# Powerful but Precarious

Mapping the Landscape of Community-Based Archives

September 2026

Mellon Foundation

engage R+D

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Cover image credits

**Top Right:** Wages for Housework Community Archives, The 1977 Houston National Women's Conference "Pro-Money Coalition" Collection.

**Bottom Left:** Christiansburg Institute Museum and Archives, Waymon Pack Photograph Collection.

**Center:** Acción Latina, Paseo Artístico, October 2025, taken by Manuel Orbegozo.


This report is supported by the Mellon Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect opinions or policies of the Mellon Foundation.

# Foreword

Dear Colleagues,

I am both honored and delighted to introduce Powerful but Precarious, a treasure trove of a report about community-based archives (CBAs). It culminates two years of participatory action research, led by Engage R&D in collaboration with the Mellon Foundation, that included a field-mapping survey, interviews and focus groups, and a core of CBA leaders serving as the "design engine" propelling the effort. It is a joy to see this study out in the world!

CBAs engage in memory work that expands on what is commonly found in institutional archives and special collections by centering and celebrating histories that have long been overlooked, misunderstood, or largely lost yet remain ineluctably woven in the fabric of America's being. And for any community-based archivists reading this report, I hope you will see your critical memory work and care reflected in these pages.

I first encountered CBAs when I joined Mellon in 2016 as a program officer. At the time, the foundation's support for libraries and archives was focused on advancing scholarly research within institutions of scale, including universities, colleges, and libraries. CBAs were typically subaward collaborators in our grants—reflecting a growing recognition that many of the primary sources or artifacts that scholars sought were held outside traditional research institutions. Beginning in 2019, however, Mellon made a more intentional shift: Through open calls for proposals and cohort-based funding, we moved to support CBAs directly, recognizing them as essential stewards of the cultural record and foundational, longtime components of the broader memory ecosystem.

Mellon's funding of CBAs has been more than an investment of grant dollars; it's been an investment in relationship building. We have been building trust in a cultural heritage space that has seen little to no support from charitable foundations like Mellon. Our investment has also been in service to deepening field knowledge about CBAs. In this report, readers will learn what these archives are, why they exist, whose stories they tell, how they activate their holdings to invite public audiences to explore them, and, crucially, what they seek and need to flourish so that the memories they hold are not lost. Moreover, as the report asserts, CBAs function as integral civic infrastructure, forging dedicated, intergenerational spaces where community members may gain access to—and learn about—historical evidence. There is likely a CBA where you live that, when entered, will envelop you in the history, traditions, and cultural practices of your community and afford you an experience and knowledge not easily obtainable elsewhere.

Giving more visibility, agency, and stature to CBAs through our grantmaking was intended not only to position them for recognition, on their terms, as legitimate archives but also to make it increasingly possible for other philanthropies to see their value and community-first ethos. Distributed across the US and its territories, CBAs promote a more complete understanding of culture, history, language, the arts, and countless other disciplines as unique as the locales in which they are situated. The mission of CBAs resonates with a wide range of funding goals and funder types, including community foundations, issue-based philanthropies, and narrative change initiatives, among others. These archives help communities feel seen and be seen.

Gratefully,

**Patricia Hswe**
Program Director, Public Knowledge
The Mellon Foundation

Photo: Acción Latina, Paseo Artístico, October 2025, taken by Manuel Orbegozo.

# Executive Summary

Community-based archives (CBAs) preserve, share, and sustain information and history that is underrepresented in mainstream archives and play a vital role in sustaining intergenerational memory. Independent and community-led, they serve an essential function that institutional archives cannot fill. This landscape study, funded by the Mellon Foundation and guided by archival experts and practitioners, offers a new look at the field of CBAs across the United States and shares CBAs' perspectives on their roles, experiences, and recommendations.

Photo: Queer History Boston's founders, circa 1980.
Courtesy of Queer History Boston.

## PARTICIPATING CBAS AT A GLANCE

### Geography

The 336 CBAs that participated in the study are distributed across the US in cities, towns, and rural areas. The largest proportions are in the Northeast (30%), West (29%), and South (22%).

### Structure

92% are nonprofits. Most rely on volunteers and a small number of paid staff.

### Histories Preserved

52% focus on archiving histories of a shared cultural heritage or identity, and an overlapping 52% archive histories of a group with shared experience, like artists, the LGBTQ+ community, immigrants, or workers.

### Longevity

74% have been in place for more than 5 years, and 33% are older than 25 years.

## COMMUNITY-BASED ARCHIVES ARE POWERFUL

CBAs' numerous contributions to their communities of focus and the public generally fall within three interconnected roles:

### 01

**Preserve Cultural & Historical Materials**

Gather and preserve stories, memories, historical documents, art, cultural artifacts, and genealogy

### 02

**Share Access & Knowledge**

Share historical roots and cultural evolution of the community; support teaching, learning, and research

### 03

**Build Community & Connection**

Support continued creative and cultural practices; build community connection and shared identity

CBAs support a **more complete American story**. Celebrating the heterogeneity of our cultural fabric, CBAs archive historical records, materials, and oral histories. They serve as memory keepers and storytellers, facilitating learning and discovery. They also **provide needed community spaces** where community members across generations can learn and strengthen ties with each other. Examples of the impacts of CBAs in study participants' words speak to the significance of their work:

> "People are finally learning about this very important community."

> "[We] share under-told histories, correct the historical record, and use findings to inform policy."

> "the joy and excitement that family members, researchers, and community [members] experience when seeing their connection and relevance to this archived history."

> "You see what a difference it meant to have their stories told in a way that they experienced history."

> "It creates a bridge for younger generations to connect with their history, hear these stories firsthand, and feel pride in where they come from."

## COMMUNITY-BASED ARCHIVES ARE IN A PRECARIOUS POSITION

Many CBAs operate under significant and persistent constraints that affect their long-term sustainability, especially related to funding, staffing, and inequitable access to resources. CBAs are also experiencing heightened scrutiny and risk in the broader political and cultural context. They face several key challenges:

### Funding instability and uncertainty

CBAs' most pressing challenge is securing stable funding sources amid rapidly shifting public funding, reduced donations due to economic pressures, and evolving philanthropic priorities. While financial instability is acute, it has long been a challenge for CBAs.

### Staffing and volunteer capacity

With insufficient funding to hire adequate staff, many CBAs' reliance on volunteer labor limits their capacity and potential, and is ultimately unsustainable.

### Technical needs

Digitization is a critical tool for CBAs to preserve and catalogue materials, as well as share access to their collections. Online presence facilitates educational programming. Costs of infrastructure and expertise are a limiting factor for many CBAs.

### Suitable physical space

CBAs use space to steward materials and provide public programming. Many lack not only climate-controlled areas but also sufficient protection from risks like water damage, fire, and vandalism.

### Safety and security

The current climate has heightened security risks for some CBAs, which report online harassment, on-site safety threats, and concerns about safety from community members. Protective measures sometimes limit access to the archives.



## WHY FUND COMMUNITY-BASED ARCHIVES

The landscape study's findings reveal the vital role CBAs play in building, preserving, and sharing community history for generations, acting in various capacities in communities across the country:

- **Enduring stewards of community memory.** CBAs serve as trusted community institutions where people can access historical records, connect with their heritage, and carry forward their own histories. They are often the only documenters of certain community histories, bringing voices and perspectives to the historical record that institutional archives frequently overlook. Their work spans local, regional, and national concerns, making them a potential fit for a broad range of community priorities and theories of change.
- **Essential civic infrastructure.** CBAs support a wide range of shared community interests, from cultural preservation and intergenerational knowledge exchange to education, social justice, and community development. More than contributors to these goals, they provide the underlying infrastructure that makes them possible, preserving the records, histories, and cultural knowledge that communities rely on. Their methods—rooted in community participation, trust, and self-determination—have proven resilient against censorship, misinformation, and historical loss.
- **Connective tissue.** Despite often operating with small staffs and limited resources, CBAs have built robust ecosystems of mutual support. These alliances, coalitions, and informal networks help archives solve problems, share expertise, and advocate collectively. Many also maintain productive partnerships with universities, museums, and other institutions, gaining access to exhibit opportunities, safe storage, and joint research while fiercely protecting their independence and control. This web of peer connection and selective institutional partnership is a distinctive strength of the field.
- **A field poised for growth**. CBAs play a vital community role yet remain significantly underfunded. Nearly half of surveyed CBAs operate on budgets of under $100,000—a threshold below which securing multiyear funding, building donor relationships, and creating long-term strategic plans become significantly harder. While 78% named multiyear or general operating funding as a top need, only 30% had secured it. The gap between what CBAs need and what they have been able to access points not to a lack of will, but to a lack of investment.

  Growing visibility and understanding of CBAs present an opportunity for funders, institutions, and practitioners to work together to ensure CBAs are recognized and resourced for generations to come.

