pennsylvania
COUNCIL ON THE ARTS

PCA Creative Communities
Letter of Interest Coversheet

Lead Applicant Information

Organization: Barrio Alegria

Address: 116 N. 11th St

City: Reading **Zip Code:** 19601

Municipality: Reading City **County:** Berks

Phone: 610.334.2834

Website: www.barrioalegria.com

FEIN: 83-1617182

Contact Name: Daniel Egusquiza

Contact Title: Executive Director

Contact Phone: 610.334.2834

Contact Email: daniele@barrioalegria.org

Organization Type: 501(c)3

☑ **By checking the box, you are indicating acknowledgment of and intention to comply with the local government resolution requirement, if your community is selected to participate in the Creative Communities Pilot Program. (See full application guidelines for more information on this requirement.)**

Letter of Interest (LOI) Submission Instructions: LOI deadline, Friday, June 28, 2019. LOIs must be submitted via email to RA-OAcreativepa@pa.gov.

a. Completed coversheet form with acknowledgment of and intention to comply with the local government resolution requirement, if your community is selected to participate in the Creative Communities Pilot Program.

b. Narrative (3 pages max.)
   - Brief community description.
   - Description of any existing cultural plans and/or experience implementing arts-based development strategies.
   - Description of successful community partnerships.
   - Description of community opportunity or challenge the organization would like to address through this program.

c. 3 Letters of Support (local government, planning, convention and visitors bureau (CVB), business improvment district (BID), chamber of commerce, local arts organization, etc.).

Reading, June 28, 2019

Sarah Merritt
Director of Pennsylvania Creative Communities

Dear Ms. Merritt

Life in a modern city is the perpetual dance between 2 competing forces: blight and creativity. When blight has the upperhand, we internalize the negativity, lose our sense of possibility, and settle for the way things are. Deep inside, we know that we each possess an inner brilliance to be change agents, but sometimes the blight seems insurmountable. Collective action is the process of joining our individual creativity in efforts bigger than ourselves to make magic happen. The "...But We're Still Here" program is an experiment in intentional human interaction designed to develop high-impact initiatives in Reading that promote social justice and an inclusive economic development, by investigating the self-limiting beliefs that prevent us from realizing our amazing potential.

Reading, PA is a city with an identity crisis. 100 years after Reading boasted itself as the global leader in per capita GDP, the City has spent the last decade on the national top 10 list of poorest cities. The older, white population seems to cling to the vestiges of Reading's past (a Railroad heritage, a Pagoda, and a brief revival as an outlet shopping destination) and the younger Latino population seems to resist claiming this place as its own.

Despite the majority Latinx population, economic development efforts in the region have historically focused on "reclaiming the urban core". The subtleties of racism that infuse this approach, and the unstated "who" that "we" are "reclaiming" the core from, are not lost on the latinx population that is often left out of those planning efforts, and thus feel quite disconnected from both the public institutions that (purportedly) serve them and the City of Reading's downtown core. This alienation is compounded by the complexity of immigrant identity politics and the diversity of experiences within the Latinx diaspora.

Where many see pain and division, Barrio sees opportunity. Witnessing the limitations of traditional outreach efforts in the city of Reading, Barrio Alegría uses the arts as a platform to engage communities. Barrio seeks to empower individuals by providing them with opportunities to experience life through a different lens than they are accustomed to - providing them with opportunities to see beauty and hope within their community. Simply putting flyers in Spanish and then blaming Latinos for not participating in planning efforts is insufficient. Accordingly, Barrio"s methodology focuses on building trust and transforming hesitant participants into conscientious stewards of their neighborhood. Barrio Alegria envisions an alternative path to creating an inclusive economic development. True community building requires a much more creative and concerted effort, one that has been bubbling up over the last few years.

Barrio Alegria and the Reading Public Library, for example, teamed up to tackle the problem of the relevancy of the public library to local immigrant community by re-imagining the library as a place

for the people in the community rather than a simple book depository. They explored redefining the library as a sanctuary and experimented with weaving together various local "communities" through ongoing interaction. The collaboration used dance to build relationships with community members and transform its space. On the surface, *Storytelling through Dance, Odyssey* was a music/dance production that took place on the library steps. Behind the scenes, it was a community engagement project that served as a platform to create a sense of "this is ours too." The event transformed the face of the library and provided a space for local high school students,differently-abled youth, anti-bullying advocates, and some youth that had just come out of the juvenile justice system.

