

WATCH ACT YOUR



**The impact of
Theatre of the Oppressed NYC
Legislative Theatre
on New York City policy
and Civic Engagement**

Version 1.2 • Rebecca Kelly-Golfman

THEATRE OF THE
OPPRESSED **NYC**



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INTRODUCTION

Theatre has always been a means of investigating humanity, sharing stories, and examining our role in the local, political, and global community. These contributions are deeply meaningful, but sometimes leave open the question: in addition to personal transformation and social critique, can theatre also be a tool for concrete social and political change? Does theatre have that power? The goal of this report is to provide background on Theatre of the Oppressed NYC (TONYC), an organization answering that question with a resounding yes! In this report, you will learn how Theatre of the Oppressed practices have been applied to raise awareness of pertinent issues of oppression, shift the minds of policymakers, and engage audience members in civic action. In addition to sharing TONYC practices, we hope this report will help support advocacy efforts by artists and other arts-based institutions looking to make change creatively.



BACKGROUND OF THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED AND TONYC

The Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) methodology was born out of the desire for theatre to move beyond emotional catharsis and toward becoming a tool for community dialogue, actively challenging mechanical thinking, and rehearsing for revolutionary change. The creator of these practices, Augusto Boal, was an activist theatre-maker in Brazil during the 1960s and 70s with roots in more traditional theatre. As the story goes, Boal traveled with a troupe into the countryside to perform a political play. In this play, the actors encouraged the people of the village in the audience to take up arms and change their oppressive working conditions. The response to the play's activist message was immediate and forceful. The audience members sought to gather weapons and fight for their liberation as urged in the play. In response, Boal and the other actors admitted that they were not prepared to take up arms with the members of the village and did not have the experience to help prepare the members of the village to do so on their own. The audience left frustrated and angry at the audacity of the actors to advocate for actions those same actors neither would nor could take themselves. Boal reflected on this experience and committed to never tell a story that did not belong to him, or push an audience to take action that he was not prepared to take himself. This new way of thinking led Boal to develop a series of theatre practices and problem-solving performance structures aimed at shifting political and social power called Theatre of the Oppressed. From these beginnings in Brazil, Theatre of the Oppressed is now practiced in over 70 countries around the world.

Theatre of the Oppressed operates with the actors as storytellers of their own experience confronting oppression. The audience members are then invited to join in on the process of *rehearsing for the revolution* through the plays. From this initial idea grew various branches of the methodology.¹ This report focuses on Forum
 1 Other Theatre of the Oppressed branches include Image Theatre, Invisible Theatre, Newspaper Theatre, Rainbow of Desire, and Cops in the Head.

Theatre and Legislative Theatre because they are the forms most used by TONYC as a means of social change. The terms below are frequently used in the TONYC vocabulary and throughout this report in describing the work:

ACTORS: members of NYC communities experiencing a particular type of oppression, such as housing or race-based discrimination, seeking to push back against that oppression through theatre

JOKERS: facilitators of the play-creation process, like the Joker in a deck of cards, they are unbiased and do not belong to any particular suit

SPECT-ACTORS: audience members who jump into the play and act out potential strategies for change or brainstorm tactics to fight the oppression in the play

PROTAGONIST(S): the person or people facing an oppressive obstacle in obtaining what they need

ANTAGONIST(S): the person or people creating the obstacle that is preventing the protagonist from obtaining what they need

INTERVENTION: The process of a Spect-Actor entering into the play is referred to as an Intervention. This process of play performance and Interventions is facilitated by a Joker.

FORUM THEATRE

In Forum Theatre, the goal is to generate strategies for the actors to fight against oppression and respond to the actions of the Antagonist. The actors perform their play highlighting unresolved problems resulting from the acts the Antagonist(s). Once the play is finished, the Spect-Actors are invited to step into the play and act out other possible tactics for engaging with the Antagonist. The actors in the play are prepared to improvise and respond to the Spect-Actor in character.

LEGISLATIVE THEATRE

The core idea of Legislative Theatre is that theatre is a means of political activity, in which voters are given the opportunity to realize their desires for political change and engage in deep discussion with legislators on their opinions, field counterarguments, and share responsibility for governance. This practice was a later development in the Theatre of the Oppressed canon. Boal felt that while sometimes solutions could be generated exclusively by the people and their efforts, equally many oppressions could be found in the law itself. He sought to create a form of theatre where the “citizen makes their law through the legislator.”² In 1992, Boal was elected Vereador of Rio, a position similar to that of a City Council Member in the United States. With this new position, he saw the opportunity to manifest the dream of making Forum Theatre “have practical and visible effects beyond those contained in the show itself... to make ‘theatre as politics,’ instead of simply making ‘political theatre.’”³ He called this new form Legislative Theatre.⁴

Given Boal’s beliefs on theatre as a civic tool, he was eager to use Legislative Theatre to generate laws in his role as Vereador. His membership on an existing legislative body was key to the ability of the theatrical process to produce ideas that would be considered and in some cases acted on by the elected officials of Rio. As Vereador, Boal used half of his staff budget to hire Jokers that then pioneered Legislative Theatre, forming theatre groups throughout Rio. Over the years, the communities created proposals which were submitted as potential laws to Boal who in turn brought them before the legislature. Of the thirty pieces of legislation introduced, thirteen laws resulted from this process.⁵

An example of a law emerging from the process came from the the Center for Theatre of the

2 Augusto Boal, *Legislative Theatre: Using Performance to make politics*, 10 (1998).

3 *Id.* at 16.

4 *Id.* at 20.

5 Tracey Mitchell, *Tactic: Legislative Theatre*, Beautiful Trouble, A Toolbox for Revolution, available at <http://beautifultrouble.org/tactic/legislative-theater>

Oppressed - Rio (CTO), with a group of youth from a favela. The group created a Forum Play about their struggle to afford the high and inaccessible cost of a required college entrance examination. An idea resulting of the Legislative Theatre process was to establish free preparatory courses only for youth from favelas. These courses would be taught by public university education students in need of practicum credits to graduate. Youth who completed the course would automatically get a voucher to take the college entrance exam for free. This idea became a law through CTO's Legislative Theatre process.

THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED NYC

TONYC was founded in 2010 by Katy Rubin. In 2008, Rubin received a grant from Julius & Ethel Rosenberg Foundation to travel to Brazil in 2008 and train with Boal at the Center for Theatre of the Oppressed in Rio de Janeiro.⁶ While in Rio, she witnessed the power of connecting theatre of the oppressed practices with government agencies and officials, forcing them to hear and respond to the concerns of the people as expressed through theatre. She was also struck by the ability of the troupes to make public education, social change, advocacy, and unpacking oppression a fun and electric process.

Rubin's desire to spread this blend of interactive theatre and activism led to the founding of TONYC. Her primary goals in founding TONYC were 1) raising awareness about pressing issues through theatre 2) building solidarity by identifying how everyone is implicated and affected by the problems presented in the plays and 3) generating concrete ideas for responding to the problems in the plays. These goals inform the current practices of TONYC.

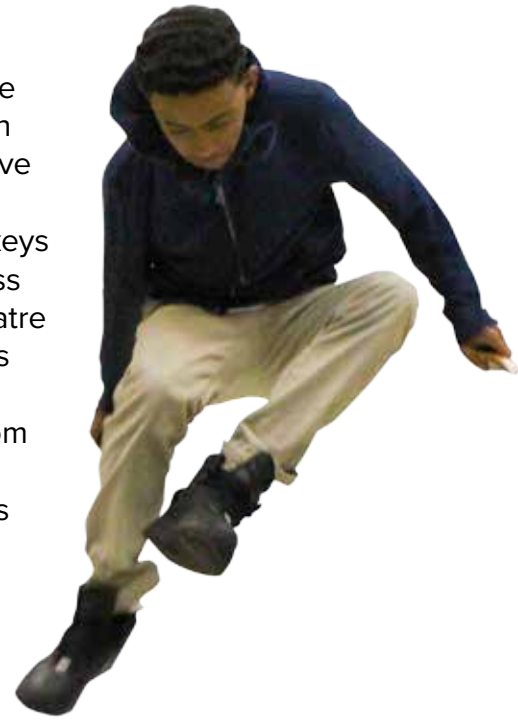
TONYC partners with community members at local organizations to form theatre troupes. These troupes devise and perform plays based on their challenges confronting economic inequality, racism, and other social, health and human rights injustices.⁷ In addition to coordinating Forum

⁶ More information on Rosenberg Fund for Children available at <http://www.rfc.org>. Theatre of the Oppressed NYC, How We Work, available at <http://www.tonyc.nyc/our-work>

Theatre acting troupes all over the city, TONYC began hosting a Legislative Theatre festival in 2013. One of the keys to the effectiveness of Legislative Theatre under Boal was his ability to pass the laws that arose from the process. Like many other groups practicing Theatre of the Oppressed, one salient question for TONYC has been how to impact policy from the outside, without a legislator as deeply committed to and embedded in the process of Legislative Theatre as its creator Augusto Boal.⁸

In response to this question, the TONYC Legislative Theatre Festival engages official at various levels of city, state, and federal government to listen to the people most impacted by the decisions they make on daily basis. TONYC cannot guarantee that the policies from the plays will, in fact, be brought to the legislature in the same way they emerge from the event. Given this reality, the TONYC events emphasize two goals: 1) cultivating a civic community where the constituents, organizers, advocates, and legislators are gaining civic awareness and using theatre to brainstorm policy solutions and 2) shifting perspectives of policymakers on proposed or existing legislation.

