

The Situation of At-risk and Displaced
Artists and Culture Professionals

ON
THE
MOVE

Volume 3
Case Studies

CHAPTER 14

**Case Study:
New York City
Safe Haven
Residency
Programme**



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CHAPTER 14

Case Study: New York City Safe Haven Residency Programme

By Lina Allia

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This case study investigates the New York City Artist Safe Haven Residency Program (NYCASHRP), following on from Dr Mary Ann DeVlieg's article¹, which focused on how artists are supported to integrate into the USA's professional arts environment. The aim here is to analyse a specific US-based residency programme solely dedicated to hosting artists at risk.

This article explores a long stay residency model², managed by a coalition of partners. Based in New York City, the case study not only outlines the objectives, success factors and challenges, but also explores the innovative approaches developed.

Background

The New York City Artist Safe Haven Residency Program (NYCASHRP) is a year-long residency in NYC for international artists who have faced censorship, persecution, or other threats to their freedom of expression.

Founded in 2017 by [Artistic Freedom Initiative](#) (AFI), Todd Lanier Lester ([ArtistSafety.net/FreeDimensional](#)), [Residency Unlimited](#), and [Westbeth Artists Housing](#), NYCASHRP is an innovative urban artist safety hosting programme that brings together arts and advocacy organisations, providing holistic support for international at-risk artists.

Through this coalition, the residency offers artists legal aid, resettlement assistance, professional

development, financial assistance for living expenses and artist materials, advocacy on their behalf, community engagement, and other services. In 2024 and 2025, the programme is hosting **visual artists and musicians** through a coalition that includes Artistic Freedom Initiative, Residency Unlimited, Tamizdat, and Joe's Pub at the Public Theater.

From 2017 through to 2023, the programme included free artist housing at the historic Westbeth Artists Housing³ community in New York City's West Village, located in the heart of Manhattan's West Village. In 2024 and 2025, NYCASHRP provides financial assistance to artists in residence for their living expenses and artist materials.

The coalition model

The expansion of the programme and the network of partners was gradual. AFI and Todd Lanier Lester were first approached by Westbeth in 2017, who offered them housing for refugee artists.

AFI suggested turning this opportunity into a residency programme, given their experience with at risk artists. Instead of providing permanent housing for refugee artists, they decided to

1 DeVlieg, M. A., 'Chapter 2: Opening Our Minds: Including Incoming Artists in the Communities and Cultural Sector of the USA' in [The Situation of At-risk and Displaced Artists and Culture Professionals - Volume 3 Case Studies](#), On the Move, 2025.

2 Temporality is a key element in the programme, cf. Yazaji, R., [Intersecting Temporalities: At-Risk and Displaced Artists in Transition. The Situation of At-risk and Displaced Artists and Culture Professionals - Volume 1 Scoping Review](#), On the Move, 2025.

3 Westbeth Artists Housing is a non-profit housing complex that has provided affordable live-work space to New York City's artists since the late 1960s.

support those facing a variety of persecution due to their work or identities through providing them with a space as long-stay resident artists, and that's how NYCASHRP first came about.

Westbeth offered one studio for a pilot phase—a live-work space in Manhattan—to host a visual artist. Due to preexisting relations, the core partners of this stage of the coalition were AFI, Todd Lanier Lester, RU, and Tamizdat, after which numerous professional development partners were brought on board. The success of the prototype led to expanding the programme from one apartment to four apartments over the course of only a few years, growing to one apartment per discipline: visual arts, writing, music, and a wild card discipline, with extra space to accommodate family members.

From 2017 to 2023, professional development for writers and filmmakers (fiction, nonfiction, film, plays) was provided by partners, including [The New School](#), [Artists at Risk Connection](#), [Fordham University](#) and Ledig House (that since became [Art Omi](#)). Opportunities included the chance to develop one's network, teaching positions, and developing new work⁴. The arrangements were different discipline to discipline. The writers hosted by the programme, for example, focused on network building, there were meet and greet sessions organised, and one

resident was offered a teaching position for a year by a partner university.

In 2019, AFI and Tamizdat developed and launched the [Safe Haven Incubator for Musicians: New York City](#) (SHIM: NYC). This third arm of the programme matches musicians in residence with carefully selected mentors. SHIM provides musicians with an opportunity to develop a specific work, hone their skills, and expand their professional network within the performing arts industry nationally and internationally. They do this in partnership with Joe's Pub at the Public Theater and the Joe's Pub Working Group, which allows for peer-to-peer connections.

