

Help MRAC Reimagine, featuring Kathy Mouacheupao

In this video, **Kathy Mouacheupao**, Executive Director of the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council (MRAC), discusses upcoming changes to MRAC's grantmaking system including how MRAC is asking for the community's help to reimagine public participation.

Kathy Mouacheupao is a Hmong woman with dark brown hair. She is wearing earrings with green triangles and a jean jacket. She is seated in front of a bookcase that is blurred.

Throughout the video, white, line illustrations are shown over a dark pink background to highlight what Kathy is saying.

Transcript Begins

[Light synth music is played in the background]

Kathy Mouacheupao: Hi. My name is Kathy Mouacheupao and I'm the Executive Director with the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council, also known as MRAC. Our mission is to increase arts access for communities in the metropolitan area through support for artists and organizations.

Our primary tool for doing this is through grants using the state's general fund, using legacy funds and resources from the McKnight Foundation.

Something that MRAC is known for is the fact that we don't make decisions about who gets funded. We rely on community members to help us review and score applications. We really value this as a way to have the public participate in our process and to really uplift community voices. Unfortunately the outcomes of this system has also resulted in a lot of disparities and barriers in our funding.

So I'm really excited to share with you that we are in the process of reimagining how the public can participate in our grantmaking and how we can really get rid of a lot of the barriers that we've been hearing about over the years. This is an invitation for you to join us in reimagining what the possibilities can be in the future.

First, I just want to state that any change at MRAC is really about how we want to become a more equitable grantmaker and what that means for us is that we have a system where everybody can access our resources. More specifically, we are really paying attention to who doesn't have access to our resources, who we're not reaching, and why. We want to be able to identify the barriers and we want to do something about them. We recognize that the inequities

in our funding is really tied to the systems that we implement, and we're ready to make a change.

So over the last five years, we have identified priority communities, and these are communities that have been underfunded or underserved at MRAC. This includes BIPOC communities, disability and disabled communities, and LGBTQIA2+ communities. We've also identified Scott and Carver Counties as our geographic priorities because we've also had challenges with getting resources into those counties.

What we've heard over and over again from our applicants, our grantees and our constituents is that our application process is just too complicated, that it is unpaid labor, that it takes their time away from actually creating art, which we feel is a problem. We've also heard concerns about bias in the grant review process that really favors English proficiency, and that it relies on a specific cultural communication style. And we share these concerns. We have made a lot of changes over the years based on this type of feedback.

So when we hear the application is too complicated, we change the words. When we hear that there's bias in the panel, we include different types of trainings. When we hear that panelists are not culturally informed, we work really hard to diversify our panel.

These have all been important steps for us in improving the process, but they have not really solved for the barriers or changed the outcomes in our funding distribution. We want significant changes, and we know that we have to actually change the system to get there.

Last year we had the opportunity to pilot a new grant making process that did not rely on the public to review the grants and score them. Instead, we used a weighted random selection process that really allowed us to have a more simple application, it took out the possibility of biases, and it eliminated the judgment about the quality of work.

In fiscal year '24, which is this year, we really want to spend the time to re-imagine how the public can participate in this process. And we want you to be a part of that.

A process that doesn't rely on gatekeeping, that isn't about judgment, and that is really more about community building and creating arts access.

We want to learn from you about the creative ideas that you might have about how the public can participate. We're curious about how you want to engage in the process, how this change may affect you and your experience as an applicant, as a grantee, and as a community member.

We have a two phase process. So the first phase is already happening. And this is a survey that we're asking for you to take, for you to share with your communities and to really be able to share with us your creative ideas about how you think the public can participate. We'll gather all those ideas and we will try to come up with the best models that we can come up with.

In phase two, we'll reshare those models in a series of focus groups to really show you what we've come up with based on your initial ideas. Then next year, we want to be able to implement a brand new process.

To learn more information you can go to our website at MRAC.org and to take the survey you can go to bit.ly/MRACsurvey. Thank you.