

COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND  
INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS

1

CITY COUNCIL  
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

of the

COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND  
INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS

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Tuesday, March 18, 2025

Start: 10:07 A.M.

Recess: 4:39 P.M.

HELD AT: Council Chambers - City Hall

B E F O R E: Hon. Carlina Rivera, Chair

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

David M. Carr  
Shahana K. Hanif  
Kamillah M. Hanks  
Crystal Hudson  
Farah N. Louis  
Chi A. Ossé  
Sandra Ung  
Nantasha M. Williams

*Other Council Members Attending: Brooks-Powers,  
Joseph, and Brewer*

COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND  
INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS

A P P E A R A N C E S

Linda E. Johnson,  
President and CEO of Brooklyn Public Library

Tony Marx,  
President of The New York Public Library

Dennis Walcott,  
President and CEO of Queens Public Library

Laurie Cumbo,  
Commissioner at New York City Department of  
Cultural Affairs (DCLA)

Lance Polivy,  
General Counsel - New York City Department of  
Cultural Affairs (DCLA)

John Hyslop,  
President Queens Library Guild Local 1321

George Sarah Olken,  
President Brooklyn Library Guild Local 1482

Deborah Allman  
President New York Public Library Guild Local  
1930

June Lei,  
Public Programs Producer at Brooklyn Museum;  
Secretary of DC 27 Local 1502

Maribel Cosme-Vitagliani,  
Executive Board Member of DC 37 Local 1502 from  
Brooklyn Museum

Margo Isabel Cohen Ristorucci,  
Public Programs Manager at the Brooklyn Museum;  
Executive Board Member of DC 37 Local 1502

COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND  
INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS  
A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Dr. Abby Emerson,  
Educational Researcher; Professor; Member of NYC  
Plan, the Public Libraries Action Network; Former  
DOE Teacher

Melody Emerson-Simpson, Age 7  
Library Patron and Advocate

Lisa Gold,  
Executive Director of the Asian American Arts  
Alliance; Member of the Cultural Equity  
Coalition; Facilitator of the Culture at 3 Call

Coco Killingsworth,  
Chief Experience Impact Officer at Brooklyn  
Academy of Music and Chair of the Cultural  
Institutions Group

Lucy Sexton,  
Executive Director of New Yorkers for Culture;  
Cultural Coalition New Yorkers for Culture & Arts

Kimberly Olsen,  
Executive Director of the NYC Arts in  
Education Roundtable

David Freudenthal, Director of Government  
Relations at Carnegie Hall

Judith Insell,  
Executive Director of the Bronx Arts

Francine Garber-Cohen,  
President and Producer of Regina Opera Company,  
Inc.

Kate Madigan,  
Government Affairs Coordinator at The Public  
Theater

COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND  
INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Ryan Gilliam,  
Executive Director of Fourth Arts Block (FAB NYC)

Sami Abu Shumays,  
Deputy Director at Flushing Town Hall; Steering  
Committee Member of the Latinx Consortium of New  
York; Steering Committee Member of the Cultural  
Equity Coalition of New York

Eleni DeSiervo,  
Senior Director of Government and Community  
Relations at Lincoln Center for the Performing  
Arts

Michael Schnall- Brooklyn Botanic Garden,  
\*Presenting on behalf of Adrian Benepe, President  
and Chief Executive Officer of Brooklyn Botanic  
Garden

Angel Hernandez,  
Director of Government Relations for the New York  
Botanical Garden (NYBG)

DJ McDonald,  
Representative from Dance Parade

Lauren Comito,  
Executive Director of Urban Librarians Unite

Vipassana Vijayarangan,  
Member of New York City Public Library Action  
Network

Dylan Flesch,  
NYC Public Library Action Network (NYC PLAN)

Devon Mercurius,  
Senior Director of Programs at Reel Work

COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND  
INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS  
A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Javon Walker-Peters,  
Reel Works Alumnus

Harry Weil,  
Vice President of Education and Public Programs  
at Green-Wood Cemetery

Cynthia Carrion,  
Director Government and Community Affairs at El  
Museo del Barrio

Jirina Ribbens,  
Executive Director of Ice Theatre of  
New York

Melinda Wang,  
Research and Advocacy Manager at Dance/NYC

Lindsay Werking-Yip,  
Director of Development at American Composers  
Orchestra

Valerie Lewis,  
Executive Director of Third Street Music School  
Settlement

Dohini Sompura,  
Director of Government Affairs for American  
Museum of Natural History (AMNH)

Sarah Cecilia Bukowski,  
Governor, American Guild of Musical Artists, AFL-  
CIO

Jenny Dembrow,  
Executive Director of the Lower Eastside Girls  
Club

Martha Bowers,  
Founder and Executive Director of Hook Arts Media

COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND  
INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS  
A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Anais Reyes,  
Curator at the Climate Museum

Aya Esther Hayashi, PhD  
Development Director at The People's Theatre

Sharon Brown,  
Member of the Public

Melissa Riker,  
Artistic Director and Choreographer of Kinesis  
Project Dance Theatre and Manhattan Theatre  
Source

Nicole Gardner,  
Director of Advancement at Building for the Art

Jessica Jackson,  
Director of School Programs and Education at the  
Bronx Children's Museum

Nicole Touzien,  
Executive Director for Dancewave

Sofia Harrison,  
Founder and Executive Director of Arts House  
Schools of Music, Dance, and Fine Arts

Mariame Kaba,  
NYC Public Library Action Network

Potrirankamanis Queano Nu,  
Artistic Director of Kinding Sindaw Melayu  
Heritage, Inc.

Lauren Miller,  
Co-Director of HERE Arts Center

Sarah Calderon,  
Executive Director of Creatives Rebuild New York

COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND  
INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Christopher Leon Johnson,  
Self

COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND  
INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS

8

SERGEANT WONG: Sound check for the Committee on  
Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International  
Intergroup Relations. Today's date is March 18, 2025.  
Being recorded by Danny Huang in Council Chambers.

(PAUSE)

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Good morning, and welcome to  
today's New York City Council Budget Hearing for the  
Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and  
International Intergroup Relations. At this time we  
ask that you silence all electronic devices.

At no time is anyone to approach the dais.

If you would like to sign up in person testimony  
or have any other questions throughout the hearing,  
please see one of the Sergeant at Arms.

Chair Rivera, we are ready to begin.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you so much. I want to  
just thank the staff for helping us coordinate this  
hearing both in City Hall and, of course, in 250  
Broadway. And I want to thank my colleagues, Majority  
Whip Brooks-Powers and Council Member Louis for being  
here first thing in the morning.

Good morning, welcome. Oh...

(GAVEL SOUND) (GAVELING IN)

Good morning!



COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND  
INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS

9

(LAUGHTER)

Welcome to the hearing for the Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations. I'm Council Member Carlina Rivera. I'm chair of this committee— proudly and humbly.

Today we will begin with a hearing on the City's three Library Systems, followed by a hearing on Cultural Affairs, and finally the Committee will hear public testimony related to these two hearings.

With that I would like to welcome you to our Library's hearing. This morning we will be discussing the Fiscal 2026 Preliminary Expense And Capital Budget for the Systems.

For Fiscal 2026, the Administration is proposing a \$480.3 million subsidy for the Systems. The Fiscal 2026 Preliminary Capital Commitment Plan, which covers Fiscal Years 2025 to 2029 includes \$1.1 billion for the Library Systems.

The Systems have a combined unmet expense need of \$44.8 million in Fiscal Year 2026 for increased costs related to uncovered wage growth and health insurance, liability insurance, rents, additional staffing needs, capital in eligible IT and deferred

1 maintenance expenses, new and expanded locations and  
2 programs, building maintenance contracts and supplies  
3 among other expenses. It is clear that additional  
4 funds are needed to help maintain our city's  
5 spectacular library systems.  
6

7 The systems have an unmet capital need of \$345  
8 million in Fiscal 2026 for comprehensive renovation  
9 of branches, critical maintenance, technology  
10 upgrades, resiliency and accessibility, and project  
11 shortfalls.

12 Enhanced capital investment is crucial in order  
13 to maintain the system's critical infrastructure  
14 needs. The Council will continue to champion  
15 libraries as a priority in Fiscal 2026 budget.

16 New York's public libraries are essential  
17 pillars of our communities, offering resources that  
18 promote education, culture, and opportunity for all.  
19 They are more than just places to borrow books,  
20 though the books are diverse and absolutely  
21 wonderful, but they are hubs of democracy,  
22 inclusivity, and lifelong learning, empowering  
23 everyone from young students to older adults,  
24 immigrants, and families. Their impact reaches far  
25

beyond their walls providing vital programs that  
strengthen our city's future.

The Council calls on the Administration to  
support the Library Systems by increasing their  
expense and capital budgets to meet all shortfalls  
the systems have. It is essential that the budget  
that we adopt this year is transparent, accountable,  
and reflective of the priorities and interests of the  
Council and the people that we represent.

I look forward to an active engagement with the  
Administration over the next few months to ensure the  
Fiscal 2026 Adopted Budget meets the goals the  
Council has set out.

And with that I just want to again thank everyone  
for being here— of course the advocates, the workers,  
we appreciate your participation today.

And with that, I will ask the Library Systems to  
begin their testimony when they are ready.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Good morning, I'm Linda  
Johnson, President and CEO of Brooklyn Public  
Library. Thank you Speaker Adams, Finance Chair  
Brannan, Chair Rivera for your leadership, members of  
the committee— I see Chairperson Farah Louis, thank  
you all for your attendance, for your leadership, and

for your stalwart support. And thanks to the entire City Council for continued support of the libraries for these many years.

