



Healing Through Art:

How Black Artists and Cultural Workers Are Transforming Homeless Services in Los Angeles

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Black artists and cultural workers in Los Angeles are transforming homelessness services through art, offering healing, empowerment, and community for the city's most vulnerable.



County of Los Angeles
**Anti-Racism,
Diversity,
& Inclusion**

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Healing Through Art: How Black Artists and Cultural Workers Are Transforming Homeless Services in Los Angeles

In the heart of Los Angeles, art has emerged as a source of healing and transformation for those experiencing homelessness. Organizations such as The People Concern and the Los Angeles Poverty Department have harnessed the power of creativity to uplift Black individuals experiencing homelessness. Through initiatives like The People Concern's Studio 526 and Los Angeles Poverty Department's community performances, Black artists and cultural workers find platforms to share their narratives, celebrate cultural identity, and reclaim visibility, creating spaces where stories of resilience and hope take center stage.

The Los Angeles County Anti-Racism, Diversity, and Inclusion (ARDI) Initiative was created to address systemic racism through policy reform and community engagement, with a focus on the Black People Experiencing Homelessness (BPEH) Implementation Steering Committee. This coalition works to reduce racial disparities in homelessness through culturally relevant interventions. In line with the agenda of the ARDI and BPEH Implementation Steering Committee, it is essential to recognize Black artists and cultural workers as key members of the care team. Organizations like the Los Angeles Poverty Department and The People Concern exemplify this by working with diverse artists, folks who have experienced homelessness, and their program participants. This approach fosters trust, healing, and community cohesion.

Finding Purpose Through Art

Founded in 1985, the Los Angeles Poverty Department is the first arts organization composed of unhoused individuals, utilizing theater and art to amplify the voices of Skid Row through performances, public art installations, and community-led storytelling projects that highlight lived experiences and advocate for social change. The organization celebrates the community through projects like the annual [Festival for All Skid Row Artists](#), which, since 2010, has engaged more than 900 Skid Row artists. Its biennial [Walk the Talk project](#) has honored 84 individuals whose work has bettered the Skid Row community across the neighborhood's history. Its Skid Row History Museum & Archive fosters dialogue on inequality and activism, reshaping narratives around poverty while advocating for equitable services and inclusive communities.

"What I do is performance, but my priority is dancing," says Leyla Martinez, a Cuban and Black dancer and performer with the Los Angeles Poverty Department. Martinez recalls a pivotal moment when she found her way to the Los Angeles Community Action Network, now known as the Los Angeles Poverty Department. While experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles, a friend invited her to a performance workshop hosted by the organization. "[Five years ago] I started because a friend of mine introduced me to dance," she shared. "He explained to me about the community [at the Los Angeles Poverty Department] and how some people who are being helped there were homeless."

Martinez's introduction to the Los Angeles Poverty Department came at a critical time. Facing housing insecurity for several years due to personal struggles, she found traditional support services unhelpful.



Photo by David da Rozas, Courtesy of Los Angeles Poverty Department:
The Covid Hotel Welcomes You to the Future.

"I tried to call 211 and stuff, but they didn't help me," she recounted. Her friend's invitation to the Los Angeles Poverty Department workshop became a turning point, introducing her to a supportive artistic community.

Performing in productions with the Los Angeles Poverty Department gave Martinez a sense of purpose and renewed identity. "It's something that I never expected I could do," she reflected. "As soon as I know my script, forget it! I'll do it."

Martinez's artistic journey includes powerful performances, such as [The Covid Hotel Welcomes You to the Future](#), a project by the Los Angeles Poverty Department that highlights the innovative healthcare approach used during the COVID-19

pandemic to support homeless individuals. Focusing on Quarantine and Isolation (QI) sites, which utilize vacant hotels to provide safe housing and medical care for those at risk of contracting the virus, the project highlights and emphasizes the importance of healthcare and housing as fundamental human rights. "We talked about how people helped each other and how they managed when there was nowhere else to go," Martinez explained.