Interviewees agree that the biggest strength of the NYCASHRP is its coalition model, which allows for the flexibility that makes a **holistic approach** possible. Each organisation contributes their expertise and their resources, which establishes a complementary pool of potential answers to the resident's needs.

AFI manages the programme overall and each arm (discipline) hosts one artist at a time for a duration of 12 months; the content is therefore very tailored to each specific resident. The experiences are curated based on the needs identified, and the extensive networks of the partners are solicited according to their relevance to the project at hand.

Objectives and goals

While the main goal and priorities have remained the same – supporting hosted artists at risk in the most holistic fashion possible – the conditions have shifted, given the fluctuating funding and resources at the disposal of the coalition.

At the end of 2024, Westbeth was no longer able to provide the housing and as a result after seven years of consistent, free accommodation for the

residents, NYCASHRP redirected its funding to provide monthly stipends to cover living costs (in an attempt to continue to meet the expenses of daily needs), in addition to granting one yearly creation and production stipend.

Given the **tailor-made approach of the programme**, the specific objectives vary from artist to artist, which creates distinct scenarios

⁴ The programme is not hosting writers or filmmakers in 2024 and 2025.

each cycle. While some artists are coming out of an emergency situation that might require the prioritisation of legal support, others might be more settled on the legal front and are in need of taking their career to the next stage.

Different artistic disciplines bring about different sets of variables. For example, musicians or performing arts' professionals in a situation of displacement require more than just access to a workspace and material supplies, as the scene, the audience and specific instruments are essential to their work. SHIM also takes into consideration

the importance of connections and collaborators for live performers. Through the partnership with Joe's pub, access to venues, bookings, and peer-communities is made available thanks to pre-existing programmes, such as Joe's pub working group.

This **flexibility**, to adapt to individual needs and specific needs of different artistic disciplines, is a fundamental part of the way the programme is run, and it enables the programme to fully support the residents in a way that is both accommodating and successful.

Funding and resources

Currently, NYCASHRP is supported by [The Andy Warhol Foundation for The Visual Arts](#), [The Wilhelm Family Foundation](#), and the [New York State Council on the Arts](#) with the support of the [Office of the Governor](#) and the [New York State Legislature](#).

The first two to three years of the programme the coalition received no funding, except for the apartments, which were provided free of charge by Westbeth. Each of the partners were donating their time and expertise, pro bono, to the residency programme. Later, NYCASHRP had the most success in securing funding from private foundations, starting with a first modest grant. This first grant allowed for the coalition members to be partially compensated, and the additional budget went to the artists.

In 2021, NYCASHRP acquired the first (two-year) grant from the Warhol Foundation. As of the time of writing (August 2025), AFI is in its second two-year cycle and plans on reapplying for two more years. While the Warhol Foundation has been generous, the grant does not cover most of the

labour of the coalition partners; their contribution to NYCASHRP continues to be pro bono.

Although the programme has proven, since its founding in 2017, that it has created a sustainable ecosystem for supporting international artists at risk, in AFI's experience securing funding is a challenging process. The singularity of the coalition model can be confusing for potential funders, who might find it difficult to understand the roles of each of the members. Also, a year-long programme that is tailor-made and managed by multiple non-profit organisations creates a very deep impact on a few individuals, whereas it is usually more appealing to funders to see a higher number of artists impacted, (which can be achieved with shorter-term residencies, for example).

Similarly to Europe, the USA is experiencing a general decrease in the funding for culture and the arts, due to budget cuts and changes in strategies⁵. Additionally, the process of US immigration is increasingly complex⁶. This context has direct repercussions on NYCASHRP's mission and is both a cause for concern and a motivation to cooperate internationally⁷.

5 Shaw, H., '[The Show Can't Go On](#)', The New Yorker, 24 April 2025.

6 See Tamizdat's webpage '[FAQs for travelling to the US now](#)', 26 March 2025.

7 DeVlieg, M. A., 'Chapter 2: Opening Our Minds: Including Incoming Artists in the Communities and Cultural Sector of the USA' in [The Situation of At-risk and Displaced Artists and Culture Professionals - Volume 3 Case Studies](#), On the Move, 2025.

Target groups and selection process

When it comes to the application and selection process, AFI generally takes the lead because of the extensive access it has to the international community of artists at risk. No open call is issued, due to the limited capacity of the programme (only being able to host one artist per discipline per year). Artists are directly approached and are asked to share their portfolio and to answer a set of questions that vary cycle to cycle. After this, a collective assessment takes place within the coalition in order to prepare the best tailor-made experience possible. Although there haven't been any open calls for NYCASHRP, AFI has an extensive network of artists at risk, and they respond to various demands of assistance outside of the residency programme.

