



Office of the City Manager

December 6, 2023

To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council

From:  Dee Williams-Ridley, City Manager

Re: Appointment of New Poet Laureate

The recently completed poet laureate selection process resulted in the recommendation of **Aya de León to be the next City of Berkeley Poet Laureate**. This recommendation is anticipated to be confirmed by a vote of the Civic Arts Commission at their December 6, 2023 meeting. Over the course of a two-year service term, the Poet Laureate receives a \$10,000 honorarium and is required to complete an original poem inspired by or related to Berkeley, coordinate at least two public readings, recite poems at City or Berkeley Public Library events, and act as mentor for Berkeley's Youth Poet Laureate.

Background & Program Development

In 2017, the City of Berkeley's first Poet Laureate was appointed by the Mayor, prior to the City of Berkeley having a formal Poet Laureate selection process. Rafael Jesús González served in this honorific role, which did not have service requirements nor any compensation, for a total of five years (González's resignation was tendered in 2022). In September 2019, the Civic Arts Commission included in their FY20 Work Plan the creation of guidelines for the selection of subsequent City of Berkeley Poets Laureate. In 2022, with the City no longer having an official Poet Laureate, Civic Arts staff approached the Berkeley Public Library (BPL) as a program partner, as the BPL was simultaneously running a complementary [Berkeley Youth Poet Laureate Program](#). As a result of the partnership, BPL committed funding for the new City of Berkeley Poet Laureate Program over a two-year period.

In 2023, Civic Arts staff researched and applied best practices from several other cities' Poet Laureate programs, including ideas from Oakland, San Francisco, El Cerrito, Chicago, Knoxville, and Orlando. Subsequently, staff developed program guidelines and a selection process. The Civic Arts Commission's policy committees approved the selection process and set forth the purposes of the Poet Laureate program, which are:

- champion Berkeley's rich poetry, spoken word, and literary arts communities;
- honor a Berkeley poet to serve as a creative ambassador of the city;
- serve as an aesthetic voice and collaborator with the broader arts community;
- provide mentorship to burgeoning literary artists;

- and continue Berkeley's historic tradition of Free Speech.

To further refine the guidelines and incorporate the perspectives of the local poetry community into the new Poet Laureate program, Civic Arts staff convened an eleven-member Poet Laureate Program Advisory Committee to provide input on the selection of the next Poet Laureate for Berkeley. This advisory committee was comprised of a neighboring city's Poet Laureate (Dr. Ayodele Nzinga, Oakland), Berkeley's only former Poet Laureate (Rafael Jesús González), and nine other local poets and literary artists. The Poet Laureate Program Advisory Committee met twice to discuss the program's eligibility requirements, review criteria, and selection process. The advisory committee's feedback was incorporated into the program's guidelines, the final guidelines were approved by the Civic Arts Commission in May 2023 (Attachment 1).

Outreach & Application Period

With the approved guidelines as a framework, the Poet Laureate application was open from July 1, 2023 to September 1, 2023, and programmatic information was hosted on a [new city webpage](#). Several strategies were used to advertise the Poet Laureate opportunity to Berkeley residents; the application was shared in the Civic Arts monthly newsletter, and a citywide Community Message was released.

Review Process and Final Selection

There were 18 applications received for the new Poet Laureate position, which were first screened for eligibility and then were then assigned to a selection panel for evaluation. The Poet Laureate Selection Panel was comprised of five accomplished poets including MK Chavez, Susan Cohen, Reginald Edmonds, Lee Herrick (California State Poet Laureate), and Nia McAllister. Panelists were offered an honorarium of \$400 for their service, provided by BPL. All panelists attended an orientation with Civic Arts staff to review the program guidelines and criteria, as well as receive a tutorial on use of the online application scoring system. Panelists were required to notify staff of any conflicts of interest with any of the applicants, and where there were conflicts of interest, the panelist with the conflict of interest did not evaluate that particular application.

