

# COMMUNITY ISSUE EXHIBITION TOOLKIT

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HOW TO MAKE AN EXHIBITION WITH YOUR COMMUNITY  
SO PEOPLE TAKE ACTION ON AN ISSUE THAT MATTERS



# COMMUNITY ISSUE EXHIBITION TOOLKIT

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# OVERVIEW

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**A community issue exhibition** uses art and artifacts as a catalyst for community action on a specific local issue. This model is designed to:

- **Invite the general public** to get involved in making their community better in a targeted way
- **Empower community organizations** that work on that issue to raise awareness and inspire action around their work
- **Strengthen your institution's position** as a community convenor and catalyst

**This is the community issue exhibition toolkit.** We wrote it for institutions—museums, libraries, cultural centers—that want to host and develop these kinds of projects. Inside, you'll find templates, checklists, and helpful tips to build a high-impact exhibition on an issue that matters in your community.

There are many ways to make a community issue exhibition that can be scaled to fit your organization's size, scope, and mission. We wrote this kit assuming you already have a way of developing exhibitions. This kit offers *special* considerations for creating a community issue exhibition. Adapt this toolkit as you see fit.

## **A community issue exhibition is:**

1. **A PLATFORM** for learning and dialogue on an issue of local significance.
2. **A SHOWCASE** for art and artifacts exploring the issue.
3. **A CALL TO ACTION** to invite visitors to take action on the issue after visiting.
4. **CO-DESIGNED** with local partners who are experts in the issue (including the impacted community, service providers, community leaders, artists).
5. **CO-HOSTED** with these partners, who help create exhibition-related events, curriculum, dialogue sessions, and community-wide activities.

## **Community issue exhibitions can help your organization:**

- **Authentically engage traditionally hard-to-reach segments of the local community.** When you partner directly with impacted individuals, you form reciprocal relationships that build trust and participation.
- **Establish credibility as a convener and hub around crucial local issues.** The exhibition and related events will make your institution a gathering place for diverse people and organizations working on the selected issue.
- **Build strong relationships with local leaders and policymakers.** This is an opportunity for your work to advance policymakers' goals for community progress. When leaders see you tackling issues on their agenda, they see you as valuable to their work.
- **Increase local and national recognition and reputation.** Community issue projects attract coverage locally in the main news section (as opposed to arts) and regionally/nationally for the uniqueness of the endeavor.
- **Advocate for the role of art in catalyzing change.** Community issue exhibitions help both visitors and policymakers value the potential for art and artists to open new ways of looking at seemingly intractable issues.
- **Attract new sources of funding.** When you flex your institution's ability to mobilize people towards positive change, more individuals and funding organizations will see your work as powerful and worth supporting.
- **Make your community stronger.** By creating a safe space for visitors to learn and connect around tough local issues, you will provide unique opportunities for people to get positively involved.

## Our Story: *Lost Childhoods* (2017)

This kit is based on our experiences at the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History (MAH) creating our first community issue exhibition in 2017: [\*Lost Childhoods: Voices of Santa Cruz County Foster Youth and the Foster Youth Museum\*](#). We've continued to use this template for other projects, but we thought it would be most valuable for you to see how this framework works with a single example from start to finish.

*Lost Childhoods* focused on the issues facing transition-age foster youth (ages 18–25) in California. We co-developed the exhibition with a key partner: Foster Youth Museum (FYM). FYM is a collection of art, artifacts, and stories of foster youth created by former foster youth. FYM had formerly exhibited their collection in short-term, pop-up formats, mostly at child welfare conferences. We worked together to make a 6-month, public version of their signature exhibition at the MAH. We allotted half the gallery space for FYM collection and artworks, and the other half for new work commissioned by local artists and foster youth.

MAH and FYM staff worked closely to define the project, curate artifacts from the FYM collection, and recruit Santa Cruz County-based community partners. We assembled a group of 128 local collaborators, including foster youth, advocates, social workers, policy makers, and artists. Over six months, along with MAH and FYM staff, this group defined the key goals of the exhibition, worked with artists, and provided input and stories to enrich exhibition labels, videos, and art projects. By the time the exhibition opened, it was full of voices of local foster youth.

The exhibition ran for six months and engaged more than 70,000 visitors. It was a surprise blockbuster, attracting national media attention and igniting our visitors' desire to take action. Prompted by a "take action center" in the exhibition, visitors made donations, offered youth jobs and housing, and even signed up to become foster parents. Santa Cruz County Human Services Director Ellen Timberlake described the project as the "the most powerful community engagement tool we've ever seen in raising awareness and opening hearts on complex social issues."

We started *Lost Childhoods* as a pilot. By the end, it was clear that this format could work. We're now using this format for biannual community issue exhibitions on different topics at the MAH. We see it as a powerful way to partner with our community and use art to ignite social action.

## A Distinctive Process: Community Issue Exhibitions are Co-Created

**One defining feature of a community issue exhibition is that you build it with partners and individuals impacted by a local issue.** For this project, you'll need community organizing skills. Your exhibition will only be as strong as your ability to recruit and meaningfully engage people who are experts on your selected issue and can speak authentically to its impact.

**You will work with many community members:**

**Key Partners** are your main collaborators (no more than two). Key partners may provide the majority of the exhibition content—artwork, artifacts, and/or stories—and are your primary expert advisors on the issue at hand.

- Key partners share ownership of the entire project with you. They work with you to develop exhibition content, find funding, recruit community partners, and execute the project.
- You need key partners on board before you involve anyone else. You'll need a lead content provider with a substantial body of art/artifacts about the issue, and you'll need one expert on the issue. These roles might be lumped into one key partner, or they might exist as two different key partners. We have done this kind of project without a key partner, but it's more difficult. Having some pre-selected objects to start with will help anchor your work.

**Community Partners** are a working group of local advisors—community organizations, impacted individuals, and policy makers—whose work directly relates to the issue you are focusing on.

- Community partners actively build the partner network, contribute to the exhibition development process, and share expertise and feedback. When the exhibition is open, they collaborate to create programming, offsite extensions and events, as well as rallying their networks to visit the exhibition.
- Aim for a diverse group of individuals and organizations who are both deeply and tangentially connected to the issue. The more the merrier.

**Specialty Partners** are community partners with special roles and needs.

- **Commissioned Artists** who create new artworks for your exhibition. You may or may not engage commissioned artists if you have enough exhibition content to fill your gallery space.
- **Impacted Community Members** who are directly affected by your selected issue. For example, if the issue is veteran homelessness, then homeless veterans are the impacted community.
  - It's likely that the impacted community faces long-term adversity and daily challenges. Take care in building relationships and gaining trust. Offer them appropriate communication channels, times/forms of participation, and compensation for their involvement. Be intentional about the time and resources you need to plan an exhibition with them.
  - If your focus is not a social issue, then you may not have an impacted community to work with.

## A Distinctive Product: Community Issue Exhibitions

### Invite Visitors to Act

**One defining feature of a community issue exhibition is that you directly invite visitors to take action.** Visitors don't just want to know about your issue. They want to help. Alongside the artwork, artifacts, and stories, it's important to empower visitors to take action and give them tools to do so.

You can do this in many different ways. For *Lost Childhoods*, we created a "take action center" with business cards listing different and specific actions visitors could choose to take. The front of each card prompted a specific action, and the back provided contact information for a community partner who could facilitate the action. Our community partners identified specific actions as well as who would be the best contact for each action. You can see what this looked like on the next page.

