

SAN DIEGO DANCE COMMUNITY INITIATIVE: ADVANCING A LOCALLY ALLIED DANCE SECTOR



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About San Diego ART Matters

San Diego ART Matters (SDAM) is a nonprofit arts advocacy and service organization whose mission is to strengthen San Diego's creative ecosystem and advocate for greater public and private investment in the people and institutions that make our region's arts and culture sector thrive.

Founded in 1989 as the San Diego Arts and Culture Coalition, SDAM champions arts and culture as essential to vibrant San Diego communities through regional programming, services, convenings, grant opportunities, and advocacy networks that foster public awareness and generate resources to cultivate an equitable and thriving arts and culture sector and creative workforce.

The SDAM motto – "Together, we make art happen," is amplified through the following results:

SDAM Recent Accomplishments

- Grants administrator and intermediary for the City of San Diego Commission for Arts and Culture's Far South/Border North project, a \$6 million artist-to-work and community engagement project for San Diego and Imperial Counties
- Research partner for AEP6 (Arts and Economic Prosperity 6), a national study to measure the economic impact of the arts in the City of San Diego in partnership with the City of San Diego Commission for Arts and Culture and Americans for the Arts
- Successfully facilitated a community-led advocacy campaign to establish the San Diego County Arts and Culture Commission, a county-wide local arts agency

New programs and services in 2024/2025:

- San Diego Artists Count – a county-wide assessment of San Diego's arts and culture sector
- Local Arts Agency Learning Network – a capacity-building program for San Diego cities and their local arts agencies

- San Diego Arts Advocates – a working group of emerging and experienced arts advocates who actively support increased public support for arts and culture at the local, state, and national legislative levels.

The SDAM office is in the UC San Diego Park and Market facility in East Village, San Diego's largest downtown neighborhood.

San Diego ART Matters is funded in part by a generous grant from the Prebys Foundation and donations from people who share our mission. For more information regarding San Diego ART Matters programs and services, visit sdartmatters.org.

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Executive Summary

Working in partnership with San Diego ART Matters, the San Diego dance community presents this white paper to solicit feedback regarding the feasibility of launching a San Diego dance community initiative. A white paper aims to help readers understand an issue, solve a problem, or gain feedback to inform decisions.

The need for a community initiative focused on dance developed over months and potentially over years and decades of discussion within San Diego's dance community. Dance artists, choreographers, administrators, production staff and technicians, patrons, donors and enthusiasts have voiced concern about the vitality of San Diego's dance sector and its lack of a centralized hub or service organization that could bring dance workers and supporters together for positive change. In previous years, the San Diego dance community benefited from the support of a nonprofit service organization focused on promoting and advocating for its needs. The San Diego Area Dance Alliance and the more recent San Diego Dance Network ceased operations, leaving a void in leadership and service.

Recently, Zaquia Salinas, a San Diego-based dancer, educator, and arts administrator, received a grant from the City of San Diego Commission for Arts and Culture's Far South Border North project, which was designed to provide individual artists with funding to investigate ways to bridge the gap between the arts and social justice, health and wellness, climate change and other community-driven issues. Salinas chose to investigate how to support an ever-growing and changing dance ecology" in San Diego. Through facilitated discussions, she conducted preliminary research on the history of dance in San Diego through one-on-one interviews, listening sessions, and a story-collection process.

She also hosted a series of in-person meetings called "Town Halls," where she provided a safe space for dance practitioners to share their experiences working as dance professionals in San Diego, discuss the field's strengths and weaknesses, and envision a desired future. While the community's strengths far outweigh its weaknesses, issues within the dance sector were significant enough to threaten its long-term viability.

The outcome of Salinas' project was the coalescing of a small group of interested dance practitioners who tasked themselves with collecting additional feedback from the dance community regarding the feasibility of launching a community initiative that will advance a locally allied dance sector. The dance practitioners enlisted the assistance of San Diego ART Matters, an advocacy and arts service organization whose leadership prioritizes the development of networks within the arts and culture sector as a strategy for capacity building and growth.