Martinez emphasizes how deeply the group has supported her. "The group has helped me a lot in my life," she said. "Performing is healing."

Beyond theater, the Los Angeles Poverty Department connects its members – all Skid Row community members – with



Photo by Monica Nouwens, Courtesy of Los Angeles Poverty Department: Artist Leyla Martinez performing in *The Covid Hotel Welcomes You to the Future*.



Photo by Monica Nouwens, Courtesy of Los Angeles Poverty Department: Artist and Archive Assistant at the Los Angeles Poverty Department Jaiye Kamson performing in *The Covid Hotel Welcomes You to the Future*.

broader community initiatives, providing artistic outlets such as movie nights, open mic nights, and community festivals in Skid Row. Martinez has participated in these events and witnessed how art fosters resilience. “They [Los Angeles Poverty Department] teach you about the community,” she noted.

The Skid Row community members are central in shaping the Los Angeles Poverty Department’s work. Residents help shape the themes for the organization’s multidisciplinary artworks. The festival welcomes performers from all backgrounds, with a significant representation of Black artists, reflecting the cultural diversity of Skid Row.

Her journey with the Los Angeles Poverty Department highlights the profound impact of creative expression on personal growth and stability. “If you’re homeless and need a place to go, they [Los Angeles Poverty Department] let you know what

you’re supposed to do to get everything you need.”

Through art, Martinez has discovered a path of resilience, empowerment, and belonging — a testament to the transformative power of art and creative communities like the Los Angeles Poverty Department.

Archiving, Art, and Resilience

An Archive Assistant at the Los Angeles Poverty Department, Jaiye Kamson also works as an artist, performing in projects like *Walk the Talk* and *Covid Hotel Welcomes You to the Future*, which celebrates individuals who have contributed to improving the Skid Row community. In addition to archival work, Kamson’s role extends into the artistic community of the Los Angeles Poverty Department, where she has found a space to grow, create, and connect.

“Art in its rawest form is just expression,” Kamson said, describing the power of art to provide a safe space for people experiencing homelessness. For Kamson, this space is vital: “Having an avenue to express yourself safely and freely is so important when you’re on the street, because there’s really rarely any space for you to take up.”

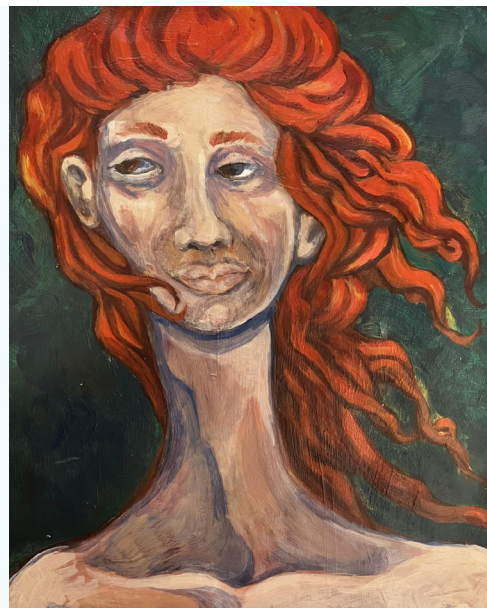
Her involvement with the Los Angeles Poverty Department began through Studio 526, an art studio in Skid Row. “I showed up to one [art event] and the rest is history,” Kamson reflected.

Kamson later participated in [The Covid Hotel Welcomes You to the Future](#) play. “[After each performance we do] — there’s a panel. And I think those panels, for the most part, bring more help to the community. It lets them know what they need to do if they need to get something done, informs them about services they can access,” she shared, emphasizing how the production offered a platform for storytelling, advocacy, and a connection to resources for the community. “And I think that’s the most important thing we do — we facilitate the area to have panels where the public can know more about

the systems that run their lives.”