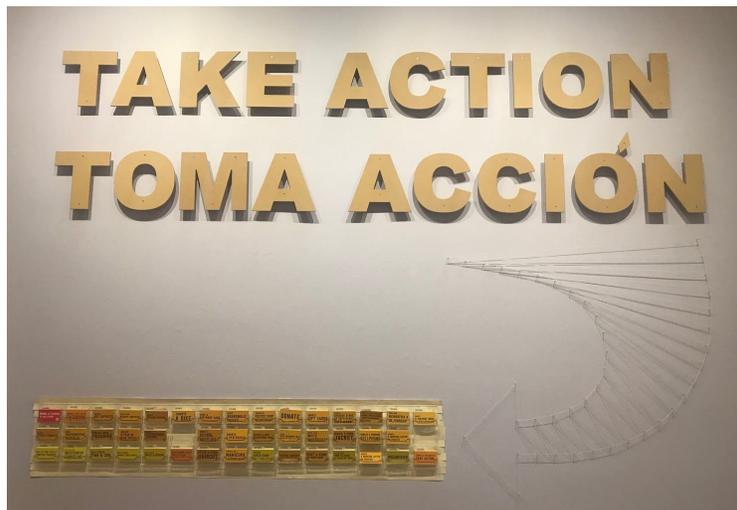
Other ways to invite visitors to take action:

- **Letter-writing campaign or petition targeted to your issue.** Invite visitors to sign on or send a letter directly from the gallery.

- **Invite visitors to connect with community partners.** This can be a simple list of partners, partner flyers or pamphlets, or a gamified bingo card or passport that leads visitors to a few of your partner organizations.
- **Enable visitors to donate to community partners directly from the gallery.** Or allow them to sign up for email lists or volunteer opportunities.

**Think: simple, specific, doable.** Whatever method you choose, make sure it:

- Provides visitors with a truly meaningful, if small, way to act rather than just a symbolic activity.
- Is an effective way for visitors to plug in without extra facilitation.
- Is measurable so you can track the data and impact to know it's working.



# Community Issue Exhibition Readiness Checklist

## Ready to get started?

Here's what you'll need to embark on a community issue exhibition:

- ❑ **Comfort and clarity talking publicly about a local issue.** The media and community will pay attention to your project. They may question you about politicizing your organization or straying from your mission and core expertise. Your board and staff need to be prepared to talk knowledgeably and proudly about the project and why it is appropriate and meaningful for your institution to lead it.
- ❑ **Comfort engaging in advocacy.** Visitors don't just want to learn about issues; they want to take action. Talk with your board about whether there are any limits to the kind of advocacy work you would be willing to support.
- ❑ **Comfort engaging in co-creation.** Because this project's success is rooted in the extent to which it authentically reflects a local issue, you must create it with people who are steeped in that issue. You'll need to work with many partners, who may have differing points of view, to create an exhibition that is seen as a fair and empowering platform for community engagement with the issue.
- ❑ **Time.** We estimate that in general, developing a community issue exhibition takes twice as long a normal exhibition. This extra time is needed to build strong local partnerships and co-create the exhibition.
- ❑ **Money.** We estimate that in general, a community issue exhibition takes 2-3x the budget of a normal exhibition. The extra money is to pay specialized staff to support the co-creation process and key partners for their participation.
- ❑ **Internal Champions.** You'll need staff members who will coach or cheer on other staff on how to dive into deep community work.

# STEP 1. IDENTIFY KEY PARTNER, ISSUE, & PLAN

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This section will help you identify your issue and key partners and develop a sensible timeline and budget.

## Pick an Issue and Key Partner(s)

How do you get started on a community issue exhibition? Do you pick an issue first or a key partner? In our experience, key partners are so crucial to the success of the project that you should not start an exhibition on an issue for which you cannot find the right key partner(s).

Strong key partners bring expertise on the issue AND core exhibition content (art, artifacts). Sometimes you'll find it all in one organization/person, or you may need to recruit one lead issue expert and one lead content partner.

### **Here's what you should look for in a key partner(s):**

- **Are they respected leaders/experts around the issue?** If your key partner is not trusted by the wider community around the issue, you will have a hard time building a credible exhibition.
- **Can they provide a substantial amount of quality content?** Powerful artwork and artifacts related to the issue will spur visitors to think, care, and act. We suggest rooting your exhibition in at least 50% content provided by the key partner.
- **Do they have a strong desire to work collaboratively with you?** You will be working very closely with key partners on all decision-making.
- **Are they eager and ready to work with your local community?** Key partners must understand that local partners will also be involved in setting the direction, look, feel, and content of the exhibition. They must also be able to participate directly in some, if not all, community meetings.
- **Can they bring additional community partners to the table?** They may already be plugged in locally and can help you recruit other partners.
- **Can you work together to solicit financial support?** It is extremely helpful when both partners can both put time and energy into securing grants, sponsorships, and resources to fuel the project.

### **Here's what you should look for in an issue:**

- **Does this issue matter locally?** Even if the issue is invisible or off people's radar, it should credibly touch the lives of diverse locals.
- **Will this issue matter when the exhibition opens?** If your development process is long, think about whether any key changes or legislation might

affect its relevance when the exhibition is open. Think about how you may continue to support work on the issue after the exhibition closes. The best community issue projects can be linked to other local initiatives or campaigns on the issue.

- **Can you open up a meaningful new conversation about this issue?** Some issues are so polarizing, or so over-covered, that your exhibition might not be a useful platform for dialogue. Look for a way into your issue that will open up the greatest possible opportunity for broad community involvement.

## Educate Yourself on the Issue

Think of your exhibition and the issue from all angles. How can the exhibition development process empower your partners? What stereotypes or misconceptions might it reinforce? What will make the resulting exhibition most impactful for visitors?

While you do not need to be an expert on the key issue, you should be informed. Do your homework. Ask your key partner for reputable information sources. Review articles, books, blogs, videos, and podcasts to expand your grasp of the issue. Attend trainings and public meetings on the issue. Learn as you go. This education will help you hone the exhibition plan at the start and make more informed decisions throughout the project.



**Example:** We learned early on that many foster youth have had extremely traumatic experiences, including suffering abuse, exploitation, dislocation, institutionalization, and loss. We realized many visitors—as well as our community partners—may have intense mental and emotional reactions to an exhibition dealing with these issues. From the start, we engaged mental health practitioners as community partners to develop resources both to facilitate supportive partner meetings and to help visitors process the exhibition.

## Hone the Issue with your Key Partner

Once you've selected an issue and a key partner, work together to solidify your broad goals and vision for the exhibition. You'll use this scope to generate a tight explanation of the project that you can use when seeking funding and recruiting other local partners.



**Example:** When we were starting *Lost Childhoods*, we grappled with what aspect of the broken foster care system to focus on. Our key partner strongly advocated that we focus on foster youth’s lived experiences as opposed to the system itself. We agreed to focus on transition-age youth (ages 18-25) to highlight the unique challenges when transitioning to adulthood from foster care—an experience that is largely invisible to the general public.

### Honing the issue will help you:

- Identify specific challenges and questions early on.
- Identify prospective community partners to recruit.
- Identify any impacted community(s) you might engage.
- Clearly represent the project to funders and partners.
- Determine any extra funding and budget needs.

## Project Timeline

Community issue exhibition development takes about twice as long as standard exhibition development due to the intensive partnerships involved. Our *Lost Childhoods* project took 18 months from when we first decided to do it to when the exhibition opened.

When constructing your project timeline, consider these key questions:

- **What is your issue’s timeline?** Are there any key dates for upcoming legislation, campaigns, or local actions related to the issue?
- **How long will it take you to build strong partnerships?** Give ample time and intention to relationship building, especially when working with an impacted community who may face daily challenges and have concerns about trust.

The following page provides the *Lost Childhoods* timeline.

