ArtsAlliance IL

A Sector Under Strain: Financial Realities of Illinois Arts & Culture Organizations in 2025

Illinois' arts and culture sector stands at a crossroads. A recent statewide "temperature check" survey with 292 respondents—spanning small nonprofits, for-profit creative firms, and cultural centers—reveals a sobering snapshot: while some institutions remain cautiously optimistic, many others are sounding the alarm about long-term sustainability and near-term survival.

🕰️ The Clock is Ticking

Though a few respondents say they can continue for "5+ years" without significant new investment, most describe a shrinking window of viability. Many anticipate they can sustain operations for just **1–3 years**, and several report that they are already operating on a timeline of **less than one year**.

> *"By May 2025, we expect to conduct layoffs if we cannot raise more money. Our pillars of financial stability… have collapsed."*
> **— Film Organization, Chicago**

📉 Scaling Back: The Unwelcome Reality

Over half of respondents are actively **scaling back operations**. This includes reducing programming, laying off staff, freezing pay, and canceling artistic or community offerings.

> *"We are doing less. Probably should have done this a long time ago."*
> **— Visual Arts Center, Chicago**

> *"We need to reduce the costs of each show. Looking for smaller venues with lower rent. Doing more with less staff."*
> **— Theater Organization, Schaumburg**

> *"We are freezing salaries… and relying on our volunteer curators to perform programming needs for no compensation."*
> **— Visual Arts Organization, Peoria**

💰 Government Support: Impactful, But Inconsistent

While most organizations report that **less than 25%** of their funding comes from government sources, even small grants make a big difference. The inconsistency and unpredictability of public funding—especially from federal sources funneled through state or city agencies—was repeatedly flagged as a threat to operations.

> *"We are seeing significant decreases ahead: DCASE is now 2 years on, 1 year off. They've been a consistent, significant, and critical part of our general operating funds."*
> **— Poetry Organization, Chicago**

> *"One program—'Healing Through the Arts'—which provides expressive studio experiences to those exposed to trauma at no cost, has been reduced to minimal participation."*
> **— Visual Arts Organization, Peoria**

> *"After not getting any government funding for years, we recently received our first DCASE grant and it's been HUGE for us."*
> **—Visual Arts Organization, Chicago**

> *"We are more conservative with programming due to uncertain ticket sales and reduced public trust in funding. We need stability to rebuild momentum."*
> **— Theater Organization, DeKalb**

🎯 Equity Work on the Line

Many organizations that center equity in their leadership and service populations are among the most precariously funded. Over half report that **51–75%** of their staff or board members are **BIPOC or LGBTQ+**, and many serve similarly diverse communities.

> *"We serve a majority-BIPOC and LGBTQ+ youth population through free music education. Increased IAC and DCASE support has been critical to our growth."*
> **— Music Organization, Chicago**

> *"We're consolidating programming and re-negotiating contracts. The Illinois Arts Council's support has been positive, but it's not enough."*
> **— Dance Organization, Orland Park**

Who These Organizations Are and Who They Serve

The demographics of the organizations responding to this survey offer a powerful reminder of the critical role the arts play in advancing equity and representation. These are not just creative institutions—they are cultural anchors led by and serving communities that have historically faced systemic barriers to funding and visibility.

Among the **292 organizations** that responded, a significant **84% are based in the greater Chicagoland area**, reinforcing the region's role as a major hub of cultural activity—but also underscoring how deeply the current financial pressures are concentrated in some of the state's most diverse and densely populated communities.

Nearly **60%** of respondents reported that **over half of their staff or executive leadership identify as women or LGBTQ+**, and **more than one-third** said the same for **Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC)** representation at the leadership level. At the highest levels of representation, over **100 organizations** reported that **more than 75% of their leadership** identifies as women or LGBTQ+—a testament to the sector's ongoing commitment to inclusive leadership.

That commitment is also reflected in service populations.

- **Over 80 organizations** said that **25–50% of the individuals they serve are BIPOC**,
- and more than **100 serve communities where 51–75% identify as women or LGBTQ+**.

Yet, it is precisely these organizations—those with strong equity-driven missions and demographics—that are among the most financially vulnerable. Several leaders explicitly noted that budget cuts and program rollbacks are directly affecting their ability to serve these communities:

> *"We serve a majority-BIPOC and LGBTQ+ youth population through free music education. Increased IAC and DCASE support has been critical to our growth."*
> — Music Organization, Chicago

Illinois' creative organizations are ready to do the work—preserve heritage, foster innovation, and serve communities. What they need is for funders to recognize their value **not just as cultural contributors, but as essential infrastructure** in a time of challenge and change.

The data is clear: if we allow these organizations to falter, we risk losing some of the most representative, community-rooted, and culturally vital work being done in the state. **Strategic and sustained investment from public and private funders is not just a rescue effort—it is a pathway to ensuring the arts in Illinois continue to reflect the full diversity of our people.**