The Situation of At-risk and Displaced Artists and Culture Professionals

ON THE MOVE

Volume 3
Case Studies

CHAPTER 8

Supportive Interventions for the Mental Health and Well-being of At-Risk and Displaced Arts Workers

Co-funded by the European Union

On the Move is the international information network dedicated to artistic and cultural mobility, gathering 86 members from 32 countries. Since 2002, On the Move provides regular, up-to-date and free information on mobility opportunities, conditions and funding, and advocates for the value of cross-border cultural mobility. Co-funded by the European Union and the French Ministry of Culture, On the Move is implementing an ambitious multi-annual programme to build the capacities of local, regional, national, European and international stakeholders for the sustainable development of our cultural ecosystems.

On the Move regularly commissions researchers to investigate different themes closely related to the network's activities and the work carried out by its members. Reflecting on transversal concerns and key areas of artistic and cultural mobility, the network tries to establish a clearer picture of the current movements and trends while formulating policy recommendations.

http://on-the-move.org

Editor Yohann Floch
Researcher Milica Ilić
English Proofreader Claire Rosslyn Wilson
Graphic design and layout Marine Domec

Acknowledgements to participants in online and on-site discussions Bénédicte Alliot, Executive Director, Cité internationale des arts de Paris, France | Bojana Panevska, Programme Adviser, DutchCulture/TransArtists, The Netherlands | Fabienne Brütt, Project Manager, European and International Action Office, Ministry of Culture, France | Heather O'Donnell, Founding Director, The Green Room, Germany | Houari Bouchenak, Coordinator and Curator, Jiser, Spain | Ilinca Martorell, AiR Programmes Manager, and Ioana Crugel, International and European Development Manager, ACCR-Association des Centres culturels de rencontre, France | Isabelle Mallez, International Relations, City of Paris' Department of Cultural Affairs, France | Jonathan Leu, Events, Partnerships and Development Manager, Artistic Freedom Initiative, Switzerland | Julie Chenot, Director, Camargo Foundation, France | Julie Trébault, Executive Director, Artists at Risk Connection, NY, United States of America | Laura Gérard, Long Standing Partnerships' Coordinator, Cité internationale des arts de Paris, France | Laura Lohéac, Director of the PAUSE Programme, Collège de France, France | Laureen Grant, Head of PAUSE Programme's culture strand, Collège de France, France | Marie Le Sourd, Secretary General, On the Move, France & Belgium | Mary Sherman, Director, TransCultural Exchange, MA, United States of America | Mathieu Girard, Project Manager, Cité internationale des arts de Paris, France | Outi Elena Valanto, PhD Researcher, University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland and Residency Coordinator, The Green Room, Germany | Simon Dove, Executive Director, CEC ArtsLink, NY, United States of America | Todd Lester, Founder, freeDimensional, NY, United States of America

Acknowledgements to Dr Mary Ann DeVlieg, initiator of the research project, as well as the advisory committee members.

This publication uses the font Atkinson Hyperlegible – a typeface developed explicitly for visually impaired people. **https://www.brailleinstitute.org/freefont/**

Suggested citation format: Ilić, M., 'Chapter 8: Supportive Interventions for the Mental Health and Well-being of At-Risk and Displaced Arts Workers' in *The Situation of At-risk and Displaced Artists and Culture Professionals – Volume 3 Case Studies*, On the Move, 2025, available at **on-the-move.org/resources**.

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

CHAPTER 8

Supportive Interventions for the Mental Health and Well-being of At-Risk and Displaced Arts Workers

By Milica Ilić

CONTENTS

Mental health and well-being are gaining increased attention within the arts sector. The topic has become more visible in international forums and a growing number of projects and programmes are beginning to address it in concrete ways. In the case of at-risk and forcibly displaced artists, mental health is not a secondary concern, it is central to their ability to rebuild a professional and personal life.

As highlighted in publications such as Mental Health, Well-being and International Cultural Mobility by On the Move, forcibly displaced artists often experience profound psychological distress. Their lives are frequently marked by trauma—rooted in threats, persecution, or forced exile—which is compounded by instability, marginalisation, and uncertainty in their new environments.