2016

2017

2018

2019

Explore

Prep

Develop

Create

Activate

Share

**Jan-May:** Met in person with our key partner to discuss goals and ideas. Committed to producing an exhibition together, and identified community partners to collaborate with. Submitted grant proposals.

**Aug:** Met with our key partner to hash out specific roles and timelines.  
**Sep-Nov:** Drafted our community meeting agendas, schedules, and plans. Confirmed dates and times with community partners to ensure optimal attendance and participation. Invited all partners and their networks to the community meetings.

**Jan:** Hosted our first community committee meeting and brainstormed big ideas for the exhibition.  
Assembled a small panel of advocates and foster youth to review Artists Proposals.

**Mar-Jun:** Hosted community meetings. Artists facilitated working groups to refine and complete their art projects. Brainstorming and planning for exhibit-related events.  
Checked-in 1-on-1 with the artists and partner organizations in between the community meetings. Developed the marketing plan.

**Jun:** Exhibition install. We invited the community committee to help.  
**Jul-Dec:** Launched our program of events. Hosted 2 events per month, both at our museum and offsite with our partners.

**Jan 2018:** Celebration! Exhibition closed in Santa Cruz County. Collected feedback and reflected on lessons learned.  
Committed to planning 1 issue-driven exhibition every other year.

**Jun:** Secured grant funding and finalized our budget.  
**Jul:** Continued growing our list of collaborators, community partners, and artists. Made phone calls and held informal, informational meetings to invite them to participate.

**Dec:** Touched base with our key partner to finalize details for community meetings and exhibition development process.

Hosted the second community committee meeting to introduce the selected artists and discuss exhibition activation strategies.

Tracked visitor participation and actions to capture the exhibition's impact.

Offered 2 tours per week, which were led by foster youth who we hired as Art Ambassador interns.

Negotiated opportunity for exhibition to travel to another site (Salinas).

## Funding and Budget

Community issue exhibitions cost **two to three times more** than a normal exhibition. They also may also enable you to tap new funding streams. Below are some special costs and funding opportunities you will want to consider.

### **Special costs you may incur:**

- Additional staff to manage community partnerships.
- Payments/funding share for key partner.
- Artist fees, if commissioning new artwork.
- Community partner stipends and/or participation support, if working with impacted community (support may include direct payment, food for meetings, transportation, translation, child care, etc.).
- Supplies and food for community partner meetings.
- Supplies and staffing for increased event programming.

### **Special funding you may pursue:**

- Foundation grants related to the issue, especially where “public awareness” is a primary funding objective.
- State or local grants related to the issue, often through “community development” funding streams.
- Contracts with state or local agencies that have existing funds to target public awareness and/or action around the issue.
- Community partners may have dedicated funding streams for public awareness and/or to support impacted community involvement in public activities.

## Template: Sample Expense Budget

| <b>Costs</b>  | <b>Details</b>   |
|---|--|
| Travel for key partner staff and foster youth           | Mileage costs + minimum wage for youth   |
| Kickoff retreat and community meeting supplies          | Lunch at retreat, snacks at other meetings, various craft materials  |
| Artist commission fees                                  | Paid ½ upfront, ½ at completion  |
| Curatorial stipend for key partner                      | Determined based on joint fundraising  |
| Exhibition supplies and installation materials          | Standard   |
| Object storage and shipping                             | Standard   |
| Participatory gallery activities                        | Take Action center materials (some needed to be replaced frequently)   |
| Graphics, labels and translation                        | Standard   |
| Program/event supplies                                  | Standard   |
| School field trip supplies                              | Standard   |
| Opening reception (food, performance)                   | Standard, plus heavier food and payments to youth for participation  |
| Promotion (flyers, postcard, newsletter, fb ads, email) | Higher volume production to share materials with partners  |
| Foster youth stipends                                   | Paid minimum wage for every hour at the MAH for meetings, events, and programs. Paid in cash, day of, with simple receipt. |
| <b>TOTAL EXPENSES</b>                                   | 2-3x a standard exhibition   |

## STEP 2. ASSEMBLE YOUR TEAM

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Appoint staff members to this project. Establish clear roles and decision-making process with your key partner. Recruit community partners.

## Special Staffing Considerations

As on any exhibition project, you will need team members to develop the concept, design the space, curate artifacts, write labels, and produce the exhibition.

**There are four elements that make community issue project teams special:**

1. **Organizing, coordinating, and communicating with community partners is a huge and time-consuming task.** You may have dozens of partners, all of whom are fiercely engaged in the issue but have little time to devote to the project. In our experience, it was valuable to assign a single staff member as the **community liaison**, meeting with partners one-on-one to support their goals and managing all group partner communication. In the case of *Lost Childhoods*, we hired a 30 hr/week community liaison (in a role called Dialogue Catalyst) to coordinate with our partners.
2. **Leading community co-creation requires a skilled facilitator.** Your community meetings to develop the exhibition may include dozens of people from different organizations, backgrounds, and perspectives. They may be skeptical or openly suspicious of each other, you, or the process. We recommend identifying one experienced lead meeting facilitator--ideally a member of your staff team--to host all community meetings.
3. **Honoring the co-creation process requires being slower and more explicit about who decides what--and sticking to it.** You can approach decision-making with your key partner and community partners however you want, but you should have clear plans for how to arbitrate conflicts, communicate decisions to all involved, and keep the project moving forward.
4. **Community issue exhibitions aren't "done" when they open--partner engagement continues or increases during the run of the exhibition.** Strong partners are going to activate the exhibition with their own events, projects, and campaigns. The community liaison needs to continue in their role throughout the run of the exhibition to support these events and exhibition extensions.

## Invite Community Partners

There are many organizations and individuals in your community who are already working on your selected issue. The more partners you involve meaningfully, the more your exhibition will reflect their deep knowledge, and the further your project can spread. We suggest recruiting a cohort of community partners into an advisory group who will support exhibition development and activation.

**tip** **Name the group before you get started.** It will help partners proudly explain their role in the exhibition development. We use the name C3 (Creative Community Committee).

### **Consider recruiting:**

- Advocates and organizations with direct, deep connections to the impacted community.
- Professionals peripherally connected to the social issue.
- Collaborative artists who create community-centered artwork.
- Community leaders, policymakers, and board members who have an interest in and passion for the community and social issue you are presenting.

**tip** **Community partners are your best co-recruiters.** They know their issue's landscape. Every time you reach out to a potential partner, make sure to ask them who else you should involve in this project.

### **Invite Impacted Community Members**

If your issue is a social issue, there are likely people in your community impacted by it. If that's the case, you must involve impacted community members in the co-creation of the project—and to be thoughtful about centering their lived experience and expertise on the issue. We have an informal rule that impacted community members should outnumber other participants in the creation of the exhibition and each step along the way.

Note: inviting an impacted community may not apply if the issue you focus on is not a social issue.

Some things to consider when recruiting impacted community members:

- **Recruit through community partner organizations.** Talk with partners who directly work with the impacted community to identify the best way to invite impacted individuals to participate. Partners who do direct service can help identify individuals, as well as identifying appropriate times, venues, and compensation strategies for individuals.
- **Stand up, step back.** Allow the impacted community to tell their stories and speak their truths on their own terms. Don't speak for them unless given permission to repeat their narratives. Don't ask or force them to speak unless they willingly offer to. Exploiting or tokenizing their life experiences to garner attention won't accomplish anything meaningful for them or your institution.
- **"Nothing about us without us."** At every step of the way, involve the impacted community, ask for their input, meet when/where it's convenient for them, and make adjustments when requested. Your relationship will grow each time you respond with flexibility and enthusiasm when they disagree or want to redirect the project.
- **Recognize that everyone is different.** No one person can speak for a whole group. There may be subgroups within the impacted community that disagree, have different experiences, or see the issue differently.
- **Honor your impacted community's specific needs.** If your impacted community is single moms, you may need to provide childcare during meetings. If your impacted community is transient, you may need to adjust expectations about their ability to commit to more than one meeting. Figure out what time, place, communication style, compensation strategy (Cash? Check? Gift card incentive?), and co-creation format will work for them. Make it easy for them to participate. Directly ask your community partners what their needs are to fully understand them.