Kamson also reflects on the profound impact of community collaboration. “The collaboration shows that it’s flexible and that it’s comprehensive, like no one organization works alone. They work in tandem to build better communities and better resources.” Her journey—from experiencing homelessness to finding stability — has been marked by courage and candor. “My biggest thing that got me off the streets was having a mental breakdown,” she shared. “I was sent to a psych ward. I had medications, and that stabilized me. And because I had medications, I could get into a board and care.”

“The impact of these programs is profound, but it’s also kind of hard to measure,” Kamson says. “Because sometimes you’re not at your best when you make art, and that’s okay. But you get better every time you do it, and each iteration is a better part of yourself. And then when you look back, you won’t be able to see where the fine line was.” Kamson’s story is a testament to resilience and the essential role art and community play in transforming struggle into strength.



Courtesy of The People Concern (clockwise left-to-right): Artist Jaiye Kamson and her painting “Brick Red Waves”.

A Creative Oasis Rooted in Community

At the heart of Skid Row, Studio 526 is a vibrant, welcoming space where art and community offer a pathway to healing. Operated by The People Concern, one of Los Angeles County's largest and most comprehensive social service organizations, Studio 526 is part of a broader mission to support people experiencing homelessness, survivors of domestic violence, and others facing severe challenges. Guided by a Housing First and harm reduction model, The People Concern prioritizes access to permanent housing without preconditions. It provides wraparound services with compassion, respect, and a deep belief in each individual's capacity to heal and grow.

Studio 526 is more than just a place to make art. It is a space where people who have experienced trauma, displacement, and isolation come to reconnect with parts of themselves that have been pushed aside to survive.

"It's like an oasis," says Alice Corona, Manager of the Arts Program. "It's an affirming environment where people are recognized as artists and storytellers, not defined by their past or their circumstances."

When people are living in survival mode, they often stop doing the things that bring them joy. This isn't a choice, but a result of the way trauma affects the body and brain. The nervous system becomes focused on

Courtesy of The People Concern (clockwise left-to-right): Artist Gary Brown and his painting "Waiting".



staying safe, and creative expression can feel far out of reach. Studio 526 offers a space where those protective walls can begin to soften. Here, people are invited to create without judgment, and in doing so, begin to release some of the weight they carry.

The studio offers a fully stocked art room with supplies for painting, jewelry-making, ceramics, and more. There is also a music room filled with instruments, including guitars, keyboards, and percussion. For participants who often face the risk of losing their belongings, the option to store personal art materials and projects at the studio is a powerful symbol of stability and care.

“If we don’t have what someone needs,” says Corona, “they add it to our wish list and we do our best to make it happen. We listen and respond because this space belongs to the artists who use it.”

The energy inside the studio is tangible. Monthly Art Jams bring together music, poetry, and performance in evenings filled with connection, laughter, and expression. These events are more than entertainment. They are a release, a celebration, and sometimes a form of grieving. Most importantly, they remind everyone present that creativity is a vital part of what makes us human.

The work created at Studio 526 has reached audiences across Los Angeles. Artists have exhibited their pieces at the Wende Museum, The Grove in Los Angeles, and other respected cultural spaces. These collaborations help challenge the stigma surrounding homelessness and show that art made in Skid Row belongs in the broader cultural conversation.

Even after participants move into

housing, many continue to return. Some travel from across the city, transferring between multiple bus lines, just to spend time at the studio. For them, Studio 526 is more than a stop along the way. It is a place of purpose, a consistent and creative home that remains meaningful throughout their journey.

“People who joined us a decade ago still come back,” says Corona. “That says something real. Spaces like this help people move beyond just surviving. They help build the foundation for a life that includes joy, connection, and meaning.”

Stories of Transformation and Breaking Barriers

The stories that emerge from The People Concern’s Studio 526 and Los Angeles Poverty Department’s community organizers and artists speak to the transformative power of art. For example, one artist from Studio 526 sold a painting for \$5,000 and worked with a case manager from The People Concern’s Money Management program, which helped stretch the income over a year, illustrating how creative success can lead to financial stability. Another, Linda Leigh, a breast cancer survivor, used her innovative voice to rise from homelessness and become a community leader.