This article contributes to current efforts to improve mental health and well-being support for at-risk and displaced artists by drawing on the experience of those who work directly with them. It offers a set of perspectives and practical recommendations to help inform future support structures, policies, and initiatives.

Scope and approach

This article is part of a broader series examining the situation of at-risk and displaced artists and art workers in Europe and the United States of America. It spans a vast and diverse terrain shaped by different migration histories, policy landscapes, and personal experiences.

It draws on several online and in-person conversations that took place in June 2025 with a range of actors involved in supporting at-risk and displaced artists. At its core are online interviews with representatives of The Green Room and their GreenHaven Artist Residencies, the Artistic Freedom Initiative (AFI), On the Move, and long-time activist and arts and human rights advocate Todd Lester. The article was further enriched by contributions shared during the seminar 'Reimagining Hospitality' held in Paris during the same period, co-organised by Cité internationale des arts de Paris in collaboration with DutchCulture, On the Move, Fresh Arts Coalition Europe (FACE), and Artists at Risk Connection (ARC). The examples and experiences discussed in Paris complemented and deepened those shared in the online conversations.

Based on this input, the author identified **key issues commonly cited as critical** by participants and formulated a set of actionable suggestions grounded in their experience, insights, and knowledge of both the possibilities and constraints of current support structures. Rather than providing a comprehensive analysis, this article offers a practice-based snapshot that centres the voices of cultural workers directly engaged in this field.

This contribution complements existing research, such as The Barcelona Guidelines on Wellbeing and Temporary International Relocation of Human Rights Defenders at Risk. It confirms and illustrates broader findings through the lived

realities of those in the cultural sector and serves as an invitation to continue exploring mental health and well-being—not only for displaced artists, but also for those creating and sustaining structures of care.

What emerges from these discussions is a clear call for more coherent, long-term, and care-based approaches to the provision of support. The sections that follow unpack the core challenges and offer insights into how mental health and well-being are embedded in every layer of the support system.

Well-being and mental health as a systemic issue

Mental health in the context of exile and forced migration is not a separate issue, it is inseparable from safety, professional development, funding, and long-term integration. It must be addressed transversally, as part of broader care structures, rather than treated as an optional add-on.

The **Green Room**, a performing arts support structure led by psychologist Heather O'Donnell, offers a residency programme for at-risk and forcibly displaced artists. Residents access a range of psychosocial support based on individual needs, underscoring how **mental health is closely linked to stability and safety**. Without a secure environment, it becomes difficult to meet core needs, let alone support creative development.

ARC, Julie Trébault underlines the importance of culturally sensitive mental health support as part of broader care structures. ARC collaborates with medical professionals and makes a concerted effort to connect artists with psychologists who speak their language and understand their cultural background. This kind of tailored support plays a vital role in helping artists process trauma and begin to rebuild their lives.

A similar understanding comes from Jonathan Leu of the AFI, an organisation led by immigration and human rights attorneys that facilitates legal representation and resettlement assistance for international artists at risk. AFI does not directly provide mental health support, but it operates within a framework that recognises well-being as a value embedded in broader structural support. As Leu notes, **saving an artist's life—or that of their family—does not in itself preserve the continuity of their artistic practice**. Well-being must be built into the process of creating a sustainable, enabling environment.

Todd Lester, a São Paulo–based artist and founder of **freeDimensional**, who has spent two decades connecting at-risk artists with safe residencies as well as co-developing major support initiatives such as the **IIE Artist Protection Fund**, Artist at Risk Connection, and the **Martin Roth-Initiative**, argues that arts organisations are uniquely well positioned to provide both safety and care: 'If a person is arriving in a new and unfamiliar place, I can't imagine a better way to receive them than through a feisty arts organisation'.

Other organisations are also shifting toward community-rooted care approaches. One example is **Casa do Povo** in São Paulo, which hosts open-cycle psychoanalysis sessions within its diverse neighbourhood context. As Lester notes, such initiatives reflect an 'expanded space where psychosocial concerns and care are happening in different ways', not always through conventional therapeutic models, but through practices that are often **curatorial, experimental, and deeply embedded in local realities**. While he stresses the importance of interrogating and challenging superficial forms of care, he also highlights the potential of such community-grounded efforts to provide meaningful support in culturally diverse environments.