But it's a welcome change this year and a testament to your leadership that this year our conversation is about investing in libraries, not cutting them. I was thrilled to hear the Speaker detail her \$2 million proposal to expand seven-day service to 10 additional branches across the city. For years, Brooklyn Public Library has operated on an essentially flat budget. Our city deserves the expanded services this proposal envisions.

However, the Fiscal 2026 Preliminary Budget does not carry forward Council's \$15.7 million libraries initiative and fall short of what's needed to sustain our services, let alone expand them.

Today I urge the City to restore this funding and invest an additional \$44.8 million in New York City's Libraries. Your support is needed more than ever after last week's White House Executive Order targeting library work nationally.

Libraries are the connection point for a diverse array of New Yorkers, so many of whom pour their skills and knowledge back into the city. We provide

much more than books— as the chairperson said— books, resources with an impact that spreads far beyond our physical branches.

At our Business and Career Center, librarians help New Yorkers realize their dreams, hosting resume workshops, career fairs, one on one business counseling sessions, and classes on everything from how to use Excel to AI basics for businesses.

For 21 years, our PowerUp competition has helped nearly 11,000 entrepreneurs launch businesses and create jobs. Notable winners include Brooklyn Tea which now offers employee college scholarships and others who give back by catering community events.

New Yorkers know libraries change lives and they're eager to lend a hand, signing up to support their neighbors and help our libraries run while gaining valuable skills themselves. This year nearly 1,500 volunteers have led English conversation groups, citizenship coaching, and homework help— a 30% increase over last year.

Our patrons want to connect with one another and we all feel that democratic spaces, libraries in particular, are needed now more than ever. Despite last year's midyear cuts, demand for library services

continued to grow. In 2024, annual visits rose to nearly 6 million. Program sessions increased by 19%, and book and digital materials circulated 9.4 million times. However, patrons still felt the impact of cuts, longer wait times, fewer open hours, and disrupted programming. I'm very proud of BPL's 1,103 employees, including our Local 1482 members, who are on the front lines, and the work they were able to do during this very trying time.

City Council helped reverse these devastating cuts and reopen our doors, but we did not truly return to business as usual. In fact, we haven't been able to resume business as usual for years. We have been operating on pre-pandemic funding levels despite a soaring increase in the cost of doing business.

Our patrons still experience long wait times for books and are consistently too thinly staffed, unable to build a strong enough base due to an inadequate funding coupled with the yearly threat of cuts.

Brooklyn Public Library has \$12.4 million in unmet needs, not just due to inflation, but unavoidable costs like union salary increases, health care premiums, and the rising costs of books, especially digital material. We must also cover

operations for two new locations, the Center for Brooklyn History and the Library for Arts and Culture, where staff provide highly in demand and specialized programming resources.

Building maintenance is another growing cost and urgent concern. In year 2024, we lost 500 hours of operating time due to aging infrastructure. On average, our branches are over 70 years old and 19 of our buildings are more than a century old.

Maintenance costs for HVAC, fire alarms, and elevators have risen by \$3 million in the past five years. Keeping libraries open consistently is our top priority, but failing systems put service at risk.

Last year, city council rescinded four... I'm sorry... Last year, the City rescinded \$47 million of capital funds compounding the challenges we already face.

Brooklyn Public Library's unfunded capital needs now exceed— I hate to use the number four at the beginning of this— but \$400 million, one-third of which are urgent emergency projects like roofs, HVAC systems, fire safety, and accessibility upgrades.

But we must also consider longer term projects. This year Brooklyn Public Library's submission for

the ten-year plan included \$307.7 million to cover critical systemwide infrastructure and to initiate cost effective, comprehensive branch overhauls rather than piecemeal projects.

It has been a decade since Libraries last received a major allocation in the City's Ten-Year Capital Plan which we used to launch transformational projects such as our renovations at Canarsie and New Lots Libraries. These new innovative spaces will serve as beacons in their neighborhoods, meeting our strategic priorities with dedicated teen spaces and larger community meeting rooms.

All Brooklyn neighborhoods should have modern libraries with spaces that accommodate patrons' needs, but without recurring capital funding we cannot efficiently plan, modernize, or manage our facilities. Sustained investment in the Ten-Year Capital Plan is needed.

We are deeply grateful to the Council, to our Brooklyn Delegation, and individual council members for their steadfast support of library capital projects.

As in previous years, Brooklyn Public Library is requesting \$10 million in discretionary capital



funding from the Council, through our delegation, to address repairs and project shortfalls across the borough.

New Yorkers deserve beautiful, safe public spaces. During these times of disconnection and dissension, libraries have risen to serve as community connectors. At our recent Night In The Library there was a palpable yearning for unity as over 5,000 people gathered to learn, debate, and even dance together over the course of the night. Right now hundreds are gathering in that same lobby at Central Library for a job fair.

You, our loyal supporters, truly understand the challenges we face and the investment we need to continue this urgent work. Addressing unmet needs and securing capital funding will strengthen our communities and help New Yorkers build a better future.

Thank you for protecting our libraries, one of the City's most valuable and most trusted and most democratic public res good morning.

PRESIDENT MARX: So, good morning, I'm Tony Marx; I'm the president of the New York Public Library, and everything she said, I agree with.

(LAUGHTER)

PRESIDENT MARX: I could stop there and... with  
Dennis.

I want thank City Council, Speaker Adams, Chair  
Rivera, and the members of the Committee for this  
opportunity to testify and for your steadfast support  
of the most democratic, the most used civic  
institutions in the City Of New York, the center of  
the world. We are grateful to the *this* body, to the  
City, and to the general public for their recognition  
of the library's role in our civic society.

We've had some hard years pretty much since I  
started, which has been a while now. We've been in a  
budget dance every year that is just remarkably  
costly in ways that, you know, are hard to imagine.  
We have fought back against proposed cuts, and that  
meant we've gotten to no cuts, but not to the  
increases of budget that are normal, that we need in  
order to provide to the public what we have to offer.

We are so grateful not to be facing a budget cut  
this year. That is a tribute to this council, to the  
public, for fighting back against the cuts in past  
years. But we have a catch up to make up here.

The City's libraries, we have requested a baselining of the City Council's \$15.7 million in one time funding and a restoration, a continuation of the baseline \$44.8 million investment— that's \$18.9 million for the New York Public Library.

This is a remarkable year in the history of the world. I mean, look in this chamber with these historical portraits— reminds us of the history of where we are now. We have experienced inflation that has continued, expenses such as the Library's materials, wages, services points, all of it has increased costs— cyber security, maintenance, repairs, IT needs. None of it has been met by fighting back the cuts to get to zero.

So while our operating funds have remained flat, the demands on the libraries have grown and we are proud to meet those demands. But that means we need additional expense funding. It means less... that expense funding means less unplanned closures that stem from limited staffing or unpredictable maintenance needs. It means that our afterschool locations need to continue. There is a... we do college and career prep counseling. Our teens, the teens of this city, depend on us like no one else.

We are ready to increase and improve upon the free programs and services we offer to all New Yorkers that we proudly do. We want to expand our collections and research materials, add more teen centers and after school locations, and provide more story times. How can you be against that?

We want to provide more English classes for speakers of other languages at a moment when the country is turning away from its immigrants, the people, everyone. We are all, almost all immigrants to this country. We have to meet these needs. We need more book clubs for different ages, we need more tech connect courses to develop new professional skill sets, we need more STEM activities for kids.

We are so grateful to the City Council and to its speaker, Speaker Adams, for funding or proposing funding for expanded Sunday services so that we can do all of what we want to do every day of the week, including weekends when people are not working. Because we know New Yorkers are working harder and more, and they need more of our services when we can make that available to them.

So we... there are even things that you can't imagine. I mean, here we are in the city that is the

center of communications in the world, and a million or more New Yorkers still don't have access to Wi-Fi at home. I mean, here we are in the city that is the center of communications in the world, and a million or more New Yorkers still don't have access to Wi-Fi at home. I mean, imagine not having broadband. I mean, that was bad enough in the pandemic. Now we've seen it more. We've gotten a \$3 million grant to pilot a program with the Department of Housing and Preservation to provide free Wi-Fi to up to 2,000 Section 8 tenants, and we know that's just the start of what we need to do. Brooklyn and Queens have done amazing work on this as well. There is more to do.

We are in a world of digital distraction and declining literacy rates just when we need the opposite of that. We need to encourage more readers to read more, to have more books available— E-books, audio books, physical books.

We will track and evaluate and assess branch data so that we can make sure that everyone is getting what they need. This is part of our commitment to adjust our collections and adjust our services to meet what the public needs at a moment when the nation seems to be turning away from that. We'll

innovate policies that diversify collections because we are not turning away.

*We are not turning away* from the notions of diversity and equity and inclusion. We are the most diverse city on the planet, which is why we are the center of the world. We will not turn away from that. We know that we need a staff that represents that diversity. We know that we need to include everyone in the possibilities of learning as the source of opportunity, and we know that that is the source of equity, which is what makes America great. Let us not forget that.

We have real capital needs, as Linda has already suggested, and we have currently \$1.2 billion in unmet capital needs, and we are requesting \$485 million for the New York Public Library. This is about basic services, making sure that things are not closed when the rain comes in through the roof or the HVAC stops working, but it's also about making sure that we have inspiring spaces for all New Yorkers. Again, we are the most visited, most used civic institution in this town. When we can demonstrate that that is something we will provide with pride, with inspiration, then we can make New Yorkers

1 understand and believe in what democracy has to  
2 offer.

3  
4       There are challenges in the City's Capital  
5 processes. We are looking forward to working with the  
6 City to move beyond the challenges of those various  
7 processes. We would like to be included again, *again*,  
8 *please*, in the City's Ten-Year Capital Plan. We've  
9 proven what that means. We've got we got a \$100  
10 million; we did five Carnegies in the in very high  
11 need neighborhoods; we, with thanks to the City,  
12 added another \$76 million beyond that so that we  
13 could produce great libraries in those most needy  
14 neighborhoods.