### **Optional: Invite Artists**

If you're commissioning new works for your exhibition, we suggest involving artists in the community partnership group (as opposed to working with them separately).

Keep in mind that only some artists can or want to produce community-based, collaborative art projects.

We recommend recruiting artists who:

- **Are comfortable taking content direction and input from others.** Artists in this kind of project need to be sensitive to the fact that their work will be instrumentalized to serve the goals and interests of community partners. They need to be good listeners and open to following the cues of partners.
- **Can identify clear and tangible ways for non-artists to participate in the co-creation of their art projects.** It's not enough to allow community partners to provide feedback on the artwork's content. Artists should be able to define an artistic process, step, or action to which community partners can contribute.
- **Create artwork in diverse mediums.** It is helpful when artists are flexible since you will not know at the outset exactly what kind of work will suit the exhibition and the issue best. Art projects are likely to evolve and change over the development process.

The best artist partners will be confident facilitating community involvement in their work directly. This is not necessary—exhibition staff can do this—but it is a huge time-saver where possible.

Make it clear to the commissioned artists about what they are getting into. They will be paid not only to create new artworks, but also for being a part of the exhibition development process during the community meetings.

## How to Issue the Invitation

When reaching out to prospective partners, consider the following:

- **Pick your communication form.** What works best: Email? A phone call? A presentation at a issue-related community meeting? To reach teens, for example, we used creative handouts, zines, and text messages. In a later project focused on socially-isolated seniors, our staff made presentations at senior support group meetings and called people on the phone.
- **Employ credibility markers.** Is it helpful for the initial outreach to come from your CEO? Or as a warm introduction from a respected partner? Invite them to commit and get their RSVP. Sometimes the names of other participants matters more than any other part of the invitation.
- **Provide your personal contact information.** Make it easy for partners to get in touch. Including both work and mobile contact information is helpful.
- **Make it easy for them to say yes.** A short message with a longer attachment is better than a lengthy email.
- **Ask them to RSVP.** It helps you know who's coming, and sharing who is already coming adds further credibility to those who are uncertain about participating.

## Template: Prospective Community Partners—Initial Message

Dear [NAME],

[RESPECTED COMMUNITY PARTNER] suggested I contact you to see if you are interested in working with us on a [YEAR] exhibition, [EXHIBITION TITLE], that we are planning with [KEY PARTNER - include hyperlink] at [YOUR INSTITUTION - include hyperlink].

We are working with [KEY PARTNER] to raise public awareness and spark community action around [ISSUE]. We are working with [OTHER POTENTIAL PARTNERS] to create this exhibition, featuring existing and new artwork co-created with artists, [IMPACTED COMMUNITY] and advocates like you.

I'm reaching out to you specifically to see if [ORGANIZATION] would like to be a collaborator in this exhibition. We would ask you to join a community leadership team in [YEAR] to advise on exhibition main messages, content, and design. We'd also work with you to identify ways that the exhibition can advance [ORGANIZATION] through collaborative events, tours, and other public outreach.

We are at the very beginning stages of planning this but are reaching out to you now because we are applying for a grant from [FOUNDATION -include hyperlink]. For this grant, we need to list possible organizations we may collaborate with and we would love for [ORGANIZATION] to be one of them.

If you are interested please let me know **by [DATE]** and please point me to a short description of your organization (~50 words) that we could use for the grant application.

Thanks in advance for your consideration. In the **[SEASON]** of **[YEAR]** we will be in touch with you more about the next steps and specifics of how you can be a part of this powerful collaborative exhibition.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

Thanks so much,  
**[NAME]**

### **Template: Prospective Community Partners—Kickoff Message**

Dear **[NAME]**,

I'm writing to reconnect with you about our invitation for you and your organization to work with us on **[EXHIBITION TITLE - include hyperlink to exhibition webpage]**, an upcoming exhibition about **[ISSUE]**.

Today I am inviting you to:

- Register **[-include hyperlink]** as a member of the project team
- Save the date **[-include hyperlink]** for our kick-off retreat on **[DATE]**
- Learn more **[-include hyperlink]** about this exciting project

You can jump to the links above to get started, or read more in this email. If you have any questions, please get in touch with me at **[EMAIL ADDRESS]** or at **[PHONE NUMBER]**.

With respect and gratitude,  
**[NAME]**

### **With each outreach message, attach an informational document that covers:**

- Time, date, and plans for any meeting you're inviting them to.
- Why you're inviting them and what they'll get out of it.
- What the time commitment and schedule is.
- Why your institution is doing this, and how they can join.
- How to get in touch with you if they have any questions.

## STEP 3. DEVELOP THE PROJECT TOGETHER

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Now that you have your team, key partner, community partners, impacted community members, and artists on board, it's time to create the exhibition. This section outlines how to facilitate community meetings and co-create the project.

## Roles in Co-Creation

There is no one way to co-create your exhibition with your partners. What matters most is that you are clear and direct in your communication about your process and the ways that partners can participate. The clearer everyone is on roles and process, the more smoothly it will go.

On the most basic level, your partners are your content experts for your exhibition. You should respect and rely on them for defining and describing the social issue, identifying credible sources and additional partners to involve, and identifying any red flags in how the issue might be shared or presented.

### **In the case of *Lost Childhoods*, we identified:**

- **Our museum (MAH) as the lead project facilitator**, exhibition designer, label writer, and marketing/promotion manager. Museum staff had final say on all exhibit text, design and fabrication decisions, and promotional materials.
- **The key partner (Foster Youth Museum) as the lead content provider.** The key partner had final say on how their objects were presented. The key partner also shared decision-making power with the museum regarding the exhibition title, commissioning of new artworks, and all press releases.
- **Community Partners (various) as content providers and advisors.** Community partners developed the big ideas for the exhibition and weighed in on all new artwork development. Community partners contributed content to new artworks and the “take action” center. They also created and led exhibition-related events both at and outside the museum.
- **Impacted Community Members (foster youth) as the driving force** of the project. Together with our community partners, we made a commitment at the first meeting that the youth would lead the advisory group. At every step, we actively solicited and integrated youth perspectives and input.
- **Artists as facilitators of the co-creation of new art projects.** Once the community partners agreed on exhibition big ideas, the commissioned artists created artworks to tackle specific main messages.

## Partner Contracts

Contracts can be a hurdle to partners signing on. We suggest NOT requiring any formal agreements with the majority of your community partners. We suggest only developing contracts for key partner and commissioned artists.

You may also want to consider creating release forms for any photography or written contributions that community partners produce. This is especially important if your partners come from marginalized or frequently exploited communities. It's important that partners understand what is being discussed in the privacy of a meeting and what words might end up in an exhibition label.