With the volunteers' input, San Diego ART Matters presents this white paper as a first step toward establishing a community initiative that will drive the growth and development of San Diego's dance sector, which includes all dance genres and forms. Informed by initial findings from Salinas's work and

additional feedback from the broadest representation of other dance practitioners and supporters, the community initiative will provide comprehensive solutions to the problems holding the dance community back. One solution under consideration is developing a plan to guide the initiative's work and a new dance entity designed to serve as a hub from which the plan's programs and activities can be disseminated.

This white paper is presented to "test the temperature" of the San Diego dance community regarding the feasibility of launching a community initiative focused on their needs and as a catalyst for additional discussion. Community feedback from a broad and diverse constituency is critical to this stage of the process. Those reading this paper are encouraged to weigh in and add their voices to an effort to make San Diego's dance community healthier, happier, and whole.

This stage could take weeks, months, or longer to ensure that with whatever path is taken, the San Diego Dance Community Initiative stands the best chance of success.

The San Diego Dance Community Initiative: Advancing a Locally Allied Dance Sector

Introduction

Dance, arguably the most widely practiced art form, may be the most under-recognized and least supported artistic discipline in the United States. However, dance practitioners in San Diego have survived and sometimes thrived over the years while providing high-quality programs and services to appreciative audiences. The lack of sustainable resources makes organizing San Diego's dance sector, building capacity among dance organizations, promoting collaboration, and connecting dancers to resources more challenging. However, through peaks and valleys, the cycle of trying to make San Diego's dance sector stronger never entirely ends.

The San Diego Area Dance Alliance, a collective representing dance troupes and independent dance makers, brought the splintered sectors of local dance together for the first time in 1981 and began a concerted effort to encourage excellence and promote the value of dance in San Diego.¹ When the Dance Alliance folded in the 1990s, talk of replacing it was rampant, but a new organization didn't transpire until decades later. With support from the San Diego Foundation, the San Diego Dance Network launched in 2014, a regional dance coalition that eventually folded when leadership changes at the Foundation caused a shift in focus away from the arts, and volunteer leaders lacked the time and resources to sustain operations. With lessons learned from the pandemic, a new generation of dance leaders have taken the reins, are challenging norms, and imagining a future with a dance service organization built to last.

Zaquia Salinas, a San Diego-based dancer, educator, and arts administrator, is a member of the new guard working to orchestrate a movement to see San Diego dance evolve. She and others recognize that much has changed in the entire arts and culture sector over the past several decades, and the time is now for new solutions for the sector's growth and sustainability.

With a grant from the City of San Diego Commission for Arts and Culture's Far South Border North project, Salinas' "Town Hall" project was born to address the question of "how to support an ever-growing and changing dance ecology" in San Diego. In her artistic statement, Salinas acknowledged and respected the many past efforts to respond to the conditions and needs of dance in the San Diego region. She recognized that, unlike other artistic disciplines, dance seemed to struggle differently, if not more, than other performing arts. Her curiosity about what an improved dance community would look like led her to turn to the dance practitioners themselves to envision a desired future.

¹ Sondak, Eileen, *Los Angeles Times*, (1989) "San Diego Dance in the Eighties: During Decade, San Diego Took Big Step Forward," Eileen Sondak, Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/46fECxv>.

Salinas' "Town Hall" project was developed with a clear set of goals offering significant potential for the local dance community.

- Illuminate and archive stories of individual local movement artists, dancers, choreographers, administrators, and community members
- Name the triumphs and challenges of the current local dance ecology. By acknowledging these challenges, she hoped to foster empathy and understanding of the difficulties faced by the local dance community.
- Design a path forward that activates and interconnects the community
- Support individual and collective action and accountability, empowering each community member to contribute to the sector's growth and sustainability. This emphasis on growth and sustainability should instill a sense of optimism and confidence in the local dance sector's potential.

Her project's methodology included preliminary research on the history of dance in San Diego, one-on-one interviews, listening sessions, a story collection process, town hall-style gatherings, and the development of online platforms for ongoing feedback.

The outcome of Salinas' assessment of the current state of dance in San Diego, which resulted from the "Town Hall" project activities, was the development of a small group of dance practitioners who have tasked themselves with collecting additional feedback from the dance community regarding the feasibility of launching a community initiative that will advance a locally allied dance sector. The task force has enlisted the help of San Diego ART Matters to provide funding, guidance, and administrative support for this phase of their fact-finding process.

Situational Analysis: What Do We Know?

