



Report on Reach and Engagement July – December 2017



Introduction

The second half of 2017 was a time of experimentation and consolidation for Civic Hall. Our community team launched three new engagement programs, designed to foster stronger bonds and build more community among core constituencies of civic entrepreneurs, organizers, and nonprofit leaders. Each, as you will read below, are already bearing fruit. At the same time, we kept up a steady pace of events and workshops designed to build and enrich the civic tech ecosystem, working with key partners from the public sector, tech companies, media and community organizations. And we intensified our work on Civic Hall @ Union Square, winning a strong endorsement of support from the Ford Foundation, which gave the first \$500,000 in seed funding for our planning process, and holding many meetings with community leaders and stakeholders involved in the project. This report describes the highlights of this work, offering a fresh snapshot of this dynamic community as it continues to grow and evolve.

Engagement and Impact

Civic Hall fosters collaboration and builds community to make tech serve social justice and civic innovation. That's the heart of our method and mission. From our start in 2015, we have focused our efforts on making sure that Civic Hall is a welcoming space where a diverse group of individuals and organizations dedicated to the public good can come, on a daily basis, to work, network and collaborate on addressing challenging public problems. Starting the second half of 2017, we rolled out three new programs designed to create stronger relationships and skill-sharing among three core constituencies in our membership: civic entrepreneurs, community organizers, and nonprofit executives. These are our Entrepreneurs-in-Residence, Organizers-in-Residence, and Digital Skills for Nonprofits Workshops programs.

Entrepreneurs-in-Residence

Civic Hall's Entrepreneurs-in-Residence (EIR) program is for civic innovators who are looking to get a civic tech project, movement or company off the ground, and who don't currently have the financial resources to purchase a regular membership in Civic Hall. Special consideration is given to applicants from various populations with unique backgrounds and identities and to military veterans. Participants are given a discounted six-month membership in Civic Hall; in exchange they are expected to contribute to the community by planning and hosting at least one Civic Hall event (a workshop, roundtable, skill-share) and by participating in one member "show and tell" during their term.

The participants in the first cohort of EIR included Nancy Vitale, the founder of Eyes Up Here Productions, which specializes in strategic storytelling through the production of moving video content, podcasts and live events; Adam Bard and Liz Greenbank of [Streetlives](#), a community built platform that enables homeless or poor people to find, rate and recommend food, health, shelter and other critical services in New York City; Noelle Francois of [HeatSeek](#), which makes net-enabled sensors that help low-income tenants collect the data they need to challenge poor service by landlords; Elana Duffy and Jacqueline Silva of [Pathfinder Labs](#), which helps ease the transitions of military veterans back into civilian life; Abigail Edgecliffe-Johnson, the founder of [RaceYa](#), which connects kids to physics through play, teaching science and engineering with a customizable remote-control car; Nancy Vitale of [Eyes Up Here Productions](#), which is a women-

led production company specializing in story-telling for campaigns; Keith Kirkland and Kevin Yoo of [WearWorks](#), a haptic design company that is exploring products and experiences to communicate information through touch; Anke Stohman, Julliene Gatchalian, and Sarah Suson of [Li'l Stories](#), which uses the power of storytelling to prepare children in public schools to be thinkers, problem solvers and innovators; Aaron Green and Louis Songster of [Yellow Magnet](#), a mission-driven consultancy that helps social ventures monetize their models; Keeley Duffy, Martin Fogelman and Chase Liebow of [Pluto](#), which uses data science to help companies map their diversity and inclusion practices and make improvements; and Sarika Kumar, Kylynn Grier, and Khadija Hudson of [Girls for Gender Equity](#), an intergenerational, advocacy organization committed to the physical, psychological, social, and economic development of girls and women.

We created the Entrepreneurs-in-Residence program to help connect these civic entrepreneurs to each other and to the larger Civic Hall community. During their residency, they have run seminars on such topics as “creative storytelling for video,” how to “join the team you want,” the importance of “getting things right at the start,” and several have also participated in community demo nights and show-and-tells.

