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www.reformingarts.org

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May 27, 2021

Dear Borealis Philanthropy,

I am writing on behalf of Reforming Arts, a grassroots 501(c)3 organization based in Atlanta, GA, to express our intent to apply for the Communities Transforming Policing Fund. We would like to request \$30,000 to support our programming with currently or formerly incarcerated people in women's prisons in Georgia. Our mission is to support people who are under carceral control in Georgia through arts, education, and reentry services. Our theatre-infused higher education in prison and reentry programs foster the development of creative critical thinking and encourage students to explore creative solutions and build livable lives.

In Georgia, over 3700 women are currently incarcerated in correctional facilities. Over 95% of those now housed in a correctional institution will be released. However, the goal of prisons is not rehabilitation but punishment. While housed within a state correctional facility, people experience more trauma and anti-socialization. Nationally, women now make up almost one out of every four jail admissions, up from fewer than one in 10 in 1983. Pathways to crime for female offenders typically include a long history of sexual and/or physical abuse, unhealthy relationships, substance abuse. Women in prison because of their association with an intimate male partner in the commission of his crime are the overwhelming majority. Overwhelming documentation shows the overrepresentation of BIPOC (particularly Black and Latinx) women in the Georgia prison population. People in women's facilities are also much more likely to be living below the poverty line. Our students have overwhelmingly been poor black people from Georgia's urban centers such as metro Atlanta, Savannah, Augusta, and poor white people from rural Georgia. When you add gender, criminal convictions, and the deep desire to do anything to get their children back, many of our clients return home to what seems like impossible barriers.

Once home, the experience is not only overwhelming – it is also retraumatizing. People returning home are suddenly expected to go from making less than 100 decisions per day to making more than 30,000 decisions a day. When leaving, our students become separated from any social network of support created while housed in prison. Returning people are often unaware of the stress and trauma their families have experienced while they were in prison. Family members likewise often cannot understand the experiences of their formerly incarcerated family. Without access to proper social services or mental healthcare, this can create a lot of emotional turmoil for both. Folks with prior convictions often also experience barriers to housing and living wage jobs because of their history. These barriers make options for survival scarce. They can cause returning folks to be forced back into toxic and dysfunctional situations that may have contributed to their previous incarceration to survive. Returning to these with the added stigma of a criminal conviction makes it overwhelmingly clear why recidivism rates for people who were incarcerated remain high.

Reforming Arts believes people under carceral control deserve better lives and solutions that support them in moving beyond survival to thriving. We achieve this through offering higher education classes in applied theatre and creative arts. The Higher Education in Prison (HEP) program was founded in 2010 and currently operates at Pulaski State Prison and Whitworth Women's Facility, two Georgia "women's" prisons. Our organization has over a decade of success offering college-level courses in partnership with Georgia State University and the Georgia Department of Corrections. Many of our students go on to enroll in college upon release and complete additional higher education. Education offers access to more options upon release and a chance at a more successful reentry.

Higher education is one of the most cost-effective long-term solutions to reduce recidivism. Not only is higher education effective, but education saves money for communities over long-term housing in prisons from recidivism. Research from the Department of Policy Studies at the University of California at Los Angeles found that "Correctional education is almost twice as cost-effective as incarceration." Additionally, a report by IHEP states that recidivism rates for people who took college classes in prison "were on average 46% lower than the rates of incarcerated people who had not taken college classes."



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As former students were released and began contacting us with their stories about the struggle of reentry, we saw a need for reentry support. In 2013, with the help of some of our previous alumni, we began the Theatre Reentry Project (TRP). While the group is primarily made up of individuals who have previously taken Reforming Arts classes in prison, it is open to any person returning from a women's prison. This project focuses on creating new plays that tell the stories of formerly incarcerated persons to share their experiences and actively change the narrative about the experience of mass incarceration. Plays are written and performed by TRP participants about their lived experiences. Audience feedback from our performances at community centers and universities has shown that this program is particularly effective at changing perceptions of the experience of mass incarceration. TRP offers participants the power to change their communities by sharing their stories, therapeutic benefit, and access to a known community to support their successful reintegration.

We are different from other organizations in that our unique pedagogical approach guides our programmatic activities. Reforming Arts utilizes a creative arts and applied theatre methodology infused with feminist theory and trauma-informed techniques to build critical thinking, self-confidence, consciousness-raising, community, and compassion. Our programs are some of the most challenging college courses offered in the prisons and build creative thinking skills highly valued in today's workforce. Additionally, our program is unique in Georgia as one of the only programs to offer both in-prison and reentry services due to the specific barriers in our state around contact with reentering people. Our students' racial and ethnic makeup has historically averaged 80% BIPOC and 20% White, non-Latinx. Our organizational leadership reflects the diversity of our service population. Board and staff identity: 100% non-binary and women; 62.5% white non-Latinx, 12.5% Latinx, and 37.5% Black; 25% formerly incarcerated individuals.

Reforming Arts builds power through education, empowerment through the arts, and community connection. We emphasize how lifelong learning helps to create opportunities. When applicable, we demonstrate practical benefits of our activities, such as showing how participants can use InterPlay activities taught in Reentry Meetings to re-ground during experiences that trigger trauma. Our participants lead the play creation process and perform their own work, building self-reliance, a sense of accomplishment, and community with each other. We invite other artists, and resource providers to our programs to share with our participants so that they are aware of all of the support available to them. Any TRP participant who has taken a class with us inside a prison can receive a \$500 stipend when released through the Welcome Home Fund (WHF). WHF also provides laptops and hotspots to TRP participants who choose to continue their higher education after release. TRP participants participate as part of our Board of Directors, helping to shape the future goals and activities of the organization.

Reforming Arts organizes around criminal justice/policing reform to advocate for systemic change through artistic performance and dialogue and encouraging systems impacted individuals to lead this conversation through their lived experiences. Our organization is part of a network of individuals working in the Southeast to support people affected by the carceral system. We participate in advocacy to change systemic inequities and seek out conversation with local policymakers involved in these systems. Our performances challenge the prevailing narrative of mass incarceration and activate community dialogue about decreasing barriers for systems impacted individuals.

We are writing to request funding to support our ongoing activities and new programming goals, including a catalytic 3-year workforce reentry program, volunteer mentoring program, and staff expansion to increase capacity. Our current operating budget for 2021 is \$211,472.

Thank you for your consideration.

All the best,

Wende Ballew, Executive Director

