FOR PUBLIC WORKS & ARTS LEADS

How to start a *sidewalk poetry* program.

The model a city can actually fund: press residents' poems into the sidewalk panels you are already replacing. The concrete is being poured anyway — the poem rides along.

THE PROVEN MODEL

Since 2008

Public Art Saint Paul + City of Saint Paul — 1,400+ stamps citywide

INSTALLATION

Use scheduled work

Budget stamps, coordination, and added crew time

TOOLING

$100–$350

Per stamp, reusable season after season

THE PLAYBOOK

The steps, start to first pour.

Start with one lead in public works, one in the arts office, and the replacement schedule. Agree on a budget for stamps, coordination, and installation before announcing the program.

01 Anchor the program to maintenance

The model that works — the one Saint Paul has run since 2008 — presses poems into sidewalk panels already scheduled for replacement. Public Works there rebuilds roughly ten miles of sidewalk a year; the poem rides along on concrete the city was pouring anyway. Plan the stamp purchase, coordination, and added crew time within that existing work.

02 Pair public works with an arts partner

Programs live at the intersection of two organizations, and the split is the reason they last. In Saint Paul, Public Art Saint Paul — a non-profit — owns the poems, the contest, the jury, and the choice of installation sites, while Public Works owns the replacement schedule, resident notification, and the pour. Find one committed champion in each. Agree on staff time for the call, jury, permissions, and installations before setting the calendar.

03 Fund it like public art, not like construction

Sidewalk poetry fits placemaking and public-art funding: state arts board grants, NEA funding, local arts levies, community foundations, and neighborhood association budgets. Saint Paul's program has drawn support from its state arts board, private foundations, corporate sponsors, and the city itself — and a watershed district sponsored a themed contest year. Grant reviewers respond to the economics: reusable tooling and installation during scheduled work can keep costs manageable.

04 Run an open call residents can actually enter

Invite short poems from residents of all ages and experience levels — Saint Paul caps entries at roughly 200–300 characters so a poem fits one panel and reads at walking pace. A theme gives people a way in and gives the year an identity. Publishing your neighbors is the entire point, so keep the entry form short and free.

05 Judge in the languages your city actually speaks

Saint Paul accepts poems in Dakota, Hmong, Karen, Somali, Spanish, and English, and seats jurors who work in those languages — a language teacher, an author, a clinician, a journalist. Non-English stamps carry a QR code linking to an English translation. This is what makes the program belong to the whole city rather than to the people already comfortable with civic processes.

06 Set each poem and approve the exact proof

Each winning poem is laid out as a stamp design with a live 3D proof of exactly how it will read in concrete. Your committee approves the proof itself — what you approve is what gets machined, so there are no surprises at the pour. Budget a revision round: poets care about their line breaks, and line breaks change how a poem fits a panel.

07 Order the stamps on public-purchasing terms

Order each approved stamp from the designer. Once your organization is approved, Net-30 invoice terms are available right in the cart, with your PO number on the invoice. Production runs on a known timeline (at least 10 business days per run), so the stamps are on the shelf before replacement season starts — order in late winter, not in June.

08 Give neighbors notice, a marker, and a way out

Saint Paul mails every property on a block before sidewalk work, including an insert explaining the poetry program, and flags candidate panels with a red-painted wooden stake. Residents can request a poem, ask which one they're getting, or decline — provided they say so before removal begins. That courtesy is cheap, and it converts the one complaint category a program reliably generates.

09 Press during replacement season, then repeat

Crews press each stamp into fresh panels on the normal maintenance schedule — it adds minutes to a pour, not days. Saint Paul uses single- or two-panel replacement sites, picked randomly from what's already scheduled, and avoids repeating the same poem in close proximity. Each stamp is reusable season after season — stamps we cut 20 years ago are still in use in the field — so one poem keeps arriving in new neighborhoods for years.

BUDGET & PROCUREMENT

What a committee will ask.

COST	
Stamp pricing	**$0.60/sq in · $100 minimum**
Typical stamp	**$100–$350**
Install cost	**Confirm with crew**
Reuse	**20 years field record**

PROCUREMENT	
Terms	**PO · approved Net-30**
Documents	**W-9, COI, submittals**
Production	**at least 10 business days**
Pricing	**$0.60/sq in · $100 minimum**

What does a sidewalk poetry program cost?

The tooling is the main line item: most individual stamps land between $100 and $350, and each is reusable across the life of the program — stamps we cut 20 years ago are still in use in the field. Because poems press into panels already being replaced, you can use the existing replacement schedule. Budget for stamps, shipping, applicable tax, coordination, and added crew time. Each stamp can serve many installations; the designer shows each stamp's price as you set it, and shipping and tax are added at checkout.

Which city has run this the longest?

Saint Paul, Minnesota. Everyday Poems for City Sidewalk was created by Marcus Young 楊墨, the city's artist in residence, and launched in 2008; it is run by Public Art Saint Paul in cooperation with the city's Public Works department, and has put 1,400+ stamps into sidewalks citywide from a collection of 102 resident-written poems. Our shop has cut stamps for that program since its early years, and for programs in 17 states.

Does the city need special equipment or concrete?

No. The stamp presses into a standard fresh pour during normal finishing — same mix, same crew, same schedule. Crews need a release agent and about a minute per panel. Quick steps come in the box, and a crew field guide is emailed with every order.

Are grants available for this?

Explore state arts grants, community foundations, corporate sponsors, and local public-art funds. Eligibility and deadlines vary. Check the current program rules; the designer prices every stamp up front, and we can supply specifications for your application.

Ready to price a program?

Set each poem in the free designer for an exact proof and price, and save them to one account. Approved programs order on Net-30 terms.

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