At the end of the six-month program, EIR participants produced detailed impact reports, tracking their own progress and accomplishments. Here are some of the highlights:

- WearWorks’ first product, Wayband, a wearable vibro-tactile navigation device for the blind and visually impaired that gives a blind person an intuitive way to an end destination using only touch, made history. On November 5th, 2017, it helped Simon Wheatcroft (a blind ultra-marathoner) run the NYC Marathon. He was the first blind person in history to run the prestigious race without sighted assistance, and his (and WearWorks) success resulted in a feature story in the New York Times along with documentary coverage in Forbes and Discovery. The company was also recently awarded a Phase 1 grant from the National Science Foundation for research and development in blind navigation.
- StreetLives built a prototype of its platform for crowdsourced information on local homeless services, and signed up three core social service partners and three roll-out partners.
- Eyes Up Here Productions started developing a documentary series about black domestic workers with We Dream in Black and deepened its relationship as the production partner for the Pop Culture Collaborative.
- Li'l Stories expanded its program and customized its labs for Title I schools and began collaborating with first and second grade classes at PS 43 in the Bronx.

Participants in the Entrepreneurs-in-Residence program are enthusiastic about the benefits of being here. Says the WearWorks’ team: “Civic Hall has given us a space to call home. It helped legitimize our efforts by giving us access to a wonderful space that has a reputation for housing some of the most exciting and groundbreaking companies working in the space of social good and civic tech. It has also given us connections to cohort members who, either directly or

indirectly, has help us with warm introductions to funding and talent, gave us feedback about our own problems and tribulations. It also served as a sort of founders' support hub, allowing us to hear and empathize our struggles with the struggles of others going through the process."

Organizers-in-Residence

Civic Hall's Organizer in Residence (CHOIR) program also ran its first cycle during the second half of 2017, with striking results. The CHOIR program started to crystallize in the wake of the 2016 election, as many members of Civic Hall began meeting in response to our September 2016 "Call to Action," sharing the many ways that they were working to defend core principles of democracy, human rights and civil rights. With the backing of the Craig Newmark Foundation, which gave Civic Hall a \$100,000 grant to establish a new residency program specifically focused on supporting organizers, and the offer of best-selling author (and long-time Civic Hall friend) Seth Godin to offer a master class on marketing, we were off and running.

The CHOIR program offered participants a free six-month membership in Civic Hall along with a biweekly group workshop where participants drilled down on their current project challenges and offered each other constructive support to help them move forward. In addition, Civic Hall co-founder Micah Sifry also provided ongoing one-on-one and group mentorship. In exchange CHOIR members were expected to contribute to the community by planning and hosting at least one Civic Hall event (a workshop, roundtable, skill-share), and by documenting their progress and providing an "impact report" at the end of their six-month cycle.

In the first three months of the program, CHOIR members met biweekly with Seth Godin for an intensive series of workshops focused on analyzing and refining their organizing projects. Participants were encouraged to zero in on the hardest challenges they were facing in their work and focus on all the building blocks that they needed to line up—from understanding their target audience to refining their pitch to narrowing their goal to the minimum viable product—in order to succeed. In the second three months of the program, participants shifted into workshop mode where every other week the group met together to update each other and critique each other's works. The cycle also included a deep dive into the whys and hows of effective fundraising. Of the CHOIR programs initial 18 participants, 13 made it all the way through. At the end of this report, we've included an appendix with some extended comments from CHOIR participants about the value of the program, but to give just two examples, here's what they had to say about what they learned and the impact it generated in their work:

Rapi Castillo, founder of [Progressive Coders Network](#) and [Progressive HackNight](#), communities of hundreds of techies volunteering their time on behalf of causes ranging from access to health care to immigrant rights:

"Being part of the Organizers in Residence Program helped me become a better organizer and realize I had a passion for it, and maybe even a knack. Growing into the role of an organizer became a journey I shared with fellow travelers on the same path, as we worked towards empowering and mobilizing others.... This led to an improvement in how I led my organization. Identifying the people like us led to effectively growing our humble team and clarified who we had to reach out to. We

grew confident in asking our attendees to act. We became comfortable requesting hard asks and refusing certain opportunities. With twenty-four HackNights under our belt, with two thousand engaged techies, and with technology provided to hundreds of thousands of people through the projects we support, I am proud of what we achieved.”