Beginning in 2024, Salinas' "Town Hall" project helped initiate a dialogue with San Diego's performing arts community about the status of dance in the region. Those who participated in the dialogue represented diverse aspects of San Diego's dance community, primarily from the contemporary dance community. Based on interviews, surveys, and other activities related to her research, there now exists a starting point for assessing the sector's health and well-being.

As an art form, dance is more popular than ever and continues to have an enduring and profound impact on communities throughout San Diego County, the country, and the world. Advancing a multitude of voices and genres gives dance its fullest expression. Dance artists are the heart of a thriving dance sector, and dance organizations of all types are stabilizing forces that ground their work and attract audiences. Dance matters. However, dance in San Diego merits broader recognition, resources, and support.

The financial and cultural landscape of the dance ecosystem has shifted since the onset of COVID-19 and is continuing to recover and rebuild. According to Dance Magazine journalist Karen Hildebrand, the dance community has caught glimpses of healthier ways to conduct business, produce more inclusive events,

and better support artists over the past three years. While some see an urgency to return to business as usual, others see danger in maintaining the status quo.

Hildebrand attended the Association of Performing Arts Professionals annual convening in January 2023 for its first in-person conference in three years and had an opportunity to interview members of the presenting community, artist managers, and dance artists about what they see—and would like to see—as the business of live performance moves forward. Hildebrand's article, "We Can't go Back: How the Pandemic Created Space to Reflect on Unsustainable or Harmful Dance Industry Norms" ² mirrors sentiments within San Diego's dance sector.

She noted that the burnout dance artists have been feeling is real, but so is the resilience they display as they learn new ways of staying mentally and physically healthy. Many spoke of the dance community's response to the murder of George Floyd, which was swift and resulted in a stronger commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion, which continues today. But just as swiftly as DEI commitments were made and posted to websites, there was a concern that those commitments would wane without an ongoing investment of resources and continued learning. Others were concerned with touring costs, which have increased due to inflation, and that audiences are returning in different numbers than before the pandemic, impacting earned income. Efforts to further the dance ecosystem and increase pay for artists, particularly independent artists, who are not well served by current grantmaking processes, are challenging when funds are limited.

There are some glimmers of hope evidenced here at home. San Diego's dance community is adapting to the new realities, but not as quickly or strongly as it could or should to grow and become more sustainable. There is a growing call for the community to "heal," address its deficiencies, and plan for the future. Connectivity and collaboration will be key to growth.

The following is a summary of comments collected by Salinas through her "Town Hall" project.

²Hildebrand, Karen, (2023) *Dance Magazine*, "We Can't go Back: How the Pandemic Created Space to Reflect on Unsustainable or Harmful Dance Industry Norms". Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3WzrPTc>

San Diego Dance Community Strengths

- The dance community is diverse, with many independent dancers, dance makers and dance organizations that produce and present their work
- Strong artists, teachers, instructors, and choreographers
- People are finally being honest about their experiences – speaking truths
- Closely held and collegial relationships among individuals in the dance community
- There is wisdom among the elders whose long histories of contributions and work are valued
- Previous history of community organizing (San Diego Area Dance Alliance; SD Dance Collective)
- People are seeking change and are open to change
- A growing community of young and emerging talent with eager young leaders ready to take the helm
- Strengths outweigh the weaknesses

San Diego Dance Community Weaknesses

- San Diego dance community is not cohesive – it is disconnected and undefined
- The dance community operates with a scarcity mindset
- A lack of inter-generational trust between “old guard” and “new guard”
- Ethics, regulatory and compliance practices and policies are not standardized across organizations
- There is no forum or neutral space to air grievances and find resolutions
- Lack of civility – interpersonal communications can be toxic
- Lack of overall understanding of the “business of dance”
- Audiences not growing
- Audiences not educated or sophisticated consumers of dance
- Lack of adequate working space for independent dance artists
- Lack of opportunities and adequate facilities to present work
- Under appreciation of new dance forms/techniques (particularly contemporary)
Lack of rigorous dance training for adult students
- Dance sector is hierarchical - not all genres are legitimized or feel included
- Lack of a central place to find information regarding dance - auditions, studio space, grants, calendar, etc

What is the San Diego Dance Community Initiative?