Both organizations operate on a harm-reduction model, welcoming individuals regardless of sobriety or housing status. “We welcome everyone as they are,” shared Edgar G. Aguilar, External Communications Manager at The People Concern. This inclusive approach builds trust and stability, with 92% of housed participants maintaining permanent housing.



Courtesy of The People Concern (clockwise left-to-right): Artist Linda Leigh and her painting "San Julian Park".

Art also serves as a bridge to resources and support. The Los Angeles Poverty Department's performances draw from community stories, fostering a sense of belonging and connection. Open mic nights, art exhibitions, and cultural festivals create spaces where talents are nurtured and recognized. "We go where the community is," Leyla explained. "Art brings people together and connects them with housing and resources."

Challenges and Future Aspirations

Despite its success, funding for arts-based programs remains a challenge. Expanding corporate sponsorships, establishing grant partnerships with cultural foundations, and increasing community-driven fundraising efforts could help secure the future of these vital initiatives. Both organizations rely on donations and volunteers to sustain their work.

Looking ahead, The People Concern and

Los Angeles Poverty Department aim to expand their programs and strengthen partnerships. "Art is a human right," emphasized Corona. "Everyone deserves access to creative spaces where they can heal, grow, and thrive." Leyla echoed this sentiment: "There are incredible artists living on the streets. They just need a chance."

Integrating Arts, Culture, and Community in Healing

Black artists and cultural workers within care teams create culturally relevant interventions that resonate deeply with marginalized communities. By integrating arts and culture — whether through music, visual arts, dance, or theater — these artists provide individuals a powerful outlet to process trauma, express resilience, and reclaim their narratives. This creative expression helps bridge the gaps between institutional care and the communities it serves, ensuring that services align with the lived

experiences of those they aim to support.

The inclusion of the arts in care programs also builds solidarity and community. As participants express themselves artistically, they heal and contribute to a collective effort to address homelessness. These initiatives foster long-term recovery by creating spaces where individuals feel valued and supported, while celebrating their creativity and cultural identity.

Transforming Communities by Uplifting the Most Vulnerable

Art is a lifeline for communities facing challenges. Through organizations like The People Concern and the Los Angeles Poverty Department, Black artists and cultural workers provide spaces for healing, particularly for those experiencing homelessness. By prioritizing the care of the most marginalized communities, they become stronger and more resilient. Empowering Black artists and cultural workers to share their stories and heal through creative expression benefits everyone, creating artistic and social cohesion.

Programs organized by organizations like The People Concern and the Los Angeles Poverty Department offer Black individuals experiencing homelessness a sense of purpose, stability, and a platform for diverse voices. These art programs are gateways to resources for immediate needs and advocate for systemic change, enriching the cultural fabric of the city – additionally, these creative spaces foster connections and pathways to long-term recovery.

The ARDI Initiative’s BPEH Implementation Steering Committee is working to implement a transformative system grounded in racial equity that ensures equitable and effective services for people experiencing homelessness. By centering Black voices, ARDI helps bridge the gap between people experiencing homelessness and culturally appropriate services within the county that are impactful. Ultimately, investing in the care of the most vulnerable fosters a more inclusive, connected, and compassionate society. By supporting marginalized voices, we contribute to the healing and growth of all.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to the [Los Angeles Poverty Department](#) and [The People Concern](#) for their vital work in using art to support all artists and individuals experiencing homelessness. Special thanks to Chief Operating Officer Pamela Miller at the Los Angeles Poverty Department, Arts Program Manager Alice Corona, and External Communications Manager Edgar G. Aguilar at The People Concern for their support and collaboration for this case study.

We are grateful to artists like Leyla Martinez and Jaiye Kamson for taking the time to share their inspiring stories of resilience and transformation with us.

Our appreciation also extends to the [Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture](#) for connecting us with these impactful organizations, whose work continues to inspire change and build stronger communities through art for all Angelenos.