15       We want to do more. We want to do more top to  
16 bottom renovations. We want to do more that includes  
17 colocation. We are, again, with Brooklyn and Queens  
18 inspiring us, eager to produce new libraries and  
19 housing on top of those.

20       Inwood, where I grew up, has a new library with a  
21 75 units of 100% affordable housing. We are looking  
22 forward... that's the first time we've ever used our  
23 air above the libraries. We want to do more of that,  
24 and we are so delighted that the Administration  
25 agrees with us on this. So we are ready to move on

the Grand Concourse. We're ready to move on  
Bloomingdale at a 100th Street, and we are looking  
for more opportunities.

Design-build is another way in which we can  
ensure that we can produce more on budget, on time.  
We are requesting \$30 million in lumpsum capital  
funding with \$10 million for each of the boroughs  
that we serve. There is so much to do.

We are living in a moment— let's not pretend  
otherwise— we are at a moment where the principles,  
the values that we represent, that the libraries  
represent are under challenge, values that New York  
represents. We have to continue our efforts at  
ensuring inclusion and equity and diversity, which  
the city stands for. We have to make sure that books  
are not banned. I can't believe I need to even say  
that, but that's where we are. And we need to make  
sure that the people of New York, people who have not  
always gotten the best of what America should  
present, do get that. We are here for everyone, which  
is why we are trusted and used more than anyone.

And we need your help, the Administration's help,  
the City's help, to make sure that we can continue to



do what you all expect us to do. Thank you for this opportunity.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you, I don't want to forget to just acknowledge my colleagues that are here: Council Member Hanks, Council Member Ung, Council Member Carr, and Council Member Joseph.

And with that, Mr. President?

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: Thank you, Chair, and good morning to you; I'm Dennis Walcott, President and CEO of the Queens Public Library. It's an honor to always be with my colleagues Linda and Tony. They do fantastic work— and to our great folks who are here as well, and those who are not here, we always thank our team for all of their hard work.

Chair Rivera, Speaker Adams, and the members of this esteemed body, the City Council, I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Library's budget priorities for Fiscal Year 2026

I'm excited to be here because we do good work. We do outstanding work throughout the city of New York. In conjunction with all of your support, we're there for the community, we provide important services, and I think as a result the hardworking staff members who are in our libraries, the public is

served. And, I will definitely not repeat what Linda and Tony talked about because it applies to all of us.

I'll just take a couple of seconds to focus on the Queens Public Library and to the Queens City Council members here, specifically looking at them for all of their great work in the communities and their partnership with the Queens Public Library, with Selvina, with Sandra, and all of those who may not be here— you're fantastic partners and we enjoy working with you. We thank you for both your individual support as well as your collective support on behalf of the community.

To me, a couple of things are important. One is as Tony and Linda indicated, you know, we are appreciative of the budget staying flat, it doesn't really meet our present needs.

In Fiscal Year 2026 Preliminary Budget, Library budgets are held intact after years of proposed cuts for which we are thankful. However, this is a perfect moment to invest in libraries because we continue to invest in the public.

As Tony and Linda indicated, our numbers are up. Our metrics are up like crazy in what we do. Our buildings are growing as well.

We've taken the "Lindsay Boxes" for those who are not familiar with that term, the 7,500 square feet libraries that were built during the John Lindsay Administration, and we're expanding them. As Tony indicated and Linda indicated, we have colocations going on in libraries— we're looking at that at Queens as well and we're seeing our visits increase.

In Fiscal Year 2024 for Queens, we had 6.3 million visits and a circulation of 8.6 million. Our program attendance has increased by 16% compared to the prior fiscal year. After we prioritized grading our locations with external Wi-Fi extenders, allowing the public to access broadband service up to a 150 yards from our buildings, our Wi-Fi sessions alone have increased by 200%. Our adult learner program had a total attendance of 81,700 people. At any given time, we have an ESOL waiting list of approximately 2,000 people with half coming from our Flushing Library. And Flushing, as you know, is just one of the largest trafficked libraries with customers

coming in day and night, seven days a week, and we're extremely proud of all of our individual libraries.

It isn't surprising that we are the trusted center, as indicated earlier, of every community in the borough of Queens, we are seeing these increases because people believe in us. They want us to do well. We were there to serve their needs. We understand what our uses and wants and needs are. If we only had adequate and reliable funding to continue to grow, we could serve more people as well.

We are woefully behind where we should be when it comes to funding. Last year, we highlighted that in addition to the budget cuts, we were facing uncovered increased costs due to contractual wage and health insurance increases, inflation, deferred capital, ineligible repairs that need to hire more staff, and more and more and more and more. These remain a continuous challenge for us, and we are trying to find ways to meet that challenge.

In total, QPL, Queens Public Library has an expense need of \$13.5 million. Without these funds, QPL is susceptible to unplanned closures due staffing and emergency maintenance. So far this fiscal year alone, we have had 114 unplanned full day or partial

closures due to staffing shortages, maintenance, and infrastructure issues.

We're unable to meet the demand of the vital programs, services and library materials our communities rely on. I know when I go online to wait for a book, it is a long wait because we haven't been able to invest because the money hasn't been there. We need the investment for the materials both in the library and our e-materials as well.

We're forced to defer critical maintenance as a result of what Linda and Tony talked about earlier. We need that investment of capital dollars.

Sometimes I don't think-- not you the City Council-- but people in general understand that we are a major building operation in the city with the capital work that's required to upgrade, to respond to emergencies, broken down HVAC systems, broken down boilers, you name it, we face it. That's why capital investment is so important.

For all three systems, the total expense need is \$44.8 million. Having these funds baselined is critical so we can properly plan for the future.

The beauty of Linda, Tony, and our teams is that we love to plan. We love to respond to future needs.

But having investments to allow us to do that will allow us to plan properly.

We know that the Speaker and the Council recognize the values of libraries and that is why we are thrilled that the Speaker has included us as a priority for the upcoming City Budget to address these outstanding needs and invest in our future. In turn, we can be there for our communities, for all New Yorkers, whatever dreams they have and challenges they face.

Like Tony and Linda, we are out there in the public. In Queens, we always like to talk about every Queens resident lives a mile to a mile and a half of a Queens public library, and I know that exists for both Linda and Tony as well. We're there for them. We're serving their needs. We value the public's input, but more importantly, we value in returning those services to meet every need of the public.

Last month, QPL launched the initiative "1000 Books Before Kindergarten", which is designed to establish strong early literacy skills by encouraging parents and caregivers to read with their young children.

In January, as part of our ongoing college and career readiness efforts, a 140 high school students and their families visited our Central Library to learn about summer opportunities, including information on internships and precollege and leadership development programs, as well as exploring various career paths.

Our teen centers are jumping off the hook, Madam Chair of Education, we are there in partnership with the Department of Education. We have programs that we all collectively run jointly with our local schools, our local districts, and we are proud of that. We work in partnership with representatives from CUNY and SUNY and private institutions as well.

At Queen's, our Justice Without Barriers initiative provides resources and professional guidance on issues that commonly affect justice impacted individuals returning home for incarceration, such as sessions on mental health, parenting, post incarceration, and financial literacy.

While this is only a snapshot, and I mean a little snapshot of the remarkable work our staff does each day, it provides a glimpse of how the Queens

Public Library impacts people's lives and create a more equitable and stronger city.

The Council has long understood that we are a lifeline for New Yorkers with its \$15.7 million Library Initiative. We hope you will continue supporting the City's public libraries by reauthorizing the initiative and advocating for its baseline.

Since the summer, Queen's Public Library has celebrated several capital milestones. We opened our brand new, and I'm looking at you, Selvena Brooks-Powers, our new Far Rockaway Library with nearly 2,000 visits on its first day alone. It is a magnificent library serving the Far Rockaway community.

We've opened a number of libraries— the Broadway Library has reopened after a complete renovation of its lower level, which now offers a computer center and updated meeting rooms. As matter of fact, just recently they had a program down there where they had lizards and all the animals, and there was a waiting list of kids to get in there because it was just truly outstanding and engaging.



Both our Hillcrest and Laurelton Libraries reopened to the public after vital infrastructure replacement, and we ended the year with reopening our Bay Terrace Library with a separate entrance for a community room, so that way we do not have to be open as a library, but the community can take advantage of our community room. And the borough president of Queens was up there around three weeks ago holding a community meeting.

I think one of our most complicated capital project which talks about the partnership of both the DDC (Department of Design and Construction) dollars available, but also our private dollars available is at the Flushing Library. We probably have five projects going on at the same time at the Flushing Library. We just opened their brand new elevator. Soon we'll be working on our auditorium, where that'll be opening soon at some point, and we'll give you an update on that, Councilwoman, soon about when that will reopen. And that's because we just can't close Flushing. Flushing would be without a major source of services and books and materials. And Flushing is very unique in that, like all of our libraries, Flushing has one of the largest actual

paper reader users I think in our library system where people from the community come in to look at papers from their homeland to see what's happening.

Those are the various things that we do at our library. Queen's Public Library has identified a system wide capital need of \$413.38 million over the next ten years, with \$42.3 million representing our most urgent needs.

To ensure we can properly plan for the future and ensure functioning spaces that meet the evolving needs of our customers, QPL requires steady reliable funding. Significant inclusion in the City's ten year plan is imperative for the Library to strategically address our immense capital needs.

QPL currently has 35 active DDC projects, and at any moment we could be informed of a shortfall. That's not the right way to do business at all. We need to have the money available so we don't have to be both informed that we have a shortfall by DDC, but then have that project stop. And then once the project stops, then that increases the cost even more so. That's no way to run a business. That's why we're asking for further capital investment in our programs as well.