Photo: WAAM scanning station, Akiko Kotani collection
Image credit: Courtesy of WAAM

# 01

# Introduction

### WHY COMMUNITY-BASED ARCHIVES DESERVE A CLOSER LOOK

Community-based archives (CBAs)—found throughout the US in rural areas, big cities, and places in between—are independent organizations that preserve historical records and narratives rarely collected or maintained by mainstream institutions. These archives hold primary records, artifacts, and oral histories documenting the lived experiences of the communities they represent. More than just repositories of information, CBAs function as sites of community memory work, where communities participate in shaping how their stories are preserved, interpreted, and shared.

Despite the growing presence of CBAs across the United States, little systematic information exists about the field at a national level, including the characteristics of these archives and the conditions shaping their work. To address this gap, the Mellon Foundation partnered with a "Design Circle" of CBA field experts and practitioners to undertake this landscape study and hear directly from CBAs about their experiences, priorities, and recommendations.[1]

The study's findings, detailed on these pages, reveal a field that is at once **highly valuable and highly vulnerable**. CBAs play an important role in preserving histories and records that might otherwise go uncollected, yet many operate under significant structural constraints. Survey and interview participants described persistent challenges, including unstable funding, limited staffing, and inequitable access to resources, all of which affect the long-term sustainability of many CBAs and, in some cases, raise concerns about their continued survival. Participants also noted that CBAs are working within a broader political and cultural context in which historical narratives and public memory are increasingly contested and in which they are experiencing heightened scrutiny. In this environment, the work of CBAs—and the risks they face in carrying it out—takes on particular significance.

> "An archive is collective memory."

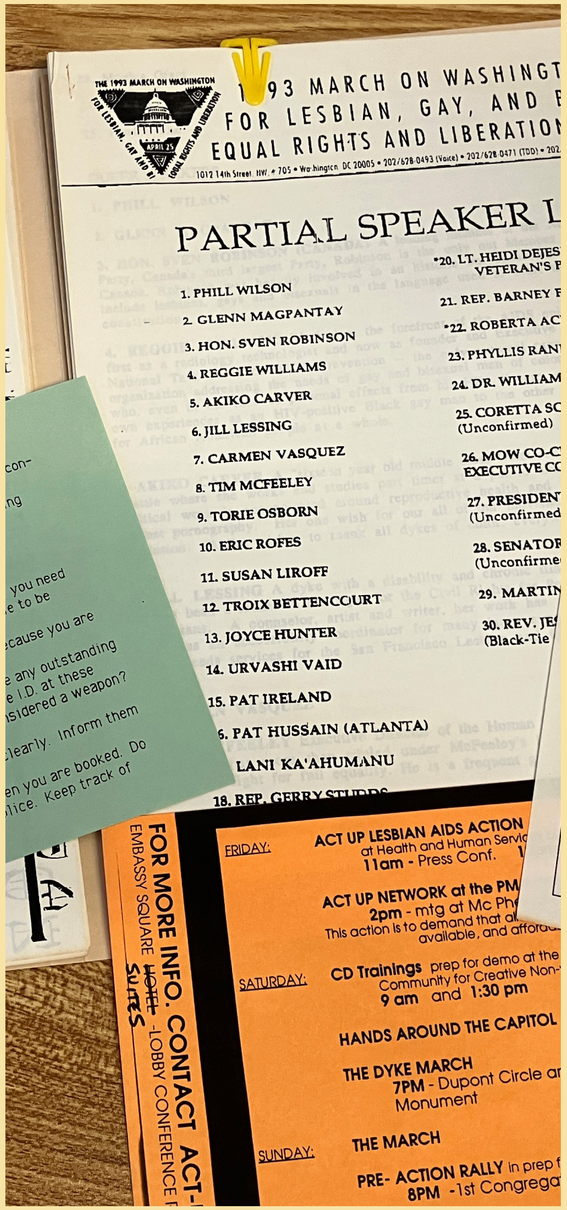



Photo: The June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives, Mary Lucey and Nancy MacNeil Collection

### LEARNING ABOUT COMMUNITY-BASED ARCHIVES

In this report, Engage R+D, Mellon's evaluation and learning partner for this effort, shares the study's overall findings alongside quotes and examples from CBAs.[2] Several specific archives are highlighted throughout to exemplify informative aspects of CBA work and experience, though they are by no means representative of the experience of all CBAs.

The study brought together multiple sources of data, including interviews, focus groups, advisory conversations, and a survey [3], collected from a variety of participants:

- **336 independent, community-led, US-based archives**, which participated in a survey conducted in the summer of 2025. These CBAs are geographically distributed across the United States and its territories and represent a wide range of focus areas and communities served.
- **More than 20 CBA practitioners,** who shared their experiences and perspectives deeply through one-on-one and small group interviews
- **Members of the study's Design Circle,** who participated in periodic advisory conversations and facilitated meetings throughout the research process

Together, these participants offered perspectives on the roles CBAs play in preserving community histories, the operational realities they face, and considerations for funders and field leaders interested in supporting this work.

[1] For a list of Design Circle members, please see the appendix.

[2] Throughout the report, direct quotes from participating CBAs have been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.

[3] For more details on our methods, please see the appendix.

# 02

# The What, Where, and Why of Community-Based Archives

Community-based archives reflect the wide diversity of communities and histories across the US. One archive preserves the history and cultural traditions of an Indigenous people; another documents LGBTQ+ experiences during the AIDS crisis; and a third records the perspectives of Latina women in the labor force. CBAs may focus on artists within a particular cultural community, oral histories of wartime experiences or police violence, or the experiences of communities facing economic hardship. Each CBA serves a distinct community and mission. Their variety makes it difficult to summarize the field as a whole, yet this study identified useful insights about who CBAs are, what they do, and the roles they play.

Photo: The June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives, Mary Lucey and Nancy MacNeil Collection

# What is community-based archiving?

**Archives** preserve primary records—the original document, the unedited photograph, the firsthand account. While museum exhibits and historical narratives interpret the past, archival records provide the underlying evidence that future generations can revisit, reinterpret, and place in new contexts. For many practitioners, the power of archives lies in this direct encounter with the original record. "You experience something different when you see the actual objects. It triggers so many more things and contextualizes in a way that I think is more grounding and human," said one CBA leader. Another CBA leader explained, "The archives come in because, how am I supposed to do work if I have no memory? … How do we move our work forward if we're not looking to where we're from?" In this sense, archives are not passive repositories but tools that we can return to, build on, and use.

**Community-based archives** are independently governed archives that preserve histories that have been overlooked, excluded, or under-collected by mainstream archives. As one CBA leader put it, "Nobody's written a history of resistance in [our community] that isn't university sanctioned or so-called state sanctioned. And we need people telling their own stories and actually being listened to." Where institutional archives are built to function at scale and across collections, CBA collections are built to be alive—shaped by the community's ongoing relationship to its own history rather than by any external standard of comprehensiveness.

**CONSIDERING THE TERM COMMUNITY-BASED ARCHIVES**

Throughout this report, we use the term community-based archives, or CBAs, to refer to organizations or efforts that:

1. Preserve, document, and share histories that expand our nation's stories and contribute knowledge that is not found in larger institutional archives such as those housed in universities, museums, or government agencies
2. Use archival materials and memory work to advance a shared community goal; and
3. Are independent, community-led, and based in the US or its territories.

At the same time, many groups in this study—including 61% of survey participants—reported that they do not call themselves CBAs. Some represented standalone archives, while others represented archives embedded within a larger organization such as a museum or library, arts and cultural center, or other non-profit organization. Many preferred terms like community- led or community-focused instead of community-based. Many described their work as memory work, cultural preservation, or storytelling instead of archiving or saw their archival work as one aspect of a broader mission (e.g., community organizing, artistic practice, or education). A few wished to avoid suggesting that they are academically trained archivists or historians, and several representatives of "accidental archives" explained they had happened into the role in response to a community need or an accumulation of historical materials.

# The Museum of the Aleutians

**THE IRREPLACEABLE VALUE OF PHYSICAL OBJECTS**

The Museum of the Aleutians has preserved cultural heritage, history, and archaeological artifacts from across a 1,200-mile island chain extending off the coast of Alaska for over 26 years. Its archival collection of 600,000 objects includes materials belonging to the Unangax, the Indigenous people of the islands, whose culture and lifeways were profoundly disrupted by Russian colonization, forced evacuation during World War II, and generations of assimilation. Preserving that heritage requires more than housing objects—it requires returning to the community to gather the knowledge attached to them:

"We are really working, trying to prioritize bringing objects to the community to get the language, to get the history of the objects, to make sure our record is as complete as possible. When we get new photos, we take them over to the senior center and try to get names and histories and information for the people in those photos."

The museum's ability to build its archive—including documenting community members' memories while still possible--depends on space and staff it does not yet have. Collections are arriving faster than they can be housed, a vulnerability that recently came into sharp relief:

"We need to double or triple our space. We just received thousands of objects that we're still working to bring into our building. We had them stored off site — and that off-site storage caught fire. We were very fortunate [the damage was limited]. And of course, we also need two, three more staff people to do this work."