⁸ This is explained by another Theatre of the Oppressed organization Beautiful Trouble explaining that "the version of legislative theater that Boal developed while he was a vereador was, understandably, an ideal arrangement that has proven difficult to match since. In his case, the elected official was the main convener of the process, and was therefore in a position to act on the recommendations that emerged." Available at <http://beautifultrouble.org/tactic/legislative-theater>



STRUCTURE OF LEGISLATIVE THEATRE

To achieve the aims of civic community and legislator policy shift, TONYC Legislative Theatre is executed in three parts: 1) Advocacy Fair; 2) Play Performance & Policy Idea Generation; and 3) Activism Workshops.

PRE-PLAY ADVOCACY FAIR

Prior to each Legislative Theatre play performance, audience members are invited to participate in an Advocacy Fair, a practice that started in 2014. The Advocacy Fair was created as an opportunity for audience members to connect with social justice organizations from across the five boroughs and join campaigns of interest to them. Over the five years of Legislative Theatre, TONYC has featured over 100 organizations during this fair. The experience of the fair primes the Spect-Actors to see themselves as activists. Spect-Actors are given the opportunity to engage with various organizations, join coalitions, and target elected officials on issues of social change.

PLAY PERFORMANCE AND POLICY IDEA GENERATION

The play performance and idea generation are broken down into three segments that TONYC refers to as: Watch, Act, Vote!

WATCH: The acting troupes perform a Forum Play. Each acting troupe is united around a particular oppressive structure or policy. The Forum Plays highlight the various ways that policy or agency practice can impact someone's life on an interpersonal level.

ACT: The audience members are first asked to strategize with the actors on ways to respond on an interpersonal level by engaging in Interventions onstage: spect-actors enter the scene to improvise new ideas, and the actors and audience analyze those Interventions through dialogue. The Jokers also ask the crowd, "what ideas for policy change do you have to fight this oppression?" The actors and audience are invited to turn to their neighbor and discuss possible ideas. Once the ideas have been discussed, everyone writes their ideas on note cards that are

collected and sorted by a team of legal and policy experts referred to as the Legislative Panel. Those experts review the cards and work with government representatives to select the ideas those representatives agree to take action on after the play.

VOTE: The Legislative Panel shares the selected policies with the Actors and Spect-Actors. The crowd debates each idea until it is clear and concise. Once clear, there is a vote. If the majority of Actors and Spect-Actors accept the idea, the government representatives make a promise to act on those ideas in some form after leaving the theatre.

ACTIVISM WORKSHOPS

In 2015, TONYC began incorporating workshops into the Legislative Theatre programming. The workshops offer training on traditional advocacy and organizing practices, such as community organizing principles, participatory budgeting practices and information-based sessions. The goal of these workshops is for people to learn new ways to engage in and shape the NYC community after participating in Legislative Theatre.



TONYC LEGISLATIVE THEATRE FESTIVALS

2013 - 2016

Those who participate in TONYC's Legislative Theatre are challenged to think outside of just facts and figures and in terms of human impact; to hear the desires and experiences of the actors; and let those outlooks change their worldviews. The actors writing and performing their pieces are able to advocate directly to policymakers in their own interest. As previously referenced, this has been achieved by 1) creating civic community and 2) shifting policymaker perspectives. TONYC's Legislative Theatre has engaged over 1500 people in this manner since its inception in 2013.

The following section outlines the Legislative Theatre events from 2013-2016. Following the synopsis of each play, the impact of the civic community and policymaker shift are listed. These findings are a compilation of interviews, post-play evaluations, media coverage, and internal TONYC documentation.

The Jokers involved in Legislative Theatre 2013-2016 were: Kate Clark, Moon Lowery, Aliyah Hakim, John LeoNimm, Sulu LeoNimm, Becca Lynch, Rachel Messer, Liz Morgan, and Katy Rubin.

2013: SAVE THE DRAMA

The first TONYC Legislative Theatre event, *Spring to Action: Save the Drama*, took place on May 18, 2013 at the Church of St. Luke in the Fields. This festival featured forum theatre acting troupes from three community organizations serving the LGBTQ youth homeless population of New York City: the Ali Forney Center (AFC), the Hetrick-Martin Institute (HMI), and The Door. *Save the Drama* included one forum theatre event, one legislative theatre event, and one day of forum theatre workshops and a panel of LGBTQ youth and housing activists. There was no post-show activism session or pre-show advocacy fair this year. The play, created by troupes from the featured organizations, followed several LGBTQ

youth of color from all over the US, beginning when they were kicked out of their homes for their gender identity or sexual orientation. The protagonists traveled to NYC to find housing, services, and community, and landed in a general-population shelter, where they faced bullying and abuse. Finally, they found an LGBTQ-specific shelter, where there were only "crisis" beds available; meaning after 30 days, they were kicked out due to lack of space.

THE ACTORS

AFC: Charlie, Cole, Hoshi, Shaka, Suzi, Vincent

The Door: Akaila, Alexis, Aumma, Devonte, Dominique, Eliezer, Emily, Nani, Fatuomata, Gregory, Jada, Jahmon, Larissa, Maryama, Michael, Phibeon, Sabrina, Troy

HMI: Eric, Giselle, Kendall, Paris, Roman, Tamara

THE LEGISLATIVE PANEL

Policy Advisor Team

Brendan Michael Connor, Health Youth Rights Advocate, CUNY

Ivan Luevanos, LGBTQ Justice Organizer, Make the Road

Johannah Westmacott, Streetwork Project Housing Coordinator, Safe Horizon

Legislator Team

Sam Miller, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development US; U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness

Michael Mallon, LGBT Liaison for Council Member Daniel Dromm, District 25

Jimmy Van Bramer, District 26, Council Member

POLICY PROPOSALS

1. Funding Package for Current Situation: (a) baseline funding for Homeless and Runaway Youth (b) redirect distribution of funds away from Administration of Child Services to community-based groups (c) add paths out of the shelter housing and exception to the New York City Housing Authority waitlist
2. Economic Justice to Prevent Homelessness: Funding for summer youth workforce and creating exemptions for workfare back-to-work requirements for youth in crisis.

3. Policing (a) Pass the Community Safety Act that would ban discriminatory profiling, establish independent oversight of the NYPD, protect New Yorkers against unlawful searches, and require officers to identify and explain themselves to the public (b) Amend NYPD Patrol Guidebook to place an affirmative duty on police officers with unaccompanied minors to share their rights during arrest and engagement and (c) Pass No Condoms as Evidence Bill in NY State Legislature, which would stop police and prosecutors from using possession of condoms as evidence of prostitution.

CIVIC AWARENESS AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

“The themes of plays are important and useful, because no one really cares about LGBT coming out, bullying and housing, we hope to show this to the audience and shock them to the point where they’ll actually do something to change it. I love being part of it. It feels like I’m finding different ways to help my community. With being an activist and actor it gives me an opportunity to help better my community. I feel important and special.” — Charlie

Whitewolf, Actor and Joker⁹

⁹ Alex Erikson, *Next Magazine Spotlight on Theatre of the Oppressed NYC*, (May 13, 2013) available at <http://www.door.org/news/theatreoftheoppressednyc>

POLICY SHIFT

Inspired by the experience with Legislative Theatre in 2013, Sam Miller led the charge to create what is now called the Federal Interagency Working Group for Homeless and LGBT Youth to meaningfully understand and address the needs of runaway and homeless LGBT youth.

“Germinating out of that initial collaboration, we ended up creating what we call now the Federal Interagency Working Group for Homeless and LGBT Youth,” Miller says. **“From [2013] on out we have maintained a continuous working relationship [with Theatre of the Oppressed NYC] and really engaged our fellow partners involvement in runaway and homeless LGBT youth. It was a different venue of expression in our communities and we were really trying to be responsive to what was going on in our communities.”¹⁰**

Council Member Jimmy Van Bramer was further swayed to support the Community Safety Act, a package of bills currently before the City Council that aims to stop discriminatory “stop and frisk” police practices, following the Legislative Theatre

¹⁰ Jarret Lyons, *Acting Out Their Demands, Advocates Take the Stage to Influence NYC Policy*, City Limits, (2016) available at <https://citylimits.org/2016/05/26/acting-out-their-demands-advocates-take-the-stage-to-influence-nyc-policy/>



event. He pushed for the legislative package increasing police oversight that ultimately became law. The Community Safety Act was signed into law in January of 2014, and ushered in significant reform to the New York Police Department practices.