In addition to sustaining expense cuts last fiscal year, QPL also sustained, and like all of us, a \$32.2 million capital reduction, as we've told our individual council members, that was never restored. Let's not forget about those budget cuts that happened on the capital side that were never restored as part of the restoration process. At some point, that's going to hurt us in the long run, and maybe that point is right now.

The Council has been very generous with its lump sum capital funding in the past, and we respectfully request an increase in the lump sum QPL traditionally receives to \$10 million. The pot of funding is critical in allowing us to seamlessly fill shortfalls for any project in our system as soon as we're notified by DDC.

Especially in these uncertain times, New Yorkers are counting on libraries more than ever before, reliable information that we provide, trusted support, and opportunities to learn and grow. That's who we are and that's what we represent. We must be stronger than ever before. Public libraries need consistent, meaningful investment that meets the increased demand for our services.

We all know this, but I just want to end really with these points, in that when someone new to this city is looking for something, they come to a library. They look at us. They walk through our door, because we are trusted and they know we are nonjudgmental as far as who they may be because their services will be there.

We hope we can count on your unwavering support— we know we can count on your unwavering support— of Queens Public Library and all of our libraries— Brooklyn and New York Public Libraries— with bold and sustained investment in our expense and capital budgets as we look towards Fiscal Year 2026 and beyond.

Thank you, Madam Chair, and members of the City Council.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you. Thank you to the three of you, of course, for your leadership. Truly inspiring the work that you do. That you've remained this pillar of democracy in what is undoubtedly a very interesting sociopolitical moment, uh, where many of us feel lucky that libraries are for everyone when there is a lot of language really disenfranchising so many and marginalizing people who

are already historically underserved. And it's hard. It's hard to plan for future needs when the money incoming has remained the same. I think anyone can say that. If you have the same money coming in every single year that remains the same, ten years later it's gonna catch up. It's gonna hurt a lot. So we're understanding of that need. Maybe \$480.3 million sounds like a lot to some folks, but 217 branches, a lot of work, very old buildings with incredible history attached to them, and so we have to make sure that people understand that it is not enough.

And that the PEGS that you also sustained, which I'll ask in a minute, in terms of some of the system, some of the changes that you might have had to incorporate as a result of those PEGS.

I just wanted to say there's so many great things about your systems. I mean borrowing books of course. I didn't wait that long for ,like, a popular book. It was like *Demon Copperhead* by Barbara Kingsolver. I didn't wait that long. And after I read it, I loved it so much, I went to my local bookstore and bought a copy. So you know, either way. And I also, just this weekend, I used Culture Pass, which is a way to get, for free, into our beloved cultural institutions just

by having a library card, and I went to the Children's Museum on the Upper West Side and had a lovely time, so thank you.

All right, so I do want to ask about some of the changes that you've had to incorporate because of the PEGS. Can you speak a little bit about what you had to do? Maybe they weren't great changes, right? Maybe they were things you had to eliminate or close down or maybe they're just some upgrades to infrastructure that you've had to delay.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Thank you for that question.

Yeah, I love *Demon Copperhead*, and it's a great thing to find a book that you love and then to love it so much that you actually want to put it in your own library as well. So I endorse that whole way of thinking also.

In terms of changes that we had to make last year, in particular when we faced so many PEGS over such a short period of time, I think for us the most devastating thing was a total overhaul in our lending policies. We couldn't spend on our collections, and so we reduced the number of books that could be borrowed both digitally and in hard copy. It created longer wait times for materials, so people who had

gotten in the habit of putting books on hold weren't able to put as many books on hold, which means that they didn't become available as quickly as people had become accustomed to. I'm happy to say that we've rolled back those changes when the budget was restored, but I would really hate for our patrons to experience that again.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: I'll focus on the hiring part of it in that we've all, I think, had this... definitely slowed down our hiring and create vacancies, which has made it really untenable for our staff who were there. And that's impacted, I think, what Linda and Tony have talked about with some of— and me— unplanned closures as well based on some of the staffing challenges. Now we're making that up and we're making that up extremely well. But at the same time, it put us way behind on the capital side and we talked about it as far as deferred maintenance. So we see the results of that as well. And that some of the infrastructure issues, that impact us we would have invested in if we had the capital money available to us, we've had to slow down on or not do it all and; therefore, we have closures as a result of that.

1           So I mean those are just two things, but those  
2  
3   are two major things that hurts the public quite  
4   frankly. I mean when the door is not open, then  
5   children can't come in, people who are going for  
6   classes can't get the services they need. It impacts  
7   all levels of our ability to serve the public. And  
8   that's what's happened as a result of the PEGS in the  
9   past. And even with the restoration of the PEG, we  
10   were behind so many months as a result of that. And  
11   without the proper investment, we're behind, and so  
12   many years, as far as being able to do the job  
13   properly.

14       PRESIDENT MARX: As Linda and Dennis have already  
15   said more eloquently than I can, we have faced  
16   reductions, we've faced threats, we've faced cuts  
17   that have, you know, meant we cannot produce or  
18   provide to New Yorkers what they need. We want  
19   provide more Sunday service. We're delighted by the  
20   Speaker's proposal on that front. Last year was  
21   really hard because of the proposed cuts. We couldn't  
22   hire, and then we had to hire faster, but we had  
23   waited because we had real cut threats. You know,  
24   we've had unplanned closures because of unmet capital  
25   needs. And now we are asking for an assurance of a



capital investment that makes it possible for us to build for New Yorkers reliable libraries, that won't be closed because of rain coming in or HVAC problems. Only if we have that kind of investment can we do what New Yorkers depend on us, require of us to do.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you for that. I mean, the hiring capital expansion of seven-day service, book circulation, circulation, I mean these are like bread and butter for the Library. Certainly deserving.

Have you been able to backfill the funds that were cut in the PEGS? And how much state and federal funding does each system expect to receive this fiscal year?

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: I know with Queens, with the feds, we're roughly like one-and-a-half percent, 2% at that level. So we get special grants that now, obviously as Linda indicated in her testimony, are threatened, and then some other federal grants that we compete for, the IMLS funding has been put on notice as far as not taking place any longer. And we rely on that as well, and that we've got the state level of funding as well. So we, for the Queen's, get a small percentage, City is roughly 90 to 92%, and

1 then the difference is split privately, state and  
2 fed.

3  
4 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Yeah, I echo what Dennis said  
5 about federal funds. IMLS has been gutted essentially  
6 or will be. And it's not an enormous amount of money  
7 relative to the total amount of our budget, but it's  
8 symbolic, and it's also money that was infused into  
9 libraries across the country to really promote  
10 innovation in the delivery of library service and to  
11 reward excellence in librarianship. So that was  
12 devastating news for all of us.

13 We've, as Dennis explained, from that pot of  
14 money received very specific funding for specific  
15 projects. Our budget is 85% from the City. We do get  
16 state funding, and we're all sort of holding our  
17 breath to figure out what that will look like,  
18 depending on what the State's budget looks like from  
19 the feds.

20 PRESIDENT MARX: As my colleagues have said, so in  
21 the case of New York Public Library, less than half a  
22 percent of our budget comes from federal sources.  
23 That's, I guess, good news. But seeing the IMLS and  
24 the investments, generally of this country, in  
25 learning and opportunity decrease or be evaporated is

1 really hard to watch. We can absorb it, but we can't  
2 celebrate it. We are really mortified by seeing  
3 what's happening. The state of New York has been  
4 incredibly supportive. It's partly formula and partly  
5 beyond, and the Governor really has invested in  
6 libraries. That's fabulous.

7       You know, the city of New York is our central  
8 source of support for the branches and for the  
9 education programs. We've, again, fought back cuts to  
10 get to zero. Now we need an increased investment,  
11 because it's been a decade of not getting the  
12 increases that we need to meet real needs. I mean,  
13 the most obvious one of those is our book budget,  
14 which has gone down by millions of dollars because we  
15 haven't had the support that we need.

16       We want you to get every book you want as fast as  
17 you want. We love our independent bookstores. We love  
18 that that's an option— not in every neighborhood— not  
19 in every borough...

20       CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Not in every budget.

21       PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Not in every budget.

22       PRESIDENT MARX: Not in every budget. And that's  
23 what we're here for. And we need your help to restore  
24 that.  
25

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: I know, I realize what a  
privilege it is to spend \$18 on a book.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Yeah. Also, I just wanna  
mention that the reason the book budgets in all three  
systems have been one of the first places where we've  
gone to find savings is because the last thing we  
want to do is cut staff who is so important on the  
front line of serving patrons. And so that's always  
the logical way to kind of put that option to the  
very bottom of the list.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: And if I may just add to what  
Linda said, and I think we've talked about this in  
the past, the balancing act of the infrastructure  
connected to expense money as well— because a lot of  
times when people hear about infrastructure, they  
think of capital dollars, but a lot of it is not  
capitally eligible. Therefore, we're paying for a  
leaky roof, people want it done quickly by us. That  
comes out of our expense money. So in addition to  
what Linda and Tony indicated, we also have to make  
sure we have that money set aside for those unknown  
expenses that would pop up on the capital side and  
then that cuts into our budget as well. So we're  
really at the bone. And, you know, it's such a tough

balancing act when we talk about, "Well, we haven't had a PEG this year," but we haven't kept pace with everything from prior years. And how we balance that out as far as maintaining a first class institution, serving a first class city, and having a public deserving us to be upfront and leading the way, requires that type of investment. So this is all combined as far as, what we are trying to articulate, as far as the need for libraries and serving the public.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: And I appreciate that, because I know I ask you every budget hearing, what do you, in terms of what your dependence is on the City for funding, but I think people really need to understand that when that when Queens, uh, 92%; Brooklyn 85%, like, these are real percentages. So the city has an obligation because you... the critical services that you all provide.