Sanda Balaban, founder of [Civics Unplugged](#) and [YVote](#), which respectively work to make civic engagement accessible to young people and to develop peer groups of young people who are committing to vote when they turn 18 in 2018:

“An iron rule of organizing is ‘go to where the energy is.’ Over the past six months, I’ve been happy to discover that the energy is at Civic Hall. The last year has by far been the most challenging of my life on multiple levels. The CHOIR has supported me through an important pivot point...Over the six months of the residency, I’ve launched TWO youth civic engagement orgs, both on a shoestring and with sizable range and reach for startups—work that I could not have done absent having Civic Hall as a backbone. Both very intentionally bring together racially, socioeconomically, and politically diverse teens to engage in deep dialogue and to expose participants to a range of different perspectives, nurturing their ability to appreciate multiple points of view, promote empathy, and foster civic discourse.”

There have been a lot of concrete impacts of the CHOIR program already. The Movement Cooperative, a voting data and tech tool collaborative of twelve major national organizations ranging from the Center for Popular Democracy to Indivisible to 350.org, got off the ground as a result of its incubation here. [Rhize](#), which trains and coaches movement organizers worldwide, got crucial support for the marketing and launch of two major projects, the release of a massive report called Understanding Activism and the successful marketing and launch of Adopting a Movement Mindset—Rhize’s new virtual course designed to teach civil society actors key ways they can provide more effective support to activists on the frontlines of today’s most critical social movements. [CTZNWELL](#), which organizes leaders and participants in the wellness community to be more civically active, launched two new revenue streams—a crowd-sourcing platform on Patreon and a membership subscription bridging personal and collective wellness. The [NYC Veterans Alliance](#) not only launched its first major donor campaign, it hosted several impactful public events, including a discussion between veterans of Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq about their common experiences and two “lunch and learn” events on veterans policy initiatives.

Both the EIR and CHOIR programs will be continued with a new cycle of participants in the first half of 2018 (and some of the current group will be staying on as they further progress in their work). To learn more about the current groups of residents, see <https://www.civiceir.org/awarded-residents> and <https://www.civicoir.org/awarded-residents>.

Launching both the Entrepreneurs-in-Residence and Organizers-in-Residence programs this past fall was a big lift for the Civic Hall team, but we also see the dividends paying off every day through the strengthened connections that have been generated among participants and with