“That day in May was so special, it was really important to me, and it worked in all the ways we talked about advocacy working,” Van Bramer says. **“Giselle’s piece on that experience by a trans woman of color was so effective. We voted just a couple of months later on ending stop and frisk as we know it in the city of New York; that piece really helped me solidify my thinking on that issue.”**¹¹

2014: CAN’T GET RIGHT

The 2014 Legislative Theatre Festival was designed to showcase performances from three different TONYC troupes — the Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services (CASES), the Ali Forney Center (AFC), and Housing Works. The festival included one night of Forum Theatre, one night of Legislative Theatre, one day of workshops, and guest performances by The Fortune Society. There was no post-event activism session. The CASES forum play followed Black youth who were targeted by police for hanging out in playgrounds. Some were found with marijuana and then all charged with resisting arrest, and sentenced to a disproportionate amount of prison time. The protagonists were assigned attorneys and agreed to a guilty plea despite their innocence. The AFC play followed a trans woman in an abusive relationship. During one attack, the police were called to the scene, and demanded her ID, which had a different name and listed male as her gender. They accused her of carrying a false ID, searched the apartment, and upon finding the syringes used for her hormone therapy, accused her of possession of drug paraphernalia and arrested her. The Housing Works play addressed racial

¹¹ Inae Oh, *How A Trans Woman Inspired Real Reform Through Her Art*, Huffington Post, (2014) available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/27/theatre-of-the-oppressed_n_5398405.html

profiling by the police, and bystanders who didn’t intervene.

THE ACTORS

Housing Works: Amy, Eli, Evelyn, Gayle, Ginyar, Goldie, Jon, Kalia, Marjory, Sadaya, Taraja

CASES: Anthony, Carolyn, Destiny, Dominique, Ebony, Elijah, Jesse, Jiovanih, Joshua, La’Quasjai, Melquan, Michael, Saquan, Shadell, Tamelle, Tyshawn, Yustafah

AFC: Aeolon, Charles, James, Lotus, Tara, Vincent

THE LEGISLATIVE PANEL

Policy Advisor Team

Kamau Butcher, Policy Organizer, The Bronx Defenders

Ashley Coneys, Project Organizer, Police Reform Organizing Project (PROP) at the Urban Justice Center

Walter Gerson Rodríguez, Director of Policy and Community Organizing, The Bronx Defenders

Candis Tolliver, Assistant Director for Organizing, Advocacy Department, New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU)

Legislator Team

Carlos Menchaca, District 38, Council Member

Jimmy Van Bramer, District 26, Council Member

Natasha Saxton, Program Compliance Branch Chief, Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

Matthew Lattimer, Conciliation Specialist, Region 2 (Northeast), Community Relations Service, United States Department of Justice

POLICY PROPOSALS

1. Change birth certificates to reflect people’s preferred pronouns and municipal IDs for New Yorkers
2. Require body cameras for police officers
3. Require a form of written consent before a search
4. Require police officers to identify themselves and the reason for the stop
5. Create a defendant’s bill of rights
6. Make the budget for Legal Aid attorneys

comparable to that of the New York City Police Department

7. Mandate middle and high school classes informing students of their basic rights
8. Set a maximum caseload for Legal Aid attorneys

CIVIC AWARENESS AND COMMUNITY BUILDING IMPACT

“It’s good to see legislators come to these performances. They get to learn about their constituents. I see the things differently now. I see a lot more options than I did before. It’s gotten me to be a better advocate because I’d never written a letter before to any politicians, but now I do.”

— Jon Mincey, *Housing Works* Actor

“To present the ideas to the legislators, it feels nerve wracking, but the importance of the issues gets you to do it. As a person I’ve grown stronger because I never knew about these pressing issues facing my community.”

— Charles, *Ali Forney Center* Actor

In addition to witnessing the power of Legislative Theatre to create civic action and awareness, Council Member **Carlos Menchaca** was struck by the usefulness of this creative tool in crafting legislation in a new way.¹²

“I believe strongly in providing opportunities for young people to voice concerns through non-violent, creative mediums,” Menchaca said in a statement. **“Theater is an ideal medium – and TONYC, in particular, has a history of engaging marginalized populations and creating spaces where the voices of these individuals can be heard and amplified. Through political theater, young participants explore the arts while developing their political identities – which, collectively, empowers them and their audiences to become change makers in their communities.”**¹³

12 Lance Richardson, *The Play’s the Thing? Homeless Transgender Youth Act Their Way Toward Justice*, Slate, (2014) available at http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2014/06/11/can_theater_bring_justice_to_homeless_transgender_youth.html

13 Jarret Lyons, *Acting Out Their Demands, Advocates Take the Stage to Influence NYC Policy*, City Limits, (2016) available at <https://citylimits.org/2016/05/26/acting-out-their-demands-advocates-take-the-stage-to-influence-nyc-policy/>





“The play focused on access to housing, which is one of the reasons I committed myself to Fair Housing.

Before experiencing the Legislative Theatre, I was not sure how it benefitted the LGBTQ community. After my experience, I was not only made aware of the important work Legislative Theater is doing, but also identified ways HUD could assist with Legislative Theatre’s mission.”— *Natasha Saxton, Program Compliance Branch Chief, Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, LGBT Liaison for Fair Housing*

“I was so glad to attend the TONYC festival. I am really inspired by what you are all doing – particularly that so many grassroots organizations are working together. I also like that you are working strategically i.e. linking with leaders and decision makers on multiple levels.” — *Spect-Actor*

POLICY SHIFT

“I authored the legislation that created IDNYC, our municipal ID, and Legislative Theatre reinforced the need for IDNYC to be inclusive of LGBT and gender non-conforming individuals. After IDNYC was created, City Council went on to create more laws and policies that protect personal information, ensure City agencies treat people with respect and with an understanding of how to honor the human and civil rights of all New Yorkers. Legislative Theatre keeps policy and legislative discussions from becoming disconnected from real people. It gives elected officials a healthy dose of reality that helps when working in government settings. I appreciate the language that’s cultivated in Legislative Theatre because it represent honest experiences and is useful in advocacy conversations.” — *Carlos Menchaca, Council Member*

2015: INSIDE/OUTSIDE

This Legislative Theatre event took place Thursday, June 6, at The New School, 66 West 12th Street, NYC. The plays were performed by acting troupes from CASES, The Staten Island Center for Court Innovation (CCI), Covenant House, and Housing Works.

The Covenant House Troupe’s play followed a young Black woman who was released from prison and was staying in a short term shelter, where she had to find a job or get into college to keep her bed. However, she was consistently denied interviews because of her previous conviction, and also denied access to scholarships for CUNY based on previous conviction. In the end, she was kicked out of the shelter and forced to live on the street.

The Housing Works play addressed a man who had been released from prison after completing a sentence, and was being refused interviews everywhere he turned in search of employment. This put extra stress on his family and threatened their economic and mental health.

The CCI play was set in a middle school attended by primarily Black and Latino youth in Staten Island. Bullying between students escalated into a fight resulting in school police involvement and the students being sent to an out-of-school detention facility. The circumstances and treatment in this facility led them to being transferred to a Rikers Island youth facility. This play dealt with the “zero tolerance” policies in NYC schools that means that any fight leads to arrest and suspension or expulsion.

The CASES play followed two teenage black men who were picked up by police because they “matched the description” of men wanted for a robbery; put in jail, and then the police, wanting to make a quota, framed them with a gun pulled from evidence for a different case. Finally, the officers persuaded one young man to falsely testify against the other, to be released.

THE ACTORS

Covenant House: Alex, Andrew, Cheyenne, Daniel, Jorge, Mariama, Quincy

Housing Works: Aaron, Eli, Goldie, Joanna, Jon, Majory, Nicole, Pebbles, Richard, Sadaya, Willvin

CASES: Brooklyn Justice Corps: Adrian, Chantal, Jackie, Joii, Kwadwo, Maleek, Roy “Real,” Shamel, Star

Staten Island Youth Justice Center actors

THE LEGISLATIVE TEAM

Policy Advisor Team

Jayne Bigelson, Director of Anti-Human Trafficking Initiatives, Co-Director of Legal Advocacy, Covenant House

Kamau Butcher, Policy Organizer, The Bronx Defenders

Amanda Jack, Trial Attorney, Brooklyn Defender Services

Deandra Khan, Organizer, Teen Activist Project, New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU)

Fred Patrick, Director, Center on Sentencing and Corrections, Vera Institute of Justice

Benjamin Solotaire, Manager, Volunteer Services and Community Engagement, Fortune Society

Angad Singh, Trial Attorney, Brooklyn Defender Services

Legislator Team

Carlos Menchaca, District 38, Council Member
Jimmy Van Bramer, District 26, Council Member

Sam Miller, U.S. Department for Housing and Urban Development; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development US; U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness

Matthew Lattimer, Conciliation Specialist, Region 2 (Northeast) Community Relations Service, United States Department of Justice

Natasha Saxton, Compliance Branch Chief, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

POLICY PROPOSALS

1. End zero-tolerance policies and increase budget for student advocates and guidance counselors by decreasing the presence of NYPD School Safety Officers and implementing restorative justice principles.
2. Supply free MetroCards, unlimited in scope, for all NYC students through the 12th grade.
3. Implement the mandatory use of body cameras for all on-duty NYPD officers. Require that the video be stored in the office of the District Attorney and made available as a matter of discovery in all criminal cases and civil suits.
4. Create city subsidies, enabling all students should be able to graduate from CUNY without any debt.
5. City Council includes seed money in the current budget for the future expansion of discharge planning resources for incarcerated individuals.
6. Support the Fair Chance Act, which promises to Ban the Box on employment applications asking about conviction history and bar employers from asking about conviction history during a first interview.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

The week following Legislative Theatre, the Fair Chance Act passed. This event provided an opportunity for audience members and actors to learn about the Act and share information.

TONYC participated in rallies to raise awareness about the new policy for employers and to thank the City Council for passing the bill.