So I just want to get to my colleagues, who are here to ask questions— acknowledge we've been joined by Council Member Brewer. We're going to begin with Council Member Brooks-Powers, followed by Louis.

COUNCIL MEMBER BROOKS-POWERS: Thank you, Chair. I am going to try and make this very brief, because I have to depart shortly after.

First, I wanted to ask about interim library space. Given the library closures in my district, what alternative solutions can QPL explore to ensure consistent library access for residents between Laurelton and Rosedale? Would QPL consider partnerships with community centers or other public spaces to provide temporary library services? And I know we've already spoken offline... Yep?

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: Sure, by all means, so a couple of things. One, as you know, we provide mobile library services to libraries similar to Laurelton in your district and we'll do that with Rosedale as well. And part of the challenge is that with alternative space. Because I know people always want us to look for an alternative site, that comes out of the expense budget. So again, we're drawing into expense need, and a lot of it is not capitally eligible as far as the work that's required to turn an alternative space into a library. So again, that's expense money.

1 But partnerships, if there's a community  
2 organization where we can partner with, we're always  
3 open to explore that because that's something that  
4 may not cost a lot of money. But again, it's not as  
5 easy when people say, "Well there's a storefront over  
6 there, or this bank closed down over there, and do  
7 you want to take this particular facility to turn it  
8 into a space while work is being done?" That means  
9 that we're managing the capital work of the library  
10 that we're trying to reform, but, at the same time,  
11 paying expense dollars to have an alternative site.  
12 It just doesn't line up with the budget needs.

14 But we're always interested in exploring and  
15 talking to our council colleagues around what the  
16 potential may be out there, but really laying it out  
17 as far as people understanding it's not as easy as  
18 having a finite amount of money available to us that  
19 allow us to finance alternative space.

20 COUNCIL MEMBER BROOKS-POWERS: And then in terms  
21 of budget and resource allocation, given the  
22 logistical and financial challenges of renting  
23 interim space, what additional resources or support  
24 does QPL need from the Council to make such an option  
25 feasible? And would QPL consider adjusting the mobile

library schedule or expanding the digital access to bridge the gap? So wanting to really hear like what we can do on our part.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: Mm-hmm. So a couple of things.

One, with the digital access, we will always maintain our digital capacity at the library so people will have the ability outside of that building to do that.

As far as what the individual council members can do, out of your budgets, if there are opportunities to set aside money for expense to potentially rent a facility, then we're always interested in doing that.

As far as the mobile library, I think as we've indicated in the past, we're going to have new mobile libraries coming online this year. And, matter of fact, we are excited about one that'll be out in the furthest reaches of the Rockaways that will be out there soon. And then we have what we call our Queen Mary mobile library coming on board and then our Good Humor truck mobile library coming on board. So, there are various sizes of mobile libraries that will be serving the public, and we'll be talking about how we partner a number of the libraries that are under



renovation at this particular point to continue the service to the public.

COUNCIL MEMBER BROOKS-POWERS: Thank you for that. And my last question is regarding the future vision and expanding outreach. And with library attendance rising in Council District 31, as you mentioned before, which we're excited about, and across Queens, what is QPL's long term vision for sustaining and growing this demand? How does QPL plan to expand outreach programming and services to continue engaging more residents, especially as renovations and new investments take place?

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: So we have just started our new five-year strategic plan, with specific emphasis on around eight critical objectives in our expansion of services and the refinement of our services, which includes the elderly, teen services, immigrants, and other objectives. And that will be part of our continued growth and refinement of our program services to the public. So we're excited about that and that's specifically for the Queen's Public Library community.

In addition to that, with what the Speaker talked about in our State of the City, as far as the

expansion of Sunday services for all three systems, that'll be another way to do that, and we're taking a look at where those potential sites will be.

And the final thing for me is how we continue the expansion through our capital programming. You know, Auburn is about to— I think the clapboard is up there right now for construction taking place for the expansion— Auburn will stay open and we'll be building on the vacant lot.

And as we continue to expand our site, (TIMER CHIMES) we will be able to expand our services as well. But that requires the investment from the City to allow us to have the staff to do that. So it's a combination of investment but also program vision of what we're gonna do.

COUNCIL MEMBER BROOKS-POWERS: Thank you, and thank you, Chair.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you.

Council Member Louis?

COUNCIL MEMBER LOUIS: Thank you, Chair. It is good to see you all this morning. And thank you, President Johnson, and your staff, Michelle, for your support with Clarendon Library and the reopening in January.

Two quick questions— One on political and civic engagement, the other one on federal funding risks.

During last year's hearing, we discussed the importance of civic engagement programs in libraries particularly given the current national political climate. How much funding is committed to these programs for FY26. And in which locations will they primarily be conducted?

The second question is in regards to federal funding risks. I wanted to know, is the Brooklyn Public Library at risk of losing federal funding, as well as the whole institution due to the Administration's policies restricting materials regarding DEI and gender equity? And if so, what contingency plans are you all putting in place to safeguard these critical education and cultural resources?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Thank you for those questions.

The civic engagement programming that we do is infused in, not just one location or in one particular category of programs, it's across all of the work that we do. So the best example, which will also address the second question, would be our Books Unbanned program, which is designed to provide banned

books as well as access to the entire Brooklyn digital collection to teens across the country who are not able to find the books they're looking for on the shelves of their local or their school libraries.

That program, while it appears at first blush to provide services to teens across the country, it also gave us the opportunity to do some very robust civic engagement work with Brooklyn teens. We have intellectual teen councils that are essentially in the business of helping their peers across the country learn how to advocate for themselves. So they are being trained to be civically engaged and to advocate for themselves so that they in turn can spread that work across the country to teens who are living in communities where their rights are being severely infringed. And that's just one example.

You know, we are trying to infuse civic engagement work in everything we do. We have program for older adults and teens as well in debates. And the topics that are being debated are often around conversations or are based on conversations about civic engagement and advocacy.

So this is work that we believe so deeply and that it's actually happening in every branch across

the system as well as programs that extend beyond the borough.

COUNCIL MEMBER LOUIS: Thank you.

PRESIDENT MARX: Can I just add, those are great questions and you know, we're all facing them. And the Systems are all doing amazing work with teens, with civic engagement, but it's more fundamental than that. We're about helping everyone learn, having access to information they can trust that is true. Those are fundamental to democracy. They are under threat at the moment. And we, these institutions, these libraries throughout the city, are at the forefront of resisting what is happening in this country, what is happening in the world. We need to ensure that people are not just getting garbage off of this, that they are getting information they can trust, they are getting the books that they want to read, that they are getting education programs that they deserve so that they can be the citizens that will defend the interests of democracy.

New York is at the forefront of that, and we are there, we are here to serve.

COUNCIL MEMBER LOUIS: Thank you.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Yeah. Not to pile on, but one of the programs that we get support from through the Institute of Museum and Library Services is a program that we call Pathways, which allows us to provide scholarships to Brooklyn Public Library employees who are not... who do not possess the master's degree in Library and Information Services, but who would like to advance their careers. And that funding allows us to support employees who apply, who have undergraduate degrees and want to go on and further their careers (TIMER CHIMES) so that they can become librarians in our system. And that program has been ongoing for a couple of years- there's still a year and a half remaining on it. It would be devastating to have to roll back a program like that, which not only helps individual employee, but then in fact pushes it out to the borough in general.

COUNCIL MEMBER LOUIS: Thank you. Thank you, Madam Chair.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you. I am also going to turn to Council Member Brewer for questions.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Thank you, she says that with, I don't know, some degree of whatever.

I have a couple of questions— DDC, this might be an IRIS question, but DDC says, oh, we do the libraries, we're great. But then the librarians and the system says they cost too much. So I'm wondering how... do we wanna keep DDC in building? Do you wanna get rid of DDC? How do we deal with them?

PRESIDENT MARX: Look, our colleagues at DDC are doing...

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: They're lovely people.

PRESIDENT MARX: they are lovely people. They are working hard. We appreciate that. We also recognize that when we do a project self managed...

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: It costs less.

PRESIDENT MARX: It costs half, and... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: And what IRIS does it costs even less...

PRESIDENT MARX: takes half the time. And, you know, I you know, IRIS can speak more eloquently than I can to this, but it's...(CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: (INAUDIBLE) all going to take money... (CROSS-TALK)

PRESIDENT MARX: Well, I'm not an expert at public policy. But when it costs...

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I am...

PRESIDENT MARX: twice as much, and takes twice as long, something's broken.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Right.

PRESIDENT MARX: Which is why we work with EDC, why we look... why we do self funded projects. But we cannot afford...

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Thank you...

PRESIDENT MARX: to do all of this. We need a partner in the City that works. And I am not sure that we have that.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: That a great way to put it, because we are actually, uh, we want to do the projects, especially the large overhauls, and we've demonstrated that we can do that and we can do it, as Tony said, more efficiently and under budget or at least at a much smaller budget. But we can't do all the work. We're not development corporations. We need a partner that's going to take care of the roofs and the boilers and the HVAC systems. Otherwise, you know, it's a big distraction from the work that is at the core of our mission.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: So they're good partners in some cases is what you're saying?



PRESIDENT JOHNSON: I don't want to overstate it, what I am saying is we need a good partner...

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: who will be able to do that work in efficient ways, so that we are not closed in branches any longer than we need to be.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: So it's easy to beat up on DDC, but it's not just DDC. There has to be a better way. And I think OMB is a part of the discussion as well as far as the role OMB plays. And this is not dogging DDC. It's just, unfortunately, the reality we have to face. We just briefed a council member around a project in this council member's district in Queens and this council member is not term limited. And so this council member has the opportunity to see the renovation of his library before he leaves. But a lot of times that's not the case. That's not the way to do business. And again, it's not dogging DDC, it's just the way the system is set up. There has to be a better system to allow us to do buildings in a way that makes it both cheaper, more efficient, and quicker.