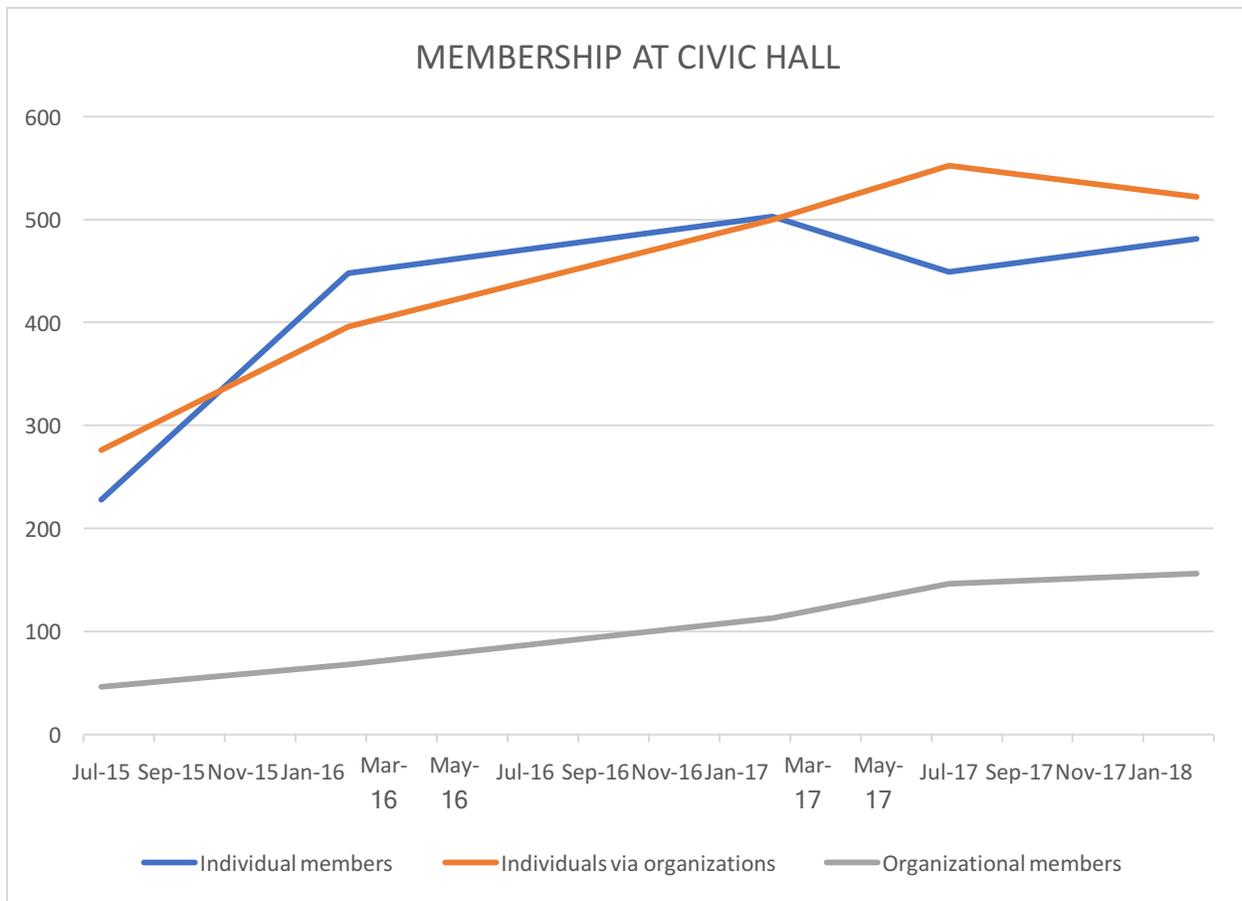
the larger community in the space. Clusters of two and three and four people sitting together have always been common here, but now we see more cross-fertilization than ever before. Collaborative relationships keep flowering as a result; for example, as a result of the CHOIR workshops, Sanda Balaban enlisted social media whiz Jackson Bird as a podcast producer for her Civics Unplugged program, and she engaged community member Ibrahim Abdul-Matin to give the keynote at one of their monthly Civic Forums.

Digital Skills for Nonprofits Workshops

The third major program we launched this fall to foster more collaborative community engagement here was our four-part series of Nonprofit Tech and Tools Workshops, sponsored in partnership with member organization Comcast NBCUniversal. The workshops were provided free to nonprofit executives interested in learning how to use tech to solve community challenges, providing attendees with actionable methods, tools and tips that they could put to immediate use. The session themes were “designing a digital strategy,” “storytelling for impact,” “becoming a data-driven nonprofit,” and “exploring new tools for engagement – augmented reality, virtual reality and live video.” Participants included the City University of New York, Friends of Brooklyn Queens Connector, Groundswell, Lower Eastside Girls Club and the Grace Hopper program at Fullstack Academy of Code.

TRACKING MEMBERSHIP AND EVENTS

At the end of 2017, our membership stood at 481 individuals, up 32 from June; plus 522 via organizational membership, and a total of 156 organizational members, up 10 from June. Here’s a look at our overall membership growth since our founding at the beginning of 2015:



As the chart shows, we continue to grow on both the individual and organizational tracks.