POLICY SHIFT

Council Member Ben Kallos was investigating how he could propose a Council bill for debt-free CUNY. TONYC met with him to share stories of New Yorkers negatively impacted by CUNY debt. In 2017, however, Governor Cuomo made CUNY free for all New Yorkers with family incomes under \$100,000.

ACTIVISM SESSION

Following the play, TONYC held its first activism workshop in the form of Participatory Budgeting (PB) engagement. This session was facilitated by PB NYC Steering Committee and District Committee members Benjamin Solotaire and Caron Atlas from Arts & Democracy. In PB, community members get a direct say in how to spend public dollars, learn how it works and how to get involved in their neighborhood.¹⁴ The following day, Community Voices Heard organizer Jennifer Hadlock led a session on the legislative process. The workshop had over thirty attendees who played different characters in the NYC legislative process and engaged in a reenactment of the steps to start a restorative justice campaign.

2016: HOUSING CIRCUS

For *Housing Circus*, the policy play and creation ran from 7pm to 9pm on Wednesday, May 5, and Thursday, May 6, with the same play performed on both days. Troupes from the Ali Forney Center and The Fortune Society's Reentry Veterans devised and performed plays about the challenges and bureaucracy of the

¹⁴ "Through Participatory Budgeting, community members directly decide how to spend at least \$1,000,000 of the public budget in participating Council Districts. Community members can propose and vote on projects like improvements to schools, parks, libraries, public housing, and other public or community spaces." New York City Council, *Participatory Budgeting*, available at <https://council.nyc.gov/pb/>

housing system. In the Ali Forney Center Troupe's play, LGBTQ youth who were experiencing homelessness were kicked out of a shelter on their 21st birthday and presented with onerous paperwork in order to apply for transitional living programs. Additionally, the caseworkers at the shelter disregarded their gender identity and punished them for not being able to complete all the paperwork accurately without offering assistance or external support.

In the Fortune Society Troupe play, veterans shared their with experience in the criminal justice system and the long waiting list for permanent housing that in some cases led to years of homelessness. After finally moving from the waitlist, the apartments made available are extremely small, barely the supplies needed for living, and a location is hours away from where they work and receive services. The veterans are told that if they do not sign up for the tiny apartments right there on the spot, they will lose their chance of ever getting housed through the program. Additionally, they are not given an adequate time to review the housing contract.

THE ACTORS

AFC: Clay, Dustin/Jay, Kai, Latifah, Michael, Nandi, Romeo, Skye, Taylor, Ty

The Fortune Society: Dave, Dewayne, Halimah, Jerry, Kenny, Paul

THE LEGISLATIVE PANEL

Policy Advisor Team

Rob Robinson, National Economic and Social Rights Initiative

Cathy Kim, Senior Program Officer, Enterprise Community Partners

Brandon J. Holmes, Community Organizer, VOCAL-NY

Ronald Day, Associate Vice President, The Fortune Society

Sassafras Lowrey, Director, Homeless Youth Services & Member Navigation, Hetrick-Martin Institute

Kevin Hansen, Founder, PolicyAtlas

Clayton Brooks, Government Relations, Covenant House New York

Legislator Team

Carlos Menchaca, District 38, Council Member

Jimmy Van Bramer, District 26, Council Member

Vicki Been, Commissioner, U.S. Department of Housing Preservation and Development

Leila Bozorg, Chief of Staff, U.S. Department of Housing Preservation and Development

Amy Sananman, Executive Director, Mayor's Action Plan for Neighborhood Safety, Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice

Randy A. Scott, MSW. Director, Runaway Homeless Youth (RHY)Vulnerable and Special Needs Youth Unit, NYC Department of Youth and Community Development

Daryl J. Cochrane, MPA, Director, Manhattan Community Service Center, New York City Commission on Human Rights

Sam Miller, Senior Management Analyst, Region 2, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

Barbara Andrews, Administration of Children and Families (ACF)

POLICY PROPOSALS

1. Streamline the Transitional Independent Living application process— investigating the use or necessity of barriers and conditional requirements surrounding the applications, such as producing medical records, psych evaluation, forms of ID, etc.
2. Improve caseworker specific certification requirements and potentially limit case workers workload— investigating what key areas of learning caseworkers must experience before working with LGBT/ at-risk youth and improving the quality of caseworkers. i.e. certified child services/social workers.
3. Investigate raising the youth housing age limit to 25 and get an understanding of why there is a clear distinction between the ages of 21 and 25. Also, be aware of safety concerns in some cases and examine funding for wraparound services for youth ages 21-25.
4. Support homeless/veterans looking for housing with “Housing Ambassadors” or case managers who are able to visit site and review lease agreements before tenants are asked to sign. Also, investigate current standards for offered housing and improve standards/better enforce compliance.
5. More federal resources for veteran housing assistance, i.e. vouchers, etc.
6. Investigate raising the youth housing age limit to 25 and get an understanding of why there is a clear distinction between the ages of 21 and 25. Also, be aware of safety concerns in some cases and examine funding for wraparound services for youth ages 21-25.
7. Improve caseworker specific certification requirements and potentially limit case workers workload — investigating what key areas of learning caseworkers must experience before working with LGBT/ at-risk youth and improving the quality of caseworkers. i.e. certified child services/social workers.
8. Caseworkers should earn higher salaries and work fewer hours.
9. Investigate the practice of the Department of Youth & Community Development (DYCD) paying young people to act as “Secret Shoppers” to review Caseworkers



anonymously

10. Ban the Box prohibit asking about criminal records on housing applications.
11. The Mayor's new Office for Veterans Services should provide advocacy and education, especially with regard to what a lease should and should not include, starting with their new center in Queens and with other new centers. These services should be provided regardless of a client's discharge status

CIVIC AWARENESS AND COMMUNITY BUILDING IMPACT

"When you are in the street and you're voicing your opinion and looking out for people, they think you are a bum and have nothing to say. I feel like I'm giving back to the universe and giving back to society because I'm enlightening people and inspiring people. It's not the problem, but it's how you solve it. Everyone will benefit from this."¹⁵ — *Maaji Newbold, Actor and Joker*

"One of the main reasons that I appreciate legislative theatre is the way it puts policy makers and some of their more disadvantaged constituents in the same room and forces them to think like a problem-solver in watching the day-to-day reality of their situation. I feel like there is a massive gap between the data that is available to people who work in government and the on-the-ground lived experiences of residents, with whom many policy makers will otherwise never come into contact."
— *Kevin Hansen, Founder, PolicyAtlas*

POLICY SHIFT

“Legislative Theatre reinforces my belief that constituents should have a direct impact on forming policies, setting budget priorities and determining legislative actions. It also offers a practical experience for both the constituent participants and the elected or administrative officials present. I admire Legislative Theatre’s ability to engage youth and people who are often not included in making decisions that impact their lives. We need to continue to increase the number of opportunities for elected officials, agency personnel, and City staff members to participate directly in Legislative Theatre, and finding new and different settings to deliver Legislative Theatre.” — *Carlos Menchaca, Council Member*



¹⁵ Sherry Mazzocchi, *Circus built from Concrete*, Manhattan Times, (2013) available at <http://www.manhattan-timesnews.com/circus-built-from-concrete-circo-se-construye-de-concreto/>

Inspired by this Legislative Theatre event and its policy ideas, Policy Atlas, a nonpartisan group focused on providing information on potential policy solutions to both supporters and opponents of a given policy, created a page for the criminal background check proposal in order to help stimulate a more detailed discussion of how the policy might be implemented as well as inform its advocacy efforts.¹⁶

“Legislative Theatre enables the issues we talk about in other settings to have a different kind of stage. The publicity around the issues is helpful for the overall issue. The more people who are talking about it the better. Also, when you’re acting out difficult things, it’s different than sitting in a meeting or rally and sharing your words. You have permission to be more honest and act out your pain. People are listening in a new way.”

— Cole Giannone, MS, Director of Program Evaluation, Training and Advocacy, Ali Forney Center

ACTIVISM SESSION

This Legislative Theatre event was again followed by a participatory budgeting session. Additionally, Voices of Community Activists and Leaders (VOCAL-NY) led a session on the basics of community organizing, promoting leadership development and engagement. During this session, actors, audience members and TONYC staff decided to hold a press conference on the steps of City Hall to support advocacy being done to raise the age of youth housing from 21 to 25 and improve caseworker training and oversight in youth shelters. Actors performed poems and excerpts from the Ali Forney Center and Fortune Society Troupes, and staff from those partner organizations spoke. The press conference attracted 3 Council Members and generated press on the issues.¹⁷

¹⁶ PolicyAtlas, *Criminal background check restrictions*, available at http://policyatlas.org/wiki/Criminal_background_check_restrictions

¹⁷ Jarret Lyons, *Acting Out Their Demands, Advocates Take the Stage to Influence NYC Policy*, City Limits, (2016) available at <https://citylimits.org/2016/05/26/acting-out-their-demands-advocates-take-the-stage-to-influence-nyc-policy>

TAKEAWAYS FROM LEGISLATIVE THEATRE FESTIVALS 2013-2016

These events raised awareness of the various issues facing the New York community and highlighted the power of theatre as a vehicle for social change. After participating for two consecutive years in Legislative Theatre, City Council Member Jimmy Van Bramer called on TONYC actors to perform at City Council hearings three times to: 1) impact arts funding, 2) contribute to the creation of a cultural plan, and 3) support passage of a resolution supporting the impact of the arts on social change. Also, The Riders Alliance, a grassroots organization fighting for reliable, affordable, world-class public transit in New York, asked TONYC to perform at City Council hearings for the FairFares Campaign.¹⁸ In 2015, City Council Member Carlos Menchaca approached TONYC to request a Sunset Park theatre troupe that could perform in a rapid response format around local community issues. The troupe has built plays on issues relevant to local immigrant communities, such as safe construction workplaces and employment discrimination, and performed them at local information fairs and other public events in Sunset Park.