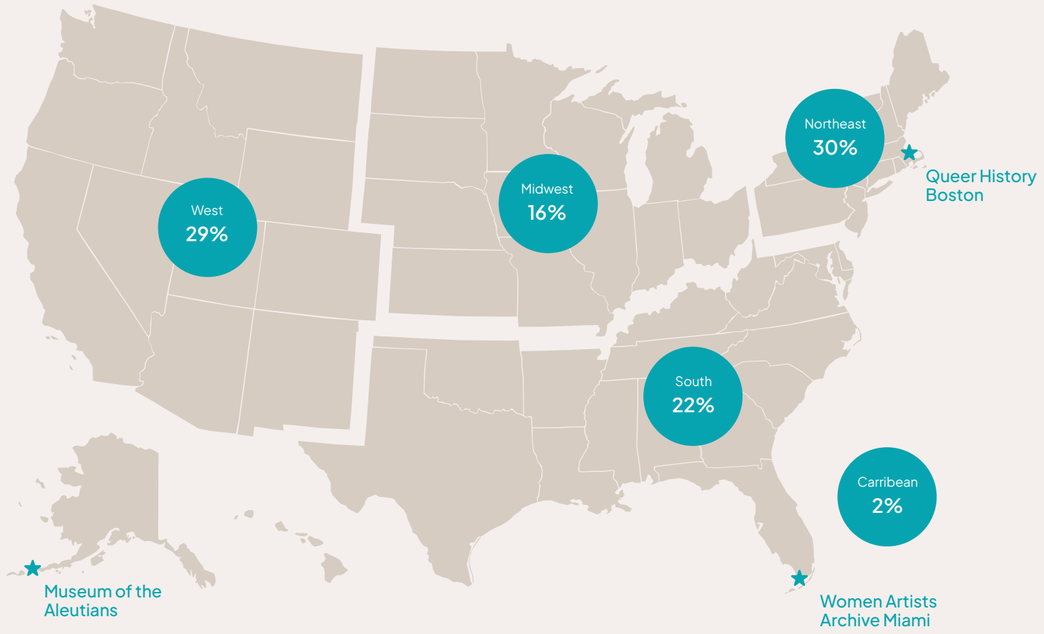
Photo: Museum of Aleutians

# Mapping the field of community-based archives

CBAs vary widely in size and structure—from collections gathered by a dedicated community member to archives maintained by nonprofit organizations. What they share is a commitment to independently preserving and sharing histories rooted in the communities they represent. Although the CBAs that took part in this study cannot capture the full geographic distribution or diversity of all CBAs across the nation, the 336 participating archives illustrate the breadth and variety within the field.

## GEOGRAPHY

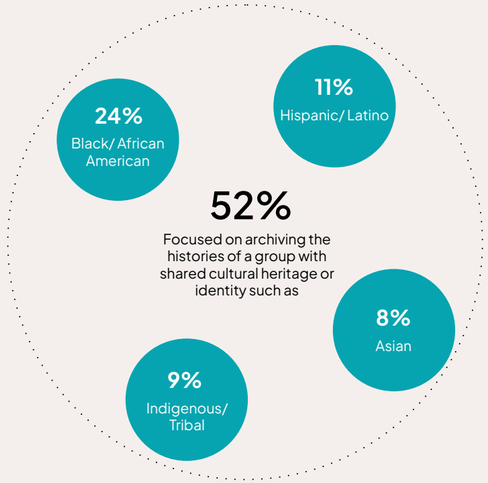
**Participating CBAs hailed from across the US and its territories**, with the largest numbers located in the Northeast, West, and South. Starred locations identify CBAs briefly profiled in this report.

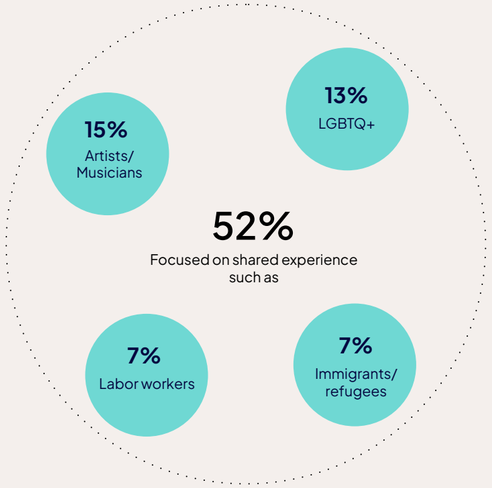



*Percentages don't add up to 100% due to rounding.

## COMMUNITIES OF FOCUS

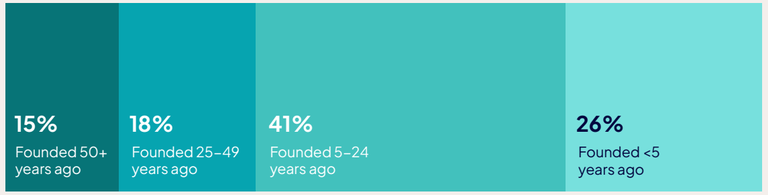
**CBAs vary widely in their key interests.** Most focused locally, but many had statewide, regional, national, or international reach. Among survey participants, 52% identified a racial or ethnic group of focus and an overlapping 52% focused on a community with a shared experience. The most often mentioned communities are shown at right.




## STRUCTURE

**CBAs are long-term efforts.** Nearly three-quarters of participating CBAs had been in place for more than 5 years and a full third were older than 25 years. Several had been founded before 1900.



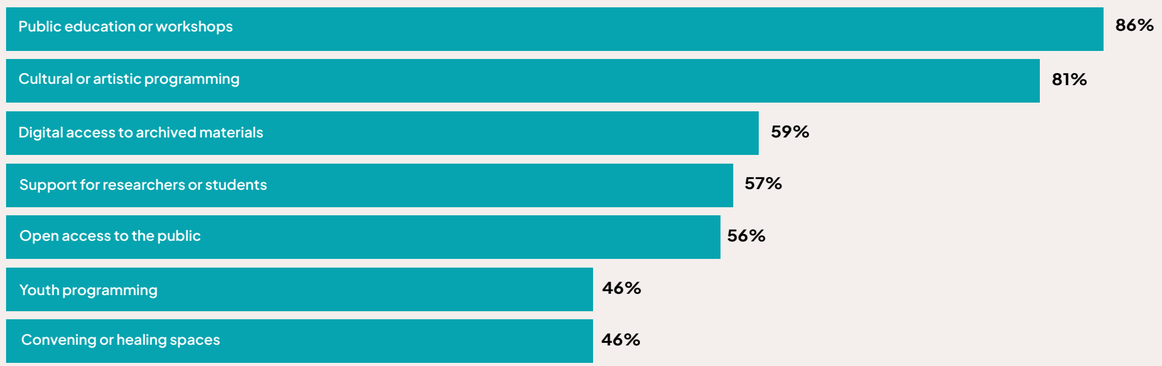

**92%**

of participating CBAs were **non-profit organizations.** Typically, they operated with **a small number of paid staff** (less than 1 to 4 FTE) **plus unpaid volunteers.**

# The broad value of community-based archives

Participants described the value of CBAs in terms of who they serve and what would be lost without them. As one CBA leader put it, “We have inspired curiosity and provided a sense of belonging and pride to many who have not seen themselves represented, who had no idea that this history and these stories existed.”

## CBAS MOST COMMONLY OFFERED SERVICES



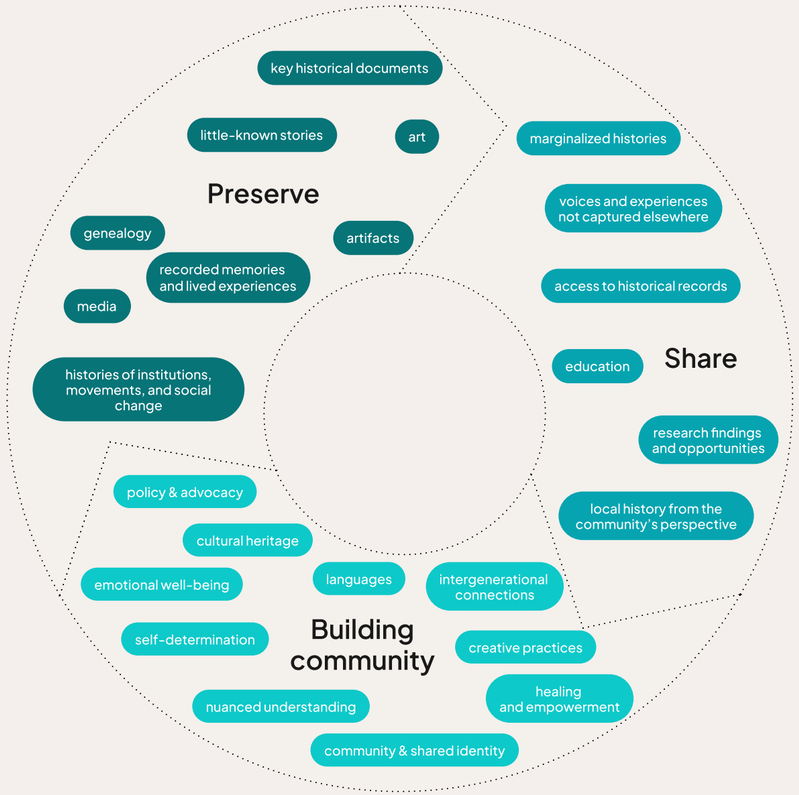

### WHAT CBAS DO FOR COMMUNITIES

Archiving encompasses far more than the essential function of cataloguing and safely warehousing documents and artifacts.[4] CBAs provide numerous services and contributions to their communities of focus and to the public at large. As the chart above shows, the vast majority of surveyed CBAs offer educational programming and cultural events, provide broad public and digital access to their collections, and create spaces for community gathering and healing.