This resonates also with the work of the Green Room. Aware of the challenges of providing a continuous safe environment, they have moved toward a more holistic framework, inspired in part by principles of community psychology. Rather than prescribing a therapeutic path, they create the conditions in which individuals can undertake their own therapeutic or healing journeys, whether or not these are explicitly named as such.

Lester also emphasises the importance of early, proactive communication when hosting artists at risk. Hosts should name common risks early on, creating openness and reducing stigma. Documents such as the **Art Spaces Hosting Activism** tactical notebook can be **excellent guides** in this process.

At the same time, Marie Le Sourd from On the Move, currently accompanying Palestinian artists selected by the Institut français to benefit from the **Sawa Sawa Residency Programme**, underlines the limits of standardised approaches. No context of risk and displacement is ever the same, which poses a real challenge for those designing support mechanisms. Each situation demands a rethinking of processes and tools, making it difficult to draw fixed lessons from past experience. As she notes: 'There is no type of long-term solution; we always need to experiment with new ways'.

Together, these perspectives point to the need for hosting practices that are not only logistically sound but emotionally intelligent approaches that treat well-being not as an afterthought, but as a foundational condition for artistic and human flourishing.

Financial stability as a condition for care

Funding is a crucial factor in both supporting the well-being of artists and enabling host organisations to carry out this work. However, as noted by Bojana Panevska, Programme Adviser for **TransArtists**, many of the organisations involved lack the resources and capacity to do this sustainably.

For artists and hosts alike, funding is not only a structural concern, it is also a critical part of the mental health challenge. Support often falls between two funding systems—social and cultural—neither fully adapted to artists' complex realities. For example, cultural funding often assumes visibility, while social funding may require community engagement, neither of which may be viable for an artist experiencing trauma or facing security concerns.

For example, the Green Room once hosted an artist who, due to the risks associated with his exile, chose not to share their name when presenting his work. This necessary anonymity clashed with cultural sector norms, which often tie funding to visibility. Moreover, from a social funding perspective, artists are sometimes expected to engage communities—an expectation that may not align with their personal artistic trajectory, capacity or intentions.

Such mismatches add to the stress and fragility of the already precarious situations of hosts and beneficiaries. What is needed is not just more funding, but funding that is flexible, diversified, and grounded in real working conditions. Short-term, project-based models rarely align with the slow, unpredictable pace of healing and integration, as noted by Simon Dove, Executive Director of **CEC ArtsLink** and Mary Sherman, Executive Director of **Transcultural Exchange**. Without stable, long-term support, care remains fragmented and unsustainable.

Challenging the organisational frame

In the current organisational framework, there are clear divisions between those who provide support and those who receive it. While this structure may be necessary to some extent, it often reinforces power dynamics that inhibit more human-to-human relationships. These dynamics can lead to miscommunication, misunderstanding, and emotional distance.

Artist and researcher Outi Elena Valanto—also coordinator of the GreenHaven Artist Residencies—addresses these issues in her research **Dance-based methodologies for navigating emotional labor and power dynamics in artist residencies**. She explores how dance-based practices might help prepare cultural professionals and institutions to host at-risk artists with greater empathy, sensitivity, and resilience. Her work advocates for a more embodied, relational approach, one that moves beyond administrative roles and toward genuine connection.

Another key element of a **care-based approach is continuity**. Time is essential, as the experience of forced displacement is often marked by prolonged, anxiety-laden processes—administrative, legal, emotional, and social—that affect both artists and their families. Short-term residencies rarely align with this extended timeline.

In her research, Valanto observes that most residencies for at-risk artists are offered as one-time opportunities, which often fails to establish continuity or long-term support structures. As Jonathan Leu of AFI notes, while three months may seem substantial in the context of general artist residencies, it is often insufficient for artists who have lived through prolonged instability and precarity. Rather than offering stability, **short residencies can increase pressure and uncertainty**.