A community initiative can be an individual or network - working together to invest significant resources and time to address a specific community problem. Community initiatives range in size and serve a variety of causes, including social justice, the environment, animal rights, education, philanthropy, and arts and culture. One thing community initiatives of all types should have in common is a commitment to clarify the Initiative's purpose and intended outcomes and establish the feasibility of success before moving forward. Issuing this white paper and gaining broad community feedback is part of the due diligence process for the initiators of the San Diego Dance Community Initiative.

The San Diego Dance Initiative (the Initiative) will engage a broad population of San Diego dance practitioners, supporters, and advocates in determining how best to address areas of need within the San Diego dance sector and work to develop community-held solutions that build capacity through various strategies and tactics.

The Initiative will position San Diego dance leaders to engage dancers, choreographers, teachers, presenters, dance journalists and scholars, wellness and health providers, and dance enthusiasts from diverse dance genres and geographies in envisioning a San Diego Dance Community Initiative.

What will the San Diego Dance Initiative Do?

If initiated, the San Diego Dance Community Initiative will establish a Steering Committee to oversee the Initiative and develop a plan to address the needs and challenges of San Diego's dance sector. The Steering Committee will consist of a diverse group of dance and other community and cultural leaders with the time, talent, and access to resources needed to move the Initiative forward. Working together, they will advocate, advise, and serve as a think tank for the dance community and guide the Initiative toward developing community-held solutions.

When implemented, the plan has the potential to increase cultural equity and access to dance for diverse communities, build dance audiences, and promote quality and sustainability among dance practitioners and organizations.

A potential outcome of the Steering Committee's work may be establishing a dance service organization that will be accountable for implementing the plan and allow for ongoing input and feedback from the dance community.

About Arts Service Organizations

Arts service organizations (ASOs) are nonprofit organizations that support the interests of artists, arts organizations, and the arts community. They can provide a variety of services, including advocacy, capacity building, collective projects, education, grantmaking, industry research, networking, policy

development, and professional services. They can be particularly beneficial to artists and groups with fewer resources. Some examples of arts service organizations connected to dance include the Association of Performing Arts Professionals, a national organization that supports the performing arts industry and its presenters. Dance/USA is the premiere national service organization for dance with a mission to champion an inclusive and equitable dance field by leading, convening, advocating, and supporting individuals and organizations. Their core programs are focused on the areas of engagement, advocacy, research, and preservation.

The following are three examples of dance service organizations operating in Chicago, Boston, and Houston.

Three Dance Service Organization Examples

See Chicago Dance

City of Chicago Population: 2.66 million

Mission: See Chicago Dance is a nonprofit service organization that advocates for the dance field and strengthens diverse dance organizations and artists through services and programs that build and engage audiences. Their two-pronged approach focuses on building audiences while developing a more cohesive dance community.

History: Originating as the website SeeChicagoDance.com, See Chicago Dance evolved as part of a multiyear market research study on strengthening the dance sector and building larger audiences, funded by the Chicago Community Trust (CCT) in 2003. SeeChicagoDance.com quickly proved to be a valuable asset for patrons and artists alike and needed to continue beyond the duration of the CCT grant. In 2006, a supporting service organization was created to ensure that vital audience development services would continue for the Chicago dance field.

Initially called "Audience Architects," the organization was formed to include other art forms such as theater and music. However, as time passed, the organization focused solely on dance, partly because dance had some of the greatest audience development needs.

In the spring of 2018, as part of a five-year strategic plan, Audience Architects changed its name to See Chicago Dance to streamline and strengthen its position across all consumer markets. Accompanying the evolution of the organizational brand identity was a refreshed and expanded website serving both artists and patrons. With this development, the organization's name now matches and melds with its high-traffic website, creating a platform that has value for audiences and dance artists alike.

Programs and Services: See Chicago Dance programs and services, which include a robust online calendar of dance events where visitors can find discounted tickets, a member directory, dance news,

and reviews by professional critics. Dance artists enjoy special programs such as the Dance for Camera: Mentorship Program, job postings, dance floor rentals, a dance journalism program to promote dance writing, the Screendance Club – a watch-party and short dance film discussion group; and research and grant opportunities. Under the Take Dance section of the website, visitors will find studio listings and information regarding dance classes and workshops. You can donate to See Chicago Dance, become a member, or get on their mailing list to receive the newsletter or other information.

