

# FAIR PAY INITIATIVE

## *Frequently Asked Questions*

These are the questions we hear most often about the Fair Pay Pledge, the Rate Guide, and what ZU Arts Initiative is trying to do. If you have a question that is not answered here, email [grow@cortezarts.org](mailto:grow@cortezarts.org).

### ABOUT THE FAIR PAY INITIATIVE

#### Is ZAI trying to create a union?

No. A union is a formal legal entity that collectively bargains, can call strikes, and has legal standing in labor disputes. ZAI is building a community standard and a voluntary accountability system. The Fair Pay Pledge is an invitation, not a contract. The Rate Guide is a reference, not a mandated scale sheet. Nobody is being organized as an employee and no venue is being compelled to recognize anything. What ZAI is doing is closer to what a professional standards body does: naming what fair looks like, building a public record of who is committed to it, and supporting the people who hold that standard.

#### Who came up with these rates and standards?

Local musicians did. ZU Arts Initiative developed the initial framework and brought it to Musician Members for review before publishing anything publicly. The rates are built specifically for Montezuma County and the Four Corners region, not borrowed from Denver or a resort market. They reflect the real economics of performing here, including smaller venue capacities, a tighter local market, and the actual cost of showing up as a working musician in rural Southwest Colorado.

#### Why does this need to exist? Can't musicians just negotiate for themselves?

They can and they do. But individual negotiation in a small market with limited venues and no public standard almost always results in the artist accepting less than their work is worth. Power imbalances are real. When one person is asking for something and the other person controls whether they get to perform at all, the conversation is not between equals. A published regional standard shifts that dynamic. The musician is no longer asking for something unusual. They are pointing to something the community has agreed on.

### **Is this only for musicians, or does it cover other artists too?**

The Fair Pay Pledge and Rate Guide cover musicians, performing artists, sound engineers, and technical crew. The broader principle that creative professionals deserve fair compensation applies across all disciplines, and ZAI's programs reflect that. The rate benchmarks in this guide focus on live music and performance because that is where the most common and persistent pay problems occur in this community.

## **FOR VENUES AND BUSINESSES**

### **Are the rates in the Rate Guide mandatory?**

No. The Rate Guide is a reference document, not a legal requirement. Venues are not obligated to use it. The Fair Pay Pledge is voluntary. What the guide does is name a regional standard so that artists have something to point to and venues have something to aspire to. The goal is cultural shift, not enforcement.

### **What if I genuinely cannot afford the full rate?**

That is a real situation and it deserves an honest answer. If your budget is limited, say so directly and negotiate in good faith. Scale the event to fit the budget. Apply for grants that include artist fees as a line item. What is not fair is making the artist absorb your budget constraint by default, without a conversation. The Rate Guide rates are minimums. If you cannot meet them, be transparent about why and work with the artist on a solution rather than simply offering less and hoping they accept.

### **Does nonprofit status mean I can ask for a discounted or donated rate?**

No. Nonprofit status does not change what an artist's time and skill is worth. Nonprofits often have operating budgets, grant funding, and paid staff. If everyone else involved in your event is being compensated, the artist should be too. If you would like an artist to donate their performance as an in-kind contribution, that is a conversation you can have, but it should be framed honestly as a donation with a dollar value attached, acknowledged publicly the way a cash donation would be, and never assumed.

### **What happens if a venue signs the Pledge but does not follow through?**

The Pledge does not have a formal enforcement mechanism. Public accountability is the mechanism. Signatories are listed on [cortezarts.org](http://cortezarts.org). Musicians in this community talk to each other. A venue that signs and then treats artists poorly will be known for it. ZAI will reach out to signatories annually to reaffirm their commitment and update their listing. Over time, the list of signatories becomes a meaningful signal of trustworthiness, and the absence from that list becomes meaningful too.

### **Can I sign the Pledge if I only book music occasionally?**

Yes. The Pledge is for anyone who books live music or hires performing artists and technical crew, whether that is every weekend or once a year for a special event. The commitment is the same regardless of frequency.