Aside from the requirement of being an at-risk artist, **the eligibility criteria are not fixed**. Unlike more conventional residencies, it is less a matter of whether the candidate is a good fit for the residency and more a case of whether the residency will be able to cater to the candidate's needs.

Several considerations are discussed among the coalition members to balance out their offerings and to determine if the programme can contribute to the candidate's growth in a significant meaningful manner. These might include: Is the candidate more focused on rest and recuperation or on creation and production? If the latter, are the resources available fit for their project? What is their level of proficiency in English? Would they adjust well to settling in a city as intense as NYC?

As for candidates with dependent family members, three apartments could host an artist and their partner, the fourth one had previously been used to host families. Since this housing is no longer available, and the aid provided comes in the form of stipends, the programme considers artists at-risk already based in NYC and offers a tailor-made experience to assist their professional development.

In conclusion, applications are not assessed by comparing the artistic merit of a candidate with the level of risk they are facing, but instead by **choosing who will gain the most out of the residency experience**.

Types of support provided

Thanks to the coalition model, NYCASHRP can provide holistic assistance to its residents through the following support:

- **Housing and financial assistance:** By the end of 2024, NYCASHRP was no longer able to provide housing, however, the funding was redirected to provide monthly stipends to cover living expenses and to alleviate, as much as possible, the weight of costly daily needs.
- **Professional development:** One of the core elements of the programme is to provide workshops, access training and to create or connect to networking opportunities that help artists at risk engage with their creative peers.
- **Creation, production and/or presentation support:** One yearly creation-production stipend is provided to each artist, in addition to showcasing opportunities.
- **Legal support:** Support is provided to help navigate the bureaucracy of settling in, which can include assistance with visas,

asylum applications, or legal representation when necessary.

- **Healthcare:** Assistance to access medical and mental health services and facilities is provided.
- **Language support:** Language classes or translation are not directly included in the programme, but assistance is provided as much as possible.

A cornerstone of NYCASHRP's work is to provide both financial, legal and professional assistance, and care for the artist's well-being in the broader sense.

Rachel Switlik, Artistic Liaison and Advocate at SHIM, connects with the performers in residence on a very personal level and she highlights how essential community is to safety. Yet, in a context

of displacement, one loses a lot going through a challenging or even traumatic journey and so having someone to go to directly on a personal level (as opposed to reaching out to an institution) is crucial. Knowing one person on a first name basis, who they can text and get coffee with, is very helpful.

Rachel says that her role is not a replacement for mental health assistance (and in fact she must be wary of not overwhelming the resident and making them feel obliged to contact her), but rather she is there to make sure they feel comfortable reaching out to her if they wish to connect on a more informal level. In the other arms of the programme, AFI provides a lot of personal support and checks in regularly throughout the residency. The long duration of the residency creates **profound and intentional relations** between the artist and their ecosystem of support.

Monitoring and evaluation

To date, the residency programme has hosted over 20 artists from Iran, Syria, Lebanon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Vietnam, Haiti, Uganda, India, Tunisia, Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Palestine, Russia, and Kyrgyzstan.

At the end of each residency, AFI conducts exit interviews. Additionally, SHIM are currently reaching out to the artists they have hosted to go through a 'where are they now?' evaluation

process and collect feedback on what was helpful and what areas of improvement could be explored.

Considering the nature of the work, the experiences artist to artist vary and it is difficult to set a rigid metric of success. However, the small scale of the programme allows the organisations to monitor short- to mid-term impact through regular check-ins and follow-ups after the residency.

Challenges and limitations

The primary challenge artists are faced with upon arriving in New York City is settling in; however fascinating and bustling with creative organisations, people and opportunities it is, NYC presents newcomers with many challenges. The creative industry is highly competitive and difficult to break into, for example, and understanding

the subway system, pricing, insurance and, on a broader level, health insurance, credit score, and other aspects of life in the USA can be overwhelming.