The second half of 2017 was also a busy time for events at Civic Hall, with us hosting 249 events with more than 6,175 guests over the course of the six months. Compared to the first half of the year, when we hosted 259 events with 8,343 attendees, this was a slight dip. But since the second half of the year includes July and August, when the pace of work in New York City slows down considerably, and December, when the last few weeks dissolve into holiday parties and vacations, the pace of events here has stayed pretty much at the same level all year round.

Event Highlights

This fall, building on longstanding work we have done to make political debates more participatory, Civic Hall was a co-sponsor and digital media partner with NY-1 on the three citywide election debates (mayor, comptroller and public advocate) overseen by the city's Campaign Finance Board. Working with our allies at the Open Debates Coalition, we helped drive participation in an unprecedented new effort to crowd-source questions for the candidates online. In each debate, at least six of the questions asked by moderators came via this form of bottom-up civic input. And one side benefit of this partnership—lots of Civic Hall members got to attend the debates in person.

On August 15, we also held a friendly debate of our own, examining the question of whether New York State should hold a Constitutional Convention, a question that was up on the ballot here this fall. Speakers included State Sen. Gustavo Rivera and tech entrepreneur and chair of the NYC Voter Assistance Advisory Committee Art Chang.

Responding to the rising criticism of tech's role in the public arena, we curated a series of public book talks that were attended by hundreds. Speakers included Zeynep Tufekci, author of *Twitter and Tear Gas*; Franklin Foer, author of *World Without Mind: The Existential Threat of Big Tech*, in conversation with Fordham law professor Zephyr Teachout; and Noam Cohen, author of *The Know It Alls*. These events were also an experiment for us—while tickets were free for members, we charged the public \$10 per event (or \$25 for all three) and happily found that these kinds of high-profile book events can be a source of real income.

As a glance at our monthly events calendar will show, Civic Hall also continues to be a hub for many of the different communities of interest at the intersection of tech and the public good. We've partnered with the Humanitarian Blockchain Summit, partnered with the Platform Cooperative folks to host their conference after-party, co-hosted the biweekly Progressive HackNight with our friends at Thoughtworks, studied how to build trustworthy tech with DotEveryone, and hosted one of BetaNYC's community engagement conversations on developing the "People's Map" for the future of civic tech and open data in NYC.

Two new public-sector agencies, NYC Department of Veterans Services and the NYC Department of Sanitation Foundation (Foundation for New York's Strongest), joined Civic Hall this fall, growing our component of public sector member organizations to fifteen. And as in the past, many of those organizations have taken advantage of their membership to engage the public and build stronger ties with the techies and local organizers who are at the heart of our community.

NYC 311 and the Manhattan Borough President's Office worked with us to mark the National Day of Civic Hacking with a Data Jam hackathon in September. Nearly 200 attendees spent the day together focusing on NYC 311's service requests and exploring how to best use insights to improve community board decision-making.

Building on a program started this spring, the New York City Department of Environmental Protection ran more of its "Green Infrastructure Grant Workshops" here to help NYC residents learn about funding opportunities for the design and construction of green infrastructure systems for qualified private properties in New York City. The workshop covers eligibility requirements, guidance through the application process, and a discussion on the programmatic details.

And working in tandem with longtime Civic Hall member organization the NYC Veterans Alliance, we held an informative "Lunch & Learn" talk for veterans, family members, and service providers to learn about the new NYC law, Local Law 119, that will provide the strongest local-level protection against discrimination in the nation for veterans and military service members

(and which was passed into law in large degree because of the efforts of the NYC Veterans Alliance).