It shouldn't take eight years from the time a shovel goes under the ground to a library being

renovated. You can renovate buildings or build buildings. We have a building that's going across from Central Library in a parking lot that in three years it was put up. I mean, that's just the way it is. We are open to partnering, as Tony indicated, and Linda is an expert on, and obviously IRIS and our teams are all part of this, as far as how to improve the system. But also the City should play a role, I think, in taking a comprehensive look as far as-- all the components that are part of building, whether it's Parks, it's Libraries, and other types of buildings in the city, and making sure that barriers that exist to prevent those buildings from being built in a timely manner, and in a cheaper manner, are eliminated. And it's not the people at DDC, it's just the bureaucracy of how we have to operate as a building institution in the city of New York that prevents us from building libraries in a timely manner.

One final thing, you know, you guys know I was chancellor at one point, and I always use this as a counterpoint when we talk about libraries and then building with... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: SCA (School Construction  
Authority)...

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: SCA...

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: SCA did a good job.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: Well, beyond that, there was  
a, uhm, is anyone here from the Bronx right now? But  
we have a, when I was chancellor, we took over a  
railyard and built three schools, an athletic  
field... an athletic field in this railyard in the  
South Bronx in three years. In three years, it was a  
\$235 million project. I will never forget this  
particular project. And, it was done benefiting the  
residents of this particular community and beyond.  
That was a three school complex, and that would  
involve (TIMER CHIMES) remediation of contaminated  
land that was there. And, it was done, and it was  
done extremely well. And that can be done for our  
libraries, by us individually, if we had all the  
capital dollars that we needed privately, but also  
can be done through DDC with the appropriate reforms,  
I think at a city level from a OMB, DDC, and all the  
issues that are connected with the buildings taken so  
long.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: And that was SCA, which usually does a great job.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: That was SCA, yeah, mm-hmm.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: You're nicer to them, to DDC, than I am.

My other question is just in terms of your language programs, I am just was wondering, they're so necessary, they're so... particularly now. I have, been working a lot with new arrivals in your library. So my question is, how much do they cost? How long is the waiting list? And what else do you need for those programs?

PRESIDENT MARX: So, I'll get you the exact numbers.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay.

PRESIDENT MARX: But the, uhm, we are the largest free English language instruction offerings in New York— other than the public schools and CUNY. We are proud of that. We are proud of the fact that immigrants have trusted us for as long as we've been around, because this is a city, a country of immigrants, and we are currently... it isn't... the money is essential, and the programs are essential, but the threat that we might be visited by ICE during

those programs has a chilling effect, and will have a chilling effect that can undermine 130-odd years of work to build this trust. That's what we're focused on at the moment.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Oh, you're right. Okay. Anybody else want to...

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: Yeah. I mean, we receive federal dollars on WIOA (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act) uh, workforce investment dollars. So that impacts our immigrant populations, and, again, as indicated in my testimony, I mean we have a 2,000-person waiting list for services of people for ESOL and others. And so, you know, we are there to provide that. So that money would be threatened by the federal government and the loss of dollars to serve that particular population.

And going back to your prior point, I guess I am the nicer twin of the two of us...

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Yeah, we... We're twins, in case people don't know...

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: Yeah, I'm the nicer twin in talking about the (INAUDIBLE)...

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Same age, to the second.

UNKNOWN: (INAUDIBLE)

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: We have... Well, when Gale was sworn in, the first time, and I was at her swearing in, her parents were there, and I got up to speak, thanks to the council member asking me to speak, and then I said to her parents, "Mom and Dad, was it something I said? You left me in the hospital and you took Gale home." (LAUGHTER)

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: That's a true story. I loved it. (LAUGHS) Thank you, twin.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: My pleasure.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: In Brooklyn is there... I actually have a waiting list also...

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Yeah, I have that.

Yes, there's a waiting list, and we're watching it, obviously, very closely for the reasons that Tony mentioned. And I'm heartened to say that, so far, we have not seen a decline in the number of people who are waiting. Normally, wouldn't be excited to have a backlog, but in this case, because the services are so necessary, and because so many of the classes are being provided in neighborhoods where there's large influx of new New Yorkers, we're pleased that they're still coming to us for services like English as a second language.

Also I would mention that, in all the conversations this morning, it's occurred to me that no one has mentioned that every day the lines in front of our libraries start to form in advance of our opening time. In the case at Central Library, there's a door which is near the IDNYC Office, and those people who are coming specifically to register for the municipal card, identification card, they know in advance where to go, which door is closest to the office, and so the line starts to form there. And I'm, you know, every day just, you know, hoping that that doesn't stop.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: And the reason I asked for the numbers, not now, later is, god forbid, something should happen to your funding, then we would have to pick that up because it's such an important service. That's why I'm asking. Later on, you can get it to the chair.

Quickly, seven-day service, thank you to the Speaker mentioning it. I've been talking about it for about 20 years.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Yep!

(LAUGHTER)

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: So, what...

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: \$7.5 million...

(LAUGHTER)

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: Seven million for us, we're ready for you this time, Gale.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay, so it's seven...

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Let me... Let me just say that the issue is not only the dollars, but because of last year's PEGS, hiring is really tough.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I know, I heard.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: So getting staffed up for it is an issue as well...

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: All right, so you have a number?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Yes.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay. Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you, Council Member.

I want to acknowledge that we have been joined by Council Member Hanif via Zoom.

I wanted to ask, I guess, back to not the DDC question, lovely, lovely people, obviously.

So if capital projects are not fully funded, as you experience, I would say probably year after year, unfortunately, how does it effect the start, the



1 completion of the project, and how many capital  
2 projects are scheduled for completion in the current  
3 fiscal year?

4  
5 And happy if you want to maybe prioritize a few  
6 that we can really advocate for to the Administration  
7 if that's better, a better way of asking.

8 PRESIDENT MARX: I'll start by saying, it was only  
9 in 2016, for the first time in decades, that we  
10 were... that the Library Systems, at all, were in the  
11 Ten-Year Capital Plan, which seems like an obvious  
12 thing to do, but somehow we didn't get it.

13 If you can't... if you don't have a commitment of  
14 a plan and an amount, you cannot do the capital  
15 improvements that we require. That's what we're  
16 asking the Administration to redress again. We did  
17 five Carnegie total renovations in neighborhoods of  
18 need. Amazing results. Amazing. Come see them. We  
19 want to do another five. We've proven, as my  
20 colleagues have in their systems, that we can produce  
21 results, but we need the commitment of dollars to be  
22 able to plan and produce those results, otherwise, we  
23 can't.

24 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: I would just add one thing to  
25 that response, which is that by doing these massive

1  
2 overhauls, we, at the same time, address many of our  
3 deferred maintenance needs, and also the risk of  
4 having to close libraries for emergencies. They're  
5 planned closures, and they're difficult while they're  
6 in place, but on the other hand, you know, rolling  
7 forward, those libraries will be in better condition.  
8 With any luck, they'll be kept and maintained in a  
9 better way. So that will minimize the amount of  
10 closures in the future.

11       PRESIDENT WALCOTT: And to answer part of the  
12 question as far as shortfalls, we have to stop the  
13 project. And that goes back to the testimony that we  
14 had talked about before, in that, once we stop, then  
15 that increases the cost and the cost goes up.

16       So that's where our teams, and I'll speak for  
17 Queens right now, have been magnificent in that with  
18 the investment from the Council on the capital side,  
19 and as Tony indicated other plans from 2016, our  
20 folks have had the money to then plug a lot of those  
21 shortfalls, but now that money is short. Therefore,  
22 when a shortfall happens, we can't continue it.

23       And then we can go in thinking a project is fully  
24 funded, but then we know the reality that that fully  
25 funded changes rather quickly.

And so that's the investment we're asking for as far as more capital dollars to allow us to meet those needs as far as shortfalls and plug them. Because again, you just can't stop it because we'll be lost.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: How has conversations with OMB been going regarding some of these unfunded needs?

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Ongoing. They're ongoing.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: They're ongoing.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: Yeah, I mean, it's ongoing. And, again, I'm a big believer in the people who are working there as far as OMB and DDC, as far as-- they're really hardworking individuals, but they have their realities they have to face as well as far as the agency they work for.

But we've had a very productive relationship, and constant relationship, with OMB as far as our needs are concerned. And so OMB hears it, and it's just how dollars flow down to benefit us. And I think that's where we are right now.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: I think that's very  
(INAUDIBLE)... (CROSS-TALK)

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: But what was the comment that you made on the steps about being kind, uhm...

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: You don't have to be nice to  
be kind.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Thank you.

PRESIDENT MARX: Can I just add? Look, I mean,  
when we... because we have insufficient capital  
investment to maintain and enhance our facilities, we  
lose serious amounts of time where we have to close  
branches because of emergency uses. In

in FY24, we lost over 4,000 hours in our  
branches, because we didn't have the investment in  
capital to keep them going.

You know, what can I say? We can do better than  
this. We have proven that we can do better than this,  
but we need a partnership and a system that will give  
us the assurance of funding so that we can produce  
for New Yorkers what they expect and should expect.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Yes.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: So I wanna answer your  
question also in a more direct way- and I got the  
information- For this calendar year, we will be  
finishing our Flushing Elevator Project, which is a  
major project. We'll also be finishing our Seaside  
HVAC project. And we'll be finishing our upgrading of  
Hunter's Point Library, which is a library we had to

1  
2 upgrade. And that will be complete by the end of the  
3 calendar year. And that I must say, I want to  
4 accentuate that, has been a very dynamic project with  
5 DDC in that DDC, the City, and the Queens Public  
6 Library have been working very close together on this  
7 particular project. And, the Hunter's Point that  
8 opened a number of years ago, will not be the  
9 Hunter's Point that people will see. And, we've been  
10 able to maintain Hunter's Point staying open while  
11 all this work is taking place and the work taking  
12 place at night, and then cleaning up for the  
13 customers during the day.