**Here are sample contracts we used for our Key Partner and for Artists.**

### Key Partner Contract

|  |
|--|
| [DATE]   |
| <p>This letter of agreement between [KEY PARTNER] and [YOUR INSTITUTION] outlines the responsibilities for the exhibition, [EXHIBITION TITLE], from [DATE] through [DATE] at [YOUR INSTITUTION].</p> <p><b>[YOUR INSTITUTION] will:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Create and manage the budget.</li><li>2. Pay the [KEY PARTNER] \$[AMOUNT] which covers their full participation in this project. Payment due net [#] after signing this contract.</li><li>3. Create a project management plan for the exhibition development in collaboration with [KEY PARTNER].</li><li>4. Coordinate and plan community meetings and structure [DATE]–[DATE].</li><li>5. Collaborate with the [KEY PARTNER] to select [#] artists to produce projects with the community committee that occupy no more than ½ the exhibition space. [YOUR INSTITUTION] manages all artists contracts and coordination.</li><li>6. Collaboratively develop the exhibition with the [KEY PARTNER], with final editorial authority for exhibit design, text, and promotional materials residing with [YOUR INSTITUTION].</li><li>7. Generate loan forms for any borrowed art or objects.</li><li>8. Insure all borrowed art and objects while at [YOUR INSTITUTION] for the amount listed on the loan form.</li><li>9. Design, produce, and install the exhibition, to include layout, lighting, labels, interpretative materials, and additional objects, stories and participatory activities related to the theme.</li><li>10. Coordinate and cover over all costs associated with exhibition-related events.</li><li>11. Coordinate and cover all costs associated with press and marketing of the exhibition. Create press kits for [KEY PARTNER] and other community partners to disseminate.</li><li>12. Collaborate with [KEY PARTNER] to develop a gallery host training. Coordinate and cover all costs associated with the gallery host program.</li><li>13. Conduct visitor and community collaborator surveys to measure impact.</li><li>14. Collaborate with the [KEY PARTNER] on grant reporting for [FOUNDATION].</li></ol> |

**The Exhibition Partner, [KEY PARTNER], will:**

1. Make artwork and objects available for inclusion in the exhibition for the entire duration of the exhibition, with time allotted for shipping, installation, and deinstallation. Artwork and objects from [KEY PARTNER] should occupy up to ½ the exhibition space.
2. Pay for and coordinate all round trip shipping of [KEY PARTNER] artwork and objects.
3. Provide images, text and information about the borrowed art and objects for background research to inform exhibition label writing by [YOUR INSTITUTION] staff
4. Work with [YOUR INSTITUTION] to create a basic design for [KEY PARTNER] section of the exhibition.
5. Work with [YOUR INSTITUTION] to install their section of the exhibition.
6. Participate in all community meetings, bringing staff and at least one [IMPACTED COMMUNITY MEMBER] from [KEY PARTNER].
7. Participate in the Exhibition Opening Talk on [DATE], speaking about [KEY PARTNER] and [EXHIBITION TITLE].
8. Participate in one [YOUR INSTITUTION] members/VIP event. The date and experience is to be determined in collaboration with [YOUR INSTITUTION].
9. Provide high resolution images of at least five artworks in the exhibition for promotion.
10. Collaborate with [YOUR INSTITUTION] to develop a gallery host training.
11. Collaborate with [KEY PARTNER] on grant reporting for [FOUNDATION].
12. Disseminate press kits to promote the exhibition to your networks.

By signing this agreement, we mutually agree to these responsibilities and related fees.

\_\_\_\_\_  
[NAME]  
[TITLE]  
[YOUR INSTITUTION]

\_\_\_\_\_  
[NAME]  
[TITLE]  
[KEY PARTNER]

## Artist Contract

[DATE]

[ARTIST NAME],

This letter of agreement between [ARTIST NAME] (Artist) and [YOUR INSTITUTION] outlines the responsibilities for the exhibition, [EXHIBITION TITLE], featuring [ARTIST NAME]'s artwork from [DATE] through [DATE] at [YOUR INSTITUTION].

**[YOUR INSTITUTION] will:**

1. Pay the artist a total of \$[AMOUNT]. \$[HALF AMOUNT] (½) to be paid 2 weeks after signing this contract and \$[HALF AMOUNT] (½) at the exhibition opening in [MONTH]. This is the total compensation to complete a commissioned project with community committee members for the exhibition, [EXHIBITION TITLE].
2. Provide guidance in the development of the project in collaboration with the [KEY PARTNER].
3. Facilitate all community meetings.
4. Meet with artist in between community meetings and connect the artist to community members as needed to complete the project.

5. Make basic art supplies and tools available for the artist to use in this project. Assist in requesting donated or discounted materials as needed.
6. Reserve space at [YOUR INSTITUTION] if the artist needs to invite community members to participate in the creation of the project outside of the community meetings.
7. Assist in preparing materials and set up before each community meeting.
8. Collaboratively develop the exhibition with the artist and the [KEY PARTNER], with final editorial authority for exhibit design, text, and promotional materials residing with [YOUR INSTITUTION].
9. Generate loan forms for any borrowed art or artifacts
10. Insure all borrowed art/artifacts while at the [YOUR INSTITUTION] for the amount listed on the loan form
11. Design, produce, and install the exhibition, to include layout, lighting, labels (English/Spanish), interpretative materials, and additional objects, stories and participatory activities related to the theme
12. Coordinate and cover all costs associated with press and marketing of the exhibition

**The Artist will:**

1. Create an artwork with community members for the exhibition, [EXHIBITION TITLE], that addresses [ISSUE OR SPECIFIC EXHIBITION GOAL].
2. Attend and actively participate in the following community meetings [TIME]: [DATE], [DATE], [DATE].
3. Meet with [YOUR INSTITUTION] staff in between community meetings and connect with other community members as needed.
4. Participate in the Exhibition Opening on [DATE] [TIME].
5. Participate in one [YOUR INSTITUTION] members/VIP event. The date and experience is to be determined in collaboration with the [YOUR INSTITUTION], community and the [KEY PARTNER] between [MONTH] and [MONTH] [YEAR].
6. Provide 3 high resolution images of the artwork in the exhibition for promotion.
7. Deliver project details including all text, square footage needed, measurements, installation requirements and images to the [YOUR INSTITUTION] by [DATE].
8. Make the artwork available for inclusion in the exhibition and deliver it to the museum by [DATE].
9. Assist in the installation ([DATE]–[DATE]) and deinstallation ([DATE]–[DATE]) of the artwork with [YOUR INSTITUTION] staff. Exact dates and times TBD.

By signing this agreement, we mutually agree to these responsibilities and related fees.

\_\_\_\_\_  
 [NAME]  
 [TITLE]  
 [YOUR INSTITUTION]

\_\_\_\_\_  
 [ARTIST NAME]  
 Artist

## Center the Impacted Community in Your Process

*"I originally joined because I had seen many cases of organizations attempt to represent and support foster youth, LGBTQ+ youth, youth of color, youth with disabilities, homeless youth, and again and again I saw youth being sidelined, being spoken over, being patronized and tokenized and left out from the very projects meant for them. ... I was ready to stop that shit before it even started.*

*To put it simply, I joined this [community committee] expecting the MAH to f\*\*k up and that I would need to call them on it.*

*... I am happy, and relieved, to say I never felt the need to.*

*From day one foster youth were brought to the forefront of every idea, every art piece, the setup of the exhibit—everything.*

*As if to rub in my face how wrong my original assumption was, the MAH has included art pieces from foster youth in this exhibit and this exhibit will even be curated by foster youth... To again put it simply, Lost Childhoods is an exhibit by, of, from, and for Foster Youth; y'all are just lucky enough to enjoy it."*

*-Jess Prudent, Community Partner (youth) speaking at the Lost Childhoods opening*

As much as possible, keep the exhibition development and public events grounded in the impacted community you are serving. It may be easy to get carried away in thinking that any and all advocacy is welcome, but it isn't always true. While there may be power dynamics between advocates, policymakers, and the impacted community all in the same room, remember to lean on your guiding principles.