In addition to the many individual events that take place here, the buzz of Civic Hall is punctuated by a number of regularly recurring member-centered get-togethers and workshops. These include a Monday 5:30 p.m. “What’s Your Week” workshop led by our community ambassadors, which regularly draws several dozen attendees who share what they’re working on and how members can help each other; a Friday morning “WeSparq” workshop where members share tips on how to be most productive; a monthly “Machine Eatable” lunch talk by and for data scientists, curated by Microsoft’s civic innovation team, which spends roughly half of its time at Civic Hall; a monthly “Press How To” lunch conversation with top tech journalists from publications like Wired, The Atlantic, CityLab and Digital.NYC; a quarterly #CivicWomen social; and a monthly “Member Show and Tell” that features quick demos and talks by members describing their projects’ progress.

CONCLUSION

As we headed in 2018, Civic Hall was also on the verge of a big change in our operational structure, one that only took effect in late January, but that was being evaluated as we moved through the fall. That change, which was ratified by the board of Civic Hall Labs, our partner nonprofit, at the end of that month, is the merger of both organizations into one unified nonprofit, operating under the name Civic Hall. As this report is being completed in early February 2018, we are currently in the middle of a strategic review of all our operations.

As we told our community when this decision was announced, it was driven by two main factors. First, we want to expand the resources, programs, and talent available to our members and the community at large. By merging our teams, we will create a more cohesive organization with even better programming, events, and member benefits, and we will increase opportunities for collaboration among our members, our community, and the larger public.

Second, becoming one unified nonprofit organization will provide the best foundation for us to move forward toward and scale up to the planned Civic Hall @ Union Square. Slated to open in early 2021, this exciting expansion will include a much bigger collaborative work space, a state-of-the-art events and conference facility, and a new 40,000 square foot digital learning and workforce development center for underserved populations. By unifying our two organizations, we will be more effectively organized and structured as we plan, develop, and build our new home.

We’re looking forward to continuing to grow and strengthen this community. We truly believe that together, we can organize to solve civic problems to scale, and this change will help us fulfill that mission and better serve our community.

Appendix:

Here are more excerpts from the impact reports written by members of the Civic Hall Organizers-in-Residence program fall cohort. The success of this program has taught us something important: collaboration and community are best created not just by offering creative people with similar values a common place, but by also adding ongoing structured workshops for a cohort that shares a common identity.

Kristen L. Rouse and Olivia Meier, NYC Veterans Alliance:

“Thanks to the resources, staff, and community support of the CHOIR program, the NYC Veterans Alliance has successfully advanced through a critical phase of organizational growth and capacity building that has included: Building and professionalizing our board of directors; building and professionalizing our staff of part-time employees and volunteers; applying for and receiving a transformational \$50,000 grant from the Craig Newmark Philanthropic Fund; and completing and submitting our applications for both 501c3 and 501c4 status. Central to our processes has been the internal conversation spurred by our series of conversations with Seth Godin. We’ve taken concepts and challenges back to our board and staff to rethink our tactics and strategies to move our audience, to realistically impact segments of our community, and to adjust our definitions and expectations of membership in our organization. Seth has been a tremendous influence on us, and we will continue to succeed by further implementing what we’ve learned from him. Before CHOIR, we were not effective fundraisers; CHOIR has been key to empowering us to turn this around.”

Josh Nussbaum, tech consultant to Indivisible and founder of The Movement Cooperative, which is building a group of organizations that will share access to critical data and tech tools for engaging voters:

“The Movement Cooperative would not be where it is today were it not for the CHOIR program. Civic Hall provided an invaluable network of individuals working at precisely the intersection of technology, data, and civic change where my work is situated. This network led to exposure to groups that joined our cooperative; mentors who helped shepherd me through an incredibly complicated landscape; funding connections; individuals who have become collaborators, joined TMC as founding staff, and experts in technology and social change who have lent their expertise at crucial moments..... There were many aspects of the CHOIR program for which I’m grateful, but at the very top of my list was the ongoing opportunity to check in, learn from, support, and be supported by a dozen other organizers who understood what I was going through because they were going through it themselves.”