The panelists evaluated the 18 applications independently over a five-week period prior to convening for the Round 1 selection panel meeting. The panelists finalized their application scoring based upon the following review criteria: *Literary Practice and Experience* (40% of total score); *Cultural Equity* (30% of total score); and *Community and Civic Engagement* (30% of total score). After concluding discussion of the applications and final scoring, the panelists decided to advance the seven highest scoring applicants as finalists for Round 2 of the selection process. The Round 2 Selection Panel meeting was held on November 14, 2023 and was comprised of the same selection panelists with the exception of Lee Herrick, who was unable to participate further. Round 2 was conducted in an interview format. All finalists received the same three interview questions and a prompt to recite up to 10 minutes of original poetry. Finalists were given this information three weeks in advance of their interviews.

Following all seven interviews, the panelists deliberated using the following review criteria: *Service to the Field* (50% of total score); and *Performance and Presence* (50% of total score). **The selection panelists** thoughtfully and thoroughly reviewed their interview notes and scores, and **unanimously agreed on their choice for Berkeley's Poet Laureate: Aya de León.**

On November 20, 2023, Civic Arts staff notified Aya de León of her selection to serve as the City of Berkeley's Poet Laureate. To memorialize the results and the process of developing and implementing the Poet Laureate program, the Civic Arts Commission will confirm the Poet Laureate's appointment at their December 6, 2023 meeting.

Provided the confirmation is successful, the Poet Laureate's service term will begin January 1, 2024 and conclude December 31, 2025. The Poet Laureate will receive a \$10,000 honorarium over two years provided by funds from the BPL; a payment of \$5,000 will be made in January 2024, and a payment of \$5,000 will be made in January 2025. Per the Poet Laureate program guidelines, the Poet Laureate will complete the following Service Requirements:

- Produce one original poem inspired by or related to Berkeley
- Coordinate at least one public reading event per year (*at least two—total—over two years*). One of these public readings must be coordinated in partnership with the Berkeley Public Library (BPL).
- Recite a poem at up to five City and/or Library events per year (*up to 10—total—over two years*), this includes an inaugural announcement/celebration of the Poet Laureate appointment (date to be determined).
- Meet with Berkeley's Youth Poet Laureate, with the goal of a continued mentorship throughout the term of appointment.
- Participate in a staff-coordinated video recording of original poetry, which must include the original poem related to Berkeley.
- Serve as a Selection Panelist for the next Poet Laureate selection process
- If applicable, provide mentorship to a Berkeley high schooler participating in the statewide Poetry Out Loud competition (yearly effort).

Councilmembers and Mayoral staff may request, Poet Laureate appearances and performances in coordination with Civic Arts staff.

Future Application Cycle

In Spring of 2025, the 2026-2027 Poet Laureate guidelines will be developed using feedback from Advisory Committee, 2024-2025 applicant surveys, and review panelist surveys. A subsequently selected Poet Laureate will then serve a two-year term from January 1, 2026 to December 31, 2027.

If you have any questions about this program, please reach out to Hilary Amnah, Civic Arts Coordinator, at (510) 981-7539 or hamnah@berkeleyca.gov.

Attachment:

1. 2024-2025 Berkeley Poet Laureate Guidelines

cc: Bill Kolb, Library Services Manager
Tess Mayer, Director of Library Services
Eleanor Hollander, Economic Development Manager
LaTanya Bellow, Deputy City Manager
Anne Cardwell, Deputy City Manager
Farimah Brown, City Attorney
Mark Numainville, City Clerk
Matthai Chakko, Assistant to the City Manager



2024/25 Poet Laureate

City of Berkeley | Civic Arts | Berkeley Public Library

[APPLY HERE](#)

Important Dates (Subject to change)

Applications Open	July 1, 2023
Application Deadline	September 1, 2023, 11:59 pm
Selection Panelist Review Period	October 2023
Finalist Interviews	November 2023
Civic Arts Commission Meeting – Poet Laureate Approval	December 6, 2023, 6:00 pm
Appointment Service Term	January 1, 2024 – December 31, 2025
Service Reflection Due	March 1, 2025

1. OVERVIEW

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of the Poet Laureate pilot program is to:

- champion Berkeley’s rich poetry, spoken word, and literary arts communities;
- honor a Berkeley poet to serve as a creative ambassador of the city;
- serve as an aesthetic voice and collaborator with the broader arts community;
- provide mentorship to burgeoning literary artists;
- and continue Berkeley’s historic tradition of Free Speech.