Isolation also comes up as a main difficulty, as artists relocating into a country that is

very unfamiliar often experience **feelings of loneliness**, which may be heightened by specific circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The professional development component is fundamental, but it does not alleviate the need for building personal relationships and connections. The programme takes this into account and helps to connect the artist both with professional networks and with relevant communities (cultural, political, etc.). In this vein, in 2025 AFI launched **The Artist Community Network (ACN)**, an artist-led initiative designed to facilitate peer-to-peer knowledge sharing, professional development, partnership-building, and artistic and networking events for the artists within AFI's NYC-based community. This initiative is designed to empower artists to support each other as co-creators, organisers, and friends.

Within the coalition the challenges differ with regards to the artists' legal, emotional, professional, and cultural situations. What is difficult for artists and hosts alike is the end of the programme, or rather the transition out of the residence. The next opportunity is not always lined up after the residency period, so the artists are usually encouraged and accompanied to prepare for the next step, by, for example, saving money when possible and connecting with peers and relevant communities. Artists based in NYC prior to the residency usually have an easier time transitioning out of it.

Rachel from SHIM, echoes the **concern for the post-residency phase**; finding oneself outside the stability of the wide array of resources and housing of the programme not only creates pressure to make the most of those opportunities while they have them but also to figure out the next step, with a deadline in mind. A lot of residencies have high expectations of output, however, the priority of NYCASHRP is to give options and support. The partners do their best to maintain relationships post-residency to assist in the post-residency phase, if needed.

Now that housing is no longer available, the coalition is faced with a big challenge it needs to adjust to. Gracie Golden, Resettlement and Partnerships Manager at AFI, asserts that 'communication can't be overdone or overstated' when asked about lessons learned from working on the residency: 'It is as important to acknowledge the resources we're able to provide as much as the resources we're not able to provide. Setting expectations of what the programme can and cannot provide and understanding the needs and desires of the artists; it's key that everybody is on the same page.'

Among the insights gained from implementing the programme, the need for integrating **mental health**⁸ and supporting residents is a recurring concern.

Conclusions and perspectives

Among the possible areas of upscaling, NYCASHRP would like to reintegrate housing with the possibility of hosting artists with families, offer a stipend to bridge the gap between the end of the residency and the next step on the career path, and invest more resources in the

artist liaison role, as the emotional labour might increase if more artists are hosted.

As described by Rachel, the role of artistic liaison can be very helpful⁹; on the one hand they can provide support for the team managing the

8 Ilić, M., 'Chapter 8: Supportive Interventions for the Mental Health and Well-being of At-Risk and Displaced Arts Workers' in [The Situation of At-risk and Displaced Artists and Culture Professionals - Volume 3 Case Studies](#), On the Move, 2025.

9 Lanier Lester, T., Tucker, A. and Monterroso, S., [A Guide to History, Ethics, & Practice](#), ArtistSafety.net and Artistic Freedom Initiative, 2019, p. 6.

programme (who receive a lot of requests from different sources and have little time or attention to provide to the artist's needs), and on the other hand they can support the artists at risk who might be uncomfortable to ask for specific day-to-day needs that fall outside of the general services provided. Someone who checks in regularly and offers informal conversation, who connects more on a personal level rather than as a peer or a partner, and who has the artist's agency in mind, facilitates cooperation for everyone.

Ashley Tucker, Co-Founder and Co-Executive Director of AFI, insists on the long duration of the residency as a key element: 'Many of us having worked with artists at risk, know that **a few weeks or months aren't that helpful for at-risk artists trying to establish themselves**, so the length of the programme was fundamental for the goals to settle in, not just creatively but also personally'.

In terms of structure, the coalition model can be very replicable, as it allows for a holistic approach and it can start very small – one artist per year, with a handful of trusted partners, and year by year the programme will grow. AFI observes that it would be good that already-existing residency programmes all over the world would add a component to accommodate artists at risk through a coalition model. Having gone through numerous iterations, this model made it possible for AFI to successfully achieve their objectives with almost no funding for the first eight years.

Finally, flexibility is a requirement when working within a context that is in constant flux. As Gracie from AFI highlights, the loss in funding in the arts and the complexity of US immigration policy is making it necessary for the programme to shift priorities towards artists already based in the USA, demonstrating that even established programmes need to continually adapt and evolve.

About the Author

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To fully appreciate the breadth of the research on The Situation of At-Risk and Displaced Artists and Culture Professionals, please do consider reading the [other chapters](#) gathered in this third report, as well as the first two reports available for download: [Intersecting Temporalities: At-Risk and Displaced Artists in Transition – Volume 1 Scoping Review](#) and [Policy and Practice in the EU: Pathways, Impediments, and Patchwork Solutions – Volume 2 Cultural Policy Analysis](#).

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