2017: 5TH ANNUAL LEGISLATIVE THEATRE FESTIVAL

The 5th Annual Legislative Theatre Festival was the largest in the TONYC history taking place over the course of three days in May and spanning three boroughs. Each Festival day ushered in a newly devised and performed play by a different acting troupe. This expansion was implemented with the goals of providing more opportunities to engage with Legislative Theatre and make the events more borough specific. Over the course of the Festival, TONYC engaged 5 elected officials, 7 city agencies, 21 policy experts, organizers, and lawyers, over 50 advocacy organizations, and nearly 500 Spect-Actors!

¹⁸ Further information on the FareFairs campaign available at http://salsa.ridersny.org/p/salsa/web/common/public/signup?signup_page_KEY=10399

Over the course of the three events, the overwhelming majority of participants expressed that the event (1) made them feel more empowered to make social change, (2) more likely to participate in civic action, (3) more likely to engage with a Council Member on issues that matter to them, and (4) were motivated by Legislative Theatre to take action on the issue presented in the play.

MAY 7, QUEENS MUSEUM

The May 7 play and policy idea creation took place at the Queens Museum. The acting troupe was comprised of adult Latino men united by their experiences with immigrant injustice in NYC and connected to TONYC through the AIDS Center for Queens County (ACQC). The Jokers for this troupe were Raquel Almazan and Megan Fountain. The troupe had been building Forum plays with TONYC since 2014, but this was their first time participating in Legislative Theatre. The play shares information about the various barriers to a safe and dignified life confronted by immigrant New Yorkers. The problems highlighted in the play were wage theft; homelessness as result of wage theft; inaccessible health care; and Immigration, Customs, and Enforcement (ICE) patrolling courthouses for the purposes of arrest and deportation.¹⁹

THE ACTORS

Ivan, Carlos, Abel, Román, Adrián, Erick, José, Oscar, Amelia, Francisco, Juan

THE LEGISLATIVE PANEL

Policy Advisor Team

The Policy Advisors on the Legislative Panel represented organizations focused on immigrants' rights, policy change, and government transparency.

Michael Sisitzky, Policy Counsel, New York Civil Liberties Union

Natasha Lycia Ora Bannan, Associate Counsel, LatinoJustice PRLDEF & President, National Lawyers Guild

Joselyn Guaman, R.I.S.E. Senior Member and

Atlas Board Co-Chair, Atlas D.I.Y.

Kathrine Russell, Supervising Attorney, Brooklyn Defender Services — Immigration Practice

Kathryn Kliff, Staff Attorney, The Legal Aid Society

Laura Redman, Director of Health Justice, New York Lawyers for the Public Interest

Miguel Medrano, Jail Services Advocate, Brooklyn Defender Services

Thuy-Ann Le, Senior Policy Analyst, Bureau of Primary Care Access & Planning — New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

Legislator Panel

Ivan Acosta, Legislative Director for Council Member Julissa Ferreras-Copeland, District 21

Justin Deabler, Office of the Attorney General for the State of New York, Civil Rights Bureau, Assistant Attorney General,

Kavita Pawria-Sanchez, Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, Assistant Commissioner Nick Gulotta, Queens Borough Director at City of New York

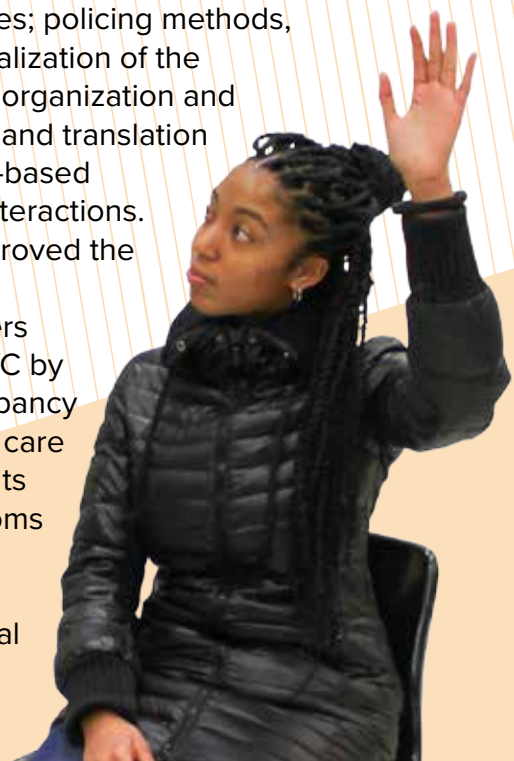
Matthew Borden, Assistant Commissioner of Government Affairs and External Relations, City of New York Department of Homeless Services

POLICY IDEAS

Overall, the actors and audience submitted 64 ideas to respond to the play. The themes for the ideas were healthcare; limitations on ICE, labor laws, providing Know Your Rights opportunities; policing methods, eradicating criminalization of the homeless, shelter organization and order, voting laws and translation services for rights-based information and interactions. The audience approved the following ideas:

1. Improve shelters throughout NYC by reducing occupancy and improving care
2. Keep ICE agents out of courtrooms in New York State
3. Provide hospital

¹⁹ Full video available at <https://vimeo.com/225856144>



patients with caseworkers to connect to social services

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

“Yesterday’s legislative theater was amazing. It’s such a brilliant format for community outreach, engagement and education. This process is an innovative and effective model for community-based policy-making that should be replicated.”

— *Natasha Lycia Ora Bannan, Associate Counsel, LatinoJustice PRLDEF & President, National Lawyers Guild*

MAY 10, UNIVERSITY SETTLEMENT

The May 10 play and policy idea creation ran at University Settlement House. This event was unique for TONYC and possibly more closely linked with Boal’s original structure for using the Legislative Theatre process in that it was an intentional partnership with the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA) achieve their legislative mandate to create a NYC cultural plan.²⁰ In May 2015, Mayor Bill de Blasio signed legislation sponsored by Council Members Jimmy Van Bramer and Steve Levin requiring DCLA to lead creation of New York City’s first comprehensive cultural plan.²¹ From August 2016 to June 2017, New Yorkers participated in a series of information sessions providing their input on the essential elements of the plan. The

20 NYC Cultural Affairs, *A Cultural Plan for All New Yorkers*, (2017) available at <http://www1.nyc.gov/site/dcla/createnyc/createnyc.page>

21 NYC.gov, *Mayor DeBlasio Signs Legislation to Develop a Comprehensive Cultural Plan*, (2015) available at <http://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/320-15/mayor-de-blasio-signs-legislation-develop-comprehensive-cultural-plan>

May 10 Legislative Theatre event essentially functioned as one of these information sessions. This structure was novel for TONYC in that the rehearsal process and play design were rooted in answering the question “what issues do we want DCLA to consider in crafting the cultural plan?”

The play was devised and performed by Concrete Justice, TONYC’s longest running acting troupe. This Harlem-based multiracial, majority people of color, acting troupe is united by their experiences with housing injustice. Concrete Justice started as Jan Hus Homeless Theatre Troupe in 2010, and since then has grown to include adult actors facing homelessness, housing insecurity, health challenges and/or economic insecurity. The Jokers for this troupe were Liz Morgan and Becca Lynch. The play focused on the barriers the troupe faced in supporting their artistic craft and accessing arts resources as low-income New Yorkers. The problems highlighted in the play were criminalization of unlicensed street vendors, workplace harassment and unfair conditions, and pay-to-play audition schemes.²²

THE ACTORS

Bill, Duwon, Maria, Deborah, Marcus, Maajidah, Christine, Letitia, Jon, Sandra, Naomi, Rachel, Timothy, Patricia, Pedro, Timur

THE LEGISLATIVE PANEL

Policy Advisor Team

The Policy Advisors on the Legislative Panel represented organizations focused on arts access, street vendor equity, bringing an anti-racist lens to arts activism and work, and civil rights.

