such as food, housing, transportation, education, employment, and healthcare, among others, to address social and structural determinants of health. Cross-sector collaborations can model after this example of arts-

based activism to integrate the expertise and strengths of health professionals and artists to serve communities in a more engaging and effective way.

Poetry for Public’s Health in the Health Promotion Practice Journal

The [Health Promotion Practice journal](#) contains a new section called [Poetry for the Public’s Health](#) which publishes peer-reviewed poems with themes of public health. Webinar speaker LeConté J. Dill is one of the co-editors of this section and discussed the significance of this example of arts-based activism in research. The [goal of the Poetry for the Public’s Health section of the journal](#) is to include poetry as an important contribution to scholarship and to explaining public health issues and the historical context surrounding health disparities. LeConté and the other co-editors seek to decolonize peer reviewing, publishing, and scholarship and to humanize the discourse and experiences surrounding health (in)equity for marginalized groups through this section. Research professionals can follow their lead by adding similar sections to other journals to promote art as insightful and scholarly works that are as valuable as research articles.

Reparative Arts in Community Engagement (RACE) Conference

In 2023, the inaugural [Reparative Arts in Community Engagement \(RACE\) conference](#) was held in Baltimore, Maryland, and the theme explored the remains of Civil War Confederate monuments in the city and how these spaces can be reimagined to create a sense of belonging for Baltimore residents. The conference hosts drew on [Dorinne Kondo’s concept of reparative creativity](#) to develop the following definition of reparative arts: “the processes (methodologies/pedagogies) and/or products (visual, audio, performance) designed to present a call-to-action for change to systemic and/or structural causes of inequity and injustice in our society by amplifying community solutions towards repair and healing.” Over the four-day conference, participants attended visual art exhibitions, performances, walking tours, policy forums, and lectures to understand how reparative art can memorialize people, events, and spaces from history and empower communities in alleviating the harmful legacies of systemic injustice. Partners from various sectors can work together to design and host similar conferences to explore the impact of reparative arts to bring light to health inequities and make change in cities across the country.

About P4HE

The P4HE Collaborative harmonizes goals, advances learning, and facilitates collaboration to improve health equity. It is led by the Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine and is part of the Tulane Institute for Innovations in Health Equity. Support for this program is provided by ICF. Funding is provided by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.



Foster

the co-creation and spread of knowledge.



Sharpen

our research tools to focus on solutions, facts and stories.



Disrupt

traditional research approaches.



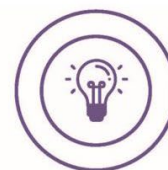
Harmonize

our voices.



Challenge

the status quo.



Shine

light on practices that are indefensible, irrational and inconsistent.

To learn more about these issues, or Partners for Health Equity's calls to action, a resource library including a full recording of this, and all previous P4HE Webinars, can be found on the P4HE [website](#).