Barrio's theory of change rests on the belief that change trickles upwards, from the personal, to the interpersonal, and then to the community. In order for change to occur, individuals need to feel empowered to make it happen. Empowerment comes through knowledge of the resources available. Once the individual has the knowledge, he or she needs the confidence in his or her ability to create change. After the individual gains knowledge and self-confidence, they are able to bring hope to their community, which is when community transformation occurs.

In 2015, Reading became the first municipality in the state of Pennsylvania to achieve certification under the national STAR Community Rating System, qualifying the City as a 3-STAR Community, recognized for "national excellence" in sustainability. The process revealed some serious gaps in the community with regard to ensuring a positive quality of life for its residents. Of the 7 major goal categories, Reading scored lowest in Equity and Empowerment (15.9%). The most notable finding was the lack of Civic Engagement, which measures citizen sense of self empowerment and participation in public life.

Barrio Alegría was inspired by this assessment to dig deeper into the problem of Latinx participation and through our community outreach identified several themes that contributed to the dynamic that disempowers them. First, the historic reliance on a Latino "strongman" who positions himself as the sole speaker for a very diverse culture, allowing residents to excuse their lack of participation because "he"s already doing that." Additionally, the conflicted cultural identity of immigrants, split between "here" and "home", has left Latinx communities to choose between succumbing to oppressive power structures, or aligning themselves with groups that fight that oppressive structure. The lack of a sense of "home" contributes to the transiency problem, as many actively avoid any effort to "set down roots" because it may trap them away from "home", while a return "home" is increasingly unrealistic. Barrio wants to renegotiate the social contract with the emergence of a new model that fights for what is loved, and serves as a safe form of stability in the face of various forms of uncertainty.

Rooted in its outreach to community members, Barrio picks an overarching theme for the year. In 2016, the theme was adventure as participants galvanized around the community presentation of Odyssey, an adaptation of Homer"s epic that dealt with immigrant identity issues. In 2017, participants took a more critical look at immigration, human trafficking, and toxic masculinity, through the development of Rosa Dances with Wolves. 2018 launched a multi-

year phase for Barrio, "But We're Still Here", which seeks to engage the local immigrant community in the light and the shadows of their existence, which resulted in: 17 Community Performances; 36 art workshops and pop-up concerts; was able to engage 2,362 event participants; 65 volunteers engaged in leadership trainings, and 3,670 volunteer hours.

The Circo del Barrio pilot project, launched in 2018, provides an open air theatrical and dance production to take participants on a guided journey to explore Reading's Latin culture, history, art, and food to the public, utilizing and showcasing local talent of Reading residents and business owners. Barrio programming intentionally engages Reading and non-Reading residents in interactions designed to help them confront their own perceptions and misconceptions of the Penn Street area of Reading. This experience seeks to welcome the public, and open people's eyes to the often unnoticed details of vibrant community, history and culture that thrives on Penn Street. The Circo del Barrio project focuses on young people 16-35, infusing civic engagement opportunities through artistic exploration. These artists committed to regular practices over a period of five months, and contributed to choreography development and story adaptation for the moving performance. At the end of the program, Barrio's surveys with performers revealed that their engagement in the community project positively impacted their perception of the City of Reading and sense of community.

Reading's reputation is often smeared by the residue of poverty demographics: median household income of $25,753, less than half of the national average; over 37% of the population subsist below the poverty line; home ownership rates in the city have dropped to 42%; less than 27% of adults over 25 have more than a HS diploma, compared to the national average of 42%. The Latino population in Reading exceeds 58% and constitutes over 80% of the population under the age of 18. Barrio Alegria chooses to focus on the richness that exists within and between the people who make up these statistics in an effort to assist with creating a stable, socially and economically diverse community where all residents benefit from neighborhood amenities and enjoy access to economic, educational, and other opportunities.