This point is echoed by Heather O'Donnell: 'I noticed when artists were coming, I was already thinking about them leaving because so much had to happen within those two or three months. They had to be ready to go out into the world. So it wasn't an opportunity just to come, rest, recover.' This is confirmed by Julie Trébault, Executive Director of ARC, who notes that a meaningful framework for well-being and mental health must include time—not only for producing, but for settling, healing, and redefining purpose.

Identity and (mis)representation

Forced displacement can profoundly affect an artist's sense of value and identity. The loss of context and audience, disruption of recognition, precarious living conditions, and interruption of creative processes can lead to deep questioning of one's worth, belonging, and purpose. As Jonathan Leu puts it: 'The migration process in itself is the loss of some status, of some identity, but the arrival brings another level of complexity because then they're alone again.'

Supporting the displacement of at-risk artists and their hosting also requires careful work around **risk assessment** and the artist's potential for support. In this sense, the artist's profile or previous notoriety becomes another site of tension and identity negotiation. Todd Lester points out that established or well-known artists may face a different kind of burden. When an artist with a strong public profile experiences displacement, they can be caught between two identities: on one hand, the accomplished artist they were; on the other, the symbolic 'poster figure' for a cause. As Lester notes, 'therein is confusion.' The weight of past recognition introduces new expectations, projections, or instrumentalisation.

Upon arrival, artists often confront externally imposed identities that feel limiting or alien. They must navigate the gap between imposed labels and their own sense of artistic self. While their circumstances clearly require tailored support, many are uneasy with labels like 'artist in exile' or 'refugee artist,' which can falsely separate them from their peers. As Outi Elena Valanto notes: 'A really important part of the integration, or the afterlife process of artists, is to get rid of the status and label.'

Funding mechanisms often reinforce these categories. To access support, artists may feel compelled to adopt a 'refugee' identity. **The arts market, too, may reward narratives that align with donor or audience expectations.** This can pressure artists to perform a version of themselves that fits external frameworks.

Ultimately, this dynamic contributes to the instrumentalisation of the arts, where artists are valued more for their biography than their practice. Such positioning undermines their agency and reproduces the very marginalisation the support was designed to address.

Community as recovery infrastructure

Creating—or re-creating—a sense of community is a crucial element in reaffirming an artist's value and identity, and a **major building block in rebuilding both personal and professional lives**. As Heather O'Donnell notes: 'What's really needed is networking, not just among the artists themselves, but also with members of the local arts communities. Cross-networking, making connections, and simply being together and creating art—that's essential.'

Community building is a key component of the professional development process put in place by AFI. They rely heavily on the support of artists who have already navigated the process successfully: 'We keep the relationship with many people because we always have an opportunity to help them, or they can bring opportunities for us to push our mission forward.' The community is also sustained through ongoing relationships built at different points in each artist's trajectory. There are recurring patterns in the support process, where the organisation encounters artists at stages similar to those of earlier beneficiaries, and these overlaps create loops of mutual learning and support, reinforcing the network over time.

Support relationships often become strong bonds, especially in the early stages when artists are navigating extreme uncertainty. In some cases, these bonds are a crucial part of the artist's sense of safety. As O'Donnell puts it: 'Make sure that the artists feel that there's safety, that there's strong enough leadership, that it's a strong enough programme to support them.'

These strong connections don't necessarily end when the residency does, especially if the artist remains in the host country. AFI builds on this continuity by fostering long-term community ties. Artists previously supported by AFI often stay in touch and become part of a loose but supportive network. They share information, extend contacts, and help newcomers navigate the system: 'They can in some way give back to the organisation by expanding our reach, our possibilities, our perspectives.'

As discussed during the meeting at the Cité internationale des arts de Paris, strong bonds require time and intention. Maintaining these connections over time is essential for building a resilient and lasting sense of community. Support structures should therefore not only focus on

the residency period, but include post-residency relationships as a key part of their design.

To foster this long-term perspective, more opportunities are needed for hosts and beneficiaries to come together, whether separately or in mixed settings. Spaces for shared reflection, exchange, and relationship-building are still too rare, and their absence limits the potential for longer-term solidarity and collaboration.

