Eastern Front Theatre created the following *Project Field Notes*
as part of their Balancing Act Level UP! Pilot Project.

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EASTERN FRONT THEATRE

BALANCING ACT

# Eastern Front Theatre
# Level UP! Pathways to Agreement Pilot
# Project Field Notes

*The following notes were written in 2024 by Elsa Pihl, General Manager at Eastern Front Theatre, as part of their Level UP! Pilot Project.*

Project focus: To develop policies around care and accessibility needs that can be applied to both staff and contractors.

Project inspiration: The team at Eastern Front Theatre wanted to expand and formalize their internal values around access and care into a more comprehensive policy to guide contracting and future decision-making. This work is a continuation of the theatre's Accessibility Project.

## Project Context

The COVID-19 pandemic coincided with leadership changes at Eastern Front Theatre (EFT), and these events brought a greater focus on the people who work with and for EFT. The pandemic highlighted the importance of self-care, mental health, and sustainability, and EFT was eager to remain flexible and attuned to the needs of the community. We began working on a new initiative known as the "Accessibility Project"—now a multi-phase project aimed at identifying and reducing barriers to the performing arts—and sought to change the way we hired artists. We experimented with various strategies to improve accessibility and care for the people we work with, such as implementing a five-day rehearsal week, five-hour workday, and hybrid rehearsals, limiting 10/12s, providing childcare, offering snacks/meals, and adjusting staff compensation to ensure a living wage.

Around this time, we became familiar with Balancing Act and their Level UP! program and were thrilled to learn that companies across the country were embarking on a similar journey. In 2023, we were invited to join the 2023–2024 Level UP! Cohort. By that time, we were ready to move from experiments to permanent offerings. Since we already had some programs in place, our priority was to ensure we had the right policies in place to support them, and decided to join the *Pathways to Agreement* strategy group.

## Planning and Implementation

Our first step was to take a look at EFT's existing mandate, mission, and values through the lens of care and access. We wanted to build on what was already established. Next we tried to expand and breakdown our values into greater detail to communicate the nuances of what folks can expect when working with and for EFT. Using notes from conversations the Artistic Director had with artists and a long list of gaps identified during the first phase of the Accessibility Project (see our Accessibility Project Report for details), we researched and brainstormed ideal working conditions, expressions of care, and potential care and access needs. These efforts resulted in a list of: 1) what was already available or offered; 2) what we are working towards; and 3) what could be available in the future.

We then began creating a Statement of Care to articulate EFT's values on care and access and provide an overview of how we can work with our staff, contractors, and audience to ensure their experience with EFT is a positive one.

During the process of drafting the Statement of Care, we realized we wanted to set up a Care and Compassion Fund for staff and contractors as well. This necessitated long conversations with our board and our lawyer regarding intent, language, and implementation. It was more difficult than we anticipated to navigate between our intentions and legal interpretations.

We now have a first draft of our Statement of Care complete, which includes details about the Care and Compassion Fund, and we are continuing to discuss and refine the content and language. We are working towards a final draft, aiming to implement it in early 2025. The Care Fund will be integrated into our 2024/2025 budget. Once the language has been approved by the board and lawyer, we will begin advertising the fund to our artists.

## Sustainability

We are committed to maintaining and upholding the Statement of Care and have created a budget line for the Care and Compassion Fund to support this. Making that the budget line remains funded will be an ongoing challenge, but our current staff are committed to this.