We are seeking admittance into the PCA Creative Communities Initiative to expand the experimental programming of the Circo del Barrio project in downtown Reading. Barrio Alegría believes that it is confronted with the opportunity to transform community engagement and power relations in the Latinx community and heal some of the divisions that prevent an inclusive economic development. We have found that many members of the Latinx community have strong self-limiting beliefs that must be overcome before they would consider themselves as leaders. We seek to unlock the potential of the hidden leaders in our community by embedding pre-leadership development work in our programming. Barrio has galvanized a committed membership base that drives its programming, and we invite PCA to be a partner in our efforts.

Con Alegria,

Daniel Egusquiza

June 26, 2019

Sarah Merritt
Director of Pennsylvania Creative Communities
216 Finance Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Dear Ms. Merritt,

On behalf of the Berks Arts Council, I am writing to express our support for the Council on the Arts Creative Communities Pilot Initiative letter of intent submitted by Barrio Alegria in partnership with the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA) on behalf of downtown Reading.

In 2017, the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance, along with the City of Reading, the Downtown Improvement District, the Berks Alliance, and the Berks County Community Foundation are leading efforts to revitalize our downtown. The collective efforts are focused on:

- Economic development to strengthen the downtown Reading commercial core and the surrounding neighborhoods;
- Attraction and retention of quality investment in the real estate of downtown Reading;
- Cultivation of an environment where businesses and entrepreneurs thrive in downtown Reading;
- Ongoing work to maintain a positive perception of downtown Reading as a unique and attractive place for business, entertainment, and living.

The arts continue to be a vital draw bringing people into downtown Reading. Downtown Reading boasts various performance venues, art centers, and art galleries at destinations such as the Santander Arena, Santander Performing Arts Center, Miller Center for the Arts, the WCR Center for the Arts, and the GoggleWorks Center for the Arts.

The ongoing revitalization of downtown Reading is a core component of both the County and City of Reading's ongoing community and economic development efforts to attract new investment, businesses, visitors, residents, and tourists to the urban center of the County.

I respectfully request that you give your full consideration to the letter of intent. If you have any questions or would like to discuss my support of this initiative, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you for your consideration of this important project.

Sincerely,

Meggan Kerber

Meggan Kerber
Executive Director

The official registration and financial information of the Berks Arts Council may be obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of State by calling toll free, within Pennsylvania, 800-732-0999. Registration does not imply endorsement.

GRCA

GREATER READING CHAMBER ALLIANCE

June 28, 2019

Sarah Merritt
Director of Pennsylvania Creative Communities
216 Finance Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120

RE: Creative Communities Pilot Initiative – Downtown Reading

Dear Ms. Merritt,

On behalf of the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA), I am writing to express our support for the Council on the Arts Creative Communities Pilot Initiative letter of intent submitted by Barrio Alegria in partnership with our organization to execute arts-based-placemaking initiatives in downtown Reading.

In 2017, the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance, along with the City of Reading, the Downtown Improvement District, the Berks Alliance, and the Berks County Community Foundation are leading efforts to revitalize our downtown. The collective efforts are focused on:

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Thank you for your consideration of this important project.

Sincerely,

Aaron Gantz, GRCA
Executive Director of Downtown Revitalization

CITY OF READING, PENNSYLVANIA

ROOM 3-12
815 WASHINGTON STREET
READING, PA 19601-3690
(610) 655-6328

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

June 28, 2019

Sarah Merritt
Director of Pennsylvania Creative Communities
216 Finance Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120

RE: Creative Communities Pilot Initiative – Downtown Reading

Dear Ms. Merritt:

On behalf of the Department of Community Development for the City of Reading, I am writing to express our support for the Council on the Arts Creative Communities Pilot Initiative letter of intent submitted by Barrio Alegria in partnership with the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance (GRCA) on behalf of downtown Reading.

In 2017, the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance, along with the City of Reading, the Downtown Improvement District, the Berks Alliance, and the Berks County Community Foundation are leading efforts to revitalize our downtown. The collective efforts are focused on:

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I respectfully request that you give your full consideration to the letter of intent. If you have any questions or would like to discuss my support of this initiative, please do not hesitate to contact me at 610 655 6328.

Thank you for your consideration of this important project.

Sincerely,

David N. Hunter, Sr., AICP
Acting Director, Department of Community Development
City of Reading

DAVID.HUNTER@READINGPA.GOV