One example of thoughtful community integration is the **Artist Safe Haven Residency Program**, which hosts at risk and forcibly displaced artists in New York City. The programme was developed as a form of community organising and curatorial balancing, not simply as housing provision. Residents were selected with care to ensure a diversity of backgrounds and needs, avoiding the concentration of individuals from a single recent crisis zone to **prevent retraumatisation or overburdening**. The goal was to foster a mutual relationship between the residents and the surrounding community—recognising artists as neighbours and peers, not representatives or spokespeople for their crises. This careful curatorial approach helped create a more sustainable and respectful environment for both artists and the host community.

Building collective capacity

Supporting at-risk and displaced artists requires the mobilisation of a wide range of competences that are rarely present within a single organisation. This work demands a large and diverse network of collaborators across sectors, each bringing different knowledge and skills.

Todd Lester, reflecting on his work with freeDimensional, strongly advocates for deeper collaboration between the human rights field and the artist residency sector and notes: 'Even before we formally started this kind of matchmaking in 2003, I already had a notebook full of examples—an underground 'railroad' of sorts—where this kind of support had worked informally. I still believe that the human rights world and the arts sector need to come together more intentionally.' At the seminar at Cité internationale des arts, participants highlighted connections with organisations working directly with refugees as underdeveloped but particularly valuable.

This reinforces the idea that meaningful support can emerge when different ecosystems connect—not only cultural, but also legal, medical, psychological, social, and activist sectors. For example, The Green Room, as a support centre focused on psychosocial care, may not have in-house production expertise, but this is a competence that other organisations can provide: 'We're speaking a little bit utopically—it's probably not possible to have all the needed competences in the room—but the more, the better. People with expertise in law, in visa processes, people with firsthand experience of refugee status—all that makes the programme stronger.'

For Outi Elena Valanto, the most important task, then, is to multiply and diversify partnerships: 'You need perspectives from different people because everyone has their own area of expertise.' To bring together this range of competences and provide consistent, multifaceted support, a single organisation or residency is rarely enough. Yet coalitions remain rare: 'There aren't enough hosting structures built on collaboration or shared responsibility,' she adds.

Todd Lester also reinforces the importance of diverse lived experience within teams, noting the specific contribution of neurodiverse team members: 'If you have someone who's neurodiverse, working as an administrator with mental health issues, they can bring a lot of their own personal knowledge into what they do for a stakeholder.'

Language is another essential element of team diversity. As Outi Elena Valanto notes: 'If you don't have a common language, or if you need to use translators, it affects the entire process. It influences power relations and impacts the general well-being on both sides.' Having someone on the team who speaks the artist's language significantly improves communication and trust. Beyond language, cultural literacy is just as critical. As Jonathan Leu of AFI explains: 'The way people speak, love, care for their families, and create art—having that insight is much more legitimate and much more skillful when it comes to assessing a situation.'

Support systems for hosts

As the demand for supporting at-risk and displaced artists grows, so does the need to strengthen the capacities of the teams most directly involved in this work. Ilinca Martorell, in charge of residencies at the **Association des Centres culturels de rencontre** (ACCR), highlights the pressure that hosts can feel when welcoming artists navigating displacement and uncertainty. Organisations are increasingly recognising the importance of being better prepared to provide mental health support, not only to the artists, but also to themselves.

Several organisations, such as ARC, the **PAUSE programme** and Cité internationale des arts de Paris, have already integrated mental health training into their operations. At ARC, for example, support for staff is taken seriously. As Executive Director Julie Trébault explains: 'You cannot care for others if you are not well yourself.' In response, ARC has established regular secondary trauma support group sessions facilitated by a trauma specialist, creating space for staff to process the emotional weight of their responsibilities. The organisation also ensures access to individual psychological support during periods of acute crisis—such as the Taliban takeover or the ongoing war in Gaza—when constituents face heightened risk and the team experiences exceptional strain. Other inspiring practices can be found in documents such as **Wellbeing During Temporary International Relocation and the Good Practices for the Implementation of the 2019 Barcelona Guidelines**.

