As we enter the third year of the COVID-19 crisis, we reflect on all the ways the pandemic has forever left its mark on Eastern State. There have been challenges, but with those challenges came opportunities. From programs and operations to the site itself, 2021 was a year of change, most of it profoundly positive. Even in the face of uncertainty, we made significant progress towards our next chapter. And we couldn’t have done it without your help.

3,000 students who joined in virtual programs

2x the number of Eastern State Members in 2021 vs 2020

101 nights of new evening programming

23,311 gallons of rain that can be held underground as part of our stormwater infrastructure improvement

794 postcards that were written to incarcerated people by museum visitors in 2021

93 percentage our attendance increased between 2020 and 2021

9 participants in the 2021 Masonry Academy

Lithograph of Eastern State Penitentiary by G. Lehman
created space for new partnerships with other fair chance businesses, and enabled visitors to engage with our mission through an educator-led tour of the Hospital Block and a new highlights audio tour recorded by Steve Buscemi. We can’t wait to continue the evolution of our evening programs in 2022.

Reimagining

Our most dramatic transformation was the introduction of 101 nights of completely new evening programming over the course of three seasons. During Night Tours: Summer Twilight, we partnered with businesses that share our values and offered the opportunity to relax with a beverage on our baseball field at the new Fair Chance Beer Garden. In the winter, we brought this visitor favorite back with additional seasonal programming like our Pop-Up Museum, where carefully selected artifacts pulled from the thousands of historic treasures in our archives told the story of Segregated Cellblocks: Race and Change at Eastern State.

In between our summer and winter Night Tours, we took a major leap. We reimagined our fall fundraiser, Terror Behind the Walls. For 30 years, this program funded the bulk of our most transformative, mission-driven work, and served as Eastern State’s financial backbone. Safety concerns forced us to cancel the event in 2020, and we knew going into 2021 that continued COVID-19 precautions would force us to evolve in big ways this year. But, in the end, this created an unanticipated silver lining.

Rethinking Terror Behind the Walls was not easy; it’s something we considered carefully. From those difficult conversations grew Halloween Nights: a new iteration of this 30-year tradition that honored the elements our visitors have come to love and expect and added so much more. Halloween Nights opened more of the site to the public than ever before, and

while we had planned to complete the work without closing the site to the public, COVID-19 had other plans. Like many cultural institutions, we were closed for most of 2020 and the first quarter of 2021. These closures devastated our earned revenue income but also allowed our construction team to work more efficiently. When visitors returned in March 2021, they benefited from greater accessibility and began their audio tours at the new tour launch point. On June 10, 2021, we officially cut the ribbon celebrating the completion of phase one and unveiled a new donor plaque recognizing those whose generosity led the way.

Rebuilding

As our programs developed, the building itself did, too. Construction of the first phase of our planned visitor center began in the fall of 2019. This work included upgrades to electrical and plumbing infrastructure, designed to support the eventual completed project. In this phase, we created a massive storm water retention system to make Eastern State more environmentally friendly. We also built a new tour launch point, providing visitors a place to rest, refill their water bottles, and get a reprieve from inclement weather.

While increasing our capacity, we had planned to complete the work without closing the site to the public. COVID-19 had other plans, like many cultural institutions.

Our earned revenue income suffered, but it also allowed our construction team to work more efficiently. When visitors returned in March 2021, they benefited from greater accessibility and began their audio tours at the new tour launch point. On June 10, 2021, we officially cut the ribbon celebrating the completion of phase one and unveiled a new donor plaque recognizing those whose generosity led the way.
Returning

After many months of closure, our reopening in March 2021 required a rigorous reimagination of our programs. We produced more new programs in less time than at any other moment in our history. We expanded our virtual programs for schools, scouts, and other groups. We built an interactive workshop that explores pathways to criminal justice reform, which has since inspired everyone from middle school students to human resources professionals. We launched new programs for members and found different ways to stay connected. We met people where they were, both on site and online, to have conversations about the legacy of criminal justice reform that were more important than ever. Indeed, 2021 was a watershed year for Eastern State.

Though at times I was not sure, today I firmly believe that Eastern State will emerge from the challenges of the pandemic as a stronger and more sustainable organization. And I know that we could not have reached this moment without the incredible dedication of our staff, steady guidance of our Board of Directors, and the generosity of our donors. None of our success – past, present, or future – would be possible without friends like you. We have truly come together in the face of adversity and demonstrated what a resilient organization can accomplish, so that we can fulfill our mission for years to come.

Thank you,

Sara Jane (Sally) Elk
President and CEO
Our Mission
Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site interprets the legacy of American criminal justice reform, from the nation’s founding through to the present day, within the long-abandoned cellblocks of the nation’s most historic prison.