### Guiding principles we recommend:

- **Give ownership and hold space.** When you share ownership of the exhibition and programs with the community, you create opportunities for empowerment and autonomy.
- **Create opportunities.** This can range from speaking opportunities to paid jobs. Offer paid internships during which impacted community members can design and run their own programs, lead tours, or engage the public around the issue they are affected by.
- **Provide resources and tools.** Make your resources and tools accessible for the community you are working with. Give them the appropriate support for them to be comfortable and successful in your institution's environment and with your constituency.

## Community Meetings

We recommend in-person community meetings to bring partners together to develop the exhibition. Working together in person is the best way to build connections and help people understand the physicality of a three-dimensional exhibition.

Online tools, digital communication, and one-on-one meetings can supplement community meetings. There may also be special opportunities for small groups of partners to participate in selecting an artist, writing a label, fabricating exhibition elements, or helping install the exhibition. But we suggest doing the core exhibition development work in person as a large group at set times together.

If you are NOT commissioning new artwork/projects, two or three meetings may be sufficient. If you are commissioning new work, we recommend four to six meetings.

### **Special considerations for all community meetings:**

- **Plan for enough time together to build relationships with community partners in your timeline.** Get to know the community around the issue and let them get to know you. Incorporate fun icebreakers into each meeting.
- **Find fun and creative ways for partners to actively contribute to the meetings.** It may be especially important with some groups to invite contributions that don't require speaking in front of a large group or writing.
- **Have realistic expectations about the level of commitment partners can provide.** Ideally, make it possible for any partner to attend just one meeting and feel like they understand the project AND had an opportunity to contribute. Provide a quick summary at every meeting of where you're at, where you're going, and what you've covered together so far.
- **Involve key partners in conflict resolution.** There may be conflicts that arise related to nuances in the issue or the relationships among partners where you don't know what to do or even what questions to ask. When

conflicts arise, lean on your key partner to guide you through or help you resolve it.

- **Determine if you need to pay some participants to attend**, and if so, do.
- **Be sensitive to specific needs or issues within the group** for special seats, foods, level of activity, or other accommodations. Plan your meetings at times and in locations where your partners can easily attend. Always provide snacks that are appealing to your partners.
- **Where possible, empower partners to lead parts of the meeting.** This could mean facilitating a breakout group, offering a warm-up activity, or sharing important content.
- **Encourage staff members working on the project to attend community meetings.** Even if their work is specific to one aspect of the exhibition (i.e. graphic design, marketing), their work will be more mission focused if they understand and connect with the community partners involved.

## **Use Your First Meeting to Establish Shared Vision and Commitment**

The first community meeting is the most important. This meeting lays the foundation for the work, relationships, and expectations ahead. If the meeting goes well, your partners will leave enthused and confident about the project. They will spread the word and invite others who were on the fence to join in.

We suggest scheduling the first meeting as a “retreat,” allotting 3-6 hours for your time together. At this retreat, you should:

- **Get to know each other.** Find creative, fun ways to introduce yourselves both in the large group and in small groups. We also recommend incorporating a meal into this meeting for more informal connections.
- **Provide an overview of what an exhibition is and how it is made.** Most of your partners will have no experience with exhibition development. Level the playing field and establish your credibility by offering a brief introduction to the power of exhibitions. We suggest including:
  - Conceptual overview of exhibitions as a 3D storytelling tool.
  - Examples of how exhibitions can be used to spark community action on an issue.

- Practical overview of the steps involved in designing an exhibition.
- Specifics on what will be part of YOUR exhibition, including images and examples of the key partner's core content.
- Specifics on how partners will contribute to your exhibition's development (including schedule).
- **Brainstorm big ideas.** This is the most important, and chaotic, part of the kickoff meeting. We recommend establishing 3-5 big ideas that you want visitors to leave the exhibition with. These big ideas will drive exhibition development, artwork creation, and decisions along the way. If all your partners feel ownership of the big ideas, they will understand and accept decisions rooted in those big ideas.

Here's how we developed the big ideas for *Lost Childhoods*:

- Before the first community meeting, we agreed on one big idea with our key partner. We used that big idea in grant-writing and to explain the project to potential partners.
- At the first community meeting, we shared the one big idea and explained that all the partners would now collaboratively identify 3-4 other big ideas.
- We facilitated small group brainstorming, leading to a large-group discussion where people nominated specific ideas for consideration. We generated a list of over 50 ideas with partners speaking them, the facilitator interrogating them for clarity, and another staff member writing them on a big shared screen. While this was chaotic and somewhat tiresome, it established a sense that everyone would be heard and that the process would be transparent.
- Live, in front of the large group, we narrowed the list down. The facilitator offered the whole group verbal edits and asked for agreement or disagreement. Again, this was chaotic but kept the process transparent. By the end of the first meeting, we had a list of seven potential big ideas.
- After the meeting, a small group of staff, key partners, and community partner representatives followed up to hone and edit the seven down to five final big ideas. These were presented to the whole partner group, first by email and then in person at the second meeting, for agreement. There was no formal vote, but people accepted and supported the big ideas.
- We used the big ideas every time a decision needed to be made. They were especially useful when working on the new commissioned artwork. If an artist got off-track from the big ideas, we used them to steer the projects back to our shared goals.

## Template: Community Meeting Schedule

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <p><b>Meeting 1</b><br/><b>[kickoff retreat]</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make intros and introduce the exhibition themes.</li> <li>• Provide a crash course in what exhibitions are and what they can do.</li> <li>• Brainstorm lots of stories, feelings, experiences, phrases, and ideas related to the issue.</li> <li>• Identify and agree on 3–5 big ideas for the exhibition.</li> <li>• Eat together, play together, generate excitement and buy-in.</li> <li>• If commissioning new artwork, task artists with developing proposals linked to the big ideas.</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Meeting 2</b></p>                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Get input on artist project proposals and hone direction for those projects.</li> <li>• Brainstorm exhibit-related events, programming, marketing, and community activation possibilities.</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>Meeting 3</b></p>                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Artists present final project plans and clear ways that community partners can participate in making the new work.</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>Meeting 4</b></p>                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working session to contribute content to artworks and to refine programming/activation plan for the exhibition.</li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>Meeting 5</b></p>                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finalize art projects and the events and marketing plan.</li> </ul>  |

## Navigating group-based decision making and establishing shared goals

Whichever methods you choose to facilitate decision-making with a large group (democratic, executive, consensus, majority, etc.) be sure to establish a system internally and with your key partner.

If needed and for extra clarity, consider informing your community partners on the different stages of decision-making and how it will be implemented. In our experience,



inviting partners to voice concerns before finalizing a decision builds stronger relationships and brings forward perspectives we may have overlooked.

There will be many times when different partners' perspectives on a given decision will conflict. That's normal. You need clarity on process and roles so you can say, "here's how you can weigh in on that" or "let's go back to the big ideas" or "that's the key partner's decision."



**Note:** If you are working with an impacted community, be especially attentive to ensuring that they feel heard and meaningfully involved in the process. This may require changing your facilitation strategy or doing direct one-on-one outreach to these individuals to make their voices heard.

For example, at our first *Lost Childhoods* C3 meeting, we found that many foster youth were not comfortable speaking up in a room full of adults. While we had originally planned to require youth and adults to work together in breakout groups, we switched to a model where youth could work on their own if they chose, which gave them a greater sense of agency.

## Communicate Early and Often

Community-based exhibition development requires constant communication. With so many players involved—you, your key partner, your community partners, and the artists—there is a lot to keep track of. The golden rule: communicate before, after, and in-between community meetings.

Here are some suggestions for how and when you communicate with partners.

- **Schedule regular check-ins with key partners.** Discuss updates, progress on artist projects (if applicable), exhibition layouts, and address all thoughts, questions, and concerns. Use these as an opportunity to ask the hard questions and resolve conflicts.
- **Meet one-on-one in the early stages with each community partner.** In between the committee meetings, we encourage you to meet one-on-one with all your community partners. These meetings allow you to learn and fully understand your community partner's goals while actively building trust and deepening the relationship.