[4] Society of American Archivists. What Are Archives? www2.archivists.org/about-archives [Accessed March 25, 2026.]

Looking across both the survey and qualitative data, three interconnected roles emerged that capture this breadth: **preserving** cultural and historical records, **sharing** access and knowledge to archival materials, and **community building** to strengthen understanding and connection. The graphic at right further outlines CBAs’ contributions within each role. Below, examples from the field illustrate how these roles reinforce one another.

## ROLES AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF CBAS



| Key roles | Types of action | Examples from the field |
|---|---|---|
| Preserve cultural and historical materials | • Record stories, memories, and lived experiences beyond mainstream narratives<br>• Collect histories of movements, institutions, or social change<br>• Preserve media and historical documents and artifacts<br>• Save art and cultural artifacts<br>• Document genealogy | "The communities that define the neighborhood that the museum is situated in have been historically racially marginalized. We collect material that likely would not be accepted by other local repositories and institutions."<br><br>"We were founded… to document, preserve, and share LGBTQ+ history as mainstream historical organizations and archives were not doing this work."<br><br>"We recognized the urgent need to document and elevate the lived experiences of Latino entrepreneurs, particularly in a climate where their contributions are often overlooked and their communities targeted." |
| Share access and knowledge | • Share voices and experiences not captured elsewhere<br>• Tell local history from the community's perspective<br>• Amplify visibility of lesser-known histories<br>• Enable education and access historical and cultural records<br>• Support research, sharing findings and opportunities | "People attend exhibitions and learn something about the community they never knew and that sparks their desire to learn more and ask how they can help."<br><br>"Many students and scholars visit our collections for their research, seeking out-of-print and other rare resources they cannot find elsewhere."<br><br>"We create, publish, and offer unfettered access to a large repository of materials representing the work of challenging avant-garde artists of every stripe whichmainstream organizations are/were not yet seeing." |
| Building Community & Connection | • Sustain and steward creative practices, cultural heritage, and languages<br>• Foster healing and empowerment<br>• Support emotional wellbeing and self-determination<br>• Build community and shared identity<br>• Nurture intergenerational connections<br>• Advance advocacy or policy | "Our archive's work restores visibility, dignity, and voice to the African American community... We are challenging historical erasure and rewriting the public narrative. Our archive provides a space where people can see themselves reflected in the city's history… It fosters pride, belonging, and a deeper understanding of the vital role African Americans have played."<br><br>"[We are] facilitating the reconnection of [Indigenous language] learners from the younger generation with archival language materials created by their own direct ancestors—reforging those relationships." |

## WHAT WOULD BE LOST WITHOUT CBAs?

**CBAs preserve and make available histories that may otherwise be lost**. Knowledge can disappear for many reasons. Fragile materials can easily decay, be destroyed by natural disasters, or be discarded without their value being recognized. Many storage methods become obsolete. Political and cultural norms can influence how histories are represented and whose histories are supported. CBAs play an outsized role in archiving histories and cultural traditions. A study participant shared that CBAs are "holding these stories right now while many of us are navigating the destruction and erasure of our stories." Broadly, CBAs act as a critical memory safety net, persisting through many varied threats to historical loss and expanding the cultural record through preservation, access, and community building.

In addition, while state-controlled institutions and those reliant on government funding are vulnerable to changes in policy and norms, CBAs—operating more independently—are less so. Throughout their existence, CBAs have secured and shared access to materials that are not prioritized by institutions. A CBA leader shared, "We are very focused on ensuring that the community has access to their own history."

> **"We're publicly available, not stuck in some private collection at a university with no public access."**

**CBAs function as community spaces and sites of stewardship**. In addition to housing archived materials, CBAs serve community members through learning, belonging, and healing. As one CBA leader described it, "The archive and the museum … [are] one of the only welcoming places for people in this area." Community members can see themselves reflected and valued in a CBAs collection in a way they might not anywhere else. A leader related, "Some of these young people … don't think they're going to live to see 18 or 21. But then they see … all of this history. It's just like, 'Oh, people have been able to survive.'" Another CBA articulated the intergenerational passing of practices, knowledge, memories, and cultural understandings: "It becomes a way to transmit the culture to subsequent generations. … We now have grandparents who have memories that they can share with their grandchildren."

**CBAs strengthen democracy and long-term change**. Healthy democratic practices like civic engagement and community organizing are rooted in historical understanding. Knowledge of what has happened before is essential for informing current and future actions. As one CBA leader put it, "[Our archival work] allows for the preservation of a playbook … that needs to be preserved … so that when things like that happen again, we can come out and say, 'Oh, we've seen this movie before, and here's how it goes.'" Access to primary sources and CBAs provides the memory infrastructure that underpins efforts toward community self-determination and long-term change, such as movement building.

# 03

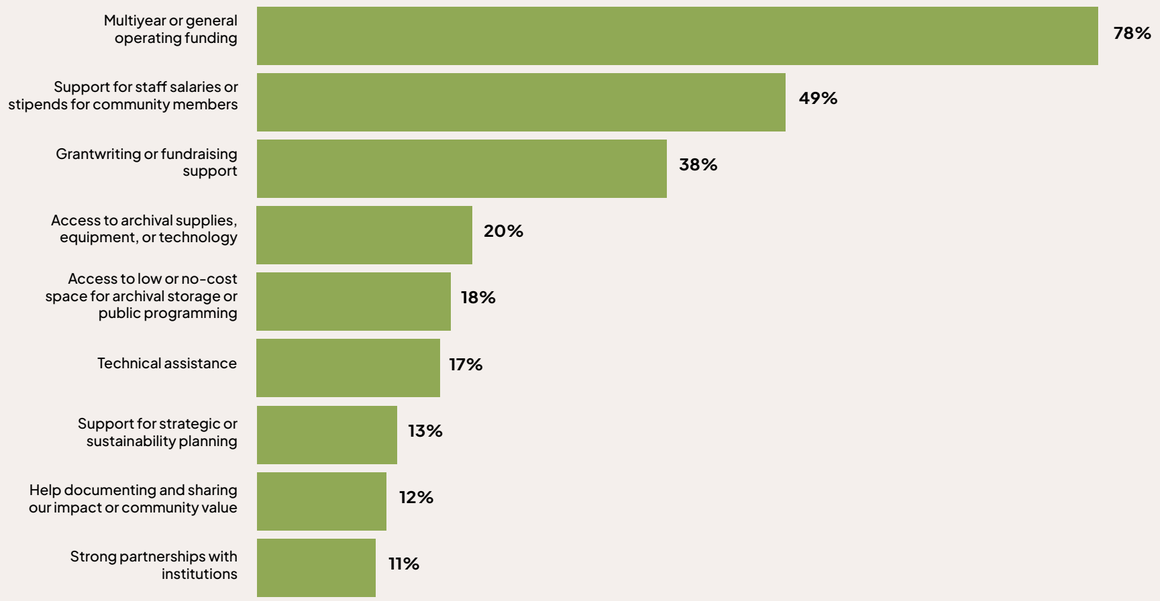
# Archiving Requires Resources: Barriers to Security and Sustainability

CBAs have shown themselves to be resourceful and persistent, yet, in many cases, their financial health is under significant strain, largely due to systemic challenges. More than half (55%) of survey participants marked a lack of sustainable funding as their top-ranked challenge, and a large majority (85%) marked it as one of their top three challenges. To understand the stakes, it helps to understand the scale (potential graphic):

- **Small CBAs make up the majority of the field.** Nearly half of surveyed CBAs (47%) operate on budgets of under $100,000, and 10% have budgets of under $10,000. Only 18% have budgets of $500,000 or more.
- **The resources that make sustainability possible are often hardest to access for those who need them most.** Surveyed CBAs with larger budgets are more likely to have secured multiyear funding, built donor relationships, created long-term strategic plans, and documented practices to support knowledge transfer—the very work that makes further sustainability possible. As one CBA leader put it, "It's sort of a catch-22. I can't qualify for a lot of grants because of my status. … How do I build capacity unless I can qualify for some of these grants in order to build capacity?"
- **The current funding environment is putting pressure on an already narrow funding base.** Three-quarters of CBAs (75%) receive foundation grants, making it the most common funding source. Yet more than a third of those recipients reported that foundation funding had decreased in the past 12 months. Government funding, received by about half of CBAs (49%), is under even sharper pressure: 50% of recipients reported it had decreased in the past year, and 56% expect further decreases ahead.