Jackson Bird, founder of [Transmission](#), a podcast focused on raising awareness of trans issues:

“It was through exercises in the residency around target audiences, messaging, and pitches that I was able to synthesize all of my ideas into the strongest mission. As I work towards relaunching the podcast and building a community around it that will

eventually become the Transmission Media Collective – a network by and for trans creators to increase transgender representation in the media – the CHOIR program has advised me on structure, funding, presentation, personnel, and more.... the best thing the residency gave me was a reliable sounding board and the confidence to move forward with my work. My fellow residents helped me find grants and fellowships to apply for to fund Transmission, pushed me to apply, and gave me feedback on my application ideas.

Sherry Hakimi, founder of [GenEquality](#), a startup that is focused on activating individuals to collectively advance gender equality:

“The CHOIR Program has created a stronger, more intimate sense of community within the Civic Hall community, which is really nice. As a member of the CHOIR, I feel like I am part of something bigger than myself; the knowledge that I am connected and part of a community of like-minded people who are each actively organizing in the effort to make the world a better place in itself is a huge value-add. Leadership can also often feel very lonely. Being part of CHOIR has definitely helped mitigate for this loneliness; it’s especially helpful to be able to share trials/tribulations, highs/lows, and rewards/challenges with a group of people who not only truly get it, and who can offer their own experiences and advice for how to maintain steadiness throughout it all.”

Kathryn Jones, founder and co-director of Collective Agency, a network of several hundred volunteers with professional creative talent that produces digital media for progressive organizations and causes:

“Perhaps as we discuss impact I should be citing business model evolutions and strategy updates that Collective Agency has implemented as a result of my participation in CHOIR, but frankly that has not been CHOIR’s most important contribution to the continued growth of our mission. Running an organization is lonely. I have the partner of my dreams leading Collective Agency with me and the best team I have ever had the opportunity to work with. And still, some days feel impossible and hopeless and lonely. Combine that with the personal financial struggles that are inherent to running any startup and the challenge to keep moving forward can be immense. Time and time again the CHOIR community has been my bedrock and my inspiration and an integral element to Collective Agency’s ability to grow and to flourish as we continue our work of amplifying the voices of the progressive movement. I am so grateful so honored and so fortunate to be a member of the Civic Hall Organizers in Residence Program. After many years, and an entirely different career, at Civic Hall I have found my community.”

Erin Mazurksy and Rachel Dougherty of Rhize, a community of movement makers and allies that fosters sustained active participation in social movements around the world:

“The Civic Hall Organizers In Residence (CHOIR) program has been among the most cohesive and impactful community engagement programs Rhize has experienced while at Civic Hall. It has been extremely beneficial to have bi-weekly meetings with our cohort to forge relationships for co-learning and solidarity. We have been able to

connect with both old and new Civic Hall members through deeper and more structured engagement than ever before. This has greatly increased our sense of community and support.”

Kei Williams, [Black Lives Matter \(NYC\)](#) and [Movement NetLab](#), which assesses and trains with national networks organizing around environmentalism, fair-housing, and immigration issues:

“The CHOIR is a unique program that I am grateful to have been a part of piloting. Whenever I entered Civic Hall, I feel a sense of community if not from anyone else – I can depend on my fellow CHOIR members. Seth Godin’s insight and challenge of ‘20 questions’ were a difficult battle for me. I was in the midst of being in three organizations, Black Lives Matter taking up the majority of my time. Seth’s prompt allowed me to gain clarity around my approach and next steps as an organizer. I truly appreciate the friendship of fellow CHOIR members. Organizers give a lot of their time and often it’s a lonely road. Being able to witness and support the growth of dozens of organizers, working on various campaigns, was insightful and affirming that the work that we do is challenging but necessary.”

Kerri Kelly, founder of CTZNWELL, which organizes leaders and participants in the health and wellness sector to be more civically engaged:

“The Organizers Residency was the perfect incubator for us to design and test our new strategy. We restructured our resources, recalibrated our staff and prioritized our work to ensure that we that we were operating efficiently and directly towards our new goals..... In addition to expertise, the network encouraged a culture of courage and support that gave us permission to think big, take risks and fail forward.”