Daryl J. Cochrane, MPA, Director, Manhattan Community Service Center, New York City Commission on Human Rights

Elizabeth Hamby, Assistant Director of Public Housing and Health, New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and the New York City Housing Authority

Hatuey Ramos-Fermín, Director of Programs and Community Engagement, The Laundromat

22 Full video available at <https://vimeo.com/226744604>

Project

Kevin Hansen, Co-Founder, PolicyAtlas.org
Matthew Shapiro, Senior Attorney, The Street Vendor Project, Urban Justice Center
Melissa Aase, Executive Director, University Settlement
Sarita Covington, Artists Co-Creating Racial Equity, The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond

Legislator Team

Eddie Torres, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Cultural Affairs
Nisha Baliga, Director of Participatory Planning
Stephen Levin, Council Member, District 33
Tom Finkelpearl, Commissioner, Department of Cultural Affairs

POLICY IDEAS

There were 107 policy ideas submitted to the Legislative Panel covering the following themes: the legal definition of art, housing; fair fares, equitable loans, diversity in government, child care, Know Your Rights, labor laws, street vending licenses, policing of minor offenses, the exploitation of artists, community-backed arts organizations, and tenant protection laws. The audience approved the following ideas:

1. Remove criminal penalties for unlicensed vending and removing the cap on licenses for non-veteran vendors.
2. Know Your Rights hotline for artists, additionally using libraries as hubs for communication
3. City government giving more money to people in borough arts councils and neighborhoods so they can organize and giving them access to other services such as labor rights; Increase assistance to neighborhoods of color and low-income.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

“Part of the impact came even before the event. TONYC added value to the process by using arts and culture to evaluate art and culture. Using the vehicle to talk about how improvements in

the field could look was useful and unique. At the event, there was a different kind of engagement than we're used to. Most of our gatherings were conversational or in response to written material. The lived experiences of the Legislative Theatre process set it up for a more tangible dialogue with a real connection to the human experience of why we make policy. We have been trying to communicate that value and Legislative Theatre really showed it in real time, so instead of considering a policy point like removing caps on vendor licenses in the abstract, we are seeing that this problem is about a real person and their livelihood. This gave the opportunity to reflect on barriers and ideas for change in the moment, in a way that dialogues and town halls are not able to achieve.” — *Nadia Elokda, Legislator Panel Representative, Cultural Plan Coordinator at NYC Department of Cultural Affairs*

“The policy discussion in city hall can sometimes become abstract, but it's so important to connect what we discuss in the abstract to the real. It was an important part of that Legislative Theatre performance that there are consequences to the laws we pass, and how they affect people's lives. People are very deferential to elected officials. The word honorable is in there. It is important for elected officials to always get back to why are we doing what we are doing and how does that impact people's lives.”

— *Steve Levin, Council Member*



“Legislative Theatre is the first time I engaged in city politics and started to follow what was happening in city council and understanding legislation that was in the works, and coalitions that were fighting in different areas related and not related to our work. My thinking shifting about how the arts offer something to organizers and activists that is actually important to them too. In conversations, grassroots partners have shared that they are excited about being a part of this kind of process.

It helps them to have people telling the story; it is important to the activism.

I went from thinking that it was an artistic process that got people to think about activism, and towards understanding that this is an important part of activism itself. The more I learn about canvassing and organizing, I think personal narratives, storytelling, and community building in a shared cultural experience are critical components of any movement and trying to make change on any level.” — *Becca Lynch, Joker*

“The power of engaging in community has become a lot more important to me. I would say Legislative Theatre and TONYC have become part of an alignment process for me. I have a lot of interests, as an artist and an activist, that have felt very separate. Now, I’m able to do a lot of those things together. From an audience perspective, I might feel a lot of emotions after a powerful play, but I don’t necessarily feel motivated to take action or be part of a process of taking action and keeping the conversation going. With Legislative Theatre, we aren’t just making plays. It’s literally concrete justice in knowing that the conversation doesn’t stop until we’ve taken that next action step or organized as a community around an issue. It’s exciting. It makes the art-making more worthwhile.” — *Liz Morgan, Joker*

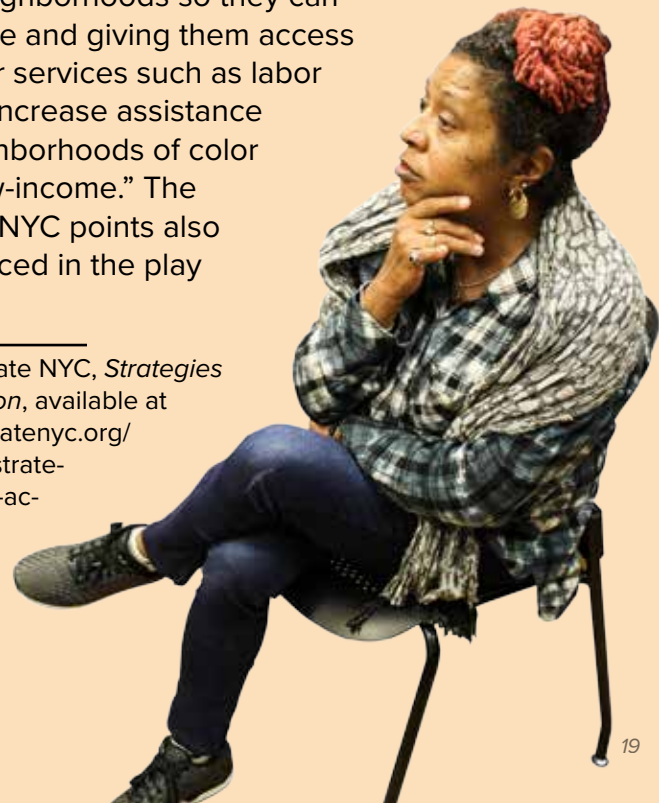
“How all boundaries dropped by way of the event, between actors, spectators, audience, legislator, everyone was equal!” — *Spect-Actor*

“An immediate thought was that I love the fact that it’s interactive and that you give the audience the opportunity to disagree and change their minds about suggested policies. This was even more possible given the smaller space than in the past.” — *Spect-Actor*

POLICY SHIFT

Council Member Levin attributed his reinvigoration around abolishing the cap on general merchandise vending permits to his attendance at Legislative Theatre and hearing from the Concrete Justice actors. Following the event, he sent new bill language to the Legislative Service Request to be evaluated. In addition to appearing in the CreateNYC report and materials, several points in the Cultural Plan Action steps were also highlighted in the Concrete Justice play and policy proposals, particularly: “City government giving more money to people in borough arts councils and neighborhoods so they can organize and giving them access to other services such as labor rights; Increase assistance to neighborhoods of color and low-income.” The Create NYC points also referenced in the play are:²³

23 Create NYC, *Strategies and Action*, available at <http://createnyc.org/en/plan/strategies-and-actions/>



- **Increasing support for the cultural life of low-income communities underrepresented groups.**
 - DCLA is committing to increased funding for cultural programming in low-income communities and for underrepresented groups. This will be implemented directly in grants from DCLA and through increased support to re-grant partners.
- **Increase support to individual artists.**
 - Following the strategies in the Health of the Cultural Sector, DCLA will increase support for individual artists through its re-grant partners.
- **Coordinate and promote engagement between the City and New York City's cultural community.**
 - Across New York, cultural groups are already collaborating with City agencies in a number of dynamic and fruitful ways. The City will further this vital work with a new fund that will enable agencies to pilot or scale up programs that engage underserved or underrepresented populations through cultural programming.

MAY 13, BRIC

The May 13 play and policy idea creation ran in a performance space at BRIC, “the leading presenter of free cultural programming in Brooklyn, and one of the largest in New York City.” The play was written and performed by 10 Black youth united by their experiences organizing for community safety and connected to TONYC through the Crown Heights Mediation Center Youth Organizing to Save Our Streets (YO SOS). The Joker for this troupe was Katy Rubin. While this was TONYC’s second year partnering with YO SOS, this was the first year YO SOS participated in Legislative Theatre.

This play told the story of young person who is killed as a result of gang-related confrontations at a party in Crown Heights. Prior to the party, the audience is also shown the street harassment faced by two of the characters on the way to that party. Later in school, the students are

denied the opportunity to mourn the loss of their friend, berated for not focusing on school work, threatened with expulsion for discussing the shooting, and confronted with police scrutiny exiting and entering what is supposed to be an safe and supportive educational environment. The problems highlighted in the play were the impact of zero-tolerance policies; prison-like environment created by school police officers and surveillance equipment; harsh exclusionary discipline policies; and gun violence within the community.

THE ACTORS

Adama, Bernard, Emmanuella, Enyah, Keya, Mike, Nate, Gariyana

THE LEGISLATIVE PANEL

Policy Advisor Team

The Policy Advisors on the Legislative Panel represented organizations focused on youth justice, policy change, and school equity.

Dawn Yuster, Director of School Justice Project, Advocates for Children of NY

Erin George, New York State Campaign Coordinator, JustLeadershipUSA

Craig Levine, Director of Public Policy Reform, The Bronx Defenders

Amanda Jack, Senior Staff Attorney, Criminal Defense Practice, Brooklyn Defender Services

David F. Miranda, Senior Staff Attorney, Peter Cicchino Youth Project at the Urban Justice Center

Darren Mack, Project Coordinator, Beyond the Bars Fellowship, Center for Justice at Columbia University

Anthoine Pierre, Lead Community Organizer, Brooklyn Movement Center

Juan Ramos, Deputy Director Crown Heights Community Mediation Center

The Legislator Panel

Carlos Menchaca, Council Member, District 38

Jennifer Thompson, Deputy Director of Cornerstone Programs, Department of Youth and Community Development

Barbara Sherman, Deputy Policy Director, Office of the Public Advocate Letitia James

POLICY IDEAS

The audience submitted 130 ideas for policy-based changes with themes of anti-gentrification; community building and violence intervention; preventing gender-based street harassment; gun legislation; mental health support; teacher diversity; and undoing the prison environment in schools. The audience approved the following ideas:

1. Divest from NYPD School Safety Agents and move school safety processes out from under NYPD oversight to DOE oversight. School safety & security practices should include a formal process for influence from school staff and student advisory committees. Invest in school counselors, guidance staff and partnerships with local violence-interruption organizations to support the development and implementation of new security practices, including restorative justice practices in all schools. Retrain and/or phase out the School Safety Agent position.
2. Transition away from public school/DOE financial investment in student criminalization and law-enforcement partnerships (i.e. practices that drive the school to prison pipeline such as suspension processes & hearings, detention & coordination with NYPD). Secure funding for in-house mental health professionals as well as training for all staff & administrators regarding mental health, trauma and anti-racism. Implement programs for peer education around trauma and violence interruption.
3. Address NYPD street harassment of youth street harassment by NYPD. Implement NYPD

training programs & curriculum in all precincts that are driven and developed by (1) Local community based organizations (like SOS, GMACC, NYC Together, etc.) and (2) Student/Youth groups.