CBAs were asked to identify the resources or supports they need most to strengthen their long-term sustainability. As the chart below shows, the three most frequently identified needs relate directly to funding. Seventy-eight percent of surveyed CBAs named multiyear or general operating funding among their top three needs—nearly 30 percentage points ahead of the second most common answer. Many of the other resources identified also require sufficient funding. While equipment, technological upgrades, and strategic planning support are often one-time or periodic costs, other needs, like staff salaries, rent and maintenance of archival storage space, public programming, and technological maintenance, require a steady flow of funds.

**CBAS' MOST NEEDED RESOURCES OR SUPPORTS FOR LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY (N=322)**



# Common Barriers to Sustainability and Security

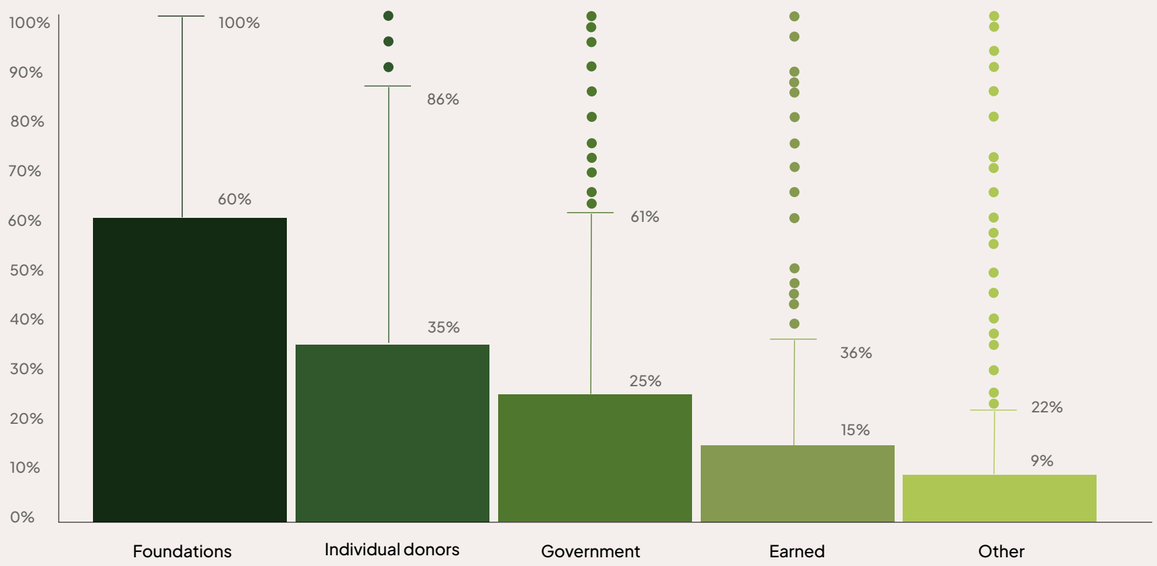
Understanding—from CBAs' perspectives—the systemic and widespread challenges to their sustainability and security can help supporters of community-based archiving identify commonalities and potential solutions across the field. In the survey and interviews, study participants tended to emphasize conditions over the past year. Many of the challenges CBAs described—funding instability, staffing constraints, infrastructure gaps—are not new to the field. What has changed is the confluence: Challenges that CBAs might ordinarily manage one at a time are now arriving together, compounding one another in ways that are harder to absorb. This section is followed by a discussion of strategies that CBAs are taking to overcome these barriers, as well as instances of success that offer windows into their tenacity.

## FUNDING

**Funding instability and uncertainty emerged as the most pressing challenge for many CBAs**. In contrast to the 78% of survey participants who named multiyear or general operating funding as a primary need, just 30% reported that they had secured multiyear funding. The survey findings reveal that the gap between what archives need and what they have been able to access is widest among smaller and newer organizations. CBAs with larger budgets and more staff are much more likely to have secured multiyear support. In other words, the organizations that most need stabilizing funding are least positioned to obtain it.

The box and whisker plot below shows how archives vary substantially in their reliance on each source of funding. In addition, surveyed CBAs shared how each source was changing, as summarized on the next page.

**% BUDGET FROM DIFFERENT FUNDING SOURCES (N=320)**




| Funding Source in the Past Year | How Funding Source Is Changing |
|---|---|
| **Foundation grants**<br>**Essential for most CBAs** – On average, foundation grants are the largest source of funds. Seventy-five percent of surveyed CBAs reported receiving some foundation funding, including 26% who rely on grants for at least 60% of their budget. | **Growing, but also more competitive** – While 53% of surveyed CBAs said they expect their income from foundation grants to grow, about a third of survey participants reported experiencing much more competition for grant dollars over the past year. |
| **Government funds**<br>**A source for about half of CBAs** – Forty-nine percent of surveyed CBAs reported receiving government funding in the past 12 months. | **Shrinking** – Fifty percent of CBAs reported that their government funding had decreased, more than three times the share that reported an increase (16%). Fifty-six percent expect further decreases in the year ahead. Some study participants specifically noted reductions in public funding for identity-based work. |
| **Individual donations**<br>**Common but typically small** – Seventy-six percent of surveyed CBAs reported receiving individual donations, but the typical (median) CBA only covers 10% of its budget through this source. | **Becoming more important but sometimes harder to get** – Fifty-two percent of CBAs anticipate an increase in individual donations, yet more than a quarter said that economic pressures on the public and on many nonprofits have led individual donations to decline. |
| **Earned income**<br>**A very small revenue source** – The typical (median) CBA covers just 3% of its budget through earned income sources like membership, workshops, or consulting. | **A growth opportunity for some** – About half (49%) of CBAs expect to increase earned income, but some said economic stresses are causing their membership to shrink. |

The CBA field entered the current moment already operating on a structurally fragile funding base, with a heavy reliance on foundation funding and limited cushion provided by other revenue streams. Against this backdrop, the current political and economic environment has compounded existing fragility, with access to government funds dropping and a tightening economy affecting other income sources. Of the one-third of survey participants reporting higher competition for grant dollars, many proffered explanations, including that the loss of federal funding sources has broadly pushed nonprofits to turn to foundations for more funding, that some private and corporate funders are prioritizing emerging critical needs in health or emergency relief, and that some philanthropic funders are shifting priorities.

The scale of foundation dependence makes this shift particularly consequential. Among the quarter of CBAs whose budgets rely on foundation grants for 60% or more of their funding, higher competition for philanthropic support may pose an existential threat. The data bear this out: Archives with smaller budgets—which are disproportionately newer, volunteer-led, and focused on Black/African American communities—are less likely to have the capacity to pursue or successfully secure grants, to have built individual donor relationships, and to have organizational infrastructure to help weather a funding contraction. Among volunteer-led archives specifically, the survey found lower rates of grant applications and multiyear funding secured compared to staffed nonprofits. As one CBA put it, "We often find [that] the effort to [apply for] application-based foundation funding overwhelms the small size of our staff. But to expand our staffing and capacity, substantial additional funding needs to be secured first."

**24%**

of surveyed CBAs are staffed by volunteers, with no full-time staff

## STAFFING

**CBAs face persistent challenges related to staffing and volunteer capacity**. Surveyed CBAs commonly rely on small numbers of paid staff and volunteers to carry out their work. The typical CBA operates with just one paid full-time staff member (median), supplemented by a median of three unpaid volunteers. Nearly two-thirds of surveyed CBAs reported operating at minimal capacity, including 39% that have a single full- or part-time employee and 24% that are staffed primarily by volunteers, with no full-time staff. Only 9% reported having five or more full-time staff. Although the survey did not ask more specifically about staffing challenges (e.g., whether they experienced issues with turnover, skills, or anything else), interview responses overwhelmingly pointed to funding being the limiting factor in growing staff capacity. Economic cycles over time have made staffing stability more tenuous—for instance, one CBA commented on shedding full-time staff during several economically challenging years, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on the survey findings, volunteer-led archives are more likely than others to [5]

- be accessible by appointment only;
- partner with institutions on resources and staffing;
- have small budgets (under $100,000); and
- focus on archiving the histories of Black/African American communities.

Volunteer-led CBAs are also less likely to have strengthened their long-term sustainability by applying for grants or securing multiyear funding.

Staffing capacity—named by 69% of survey participants as one of their top three challenges—has multiple implications. For one, limited capacity has kept some CBAs from achieving their goals. "We have big ideas but limited funds," one participant commented. "We have a very strong collection and are doing forward-thinking work, but don't have enough staff." Lack of adequate funds to pay workers has also left CBAs' sustainability vulnerable. Evidence suggests that it has become normal to think about this work as a "labor of love," discounting the value and necessity of experienced staff to support the long-term durability of CBAs.