14       So, again, similar to Flushing, Flushing we've  
15 kept open as well and having work done at night and  
16 keeping it open during the day and the evening.

17       CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: And just speaking of hours,  
18 you know this council, under the leadership of  
19 Speaker Adams, have really championed libraries. It  
20 was mentioned in the State of the City speech,  
21 calling for 10 additional branches to be open seven-  
22 days a week. I think out of the 219 total branches,  
23 only 21 are currently open seven days.

24       So how do we meet all the unmet needs of the  
25 three systems? What is the Administration's plan— and

1  
2 what is your plan to accomplish the goal of getting  
3 the 10 additional branches to be open seven days a  
4 week and then seeing how much further we can go in  
5 that expansion? We're still deciding, right, on the  
6 10?

7 PRESIDENT WALCOTT: Yeah, I mean...

8 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Yeah, we haven't identified  
9 which branches will be added to the list.

10 The question really though is a much broader  
11 question than the Sunday service. It's really at the  
12 core of everything that we're talking about today,  
13 which is having been held constant for so long, we've  
14 really been facing cuts every year. And we know it's  
15 not popular to talk about the increased cost of doing  
16 business these days. We know that our counterparts at  
17 every agency in the city are experiencing the same  
18 inflation and the same increased cost of doing  
19 business. But, in addition to just the inflation that  
20 we are experiencing, we're also in a situation where  
21 our budgets have remained constant for so long that  
22 we've in essence experienced cuts along the way— And  
23 by the way, at the same time that we've expanded  
24 services.  
25

PRESIDENT MARX: Again, we are so grateful to the Speaker and to the Council for this proposal. We would like as much seven day service as possible. It does mean over time, because of our arrangements, our negotiations with our wonderful partners at in the unions, we understand that people need to be paid what they need to be paid, but it's expensive. Gale been on this forever.

We are delighted to do more, but we need an assurance of the budget. And, you know, and we see the OMB as great partners in this, and we hope we can find a great resolution that will produce more seven day service for New Yorkers.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: Same with us. We will be identifying the sites, and then obviously share it with the Speaker, and you, Chair, and the members of the Council as far as once we identify those sites.

But, you know, I have a dream, I mean my dream is to really expand our services in a variety of ways. I mean, the public is demanding that, and they want it, and they need it.

And even with our services staying basically constant right now, and the threat last year, the PEG and the restoration, as we reflected in our

testimony, was showing all of our metrics going up at all the individual libraries. The metrics are going up and that's basically staying the same.

Can you imagine? Can you imagine the numbers we would have, and the public numbers that would be served, with that expansion of Sunday service, but also expansion of hours, expansion in the way we do things. That requires the money to be baselined and for us to have a constant stream of dollars that we can rely on.

It's never a way to do business with the constant thought of threats of dollar reduction and having to plan with not knowing how much you're gonna have for the next fiscal year. The public shouldn't have that from our libraries. We shouldn't have that. The city of New York should not have that.

We're the greatest city in the world. We're the greatest library system, and that investment will allow us to even be greater in what we do.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Well, I just want to thank you all again. Just turn to my colleagues, see if they have any other questions? Okay.

Your branches are amazing. The people inside of them make them truly special places in New York City.



I think we all have a story about that librarian,  
that person that we met that will stay with us  
forever.

And I think that's the only... these are the only  
spaces in New York City where you can find  
information on composting, go to a job fair, get a  
prom dress, make a friendship bracelet, like all of  
these things, and read incredible works of literature  
that are going to be with us forever.

So it goes without saying you're deserving of our  
absolute commitment. And so I want to thank you for  
your testimony today, for your work, for all of the  
people in your systems that show up to work every day  
to do such incredible, provide such incredible  
service.

So thank you, and see you soon. Let me know.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Thank you.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: Thank you, Chair, thank you  
for your leadership, and thank you to the Council—  
and thank you to the Speaker.

(APPLAUSE)

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: All right, stay tuned, folks,  
we are going to come back and talk to DCLA  
(Department of Cultural Affairs) in a few.

(PAUSE)

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Good afternoon.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Good afternoon.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Hi, everyone, hello up there.

I just want to thank everyone for being here. Welcome to this hearing from the Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations. I am Council Member Carlina Rivera, Chair of the Committee. I would like to recognize the members of the Committee who are present: Council Member Louis, Council Member Hudson, Council Member Brewer, Council Member Carr, and Council Member Ung. And I want to thank the staff at City Hall for always ensuring that we are running a very smooth operation here for the people of New York City. And I want to thank my staff for organizing today's hearing, as well as the Katie Loeb, Eddie Amador, Sandra Gray, Christina Yellamaty, and Regina Paul, thank you for your work.

This afternoon we will be discussing the Fiscal 2026 Preliminary Expense Budget for the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, which stands at a \$164.4 million, and the Fiscal 2026 Preliminary Capital Commitment Plan, which includes \$1.3 billion

in in Fiscal Years 2025 to 2029, as well as the Ten-Year Capital Strategy, which includes \$1.6 billion in Fiscal Years 2026 to 2035 for the Department.

The Agency has a robust capital program and is currently funding 361 capital projects on behalf of approximately a 98 arts organizations. The Preliminary Plan includes an additional \$3 million of baseline City funding starting in Fiscal 2026 to add up to five new members to the Cultural Institutions Group, CIG. I'm excited to see new additions to this coalition of organizations that serve all five boroughs and operates as stewards of city-owned facilities.

But as we discuss the numbers today, let's be clear, this budget is about more than just figures on a page. It is about protecting and strengthening one of New York City's greatest assets, our cultural institutions and arts organizations.

At the urging of the Council, the Administration added \$45 million in additional funding at adoption of the Fiscal 2025 Budget. This funding provided much needed support to both the Cultural Institution Group and Cultural Development Fund, CDF, recipients. The Council is disappointed that the funding is not

included in Fiscal 2026 in the Preliminary Plan. It is imperative that this funding be baselined to meet the needs of the cultural community.

New York's arts and culture sector is an economic powerhouse, generating \$22 billion annually and providing an extraordinary 99-to-one return on city investment. Theaters, museums, and performance spaces don't just inspire us, though that's so important. They drive tourism, they create jobs, and they define our global identity. They are community lifelines that provide accessible programming, uplift diverse voices, and embody our commitment to the freedom of expression.

Yet despite their importance, the sector continues to face significant challenges. While tourism is rebounding, international visitor spending remains more than 20% below pre-pandemic levels. A troubling given that international tourists spend twice as much as domestic visitors and make up a crucial portion of audiences for Broadway, the Met Opera, and our museums. Federal policies, including restrictive immigration measures and harmful trade policies, have already discouraged international

travelers from visiting The U.S. threatening the financial health of our cultural sector.

Just this month, a British tourist on a four-month backpacking trip across North America was detained by ICE for ten days simply for attempting to enter The U.S. from Canada, and now federal funding for the arts is also under attack.

The Trump administration has already issued a directive to review and potentially pause federal loan and grant spending, creating deep uncertainty for cultural institutions that rely on this support.

The recent announcement that the National Endowment for the Arts will eliminate funding for diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, DEI, starting in FY 2026, is yet another alarming move that threatens to undermine the progress we've made in ensuring that the arts reflect the full diversity of our city.

During this hearing, I would like the commissioner to elaborate on the Agency staffing capacity and the Department's ability to process and ensure timely disbursement of funds for CDF program organizations, which did not happen last year, and remains a matter of concern for me.

1  
2       Additionally, we want to clarify what additional  
3 new needs the agency has submitted to OMB for Fiscal  
4 2026.

5       In the Fiscal 2026 Budget, the Council will  
6 continue to prioritize cultural funding with our  
7 numerous initiatives such as Cultural After School  
8 Adventures, CASA, the Cultural Immigrant Initiative,  
9 Coalition of Theaters of Color, Art and Catalysts for  
10 Change Initiative, and the SU-CASA Creative Aging  
11 Program.

12       It is the Council's responsibility to ensure that  
13 the City's budget is fair, transparent, and  
14 accountable to all New Yorkers. Therefore, as the  
15 chair of the Committee On Cultural Affairs,  
16 Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations, I  
17 will continue to push for accountability and  
18 accuracy, and ensure that the budget reflects the  
19 needs and the interests of our city and our  
20 neighbors.

21       It is essential that the budget that we adopt  
22 this year is reflective of the priorities and  
23 interests of the Council and the people we represent.  
24 This hearing is a vital part of this process.  
25

I expect that DCLA will be responsive to the questions and concerns of council members, and I always look forward to an active engagement with the Administration over the next few months to ensure the Fiscal 2026 Adopted Budget meets the goals the Council has set out.

With that, I will turn it over to Committee Counsel, thank you.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Hi, good afternoon, please raise your right hand.

Do you affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth in your testimony before this committee, and to respond honestly to council member questions?

Laurie Cumbo?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I do.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Lance Polivy?

LANCE POLIVY: I do.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, you may begin.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Thank you. Good morning, Chair Rivera and the members of the Committee. And I want to thank all of my colleagues that are here today.

I am Laurie Cumbo, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. I am here to testify regarding today's topic - the Mayors Preliminary Fiscal Year 2026 Budget.

I'll start off today by reviewing the numbers in the Preliminary Budget Proposal. THE PRELIMINARY FISCAL YEAR 2026 Budget allocates \$164 million to DCLA, including \$28.5 million for the Cultural Development Fund, \$79.1 million for Operating Subsidies for the Cultural Institutions Group, \$46.9 million to cover energy costs at cultural groups on City property, \$8.4 million for agency personnel and expenses, and \$1.2 million for Create NYC Initiatives.