Staff and Board: The organization is managed by an executive director and governed by a board of 13 members.

Funders and Annual Operating Income: See Chicago Dance is supported by the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, the Illinois Arts Council, the National Endowment for the Arts, and various foundations and individual donations. Annual operating income in 2023 was \$316,183.

Boston Dance Alliance

City of Boston Population: 650,706

Mission: Boston Dance Alliance (BDA) builds capacity for dance by identifying and creating shared resources, information, and productive partnerships to help dance flourish across the Boston metropolitan area and New England region. We are an independent service organization representing dancers, choreographers, teachers, presenters, allied arts and cultural professionals, arts journalists and scholars, wellness and health providers, and dance enthusiasts brought together across dance genres and geographies.

BDA strives to increase cultural equity and access to dance for diverse communities, build dance audiences, and promote quality and sustainability.

History: The BDA was established in 1994.

Programs and Services: BDA's services to their members and the broader dance community include a rentable, portable sprung wood floor enabling dancers to present their work safely in any setting; an annual Dancewear Distribution initiative that provides shoes and clothing to financially disadvantaged dancers of all ages; an annual Open Call Audition that attracts dancers and choreographers across a variety of genres; Dancer Health Day, providing dancers with wellness screenings; information about studios available to rent from Kittery to the Cape; fiscal sponsorship to aid unincorporated companies and dance projects in fundraising; the Boston Dancemakers Residency in partnership with the Boston Center for the Arts; professional development consulting and workshops; convening of regional dancers with disabilities to improve access for all; and the region's most comprehensive dance calendar of performances, classes, workshops, and auditions, amplified in BDA's weekly Pro/Motion newsletter.

Acting as advocates for dance at the local, regional, and national levels, BDA encourages the dance community to advocate for critical cultural initiatives. BDA is a proud member of MASSCreative, advocating for arts and culture across the Commonwealth.

Staff and Board: Staff of three and a nine-member board of directors. They also have an artists' advisory panel of 5 members.

Funders and Annual Operating Income: BDA funding derives from donations, membership dues, floor rentals, Gala tickets, and other earned income. Total revenue reported in 2023 was \$821,838.

Dance Source Houston

City of Houston Population: 2.3 million

Mission: Dance Source Houston's mission is to empower diverse individuals and organizations working in the field of dance throughout the Greater Houston region through advocacy, inclusive community engagement, and support services.

History: Dance Source Houston was established in 2005.

Programs and Services: Support dance artists via various programs and resources, including convening, funding, marketing performance opportunities, and more. Artists in Residence, Dance Class Directory, Barnstorm Dance Festival, Dancer Physical Therapy Clinic, Dancer Wellness Series, Groundwork Grant, Studio rental Directory, Day of Dance Health, Mind the Gap Showcase, The Dance Card – a one-stop service for dance events in and around Houston, the Opportunity Board, listing auditions, funding, residencies, workshops, and summer intensives everywhere in Houston. The Dancer Fund provides matching direct support to freelance dance artists who have received payment from choreographers and/or organizations for their project-based, performance-related work.

Staff and Board: Dance Source Houston has three staff—an executive director and two administrators—and is governed by an eight-member board that includes the organization's founder.

Funders and Annual Operating Income: Dance Source Houston is funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, the Texas Commission on the Arts, the Houston Endowment, the City of Houston through the Houston Arts Alliance, the Cullen Foundation, and other individual donors. Total revenue in 2022 was \$281,919.

What Core Programs and Services Would a Dance Service Organization Offer?

- Provide a dedicated paid administrator to support the Alliance's work
- Establish a robust website that serves as an online platform for dance-related information and resources
- Provide a communications and social media hub to share relevant and timely information
- Host networking events to build a community for dance professionals to learn about each other and lay the groundwork for future collaborations
- Provide professional development opportunities for dance educators and administrators to grow their practice
- Market dance to increase and broaden participation; promote the value of dance to enhance appreciation
- Research to gather data on the health and well-being of the dance community and establish benchmarks for success
- Offer fiscal sponsorships to aid unincorporated companies and dance projects in fundraising
- Other Programs and Services:
 - Online app to help dancers find dance classes
 - Rentals, such as a portable sprung wood floor or information about studios available to rent;
 - Grants to support financially disadvantaged dancers, access to free or low-cost dancewear, and free wellness screenings
 - Open-call auditions that attract dancers and choreographers across a variety of genres
 - Support to dancers with disabilities, such as convenings and technical assistance, to promote inclusion and improve access to dance
 - A comprehensive dance calendar of performances, classes, workshops, and auditions
 - Share information regarding grants, dance residency opportunities and jobs
 - Awards and recognition events to celebrate people in dance doing good work

Are We Ready?