Several comments on the survey and in interviews spoke of a culture of undervaluing the work and of CBA staff and volunteers joining the effort out of love or in response to a dire need. They also shared that CBAs often began informally, suggesting that, even for some in the field, views may evolve over time on recognizing community-based archiving as a formal job that requires substantial time and expertise. A participant illustrated this challenge, sharing, "I've never received a livable salary for this work, but I've continued because the community relies on me. Looking ahead, I recognize that this model is not sustainable. I cannot expect the next executive director to operate under the same conditions."

> "Our work is important, but we need help. Staff is overextended, and though we are determined to make our way out of the dark times, we are all exhausted."

[5] Small sample sizes of CBAs grouped by staffing structure add uncertainty to these findings



# Queer History Boston

### STABLE BUT NOT SUSTAINABLE

Queer History Boston is an archive of LGBTQ+ collections from the early 20th century through the present. The CBAs experiences and insights as it seeks to establish steady funding offer one illustration of the gap between operational stability and long-term sustainability, as shared by Queer History Boston's executive director:

"We were entirely volunteer-run for 40 years. And then … to survive and pay rent and take care of our collections, I learned how to write grants. We now have three grant-funded staff … meaning that we can have staff, but that doesn't mean that we are sustainable after two or three years."

Sustainability, the executive director explained, requires dependable funds beyond grant-based funding, which are particularly elusive for CBAs whose communities are not affluent. This is true for Queer History Boston, despite its strong mix of funding sources and broad efforts toward sustainability, including building donor relationships, creating a strategic plan, developing earned income, reducing founder reliance, and training new archivists.

"Community-based archives don't have the same access to capital. … [In] our individual donor base, over 70% of donations every year are for less than $50. We have huge community investment, but our community doesn't have the funds [needed to sustain the CBA]."

"Sustainability to me would mean consistent funding year over year. Does that mean there should be a trust for community archives? Does that mean we all create a big endowment together? If I tried to create an endowment, I wouldn't be able to pay my staff or my rent or do the work that we're already doing. … We can't be expected to be supported for a few years and then … be on the same level as organizations with larger resources and donor bases that have access to capital and generational wealth."

Photo: Queer History Boston

### TECHNICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

CBAs reported technical infrastructure and digitization needs to expand access and preserve materials. Many CBAs are focused on making use of digital systems and cataloging software, with standard platforms including Omeka and ArchivesSpace. CBAs also commonly rely on websites and social media to facilitate public access to materials and educational programming. For 46% of survey respondents, though, gaps in technological software, IT staff, and processes remain among their top three challenges. Although the survey grouped digitization of archives with other technology needs, open-ended responses suggest that general IT infrastructure (such as data security measures and routine data backup) is a widespread challenge, with several specifically identifying the need to digitize as materials degrade. "We've been relying on an IT person part-time who has recently gone MIA on us," one such participant shared. "There's lots of data that hasn't been backed up lately. [It's a] serious concern." Another CBA explained, "[We're] working on digitizing [our] large analog oral history collection but currently have no funding for that." Costs are a substantial barrier, as is the time needed to implement new systems, make changes, and address security concerns. Some costs, such as system upgrades and digitization, lend themselves to being grant-funded project by project, while others, like IT maintenance, require sustained operational support.

### PHYSICAL SPACE

Suitable physical space for collections is an unmet need for many. Close to a third (30%) of archives listed difficulty securing long-term physical space as one of their top three challenges. CBAs need space for processing and cataloguing materials as well as storage and public programming, such as exhibits and education. While some have dedicated, climate-controlled spaces for their archived materials, others are outgrowing their space or lack proper environmental controls.

> "We exist in a 100-year-old home, and most of our materials are in the attic, which is not temperature-controlled. … There's snow, extreme hot, extreme cold."

Rising costs of rent and facility maintenance pose barriers to CBAs' ability to remain in the communities where they're established, leading some archives to move to or settle for problematic locations. "[Our area] has been experiencing a catastrophic housing crisis," one CBA shared. "There's no affordable rent. … We had to leave." Storage and programming space also comes with security risks, and CBAs cited considerations of fire, flood, theft, and other threats when housing irreplaceable artifacts and other items. One study participant commented, for instance, "We share a building. … We are on the bottom level, and above our collections are dressing rooms and bathrooms. It's not unusual for there to be leaks. We have to tarp the collections." Another noted, "We've had a lot of burglaries in our space. I am literally carrying [archival documents] to my home."

### SAFETY AND SECURITY

Safety and security. In addition to concerns about digital security and how well their physical space can protect their archives, some CBAs reported significant safety concerns due to the current climate. This included concerns about immigration enforcement in their neighborhoods and an uptick in targeted aggression against the communities they serve. Two CBAs reported that, because of experiencing safety threats, they have shifted from open-door practices to receiving visitors by appointment only or not publicly sharing where they are located. Heightened safety risks and some of the protective measures that CBAs have had to take in response have had the side effect, they say, of reducing visitors.

Photo: Digital archivist Devora Perez,WAAM studio
Image credit: Courtesy of WAAM

## Women Artists Archive Miami

### STRIVING TO SUPPORT A COMMUNITY UNDER DURESS

Women Artists Archive Miami, or WAAM, was founded in 2018 to meet an urgent need to preserve the histories of female artists who were living and working in a hyperlocal context, and where the only archives were limited-access institutional archives with different goals. WAAM's actions as a CBA exemplify its role as a community anchor that continually provides close contact with its community of artists and offers care amid both acute crises and ongoing challenges.

"The artists and the very communities that I work with are struggling because of the rent crisis, climate change, [and] gentrification in Miami. A lot of artists are having to move farther and farther out. … In this overall state of hardship, it becomes difficult to just call up someone and say, 'Hey, let's do this exhibition,' because everyone is struggling. So, we're playing a different role. I'm listening to people or offering moral support. … I'm having to reach out to everyone again this year and say, 'What are your most urgent concerns now?' … The needs are changing."

At the same time, WAAM contends with barriers from funders as it seeks to grow its capacity as a community anchor. "Before I was a 501(c)3, I had a fiscal sponsor. It was sort of a catch-22. I couldn't qualify for a lot of grants because of the fiscal sponsorship status," a WAAM leader explained, adding that the costs of obtaining 501(c)3 status can be steep. The work and impact of the organization remain the same whether they have that status or not, the leader argued, suggesting that funders may have an opportunity to expand the types of fiscal structures they support. Indeed, fiscal sponsorship can offer valuable assistance to the CBA field (for example, providing professional administration and sometimes human resources and other Infrastructure support—benefits that may align well with funders' capacity-building interests).

# CBAs' Actions to Strengthen Sustainability

Although barriers to CBAs' sustainability and security have been particularly fraught over the past year, the field has always faced—and overcome—challenges. Based on this history, CBAs are primed to meet this moment.

Surveyed CBAs marked a wide variety of actions they had taken to strengthen their long-term sustainability. More than half of survey participants reported that they had applied for grants, engaged volunteers, worked to build individual donations, and/or invested in digital infrastructure to increase access and visibility. The data suggest that organizational size and longevity shape which sustainability strategies are within reach. Specifically, CBAs with the following characteristics are more likely to have been able to strengthen their sustainability:

- **Archives with budgets of over $100,000** are more likely than their smaller counterparts to have built donor relationships, created strategic plans, secured multiyear funding, and documented policies to support knowledge transfer.
- **Archives with more staff** are more likely than those staffed primarily by volunteers to have taken any sustainability action.
- **Archives founded five or more years ago** are more likely than newer organizations to have secured multiyear support and reduced founder dependence. CBAs founded after 2020 (26% of the survey sample) are more likely to have smaller budgets and to have had less time to build funding relationships and organizational infrastructure that support sustainability.

These findings suggest that stable funding and organizational capacity build on each other over time. They also point to an opportunity for supporters of the CBA field to offer capacity-building assistance to smaller and newer archives. One archive leader described the positive effects of their CBAs trajectory toward greater capacity. Founded in response to a community need—with no formal structure and no plan to become an archive—the organization spent several years focused on building the capacity to sustain its work. "We have spent the past five years or so really focusing on making sure that we have the people to run the archive," they explained. "We are now very lucky that we have two full-time staff." The investment enabled the CBA to establish dedicated archive space with environmental controls, provided infrastructure to support researchers, and assisted the archive in building the organizational capacity to engage institutional partners on its own terms.

Peer networks and coalitions have also supported sustainability in ways that individual archives cannot achieve alone. Also noted in the sidebar at right, about a third of surveyed CBAs named peer networks and collaboratives as a primary source of support. Participants described relationships as doing practical work: state-level coalitions pursuing public funding, informal networks where archivists share expertise and problem-solve, and emerging formal structures that pool resources. One CBA leader described a group of archives that shares a region and community of focus and is exploring a shared 501(c)3 umbrella that would pool digitization infrastructure, staff benefits, and collective legal protection. Another archive described a state coalition of roughly 20 archives that has supported public funding advocacy and ongoing peer consultation: "That group has been really helpful, particularly in terms of advocacy around funding, but also just to have a network of people that we know we can email and say, 'What do you do about this?'"