Hosting at-risk artists requires more than specific knowledge, skills, and competences; it also demands emotional attention and personal commitment, often to a degree that makes it difficult to maintain healthy boundaries. As Jonathan Leu notes: 'You cannot be at home in the evening with your family and be crazy because of what happens.' The intense bonds that often form during the hosting period can create a high level of dependency, particularly in the early stages, when the artist is navigating deep uncertainty. It is therefore crucial to clarify roles from the outset and avoid overextension. Maintaining clear boundaries helps build trust and prevents burnout on both sides.

Peer-to-peer exchanges are invaluable—not only for filling skill gaps, but also for creating meaningful human connections with others who have gone through similar experiences. One key insight from the closed meeting of support organisations for at-risk artists was the urgent need for a transnational support network that also recognises and supports the mental health and well-being of hosts.

In addition, tools grounded in artistic practice—perhaps dance and movement, as suggested by Outi Elena Valanto—could be developed to support hosts, providing coping mechanisms, space for reflection, and creative methods for managing emotional labour. Such tools can help hosts understand their own limits and establish boundaries they feel comfortable with, while remaining engaged and supportive in their roles.

Towards effective support structures for at-risk and displaced artists and culture professionals

The following features have been distilled from the conversations, practices and experiences shared throughout this document. They outline key elements that support structures should embed in order to respond meaningfully to the needs of at-risk and displaced artists. These are not fixed prescriptions but evolving principles grounded in practice.

Key features of effective support schemes for at-risk and displaced artists:

1. Mental health and well-being embedded throughout

Effective schemes treat mental health and well-being as **foundational**, not optional. This includes **both artist support and care for staff involved**, using **formal training** and **creative, embodied tools** for emotional resilience. Models often **combine formal and informal approaches** and are **rooted in cultural sensitivity and community-based care**.

2. Time and continuity as structural components

Support is conceived as a **process**, not a one-off intervention. **Longer residencies and progressive models and tools** allow for rest, healing, creation and the redefinition of purpose. **Follow-up** and **peer-based networks** provide continuity beyond the residency period.

3. Respect for autonomy and identity

Schemes are designed to **respect the privacy of artists** and avoid imposing visibility. **Artists keep their agency** and guide their own level of public exposure. Support is **not conditional** on personal narrative or symbolic value, and **artistic merit is valued** on its own terms and is context-related.

4. Shared responsibility and cross-sectoral collaboration

Responsibility of hosting is shared across organisations and is rooted in multiple sectors. **Cross-sector alliances** (including arts, human rights, legal, psychosocial, and civil society actors) bring together complementary skills and ensure systemic support.

5. Ethical relationship building and role clarity

Emotional dynamics between artists and hosts are openly acknowledged. **Clear roles, boundaries** and **reflective practices** help sustain care. Strong **interpersonal connections** are supported and encouraged, and **dependency is addressed**.

6. Inclusive and diverse team structures

Teams often **include people with lived experience of displacement**, along with interdisciplinary competences. **Language skills** and **cultural literacy** are treated as central to trust and well-being.

Supporting at-risk and forcibly displaced artists is not only a humanitarian imperative, it also invites a broader reflection on how care is embedded in the structures and practices of the cultural sector. The experiences shared here underline that well-being is not a separate issue. It is inseparable from safety, recognition, funding, time, and belonging. When support is approached in a holistic way, it can open space for transformation—not just for the artists concerned, but also for the organisations and communities involved.

About the Author

Milica Ilić is a cultural worker with extensive experience in transnational cooperation within contemporary performing arts. She is particularly invested in exploring organisational practices in the arts sector that are grounded in equity and solidarity. Milica supports the strategic development of cooperation projects and actively contributes to the transnational arts scene as a trainer, educator, researcher, and evaluator. She has authored and co-authored numerous articles, policy papers, and analyses.

Advisory committee members

To fully appreciate the breadth of the research on The Situation of At-Risk and Displaced Artists and Culture Professionals, please do consider reading the **other chapters** gathered in this third report, as well as the first two reports available for download: **Intersecting Temporalities: At-Risk and Displaced Artists in Transition – Volume 1 Scoping Review** and **Policy and Practice in the EU: Pathways, Impediments, and Patchwork Solutions – Volume 2 Cultural Policy Analysis**.

ON
THE
MOVE

Co-funded by
the European Union