An important part of this discovery process involves asking deep questions about the San Diego dance community's readiness to start a community initiative. Over the coming weeks, asking the following questions will be important:

- Is starting a Community Initiative within San Diego's dance sector the right solution at the right time, for the right reasons?
- Is there a reasonable expectation that the Community Initiative will be successful?
- Are the problems to be solved well-defined and specific, or overly generalized and broad?
- Could the Community Initiative achieve measurable outcomes – both quantitative and qualitative?
- Is there potential for short-term, intermediate, and long-term impact and community outcomes?
- Could the Community Initiative enable the dance sector to lead action, influence public policy, or raise public awareness of dance?
- Could the Community Initiative present opportunities to develop new leaders or build capacity within the dance community?
- Could the Community Initiative encourage more significant investment in dance among individual, public, or private funders?
- Could the Community Initiative inform or learn from other planning initiatives, such as the City of San Diego Commission for Arts and Culture's cultural plan?
- Are there natural allies that would want to support this Initiative? Who might they be?
- Would the Community Initiative attract new partners and supporters for San Diego's dance sector?
- Is there a reasonable plan to acquire initial funding for the Community Initiative?
- Is there a reasonable expectation that funding to support the Community Initiative would be sustainable?
- How long should the Community Initiative and its steering committee take before a plan is completed and real work begins?
- Would the overall dance community consider and support the Community Initiative a priority?
- Who would think this is a bad idea and would oppose it? What would be their reasons?
- What can we learn from past attempts at organizing the San Diego dance community? What can we learn from other communities that have tried similar initiatives supporting dance?
- What happens if we do not launch this Community Initiative or do nothing?
- Does the dance community believe San Diego ART Matters should provide the Community Initiative with funding and administrative support? Is there another entity that should and could do these tasks better?

Next Steps

A white paper aims to help readers understand an issue, solve a problem, or gain feedback to inform decisions. The goal is for this white paper to be broadly distributed and read throughout San Diego's dance community, including dance practitioners, administrators of dance organizations, dance business owners, dance enthusiasts, dance writers and filmmakers, dance funders, dance educators, and others who care about the future of dance in San Diego.

San Diego ART Matters has agreed to oversee the white paper's distribution, promotion, and feedback-collecting process. The feedback period will last up to three weeks before the analysis process begins. The small group responsible for issuing this white paper will make recommendations regarding the next steps and present its findings to the public.

Providing Feedback

The authors of this white paper want substantive feedback on what has been presented. We seek to answer the question, "Would the San Diego dance community support the launch of a community initiative to address areas of need within the local dance sector, which may ultimately result in establishing a new San Diego dance alliance?"

There will be a **feedback period between November 15th and December 6th** where you can provide feedback on this initiative in the following ways:

1. A community survey will become available between November 15th and December 6th. Please take the survey and respond to the open and multiple-choice questions. We thank you in advance for participating in this survey, should you choose to do so. We highly value your honest and candid feedback and assure you that your identity will remain anonymous.
2. You can also attend facilitated feedback sessions, where you can join others to discuss this document. Your feedback won't be anonymous, but you will benefit from hearing what others think and having others respond to your ideas and comments.

To join the virtual discussion, please RSVP to receive the zoom link: [RSVP LINK](#).

Upcoming Sessions:

- **Sunday, November 16** | 6:00–7:00 PM PST
- **Thursday, November 20** | 8:00 – 9:00 AM PST
- **Saturday, November 22** | 10:00 – 11:00 AM PST

Additionally, for more general information or feedback, questions, or ideas regarding this white paper, please email Milana Aernova, Program Coordinator at San Diego ART Matters at

coordinator@sdartmatters.org or send postal mail to:

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For questions, comments, or suggestions, please email Milana at coordinator@sdartmatters.org