CIVIC AWARENESS AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

“Legislative Theatre broadened my thinking in terms of collaboration.

It’s one thing to know about the progressive commitment in young people, but it’s another to be in it with them. It’s rejuvenating and inspiring to see how the next generation wants to improve the community. As a public policy organization, you work with other similar-minded analytic and service-minded folks. We sometimes don’t go to the next concentric circle of working directly with community groups, which we should. It should be both.”

— Craig Levine, Director of Public Policy Reform, The Bronx Defenders

“Going to Legislative Theatre, most of all, sold me on Legislative Theatre as an organizing tool. In organizing, we sometimes struggle with how we talk about policy. It can be discussed in esoteric ways. Legislative Theatre contextualizes policy issues in their environment.” — Anthonine Pierre, Lead Community Organizer, Brooklyn Movement Center



“I’ve attended TONYC shows before and have always been impressed and inspired. However, this legislative theatre made me really feel and realize the power of reaching out to city council members despite still protesting and rallying to encourage and support community members.”

— *Spect-Actor*

“I was impacted by the talkback after the play. It allowed me to strategize ideas on gun violence prevention and school-to-prison pipeline.”

— *Spect-Actor*

“I am confident unified communities can end the school to prison pipeline, and the criminalization of school discipline. Legislative Theatre is a tool for illustrating the value of struggling for justice – especially for young people, immigrant communities, non-English speakers and those most often excluded from decision making that affects their lives.”

— *Carlos Menchaca, Council Member*

ACTIVISM SESSION

This Legislative Theatre Festival also incorporated new programming called Get Activated! developed by Creative Advocacy Coordinator, Rebecca Kelly-Golfman. The goals of each session were to make an immediate impact in moving forward the proposals from the play, gain a valuable civic-engagement skill, and provide an opportunity for people to stay connected with TONYC in the push to turn their policy ideas into real practices and bill proposals. There were three TONYC independent sessions and two that incorporated the work

of outside advocacy partners, VOCAL-NY and JustLeadershipUSA.

TONYC INDEPENDENT SESSIONS

SHARE IT: IMMEDIATE ACTION

(May 7, May 10, and May 13)

The Share It! session was designed for people who needed to leave can take quick action to support the proposals. People were given the option to: (1) Sign a Letter of Support for the policies created during the event that TONYC would mail to the Chair of relevant City Council Committees and (2) Tweet at the Chair of the Relevant City Council Committee with the policy proposals. Joker Max Freedman facilitated this session.

REHEARSE IT: LONG TERM ACTION

(May 7 and May 13)

The Rehearse It! session was setup to give people the opportunity to (1) practice talking to strangers about the proposals from the play they watched (2) identify self-interest of others and (3) practice talking to people they know and elected officials about the proposals. Jokers Becca Lynch and Liz Morgan facilitated this session.

DESIGN IT: LONG TERM ACTION

(May 7 and May 13)

The Design It! session was designed to create an outline for possible artistic protest and awareness campaign around the proposals. Jokers John LeoNimm, Sulu LeoNimm, and Joker-in-Training Andres Cabreja facilitated this session.

PARTNER ORGANIZATION SESSIONS

LEGISLATE IT: LONG TERM ACTION

(May 7 and May 13)

The goal of this sessions was for people to (1) understand the city level legislative process and (2) how/when New Yorkers can make an impact on that process through civic action. Clifton Garmon, Policy Analyst with VOCAL-NY designed and facilitated this session.

MAP IT: LONG TERM ACTION*(May 13)*

The goal of this session was to introduce participants to (1) the tool of power-mapping (2) identify who has power connected with the Legislative Theatre proposals. Brittany Williams, Community Organizer with JustLeadershipUSA designed and facilitated this session.

ASSESSMENT OF 5TH ANNUAL LEGISLATIVE THEATRE FESTIVAL

Before highlighting the post-Festival activities, the section assesses this most recent iteration using the Style, Accuracy, and Ethics methodology. Style, Accuracy, and Ethics is a three-prong review created by TONYC staff member John LeoNimm, and Founding Executive Director Katy Rubin. This form of assessment was originally created as an internal evaluation of the effectiveness of facilitation practices and later evolved to also review TONYC programs.

‘Style’ refers to the unique energy and character brought by a facilitator. Examples of Style include things such as professorial, playful, musical theatre performer, etc. When applied to a program, this refers to the type of energy cultivated by an event, such as theatrical, academic, or board meeting.

‘Accuracy’ is a review of whether the goals and intention of the activity or event were communicated correctly to the participants. Put simply-did people understand what you were asking of them, and did you structure your process so they could act on that understanding?

‘Ethics’ asks the crucial question of how was the facilitation or event structure oppressive to the participants.

STYLE

VENUE IMPACTS DIALOGUE

The venue had a significant impact on the energy of each event. The Queens Museum offered a beautiful bright and open space. Additionally, because the museum remained open to the public for regular museum visits giving it the atmosphere of theatre-in-the public square. People visiting the museum were able to pass freely through exhibits and stop through the play for some or all of the Legislative Theatre event. This setup also impacted the accuracy and ethics of the event; however, in that the people who wrote ideas did not necessarily see all of the play and not all of the people who saw the play stayed to write and vote on the ideas.

The May 10 event at University Settlement was structured with the performance in the center and the audience and Legislative Panels sitting around three sides. People sat in chairs and the on the floor as well as standing all-around the performance space. This created the style of a community meeting that was very conducive to the back and forth dialogue needed in the Forum Play, idea refinement, and voting process.

The BRIC performance on May 13 was the most traditional theatre venue. The space



offered a stage with raked seating for over 150 people. This space also offered lighting, props, and other technical needs that brought a new life to the play. The venue additionally provided the Legislative Team ample space to sort and discuss the policy ideas without interfering with the audience's enjoyment of the intermission performance; however, it made the audience appear to be more spectators than Spect-Actors because of their physical distance from the action of the performance, interventions, and idea sorting.

ACTORS AS JOKERS

Until 2016, only 3-4 TONYC actors had experience as facilitating the forum dialogue as a Joker. Jokers were generally hired from outside the troupe. In 2016-2017, TONYC focused more energy on preparing actors to lead the dialogue. TONYC is in the process of preparing more actors to facilitate the Forum Play dialogue between audience and fellow actors. This took place most prominently in the May 10 and May 13 events. As a plot point of the May 10 event, TONYC Jokers were unable to make it to the event with the actors beginning the Forum Play. The May 13 Forum Play was Joked exclusively by actors who were also in the play because the troupe was created with the express purpose of actors also serving as Jokers. The more actors are leading the process, the more the style of the each event feels more inclusive and engaging as a community space.

ACCURACY

SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION

The May 7 event of the Legislative Theatre Festival was the first event where TONYC has been able to provide simultaneous translation services. Everyone who requested it was provided an earpiece where they could hear translation from English to Spanish and vice versa depending on the need. The amount of time required for the translators to explain the service to the audience was not accounted for in the event planning, which added to the overall length of the event. Additionally, while translation services were provided for the play and policy

idea generation, the services were not retained for the post-play Get Activated sessions. This oversight crossed into the ethics of the event in that it was advertised as bilingual when, in fact, only a portion of the experience was available in both languages.

NARROWLY TAILORED PLAYS AND POLICY IDEAS

The number of issues presented in each play impacted the specificity of the policy ideas from the audience. When a play shared numerous issues presented by varying Antagonists, the audience ideas mirrored that variety. While a large number of intersecting problems is both true-to-life and engaging, it can sometimes pose a problem for generating enough nuanced and innovative ideas around any one issue that can shift policy on a specific issue or provide concrete tactics for actors to try in life.

TIME CONSTRAINTS ON POLICY SORTING

Given that the team of Policy Advisors are given approximately fifteen to twenty minutes to sort sometimes over 100 audience ideas, they do not always have the time to, as one policy advisor put



it, use their substantive expertise in that process. This impacts the accuracy of the Advisors deeply considering the views of the audience and creating thoughtful proposals for the government representative panel.

GET ACTIVATED

Elements from the Get Activated sessions followed each Legislative Theatre event. While people were able to take immediate action or engage in brainstorming post-event, many people felt as though they had a lot to digest after the performance event and were more interested in discussing their experiences, connecting with the actors, each other, and TONYC staff. For accuracy moving forward, we can consider advertising their place and purpose more prominently, placing some activities prior to the event during the Advocacy Fair or adding them on the following day.