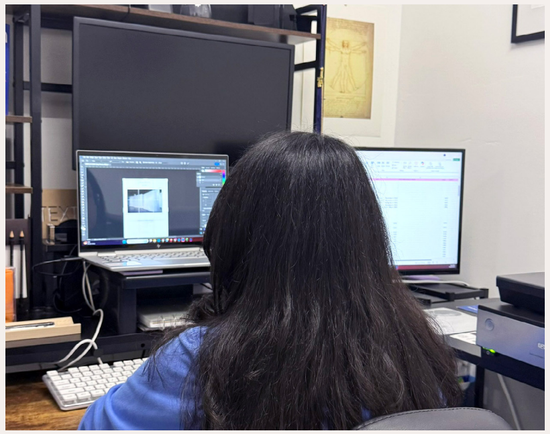
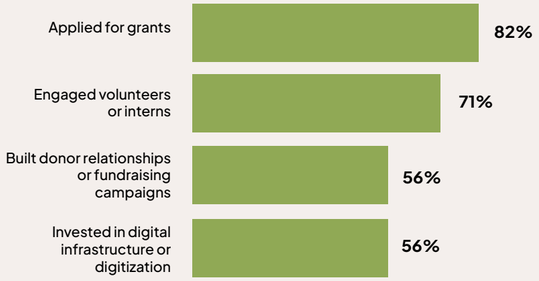


Photo: Women Artists Archive Miami

**CBAS' MOST COMMON STRATEGIES TO STRENGTHEN SUSTAINABILITY**




**JOINING FORCES: HOW CBAS MAKE USE OF PARTNERSHIPS AND PEER CONNECTIONS**

CBAs rely on partnerships and peer connections to share resources and information. A CBA leader articulated a goal to "build collaborative partnerships that can help us build capacity to effectively fulfill our objectives." Another added that strong partnerships provide a sense of protection within a broader political climate that puts some groups at risk. Specifically, the study found that CBAs make use of partnerships and peer connections in several ways:

**CBAs commonly partner with institutions** such as universities, museums, or government agencies, providing access to their collected materials. CBAs named a range of benefits, including:

- space for events, exhibits, or secure storage;
- ability to reach an established audience; and
- collaborative research or complementary expertise.

**CBAs are protective of their independence.** Some voiced concerns about institutions controlling exhibit narratives or limiting access to archived materials. "We are fully independent because we do not trust that a university archive or similar institution would provide access to community or allow us to candidly explore our history," a CBA reported. Another shared their policy to "collaborate selectively without ceding identity or control."

**CBAs have built ecosystems of mutual support** with peer CBAs and other small organizations. Several study participants reported alliances, coalitions, and networks with peers in their geographic region or community of interest, providing support for one another —for instance, in the form of advice, knowledge sharing, and problem-solving; joint advocacy; and shared space and resources.

**75%**

Of CBAs reported partnering with institutions in the past five years

# 04

# Reflections and Recommendations

The findings of this study point to a field that is both deeply valuable and structurally vulnerable. Community-based archives (CBAs) offer benefits distinct from institutional archives, preserving histories that might otherwise be lost or erased, protecting and expanding public access to knowledge, and strengthening communities' ability to understand their past and shape their future. At the same time, many operate with limited resources and precarious infrastructure.

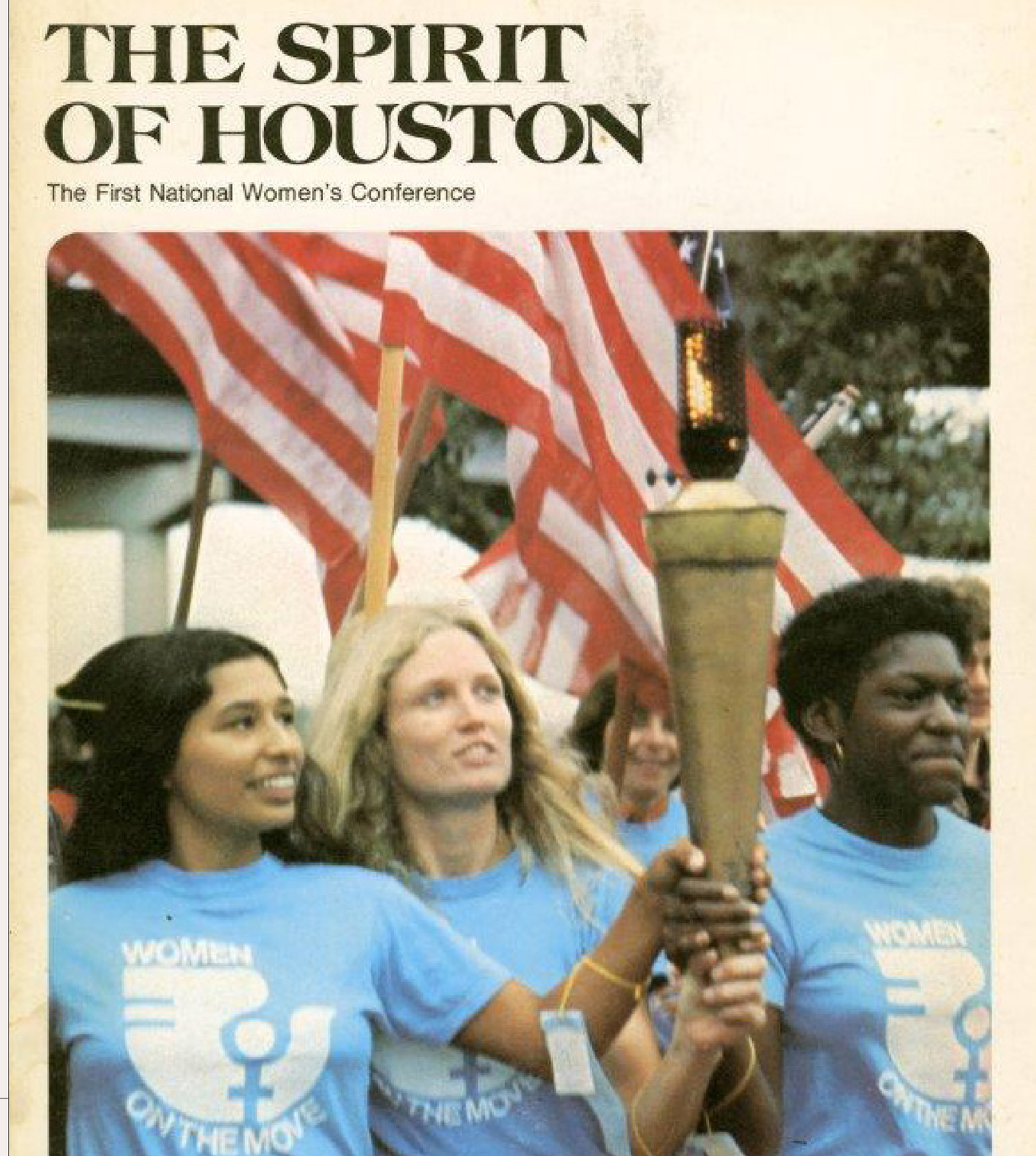
Drawing on insights from the many CBAs that participated in the study—together with guidance from the project's "Design Circle" of archival practitioners and experts—the following recommendations highlight specific opportunities for funders to engage with CBAs as partners in the work they care about. Philanthropic funders, public institutions, archival organizations, and CBAs themselves each have a role to play in building stronger, more sustainable support for this essential and underrecognized field.

**CONSIDER HOW COMMUNITY-BASED ARCHIVES CAN HELP ADVANCE THE WORK YOU CARE ABOUT**

CBAs support education, cultural preservation, and social justice work by preserving the records, histories, and cultural knowledge that communities rely on. Furthermore, they are geographically widespread and work in diverse areas of interest, making them a good fit for local, regional, and national efforts alike—yet few philanthropic funders support CBAs as part of their strategy. There are several opportunities for funders new to the CBA field and CBAs who are interested in working with funders:

- **For funders:** Get to know CBAs in your area and consider how their archival work might advance your goals in areas such as education, civic engagement, cultural preservation, and social change.
- **For CBAs:** Consider how your work might align with funders' priorities and theories of change both inside and outside the humanities, as well as regional, family, and community foundations.
- **For the field:** Encourage collaboration among funders with overlapping interests—for instance, in supporting memory work, historical preservation, or narrative change—to coordinate on bolder and more sustained support for the CBA field.

Photo: Wages for Housework Community Archives, The 1977 Houston National Women's Conference "Pro-Money Coalition" Collection.