- **Coach artists along the way.** If you're commissioning artists, meet with them one-on-one between community meetings. Help them get and process input from partners. The art projects may drastically change from their initial proposals during the process, and it's your job to keep the production timeline on track. Use the big ideas as your guides and keep it driven by the impacted community.
- **Keep staff in the loop.** Regroup with your exhibitions team to troubleshoot requests from your key partner, problem-solve any artist obstacles, devise layout plans, and prototype labels, signage, and gallery interactives.
- **Document the process.** Share the energy and momentum. This is especially helpful in sending updates and keeping in touch. Be brief and provide consistent touchpoints. We recommend sending communication out 2x/month during the planning and development, and 1x/week when the exhibition is open. Even if you receive little to no response, it will keep your community in the loop.

### Example: Email to *Lost Childhoods* partners during exhibition development

Hi C3ers,

Our **LAST C3 Meeting** is **Tuesday May 9th 6-8PM at the MAH!** Whether you've only come once or have come every time--- we want you there for this important final meeting together!

- **We will start promptly at 6PM. There will be snacks. We will end promptly at 8PM.**
- **We have a summer program plan to activate this exhibition!** At this meeting we'll share with you the plan for events here at the MAH, at partner locations, and a new youth-driven weekly program series-- specifically for and designed by transition age foster youth during this exhibition.
- **There are still MANY opportunities for you to contribute to the exhibition.** At this meeting, we'll discuss:
  - How youth can have their own art in this exhibition
  - How you can contribute your objects to one of the installations
  - Internship opportunities for youth
  - What marketing tools do you need from MAH to share this exhibition
  - How you can participate in installing the exhibition in late June/early July!
- **At this meeting, you will get creative in making the art projects to accompany the Foster Youth Museum.** You'll be drawing, writing, and making journals for the exhibition at this next meeting.

We're excited to see you all **TUESDAY May 9th!**

Nina, Stacey, and Lauren

## Create Multiple Ways for Partners to Contribute

Some partners will come to every meeting and respond to every email. Others will not. It's your responsibility to find as many ways as you can for partners to contribute to the exhibition.

### **For example, we invited community partners to:**

- Develop the five big ideas for the exhibition.
- Review artist proposals and select who to commission.
- Develop “take action” opportunities for visitors related to their own work.
- Develop events and programs rooted in the exhibition.
- Sign their names on a wall in the exhibition.
- Host tours, events, policy meetings, and workshops alongside the exhibition.
- Bring youth to the exhibition for free.

### **We also invited impacted community members—foster youth—to:**

- Share their personal stories in a video component of the exhibition (footage shot both at community meetings and at partner sites).
- Contribute creative work to be integrated into commissioned artworks (at meetings).
- Exhibit their own personal artwork in the exhibition.
- Contribute their own personal stories to seed exhibition notebooks (distributed at a community meeting).
- Take on paid internships to activate the exhibition and related events.
- Speak at exhibition-related openings, events, and policy meetings.

## Mistakes We Made

Co-creating an exhibition with community partners is not easy. You will make mistakes. Here are a few we made our first time around:

- **We didn't have a clear decision-making process for the exhibition title.** Some community partners hated the title and wanted to change it. It took a few meetings before we understood that the title was a must-have for our key partner, at which point we agreed to stick with it and to address partner concerns about it in other ways.
- **We realized late that artists needed support to navigate community co-creation.** Artists and community partners were eager to help each other, but when different community partner input conflicted, artists got stuck. We ended up assigning a staff member (our director of community engagement) to coach the artists and curate the projects to completion.
- **We didn't communicate clearly enough about what would be on display.** Community partners were confused about what exactly would be on display. We learned to start EVERY meeting with a quick reorientation of the exhibition big ideas, a layout/walk-through, and a few sample objects to keep people connected to the physical content of the exhibition.
- **We didn't consider existing tensions and disagreements among community partners.** In our case, there were some partners who were resentful or suspicious of others in the room. It took time—and strategic small group breakouts—to keep everyone engaged and comfortable.

## STEP 4. ACTIVATE THE EXHIBITION

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Arriving to the opening reception is a big feat! This section covers how to share the exhibition with your community through openings, events, and related programs.

## Installation and Opening

We recommend inviting community partners to help at each step of the way, including during exhibition installation. Taking this approach instills a sense of ownership and pride in the exhibition. We recommend setting aside a few time slots that you could use more helping hands and volunteers that you can manage.

### **A few ways you can invite your partners to help:**

- **During installation:**
  - Assemble the community-created artworks with the artists.
  - Help hang labels, install artifacts, and support general exhibit prep.
  - Create seed content for areas inviting visitor input.
  - Create and/or distribute flyers for the opening.
- **During openings and exhibition events:**
  - Table in the gallery to share about their experience in creating the exhibition, the work they do, and how the public can get involved.
  - Show people around the exhibition as a gallery host or art ambassador.

Consider hosting two distinct opening receptions, a private one for partners and a public one for the whole community. Here's how we think about these:

- **A private opening acknowledges partners for their dedication to the exhibition.** This reception should be planned to be as welcoming as possible for the impacted community and partners. Invite your community partners, their VIPs, and their networks. Arrange for policymakers and elected officials to attend as well.
- **A larger, public opening is educational, inspirational, and informative.** Feel free to stick to your normal exhibition opening format here. Since this reception will yield a higher attendance of visitors who are probably less familiar with the issue, we recommend having a community partner tabling or offering tours in the gallery to share more information about their work and connection to the exhibition.

## Make it Easy for Partners to Share the Exhibition

Your partners are the best people to share the exhibition with non-traditional audiences who care about the issue addressed. We recommend working directly with partners to co-create press releases and promotional materials. They will know how to speak to their audiences just as you know how to speak to yours.

Consider providing partners with:

- Press releases and promotional materials that highlight their involvement.
- Opportunities for partners to be interviewed by press and media.
- Free passes to share with their clients and constituents.
- Memberships so they can enjoy and share the exhibitions.
- Easy ways for them to host their own tours, events, and programs.
- Invitations to all events related to the exhibition—and encouragement for them to invite others.
- Versions of the “take action” component they can share at their own sites.



**Example:** *Lost Childhoods* received unusually high media coverage for a MAH exhibition. We primarily attribute this to having issued a joint press release with the Santa Cruz County Human Services Department. In addition to coverage of the show, reporters wrote long-format stories about individual youth involved with the project. This led to the community at large (including business owners, educators, and parents) rallying to support foster youth and the exhibition.

## Programming and Events

Exhibit-related events can help fill in gaps in your exhibition or create opportunities to dive into specific aspects of the issue. Events give community partners center stage, and they aid in ramping up the energy and buzz around the issue. As much as possible, support your community partners in leading their own events—both at and outside your institution—in conjunction with the exhibition.



**Tip:** Community partners may have a million ideas for kinds of events they'd like to help host. You know your institution's strengths best. You can save some time and frustration by offering clear event templates or parameters to help partners focus their thinking.

**Different kinds of events can help you achieve different goals.** Consider developing events that serve as:

- **Platforms for learning and dialogue, like:**
  - Events featuring dynamic community partners sharing their experiences, expertise, and knowledge.
  - Events featuring speakers who relate to the issue in many different ways.
  - Private events by and for impacted community members to connect and share with each other.
  - Events hosted and led by community partners (at your site or theirs).
- **Showcases for partners and the work on display, like:**
  - Events inviting the broad public to learn more about the issue.
  - School tours and custom group visits.
  - Film screenings, workshops, or short lectures with discussions.
  - Intimate opportunities for the public to talk with impacted community members.
- **Calls to action to invite people to get involved with the issue, like:**
  - Specialized trainings for target groups led by community partners.
  - Direct engagements between the impacted community and policymakers.
  - Formal check-ins with policymakers to advance advocacy efforts.