1.2 Pilot Program Background

The Poet Laureate pilot program is a joint project of Berkeley Public Library and Civic Arts. Though the City’s first Poet Laureate was appointed by the administration in 2017, this is the first formalized, open selection process for the appointment.

1.3 Land Acknowledgment

The City of Berkeley recognizes that the community we live in was built on the territory of xučyun (Huchiun), the ancestral and unceded land of the Chochenyo-speaking Ohlone people, the ancestors and descendants of the sovereign Verona Band of Alameda County. This land was and continues to be of great importance to all of the Ohlone Tribes and descendants of the Verona Band. We acknowledge and honor the original inhabitants of Berkeley, the documented 5,000-year history of a vibrant community at the West Berkeley Shellmound, and the Ohlone people who continue to reside in the East Bay. We recognize that Berkeley’s residents have and continue to benefit from the use and

occupation of this unceded stolen land since the City of Berkeley's incorporation in 1878. As stewards of the laws regulating the City of Berkeley, it is not only vital that we recognize the history of this land, but also recognize that the Ohlone people are present members of Berkeley and other East Bay communities today. The City of Berkeley will continue to build relationships with the Lisjan Tribe and to create meaningful actions that uphold the intention of this land acknowledgement.

1.4 Cultural Equity Statement

The City of Berkeley Civic Arts program commits to equity within the arts and culture sector by consistently evaluating its programs and practices. The City recognizes the multiple benefits the arts provide, regardless of race, color, religion, age, disability, national origin, sex, sexual orientation and gender identity/expression.

Beyond ensuring access to the arts, the City of Berkeley commits to supporting artists and arts organizations that represent diverse cultures, life experiences, and socio-economic backgrounds. The City supports the empowerment of perspectives and identities that have been historically and systemically underrepresented.

1.5 Eligibility – Who can apply?

Applicants must meet all of the following eligibility requirements:

- Applicant is an individual poet and *not* applying as a partnership, group, or collective
- Applicant's current and primary residence is in the City of Berkeley
- Applicant is 18 years of age or older

1.6 Eligibility – Who can't apply?

- City of Berkeley employees employed at the time of the application or during any part of the Service Term
- Individuals who do not live in the City of Berkeley
- Organizational applicants (*for example, festivals, nonprofit organizations, businesses, etc.*)

1.7 Who is encouraged to apply?

Although not considered in the review process, individuals representing systemically marginalized identities, including but not limited to: Arab, MENASA (Middle Eastern, North African, South Asian); Asian; Black, African American; California Native American, Indigenous, Tribal; Disabled; Elders, Seniors; Latinx, Chicanx; LGBTQIA2S+; Low Income; Neuro-Divergent; Pacific Islander; People of Color; Trans and/or Non-Binary People; Immigrants (Documented and/or Undocumented), Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Migrants; Unhoused; Unsheltered; Veterans; or Youth 18 years of age or older are strongly encouraged to apply.

1.8 Honorarium

The City of Berkeley Poet Laureate will receive a **\$10,000** honorarium for the two-year Service Term.

The full honorarium will be split into two payments. A \$5,000 payment will be made to the appointee in January 2024, and another \$5,000 payment will be made in January 2025.

1.9 Honorarium Use Restrictions

The honorarium may not be used for the following:

- Political advocacy or lobbying
- Religious purposes or proselytization

1.10 Service Requirements

All service requirements must be completed within the two-year Service Term.

- Produce one (1) original poem inspired by or related to Berkeley
- Coordinate at least one (1) public reading event per year (*at least two—total—over two years*)
 - One of these public readings must be coordinated in partnership with the Berkeley Public Library
- Recite a poem at up to five (5) City and/or Library events per year (*up to 10—total—over two years*)
 - This includes an inaugural announcement/celebration of the Poet Laureate appointment
- Meet Berkeley's Youth Poet Laureate, with the goal of a continued mentorship
- Participate in a Civic Arts staff-coordinated video recording of original poetry
 - This must include the original poem related to Berkeley
- Serve as a Selection Panelist for the next Poet Laureate selection process
- If applicable, provide mentorship to the Berkeley high schooler participating in the statewide Poetry Out Loud competition