### PARTNER WITH COMMUNITY-BASED ARCHIVES TO SUPPORT ESSENTIAL CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE

More than just cultural repositories, CBAs are trusted resources that play important roles in community life. CBAs create spaces where community members can access and learn about historical evidence, connect with past and future generations, engage in deeply rooted cultural and creative practices, and carry forward their own histories. Many of the strategies funders use to drive lasting community impact—from shifting narratives to strengthening places and building toward shared goals—depend on exactly this kind of deep, community-rooted work. There are a few opportunities to partner with CBAs:

- **Narrative change and storytelling.** In working to change behaviors or policies, many find that they must first change the stories we tell about who matters, whose history counts, and what is possible. CBAs hold the historical evidence that makes this work possible by preserving records, oral histories, and artifacts of communities whose histories have been excluded or underrepresented in mainstream institutions. For funders invested in narrative change and storytelling, CBAs provide the infrastructure that makes that work credible and community-rooted.
- **Place-based efforts.** Lasting change often requires deep, sustained engagement with the particular history, assets, and needs of that place. By preserving the specific history of a community and geography, CBAs serve as anchor institutions within that place that are accountable to the people who live there. As one of the few institutions that holds the long-term memory of a place, they are a natural partner for funders trying to understand and strengthen a specific community from within.
- **Movement building.** Working toward a common goal requires connection and a shared sense of identity. CBAs can provide that grounding, preserving the records, stories, and milestones that connect current efforts to those that came before and giving communities a sense of what they have already achieved and what remains possible. For funders invested in long-term change, CBAs provide the institutional memory that makes that work more effective and durable over time.

### STRENGTHEN THE CONNECTIVE TISSUE OF THE FIELD

CBAs often operate with small staff and limited resources, yet many have developed strong networks of collaboration and mutual support. Research participants described alliances, partnerships, and informal knowledge-sharing networks that help archives solve problems, share expertise, and support one another. They also noted the value of partnerships with institutions like museums and universities, which can offer exhibit opportunities, safe storage for collections, or joint research opportunities—with the caveat that CBAs strongly expressed the importance of maintaining independent control of exhibit narratives and archive access.

As archives themselves work to expand their peer connections and develop partnerships on their own terms, investing in this connective infrastructure can strengthen the field as a whole. The potential areas of support are many:

- **Sponsor or organize convenings,** such as regional or topical gatherings that showcase CBAs' work and ideas, designed to enable archives to connect with each other, institutions, funders, and broader audiences.
- **Host peer learning opportunities** for CBAs to build networks, share challenges and solutions, and pursue collaborative ideas.
- **Support partnerships** among CBAs and/or with institutions that meet common goals and build relationships while respecting CBAs' independence.
- **Provide visibility** for CBAs' work and the archiving field through websites, newsletters, events, and other outreach.
- **Fund shared resources and technical assistance** across CBAs that address structural or operational needs while modeling collective solutions. In addition to identifying and addressing CBAs' priorities, intermediaries can play a role in field building—for instance, by facilitating leadership development and broadening grassroots support.[6]

[6] The Bridgespan Group. July 2009. The Strong Field framework: A Guide and Toolkit for Funders and Nonprofits Committed to Large-Scale Impact. www.bridgespan.org/insights/the-strong-field-framework-a-guide-and-toolkit-for

Photo: Acción Latina, El Tecolote Archives, "The 90s Matter in the Mission" by Yano Rivera.

### INVEST IN LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY

The very purpose of archives is farsighted: preserving materials and histories across generations to inform and improve communities now and into the future. Short-term or project-based funding, however, rarely aligns with the long-term nature of this work. Study participants consistently emphasized the importance of funding models that provide stability and flexibility. Funders can strengthen the field in several ways:

- **Provide substantial multiyear grants** that enable CBAs to plan over a longer time horizon and spend fewer resources on grant applications.
- **Offer unrestricted general operating funding** with minimal reporting requirements that gives archives the flexibility to address their most pressing needs.
- **Support staff salaries, leadership development, succession planning**, and other targeted grants that expand capacity and recognize the necessity of experienced, paid staff.
- **Invest in permanent acquisition of physical space, archival storage, and digital infrastructure.**

These investments help ensure that archives can continue to steward collections, support communities, and maintain access to historical materials over time.

### LOOKING AHEAD

Throughout the research and Design Circle discussions, participants expressed a strong interest in continued collaboration across the field to strengthen support for CBAs. Growing visibility and understanding of the field present an opportunity for funders, institutions, and practitioners to work together to ensure that CBAs are recognized and resourced for generations to come.

# Appendix

**MEMBERS OF THE DESIGN CIRCLE**

A "Design Circle" of archival field experts and practitioners, listed here, partnered with the Mellon Foundation to provide guidance on this landscape study.

**Michelle Caswell**
Professor of Archival Studies, Department of Information Studies
University of California, Los Angeles

**Nancy Godoy**
Director of Community-Driven Archives Initiative and Associate Archivist of Chicano/a Research Collection
Arizona State University Library

**Bergis Jules**
Archivist and Founding Member
Shift Collective

**Maile Loo-Ching**
Executive Director
Hula Preservation Society

**Gabriel Solís**
Executive Director and Ex-Officio Board Member
After Violence Project

**Maigen Sullivan**
Co-Executive Director and Cofounder
Invisible Histories

**STUDY DETAILS**

**Evaluation Questions**

1. Defining characteristics. What are the defining characteristics of CBAs, including their geographic distribution, focus areas, and governance structures?
2. Success metrics. How do CBAs define and measure success, particularly in terms of resilience, independence, community impact, and sustainability?
3. Community focus and role. How do CBAs define their community and their role within it?
4. Barriers and sustainability. What systemic barriers—such as funding inequities or staffing constraints—do CBAs face, and how do these affect their sustainability?
5. Innovations in practice. What innovative practices are CBAs adopting to address challenges (e.g., current political threats, digital security and ethics, climate challenges, the return of Tribal cultural artifacts to their communities) and serve their communities effectively?
6. Resources needed. What funding, partnerships, or resources are most critical to support CBAs' growth and independence?
7. Field development. With reference to Bridgespan's Strong Field Framework, to what extent do CBAs comprise a strong field, and what are its strengths and needs?

**Methods**

- **Survey.** In June and July 2025, Engage R+D fielded a survey to independent, community-led, US-based CBAs to gather information about their size, geographic distribution, focus areas, priorities, and challenges. The survey was distributed to a list of CBAs compiled by Mellon and through trusted outreach partners, including Design Circle members. Survey participants could also suggest additional names for outreach. In all, the survey was sent to at least 1,633 individuals and received 336 responses that met the criteria for inclusion. A wide range of CBAs from across the country responded to the survey, with good representation from those who serve Black/African American (24%), LGBTQ+ (13%), Latino (11%), and Indigenous (9%) communities.
- **Interviews and focus groups.** In December 2025 and January 2026, Engage R+D followed up with a subset of survey participants and additional names suggested by Mellon and the Design Circle to learn more about how they see themselves, think about sustainability, navigate threats, and find support. In particular, we sought to understand the unique needs of CBAs that use technology in their work (focus group 1, n=9), that house significant physical collections or require dedicated space for their work (focus group 2, n=5), and that face threats, are vulnerable to climate impacts, and/or serve communities experiencing exclusion, harassment, or heightened risk (interviews, n=9).
- **Mellon staff and the Design Circle.** Throughout the project, Engage R+D engaged in structured dialogue with Mellon Foundation staff and the Design Circle to shape and validate the study at each phase. Early in the project, the Design Circle provided input on the survey instrument, sampling strategy, and outreach approach. Following the survey, they reviewed interim findings and helped prioritize the qualitative research questions and participant selection criteria for interviews and focus groups. Mellon's Public Knowledge team contributed a funder-facing perspective on research priorities and key themes. Together, these conversations ensured that the study's design, analysis, and emerging conclusions remained grounded in the realities of the CBA field and relevant to the needs of funders.

**STUDY LIMITATIONS**

As with any study of this kind, the findings reflect the perspectives of those we were able to reach, and some voices are likely underrepresented. There are a few key limitations:

- **Sample.** Smaller, more informal CBAs—including grassroots groups without nonprofit status, fiscally sponsored projects, and volunteer-led initiatives with limited digital presence—were harder to identify and engage. Because outreach relied primarily on existing networks, including Design Circle members and partner organizations, CBAs that are less connected to professional or archival field networks may have been less likely to receive or respond to the survey. And while the survey was translated into Spanish, CBAs that operate primarily in other languages may have faced additional barriers to participation. Together, these factors mean the sample skews toward organizations with some degree of formal structure, and the experiences of the most under-resourced CBAs may not be fully captured here.
- **Privacy concerns.** CBAs that serve communities with heightened concerns about data privacy and government surveillance may have been less likely to participate, even with assurances of confidentiality.
- **Qualitative data limitations**. The interviews and focus groups involved a limited number of participants, selected in part based on survey opt-ins and network referrals. These findings offer depth and texture but e not representative of the full range of CBA experiences.

These gaps are worth naming not as failures of the research, but as a reminder that the CBA field is likely larger and more diverse than any single study can capture—and that the organizations most in need of support may be precisely those hardest to reach through conventional research methods.

Mellon Foundation

engage R+D