ETHICS

RACE AND TONYC LEGISLATIVE THEATRE

The vast majority of TONYC actors are people of color, but the policymakers and government officials did not always mirror this composition with many being white. TONYC seeks to challenge mechanized thinking and disrupt existing power structures. Placing the ultimate decision-making power to address people of color problems and desires with a mostly white team does not disrupt, but rather, reinforces existing power. Moving forward, prioritizing a majority people of color decision-making panel and distributing decision-making more evenly among the audience, actors, and panel will be at the forefront of the process.

The rehearsal process was also impacted by an imbalance in the racial makeup of Jokers and acting troupes. Of the three performances, only one troupe was not exclusively people of color; however, none of the Joker pairs was exclusively people of color. While a multiracial leadership team can be productive, without an informed and intentional practice of challenging ideologies of power and “internalized racial oppression,” the manifestation of those attitudes appear

and occasionally disrupt.²⁴ Feedback from the events highlighted that this was particularly true in troupes with actors who do not engage with white people outside of the rehearsal process, either intentionally for self-preservation or because of the segregated nature of our cities. In response to this, TONYC is seeking to engage in an all-community anti-racist training in 2018 with ongoing work to follow that process. The goal is to ensure that internalized racial oppression is acknowledged, examined, and continually challenged throughout all TONYC processes from troupe formation to office practices.

ACTORS AND GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL CIVIC COMMUNITY

Many actors shared problems connected to government agencies and officials, which, for some actors, can make the idea of engaging with legislators less appealing as a vehicle for change. This was particularly noted in the ACQC troupe. Many of the actors in that troupe left their home countries because of government corruption and overreach. These experiences raised serious doubts for them as to the impact of the Legislative Theatre process and their comfort sharing their struggles with immigration in the United States. While the actors forged ahead and took the opportunity to share their experiences, there was a high level of exposure for the troupe during this particular performance. Moving forward, a deeper bond between the attending officials and the troupe would be useful for this particular troupe and in general. This relationship building could help with further candor and

24 According to The People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond, a national and international collective of anti-racist, multicultural community organizers and educators, Internalized Racial Oppression manifests itself in two forms: Internalized Racial Superiority and Inferiority. Internalized Racial Superiority is the acceptance of and acting out of a superior definition of self rooted in the historical designation of one’s race. Over many generations, this process of empowerment and access expresses itself as unearned privileges, access to institutional power and invisible advantages based upon race. Internalized Racial Inferiority is defined as the acceptance of and acting out of an inferior definition of self given by the oppressor that is rooted in the historical designation of one’s race. Over many generations, this process of disempowerment and disenfranchisement expresses itself in self-defeating behaviors. More information available at <http://www.pisab.org/our-principles-undoing-internalized>.

producing results with a more immediate impact on the issues presented in the play.

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR THE LEGISLATIVE THEATRE POLICY IDEAS

Each Legislative Theatre event resulted in three different policy ideas for the panel resulting in nine ideas from the festival as a whole. Since TONYC is not a policy organization, tracking and advocated for nine separate issues is not within the organizational capacity or permitted within the 501(c)(3) structure. Without the ability to stay engaged in trying to move these ideas forward, power remains with the same people who walked into the room holding it. In response, we are engaging in coalition work to contribute our theatrical expertise to their advocacy efforts. Additionally, these limitations motivate us to lessen the number of Legislative Theatre events and continue to brainstorm ways to share accountability for advocacy on these issues with all the people who are a part of the process.

POST-LEGISLATIVE THEATRE ACTIONS TOWARD POLICY CHANGE

Following the play, TONYC reflected on our expertise and capacity to advocate for legislative change. In order to take the most impactful and effective steps towards action on the policies generated from the Legislative Theatre events, as well as stay rooted in the goal of community-based change, TONYC decided to join issue-aligned coalitions working on the ideas reflected in the Legislative Theatre policies. As primarily a theatre-based organization, we have found success in bringing a fresh perspective to legal and policy organization and also challenges in terms of our ongoing advocacy contributions. In terms of structure, as a 501(c)(3), there are limitations on the amount of time the organization can spend attempting to influence specific legislative change. Given this limitation, TONYC must be strategic about the time spent in this area. Additionally, TONYC seeks to stay true to its roots of using primarily theatre for social change. To that end, three means of participation emerged in terms of support: 1) work with coalition members to put together a scene(s) with their impacted membership; 2) support their

events advocated for change related to the plays with scenes by the actors; and 3) create Know Your Rights plays and forums.

Using these means of participation and support as a foundation, TONYC put out the call to support the coalition of the 110 legal service organizations, domestic violence, victim services, and community based organizations working in coalition for New York courthouses to be to be off limits to ICE for the purposes of arrest and deportation. This was the most urgent idea emerging from the May 7 Queens event.

In response to the May 13 proposals, TONYC has become a member of the New York City chapter of the Dignity in Schools Campaign (DSC) in order to “challenge the systemic problem of pushout in our nation’s schools and works to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline....build power amongst parents, youth, organizers, advocates and educators to transform their own communities, support alternatives to a culture of zero-tolerance, punishment, criminalization and the dismantling of public schools, and fight racism and all forms of oppression.” As a member of DSC, TONYC is able to act on the desires of the May 13 Legislative Theatre community in an ongoing and strategic manner.

BIG PICTURE TAKEAWAYS FOR LEGISLATIVE THEATRE POLICY IMPACT

The reflections from Legislative Theatre participants over the course of the last five years and information gathered after the most recent Festival reveals that process has impact on policy in three primary ways: 1) influencing government officials and employees’ perspective on existing legislation and standard practices; 2) activating attendees to engage in robust democratic debate; and 3) raising awareness of issues of oppression in NYC.

TONYC actor Jon Mincey put it best in asserting, “it’s good to see legislators come to these performances. They get to learn about their constituents.” The impact of connecting New Yorkers and government officials is a foundational tool in generating social change through the Legislative Theatre process. Audience

members and actors are able to connect with government representatives and vice versa. The overwhelming majority of audience members shared that their experiences at Legislative Theatre made them more likely to engage with a Council Member or other elected official on issues that matter to them than before the event.

Theatre of the Oppressed NYC will continue to use the Legislative Theatre as a process to impact public policy throughout NYC by creating a space for constituents and residents to debate policy, providing a creative platform for the people most oppressively impacted by certain laws to speak truth to power, connecting New Yorkers with campaigns and coalitions to continue advocated for the changes they want to see in their city, and shifting the view of participating legislators.

MOVING FORWARD

As TONYC as an organization has grown, Legislative Theatre has grown with it. Unable to exist in a vacuum, the work is influenced and impacted by the organization's capacity, by the panelists, the audience, the actors, and current events. Given the present political climate, Legislative Theatre and the arts as an agent for change are vital tools for educating constituents, empowering and engaging individuals, challenging the status quo, and altering policy for the better. •





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rebecca Kelly-Golfman is a Joker and Creative Advocacy Coordinator with Theatre of the Oppressed NYC. Additionally, she is a racial justice educator teaching the course Race, the Arts, and Activism at Wagner College and serves as a freelance facilitator with sessions designed to use the arts as a tool to examine identity and uplift Black Women's work toward liberation. Her background in theatre and as a civil rights lawyer provides a unique foundation to support her interdisciplinary perspective. As an attorney, she served as Associate Counsel for the national headquarters of The Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law focused on the school-to-prison pipeline and voter disenfranchisement and an Adjunct Professor at the American University Washington College of Law teaching a seminar for upper-level law students on education law and teaching pedagogy through an anti-racist youth empowerment framework. Rebecca's full work experience and original workshop designs can be found on her website rebeccakellyg.com.

WHO'S WHO

AT THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED NYC

STAFF

Katy Rubin, Founder & Executive Director
Sulu LeoNimm, Joker & Program Director
Holly Sansom, Operations Manager
Rebecca Kelly-Golfman, Joker & Creative Advocacy Coordinator
Liz Morgan, Joker & Community Resources Coordinator
Katie Diamond, Communications & Design Coordinator

Adama Diallo, Joker
Andres Cabreja, Joker
Ashley Rogers, Joker
Becca Lynch, Joker
Charles Whitewolf, Joker
Gariyana Williams, Joker
John Leo, Joker
Kaimani King, Joker
Kate Clark, Joker
Letitia Bouie, Joker
Maaji Nishizaka, Joker
Maddox Guerilla, Joker
Max Freedman, Joker
Michael Gonzalez, Joker
Nivia Marrero, Joker
Raquel Almazan, Joker
Tasha Grant, Joker
Vincent St. Vincent, Joker

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“How all boundaries dropped by way of the event, between actors, spectators, audience, legislator, **everyone was equal!”**

— Spect-Actor

“One of the main reasons that I appreciate legislative theatre is the way it puts policy makers and some of their more disadvantaged constituents in the same room and **forces them to think like a problem-solver in watching the day-to-day reality of their situation ...”**

— Kevin Hansen, Founder, PolicyAtlas

“ ... **It's gotten me to be a better advocate because I'd never written a letter before to any politicians, but now I do.”**

— Jon Mincey, Housing Works Actor

“I am confident unified communities can end the school to prison pipeline, and the criminalization of school discipline. **Legislative Theatre is a tool for illustrating the value of struggling for justice – especially for young people, immigrant communities, non-English speakers and those most often excluded from decision making that affects their lives.”**

— Carlos Menchaca, Council Member