2. APPLICATION PROCESS

2.1 Application Materials – Round 1

All application materials must be submitted electronically before the deadline. The Poet Laureate application consists of the following components:

- Proof of residency
 - Applicants must submit documentation demonstrating Berkeley residency with their application. Unhoused and unsheltered poets may provide a letter from a Berkeley-based shelter or a Berkeley-based homeless service program as proof of Berkeley residency.
- Work samples and descriptions
- Résumé or Curriculum Vitae (C.V.)
- Narrative questions
- Support materials (*for example, news articles and event fliers*)

2.2 Application Materials – Round 2

Finalists from the Round 1 application process will be invited to an interview with the Selection Panel. For the interview, the finalists should prepare a presentation of the following information:

- A brief summary of your experience with poetry, spoken word, and/or literary arts
- How you, your poetry, and/or your artistic practice would represent the City of Berkeley
- An example of a poetry reading event you would plan for your required service
- Recitation of an original poem

2.3 Application Management System

All application materials must be submitted electronically using the Office of Economic Development's grants management system, [Submittable](#). Technical assistance with creating a Submittable account is available through [Submittable's Customer Support](#).

Please note: Paper or physical applications are not accepted at this time.

2.4 Technical Assistance

Technical assistance for program-specific inquiries is available from Civic Arts staff by email or by appointment. This technical assistance can help provide guidance around eligibility, service requirements, or review criteria.

Staff contact: Hilary Amnah, Grants Program Lead
hamnah@berkeleyca.gov
[Schedule a virtual appointment](#)

2.5 Accommodations for Disabilities

Individuals with disabilities who need reasonable accommodations to participate should make their requests to the Civic Arts staff at civicsarts@berkeleyca.gov. Staff will work with the Disability Compliance Program (ada@berkeleyca.gov) to review and fulfill the request. Disability-related accommodation requests must be made at least 72 hours in advance of deadlines or meetings. TTY users can dial 7-1-1 to be connected to a specially trained communications assistant from a [state relay provider](#).

2.6 Translation Services

The program guidelines and application questions are available to be translated into another language upon request. Requests can be emailed to Civic Arts staff at civicarts@berkeleyca.gov. If the application is submitted in a language other than English, a third-party translation service will be used to translate application answers into English for Selection Panelists.

3. EVALUATION AND SCORING

3.1 Review Criteria – Round 1

Electronic applications will be evaluated by Selection Panelists according to the following criteria:

Literary Practice and Experience (40%)

- Work samples demonstrate high-quality artistry and command of poetry as a craft
- Resume or Curriculum Vitae (C.V.) demonstrates exceptional accomplishments through literary experience and achievements
- Reasoning for how the Poet Laureate appointment will enhance, develop, and/or transform the applicant's artistic practice is compelling

Cultural Equity (30%)

- Applicant clearly conveys how their personal experiences and/or identities are rooted in and reflective of historically marginalized communities
- Applicant's artistic voice is representative and a reflection of Berkeley's diverse identities

Community and Civic Engagement (30%)

- Narrative answers and support materials demonstrate a history of community engagement and collaboration in Berkeley (*for example, hosting events, organizing, teaching, leading workshops, and/or creative outreach*)
- Applicant shows a deep and meaningful relationship with Berkeley

3.2 Review Criteria – Round 2

Interviews for finalists will be evaluated by the Selection Panel according to the following criteria:

Service to the Field (50%)

- A brief introductory summary of your experience with poetry, spoken word, and/or literary arts
- Clear explanation of how you, your poetry, and/or your artistic practice would represent the City of Berkeley
- Outline of an example poetry reading event you would plan for your required service is feasible, engaging, and meaningful

Performance and Presence (50%)

- Finalist demonstrates a mastery of poetry recitation that embodies physical presence, voice and articulation, and dramatic appropriateness
- Recited poem demonstrates a mastery of written poetry and literary arts

3.3 Scoring Scale

Selection Panelists use the following scale in assessing how well the applicant meets the review criteria. This scale will be used for both Round 1 and Round 2 evaluations. Numerical values are then translated to the appropriate weight for each criterion.