**Tip:** Events and programs offsite at your partners' locations increase the visibility of the exhibition. When you promote these events through your organization's normal channels, you invite audiences to bridge and visitors to get more deeply involved with the issue.

## Engage Policymakers

Policymakers have unique opportunities to lead community action around your issue. Empower them to do so. Early on, work on building strong relationships with local policymakers around your project. Invite them or their staff to participate as community partners or to attend community meetings. Ask for their help in raising funds and raising awareness of the project. The best case scenario is that they actively participate as community partners in the exhibition development process. Their investment can help you spread public awareness on this issue, AND set you up for a lasting support network for any future community issue exhibitions.

For example, we:

- Invited a County Supervisor and a State Assemblyman to be community partners. While neither elected official participated directly, they sent staff to our meetings as representatives. They also helped by speaking at the opening and sharing the exhibition with colleagues in other counties.
- Hosted a public County Board of Supervisors study session meeting at our museum. This served as a direct engagement between the Board of Supervisors and local foster youth who participated in developing the exhibition with us. The youth gave their feedback on recent measures and legislative change and provided their experiences and suggestions on foster system successes and improvements.
- Made presentations about the project to County and City Councils. After these presentations and related meetings, County supervisors and City council members directly approached us about hosting tours or direct engagements with other special municipal groups. We hosted several versions of direct engagements with different entities, including regional school superintendents, County social workers, and the County Human Services Division staff. Foster youth led the conversations on how policymakers can support their community.

Engaging policymakers helps bridge the gap between the impacted community and the systems that are meant to serve them. Involving policymakers in the advocacy work of your exhibition can raise awareness on the issue and your institution's involvement, mobilize a larger set of your community to get involved, and attract positive media attention.



## STEP 5. MEASURING AND CELEBRATING IMPACT

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Take a moment to appreciate the positive change you've ignited in your community. This section covers special data to collect and ways to celebrate the impact of your community issue exhibition.

## Gut Check: Reconnect and Adjust

After the opening, check in with your community partners to hear their feedback on the exhibition and development processes. We recommend capturing the initial impressions in the first month of opening, and then again halfway through the run of the show.

### **Here are some good questions to ask partners:**

- Do you and your clients feel safe and welcome to explore this space?
- Are all spaces accessible (space, language, and volume of sound/media)?
- Are we achieving our goals of the exhibition?
- Do you feel pride in this project? What are we missing? What can we add?

### **And some questions to ask yourselves:**

- Are visitors taking the actions offered? Which ones need to be changed or updated?
- Are people participating in the exhibition appropriately? Are the big ideas coming through?
- Do visitors need any emotional or other kind of facilitated support in processing and responding to the exhibition?

## Project Evaluation

In addition to capturing standard exhibition data, like attendance and visitor comments, we encourage you to consider collecting some unique data for your community issue exhibition. You may want to track:

- **Direct Actions Fulfilled.** Track the actions based on the system you provided for visitors to take action. Give your community partners access to your tracking methods so you can tag-team the effort.
- **Special Media Coverage.** Your exhibition may attract the attention from larger news outlets or academic journals related to the issue. Media coverage is often particularly important to direct service organizations who may have a hard time bringing public awareness and visibility to the issue through their ongoing programs.
- **Testimonials about Impact.** Partners, visitors, and impacted community members may have personal stories to share about the exhibition's impact on their work and lives. You can use these testimonials to advocate and recruit partners for future community issue exhibitions.
- **New Opportunities Unlocked for Community Partners.** Did your partners attract new volunteers or donors because of this project? Did it change anything about how they work? We used one-on-one meetings and a community partner survey (below) to capture this data.

### Partner Survey Template

Consider offering partners a formal survey in addition to informal check-ins requesting their feedback. Make it easy for as many partners as possible to fill these out. We handed these to partners at the closing party.

#### Template: Community Partner Feedback Form

Thank you for sharing your feedback with us! Your answers will help us improve and help us understand how our work impacts the community. All responses are anonymous.

1. Was this your first time collaborating with the [YOUR INSTITUTION]?    Yes    No

2. Circle all that apply:

I'm an advocate working with [IMPACTED COMMUNITY].

I'm a [IMPACTED COMMUNITY MEMBER].



## Celebrate

Mark the end of your project with celebration and thanks. Thank your partners, collaborators, and staff for their efforts in collaboration, empowering community, and inspiring change to make an impact. We encourage you to host a party for everyone who helped make it happen. Consider inviting:

- Key Partners, Community Partners, Impacted Community, Advocates
- Board Members
- Programming and Events Collaborators
- Local Policymakers
- Friends and family of your partners

This celebration should be inspirational, fun, and lighthearted. There may be a lot of people in the room who regard your exhibition as a game-changing and life-altering experience. Highlight the “greatest hits” of the exhibition outcomes, express gratitude for everyone’s commitment to the project, and collect feedback from your partners. Food and music can help it feel informal and celebratory.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We want to thank everyone who was part of the development of the community issue exhibition model and this toolkit.

The model was conceived and developed by many MAH staff, with leadership from Director of Community Engagement Stacey Marie Garcia. MAH staff Nina Simon, Lauren Benetua, Justin Collins, Nora Grant, Michaela Clark-Nagaoka, Jamie Keil, Helen Aldana, and Nick Ibarra all contributed to the development of the *Lost Childhoods* exhibition. After the exhibition closed, Lauren Benetua led the development of this toolkit, with help from Nina Simon and Stacey Marie Garcia.

We could not have created *Lost Childhoods* without our extraordinary key partner, Foster Youth Museum, led by Jamie Lee Evans and Ray Bussolari. Jamie and Ray's vision, expertise, and openness made this whole project possible. When you create a community issue exhibition, we hope you will have a key partner as talented, smart, committed, and fierce as Foster Youth Museum.

Many community partners signed on to *Lost Childhoods* without knowing what they were in for. Thank you to all the youth and advocates at the following partner organizations: Food, What!?, California Youth Connection, Camp Opportunity, CASA of Santa Cruz County, Community Action Board, Encompass Community Services, The Epicenter, Guardian Scholars of Cabrillo College, Haven of Hope Homes, New Families, Inc., Santa Cruz County Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, Santa Cruz County Family and Children's Services, Santa Cruz County Human Services Department, Santa Cruz County Office of Education, Santa Cruz Resource Center for Nonviolence, University of San Francisco Museum Studies Graduate Program, University of California Santa Cruz Smith Renaissance Society, Walnut Avenue Women's Center, Your Future is Our Business, and Youth Violence Prevention Task Force. Last but not least, thank you to the commissioned artists: Bridget Henry, Elliott Taylor, Melody Overstreet, and Nada Miljkovic.

This was the most expensive exhibition we've ever created at the MAH. Our funding partners enabled us to commission artists, hire a Dialogue Catalyst, and document the process. This project was made possible with grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and California Arts Council, a state agency. We also received local support from Santa Cruz County Human Services Department, Nordic Naturals, Keri and Dan Crask, Ken and Kathy Doctor, John and Karen Dowdell, Judy Jones, Bill Ladusaw and Ken Christopher, Vance Landis-Carey and Robert Carey, the Law Office of Benjamin Leibrock, and George Newell. Plus one anonymous donor who believed in the potential of this model and made a big difference--thank you.

And most of all, thank you for reading this kit and putting it into action. We can't wait to see the change you create in your own community through this work.