### **Can I remove my name from the signatory list after signing?**

Yes. Email [grow@cortezarts.org](mailto:grow@cortezarts.org) and we will remove your listing. We would ask that you let us know why, because that feedback helps us understand where the standard needs to be refined.

### **Does signing the Pledge cost anything?**

No. There is no fee to sign. The commitment is the point.

## **ABOUT SPECIFIC SITUATIONS**

### **What is the standard for open mics?**

Open mic performers signing up for a slot are participating in a community format and are generally not paid per set. That is understood. The person hosting and running the open mic is doing something different entirely. They are managing sound, welcoming performers, holding the room together for two or three hours, and making the whole night work. That is professional work and should be compensated as such. Open mic hosts deserve a guaranteed fee just like any other working musician.

### **What about benefit concerts?**

Benefit concerts are the situation where musicians feel the most pressure to say yes for free, and where the ask is most often made without examining who else in the room is donating their labor. The venue still earns bar revenue. The organizers still receive goodwill and visibility. The artist is frequently the only person being asked to work for nothing. A fair standard is either the artist is paid the standard rate with a portion of proceeds going to the cause, or the artist genuinely chooses to donate their performance as an in-kind gift with a dollar value attached and acknowledgment that matches what a cash donor would receive.

### **Are free drinks considered part of an artist's compensation?**

No. Offering performers a drink or a meal is a hospitality gesture and it is a welcome one. It is not compensation. Free drinks have no consistent value, cannot pay rent, and put musicians in an uncomfortable social position. A venue that offers hospitality and pays fairly is doing two good things. A venue that offers hospitality instead of fair pay is doing one good thing and avoiding the other.

### **What if a venue asks an artist to play longer than agreed?**

That extension should be compensated at the same hourly rate as the original booking. If an artist agrees to a two-hour set and is asked to play three hours, the additional hour is additional work and should be paid as such. The request should come before the extension begins, not after.

### **What is the cancellation standard?**

If a booking is cancelled within 48 hours of the performance, the artist is owed 50% of the agreed fee. They have already turned down other opportunities, prepared their set, and arranged their schedule around the booking. Last-minute cancellations have a real cost and that cost should not fall entirely on the artist.

### **When should an artist be paid?**

End of the night. Not next week, not after the books are settled, not when the owner gets back in town. If a genuine exception is needed, it must be communicated and agreed upon in writing before the performance takes place.

## **FOR MUSICIANS AND CREW**

### **Am I obligated to charge the rates in the Rate Guide?**

No. The rates are a floor, not a ceiling. You can and should charge more if your experience, demand, or the nature of the event warrants it. The guide exists so you have a regional standard to reference, not a cap to stay under.

### **Is it okay to negotiate below my stated rate?**

Sometimes, yes. Negotiating in good faith with a venue that is honest about its budget is different from being pressured into accepting less by a venue that simply does not want to pay fairly. The key questions are whether the budget conversation is genuine, whether you are being respected in the process, and whether accepting the rate serves your interests. What the Rate Guide protects you from is the situation where there is no standard at all and the default is always whatever the venue feels like offering.

### **What if a venue I really want to play at cannot meet my rate?**

That is your call to make. You might choose to play there at a reduced rate because you value the relationship, the audience, or the opportunity. That is a legitimate choice. What matters is that it is your choice, made with full information, not a situation you were maneuvered into because you did not know what fair looked like.

### **What if I quote my rate and the venue just stops responding?**

That is information. A venue that ghosts you after you state a professional rate is telling you something about how they value artists. It is frustrating, but it is better to know before you show up than after. Hold your rate and move on.

### **How do I become a Musician Member of ZAI?**

Musician Membership is \$15 a month, with a sliding scale available at \$5 to \$14 a month for those who need it. Members get voting rights on fund decisions and a voice in the Fair Pay standards for this region. Mutual aid access and pension eligibility begin once the fund reaches its funding goal. Visit [cortezarts.org/onemoreshow](https://cortezarts.org/onemoreshow) to join.

*Have a question that is not here?*

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