5	Exceptional	meets review criteria to the highest degree
4	Strong	strongly meets review criteria
3	Good	satisfactorily or successfully meets review criteria; average
2	Fair	moderately meets some of the review criteria; needs some improvement
1	Underdeveloped	minimally meets the review criteria; greatly needs improvement
0	Weak	does not meet any elements of the review criteria

4. REVIEW PROCESS

4.1 Eligibility Screening

Civic Arts staff will review each application submitted before the deadline for eligibility and completeness. Eligible applications advance in the review process to be evaluated by a Selection Panel.

4.2 Selection Panel

The Selection Panel is comprised of individuals located in the greater Bay Area with diverse backgrounds in the literary arts field.

Any Selection Panelist who has a conflict of interest with an application(s) must recuse themselves from reviewing that application(s). A 'conflict of interest' is defined as a situation in which a Selection Panelist has a competing professional, financial, or personal interest that could impair their ability to perform their evaluation responsibilities objectively.

4.3 Panelist Independent Review and Review Panel Meeting

Selection Panelists have several weeks to independently evaluate all eligible applications in accordance with the review criteria for Round 1 of the review process. At the conclusion of the independent review period, a review panel meeting will be scheduled for Selection Panelists to discuss the applications.

The review panel meeting will be facilitated through a Zoom Video Webinar.

Finalists will be determined by the Selection Panelists' final scores, and be invited to participate in Round 2 of the review process.

Panel comments made by Selection Panelists in support of their scores are available to applicants upon request after the Poet Laureate is officially appointed.

4.4 Finalist Interviews

Finalists from Round 1 will participate in an interview with the Selection Panelists. The interviews will be evaluated in accordance with the review criteria for Round 2.

4.5 Civic Arts Commission Approval

After the Selection Panel has scored all interviews from Round 2 and made a final decision for the appointee, Civic Arts staff will present the results at a Civic Arts Commission meeting. The Civic Arts Commission approves the Poet Laureate before the official appointment is made.

5. POET LAUREATE REQUIREMENTS AND POLICIES

5.1 Invoicing

The Poet Laureate must complete a Demographic Survey to receive their honorarium invoice from Berkeley Public Library. Staff will provide an invoice for \$5,000 in January of 2024, and another invoice for \$5,000 in January of 2025.

Please note: Appointees should be aware of the tax implications upon receiving the award and maintain documents required for state and federal income taxes.

5.2 Selection Panel Service

The Poet Laureate is required to serve as a Selection Panelist for the next application cycle of the Poet Laureate Program. This service will be completed at the end of the second year of the Service Term.

5.3 Service Reflection

A completed Service Reflection form is due within 60 days after the end of the Service Term. Service Reflections are usually due by March 1 unless otherwise noted. The Service Reflection should outline completed activities, achievements, and experience working with the Youth Poet Laureate during the Service Term. It also includes evaluation questions for self-reflection and for Civic Arts staff to make improvements to the program. Poets Laureate who do not submit a Service Reflection are ineligible from applying for future Poet Laureate appointments and Civic Arts funding.

5.4 Use of Original Berkeley Poem

The City may use the original poem created as part of the Service Requirements for city-related business. The poem may be displayed on the City's website and displayed in print at a publicly accessible location. Appropriate credit will be given to the poem's author. The Poet Laureate will retain the copyright of the original poem and will acknowledge the City of Berkeley whenever it is published.

5.5 Poetry Video Recording

Poets Laureate are required to participate in a video recording of poetry recitation coordinated by Civic Arts staff. This recording must include the required original poem inspired by the City of Berkeley. The video will be archived and used to share the work with the community. The poetry video may be used for Berkeley Public Library and Civic Arts promotional purposes.

5.6 Notifying Library and Civic Arts Staff about Public Engagements

In public engagement or events where the appointee is appearing in an official capacity as the City's Poet Laureate they should notify the appropriate Berkeley Public Library and Civic Arts staff for promotional support from both agencies.

5.7 City Permits and Permissions

A Poet Laureate appointment does not imply that the City will produce, exhibit, or promote artwork(s) created during the Service Term. It is the responsibility of the Poet Laureate to secure venues, permits, and appropriate insurance for public presentations.

5.8 Incomplete Service Requirements

Poets Laureate who do not complete all service requirements during the Service Term may need to return their honorarium to the City of Berkeley.