



**New York City Council
Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Intergroup Relations**

Oversight Hearing: DCLA, COVID-19 and Cultural Organizations in New York City

June 22, 2020, 10:00AM – Virtual Hearing

**Testimony Presented by New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA)
Commissioner Gonzalo Casals**

Good morning, Chair Van Bramer and members of the committee. I am Gonzalo Casals, Commissioner of the Department of Cultural Affairs. I am here today to testify on COVID-19 and Cultural Organizations in New York City. I am joined today (virtually) by a number of my colleagues, including First Deputy Commissioner Kathleen Hughes; Deputy Commissioner Sheelah Feinberg; Chief of Staff Shirley Levy; General Counsel Pranita Raghavan; Assistant Commissioners Terri Richardson and Andrew Burmeister; Finance Director Phillippa Shao; and External Affairs Director Ryan Max. I want to take a moment to thank Kathi Hughes, both for stepping up as Acting Commissioner, and for nearly 40 years of public service to this agency and the people of New York.

The COVID-19 crisis, and its impact on the cultural sector have been our top priority. By now, we're all painfully familiar with the profound challenges that this crisis has posed for everyone in this city. We have all experienced loss in one way or another. While we're seeing signs that the worst of the public health crisis may be behind us, the social and economic damage is still unfolding. With survey data and through daily, ongoing conversations with our constituents, we are starting to get a fuller picture of the crisis. For instance, a recent survey conducted by cultural organizations who connect daily on a 3 PM phone call found nearly a half a billion dollars in revenue loss from the 144 organizations that responded. For groups with budgets under \$100,000, these losses represented more than half of their operating support. There is no question that our cultural community is in a dire situation. But this is a crisis whose full impact won't be understood for many months or even years.

The pandemic has affected our low-income neighborhoods and communities of color disproportionately. At a time when the pain, anger, and protest over the killing of black men and women by police has reached a boiling point, these communities are enduring a public health and economic crisis, while also struggling against systemic racism. We know that the presence of culture in communities correlates with improved public safety, health, and education. Our work must focus on supporting these communities in recovery.

There's nothing that makes these communities inherently more vulnerable to COVID-19. It is entirely our economic, health, and other social systems that put communities of color, and Black communities especially, at an enormous disadvantage. COVID-19 hasn't created these divisions and disadvantages, but it has shone a harsh new light on them. We must use the power of arts and culture to support the healing of these communities.

I've been inspired to see the cultural community speak out loudly against racism and white supremacy and declare their commitment to racial justice. But we have a long way to go in fostering a more equitable, inclusive city and cultural community. The energy and urgency of this moment remind us how important it is to back these words with action.

Our cultural community has suffered through the crisis alongside our fellow New Yorkers. Spaces have closed, entire seasons have been canceled, and revenue streams have disappeared. Organizations have struggled to make rent and payroll. Cultural workers have been getting sick, laid off, and furloughed. But even in these unprecedented circumstances, cultural organizations have continued to serve the people that live in this city.

On Staten Island, Snug Harbor's campus became a COVID-19 testing site. The Bronx Zoo parking lot became a staging site for ambulances. JACK in Brooklyn and

Dreamyard in the Bronx transformed their spaces into community food hubs. Dance/NYC launched a campaign to remind us that #ArtistsAreNecessaryWorkers. There are more examples than I can list here. The ways our community has shown up for New Yorkers demonstrate just how central cultural organizations are to our social fabric, and how important this public-private partnership is to our city. It underscores how critical culture is going to be for our city's recovery.

In addition to responding to these urgent needs, cultural organizations also continued to provide us with important, necessary ways to connect, engage, mourn, and create. Just yesterday was Make Music New York. The Criminal Queerness festival, which we're supporting through a Mayor's Grant for Cultural Impact, is presented online through June 28. The first-ever Virtual Museum Mile Festival happened on June 11. And virtual Pride programming is helping us connect even in the absence of the traditional parades - but I admit I'll miss those quite a bit.

At DCLA and throughout City government, we've done our best to support organizations while also adapting to the constantly changing crisis. At Cultural Affairs, we've worked closely with OMB to keep payments flowing. DCLA is current with payments to virtually all grantees. We've been sharing resources with our constituents, notifying them of upcoming funding opportunities from philanthropy and the federal government. The U.S. Small Business Administration's Paycheck Protection Program and Economic Injury Disaster Loan programs, while they have limitations, have been particularly important sources of support for eligible organizations. Still, more federal support is needed.

We're also working to develop and better quantify our understanding of the impact on the cultural community. This can help us advocate for support from state, federal, and private sources, and direct it where it's most needed. We partnered with Americans for the Arts to conduct a major survey of our grantees last month. The final report is being created by SMU DataArts. But preliminary findings suggest that smaller organizations and community-based groups have been hardest hit. We are constantly talking to our grantees through listening sessions, one-on-one conversations, and through the sector

advisory councils. These conversations have helped us to understand the reality on the ground for organizations struggling through so many crises at once.

My colleagues at Materials for the Arts have pivoted operations to supply much-needed donations to city agencies and cultural organizations. Furniture from MFTA was used to create respite centers at Metropolitan Hospital in Queens and Kings County Hospital in Brooklyn to help people on frontlines fighting the coronavirus. MFTA has also made a wide range of educational offerings available online through the newly launched MFTA Online Education Center. The Administration for Children's Services received fabric and sewing machines for masks to distribute to its teen population, along with notebooks and education materials. And we worked with the Parks Department to provide helmets, equipment, and gardening materials for summer programming.

Our partners in City government have also stepped up to assist the cultural community during this crisis. The Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment and Office of Nightlife have launched major engagement efforts with their constituents. Early in the crisis, the Department of Small Business Services offered a program to help groups retain employees. The Mayor's Office, the Department of Consumer and Worker Protection, Community Affairs Unit, have been tirelessly updating New Yorkers with public health guidelines, reopening strategies, and other resources to help our city get through the worst of the crisis and, now, take the first steps toward reopening.

These local efforts are necessary, but no one source of support is going to get our constituents through this crisis. The City cannot do this alone.

While we haven't reached the phase of reopening that includes arts and culture, we are already thinking about what reopening will look like for the cultural community. I want to take this opportunity to thank all of our cultural workers. They've endured fear, loss, and uncertainty alongside fellow New Yorkers. And now, we'll look to them to reactivate our cultural spaces as the powerful hubs for community and connection they've always been.

Regarding the Council's proposed legislation, Intro 1967-2020, we appreciate the foresight in wanting to support cultural organizations with resources for reopening. I'm not sure the legislation in its current form is the best way to achieve this. But we look forward to working with you toward a bill that best suits the needs of our constituents as they look to reopening their facilities.

Re-opening won't mean resuming business as usual. As our audiences return after months of hardship, suffering, and loss, how can our spaces be places for reflection, empowerment, creation, and healing? With a new urgency to root out systemic racism at every level, how can our collections, programs, and expertise help our audiences make sense of the profound changes that are happening - or aren't happening but need to?

In the last six years, together, we have centered diversity, equity, and inclusion as core values. How do we ensure that the progress we've made in fostering a more inclusive cultural community isn't lost? Far from being put on hold during this crisis, we need to focus more than ever on how we bring these values into our work.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My colleagues and I are happy to answer any questions you may have.