Note that these figures do not include any of the one-time funding allocations such as Council initiatives, thank you very much, that are typically added at budget adoption each year.

By comparison at this point in the budget process last year, the Preliminary Fiscal Year 2025 Budget allocated a \$143.9 million to DCLA— \$20 million dollars less than where we stand now for Fiscal Year 2026



Thanks to sound, responsible fiscal planning, our Fiscal 2025 budget currently stands at \$254 million , an all time record high for the Agency.

We look forward to working in the months ahead toward adopting budget for Fiscal Year 2026 that builds on this strong record of support for arts and culture that we have demonstrated during the Adams' administration.

Now I'd like to provide a few highlights and updates on the programs that these investments allow us to deliver for New Yorkers.

As part of our Fiscal Year 2025 Budget, we recently announced the 1,078 recipients of nearly \$60 million in grants through the Cultural Development Fund. This represents an all time record investment in our amazing cultural sector and includes city council member items that we are proud to partner with you each year to administer.

The Fiscal Year 2025 CDF awards reflect changes that respond directly to critical feedback from the Council last year during hearings and discussions. These changes are also the results of engagement with the cultural community, including through testimony they have shared at council hearings, Culture at 3,

and other sector-led forums, and numerous conversations with our constituent organizations. We are accountable to you, and we have taken all of your feedback into consideration.

All of this input is part of the collaborative process that was instrumental in fostering a stronger, more equitable CDF process, which now includes a number of new and restored initiatives that I'm excited to discuss with you.

I will begin by highlighting initiatives that we brought back for Fiscal Year 2025 that I'm extremely excited about.

The Language Access Fund, which is providing 64 organizations an additional \$10,000 each in grant funding to bring more cultural programming to non English speakers, multilingual language learners, and English language learners.

The Disability Forward Fund, which is supporting 42 organizations with an additional \$10,000 each to deepen cultural engagement for people with disabilities as artists, cultural workers, and audience members.

As you know, last year's CDF also brought back city council representation into the panel review

process for the first time since before the pandemic. Nobody knows your districts and local cultural institutions better than you. And we were delighted to have your perspectives and wisdom reflected in the process this year. It made it better.

There were 37 city council representatives on Fiscal Year 2025 panels from 20 council districts in all. We'll be coming back to you to get this process started again soon, so look out for communications from my team in the weeks ahead, because we'd love to have all 51 members a part of this.

Now I'll go over several of the new Fiscal Year 2025 CDF initiatives:

—An increase for the five borough arts councils: DCLA provides funding to local arts councils in each borough to distribute grants to individual artists and small not for profits in their respective boroughs. This year, we're investing \$3.4 million in the Arts Councils, a 15% increase over their Fiscal 2024 allotment. Last year, these funds reached nearly 700 artists and small arts organizations across the five boroughs. We're excited to build on this important investment and our city's working artists.

1                    -The newly established CDF Equity Fund is  
2  
3       providing 264 organizations located in underserved  
4       areas of New York City with a total of \$2 million in  
5       additional funding on top of their CDF awards.  
6       Research shows that cultural assets correlate with  
7       better outcomes in public safety, health, arts  
8       education, so the equity fund is investment in  
9       stronger communities across the City.

10           -Additional support for completing capital  
11       projects: New facilities often require cultural  
12       organizations to ramp up operations, threatening  
13       their financial health and stability. As part of the  
14       CDF equity fund, several organizations received  
15       additional funding tied to the completion of major  
16       city funded capital projects to support groups they  
17       bring new facilities online, such as La MaMa in  
18       Council Member Carlina Rivera's district.

19           -CDF safety net funding: This was one of the top  
20       priorities for the Council in last year's hearings.  
21       This funding is designed to help long time CDF  
22       recipients avoid significant disruptions in their  
23       programming should they not receive a baseline CDF  
24       award. The FY25 safety net will provide a total of  
25       \$720,000 to applicants that have received CDF

baseline awards in six consecutive prior fiscal years, but whose applications did not score highly enough to receive baseline funding in the FY25 twenty cycle. We heard from many of our constituents and members of the City Council that this reform was a much needed way to offer a lifeline to groups who rely on our funding.

Taken together, these far reaching investments and reforms have made the CDF a stronger, more reliable source of support for our city's cultural sector. We look forward to continuing conversations about how we can further strengthen the CDF for our grantees.

While capital investments are not included in the City's budget until adoption, I'd like to highlight a few recent milestones we've celebrated, thanks to support provided through our capital portfolio.

Earlier this month, I joined DDC to mark the start of a new project to renovate Selma's House and the Louis Armstrong House Museum in Corona, Queens.

There is a remarkable story behind this project. Selma Heraldo was a longtime neighbor of Louis and Lucille Armstrong. Her connection to them was so strong that when she passed away in 2011, she

bequeathed her house to the museum, which has used it for administrative space. Now with the start of this \$3.5 million renovation project, Selma's legacy will live on as we create more open and accessible space for the museum.

With the recent ribbon cutting for a new exhibition and performance space just across the street from Selma's house, the Louis Armstrong House has transformed into a hub for cultural and economic activity in the heart of Corona, where "Satchmo" was a beloved neighbor for decades.

At the January, we celebrated a milestone that I've championed for decades. The opening of the L10 Arts and Cultural Center Downtown Brooklyn. I was happy to celebrate with Council Member Hudson.

The 65,000 square foot creative space and cultural hub was developed by EDC with \$84 million in City funding from DCLA.

L10 will host a wide range of cultural programming from four beloved Brooklyn institutions. These include new cinemas and archival space for the Brooklyn Academy of Music, a new branch of the Brooklyn Public Library, a gallery and performance space for the Museum of Contemporary African

Diasporan Arts— which is five times as much programming space as it's in its prior location— and rehearsal studio performance space for 651 ARTS, the organization's first permanent home.

For all four institutions involved, and for all New Yorkers, this is a major new cultural landmark that will serve as a vibrant community hub for generations to come. A project of this magnitude takes a huge community of people working together for many years to make it a reality. I'm proud of DCLA's role in it and want to congratulate everyone who made it happen, and thank you so much, Council Member Rivera for being there for the ribbon cutting.

With major projects moving forward at the Public Theater, Studio Museum, Hip Hop Museum, Africa Center, ABC No Rio, Staten Island Museum, Belongó - Afro Latin Jazz, People's Theater Project, National Black Theater, the Clemente, Nuyorican Poets Café, and so many more.

There are exciting city funding cultural projects coming to neighborhoods across the five boroughs that are reshaping our city's cultural landscape, and I couldn't be more proud to be the commissioner working

with this incredible city council. We are making our dreams come true.

While I could not be more proud of the work our agency and our sector is doing, and the investments we are stewarding on behalf of all New Yorkers, I also want to recognize the very real challenges that our sector is facing despite all of the excitement that's happening in terms of evolution and creating a stronger and more inclusive cultural community.

Foundations are shifting their focus away from the arts. Corporations are cutting support for institutions they once championed. Individual donations are down across the sector, and now organizations are seeing once reliable federal arts and cultural funding sources eliminated, shifted, or called into question.

These changes at the federal level will profoundly impact New York City in our cultural sector. The National Endowment for the Arts, the most prominent federal funding source for arts organizations, has received its guidelines to promote... I'm sorry, has revised its guidelines to promote projects that celebrate the nation's rich artistic heritage and creativity by honoring the semi



quincennial of The United States Of America. It has been discontinued its long standing Challenge America program, Fast Track Grants, which provided support to small arts organizations in underserved and low income communities. And this past Friday, another Executive Order took aim at eliminating the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

Meanwhile, our arts and cultural organizations are confronting drastically increased costs from inflation. Audiences have yet to return in the same numbers they did before the pandemic. Even our tourism numbers, while we've come a long way toward their recovery, have taken years to return to their pre-pandemic heights. As a result, organizations across the city and beyond are being forced to make painful decisions. In just the last few weeks, number of cultural- major cultural institutions have announced layoffs as they struggle to address these tremendous challenges. In recent years, this trend has left no discipline untouched. We're proud of our historic levels of support for the sector, but the City can't tackle these large systemic challenges alone. We look forward to working with the Council

and partners across sectors to face these problems  
and to identify lasting solutions together.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I'm  
happy to answer any questions you have.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you so much for your  
testimony.

Let's start with something you just mentioned, is  
what happened on Friday when President Trump issued  
an Executive Order to reduce the scope and size of  
the Institute of Museum and Library Services as part  
of a reduction in federal services. The Institution  
directs almost \$20 million in grants to New York  
State. That includes \$8 million grant directly to New  
York State, \$9.5 million for 49 museums statewide, 20  
of which are in the five boroughs.

My question is does DCLA receive any funding from  
the Institute of Museum and Library Sciences, and how  
will the loss of this federal institution affect your  
programs and services? Which I know we also... the  
symbolism of the action is horrifying. But I guess  
just concretely how does it affect your budget?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Thank you so much for that  
question. We are in complete agreement. The  
elimination of IMLS is very disturbing to our agency

1  
2 for the organizations that we support. We do not  
3 receive federal funding from IMLS, but many of the  
4 organizations that we do provide funding for do  
5 receive IMLS funding, do receive fast track grants,  
6 and we are very concerned. And we are working with  
7 our organizations in terms of recognizing how this is  
8 going to impact their operations.

9 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: So you are... you're talking  
10 with them? I know the impact on whether they're CIG,  
11 CDF, other cultural institutions in New York City, I  
12 guess it's something that we're looking at ongoing.  
13 It's very scary. It's unfortunate.

14 We know how much these groups do with the little  
15 funding that they do receive. Other actions from the  
16 federal government, especially around immigration and  
17 free speech, left many people in the cultural  
18 community concerned about their future. And something  
19 that groups have said to me recently is, many people  
20 wouldn't think that ICE would show up at a cultural  
21 celebration at a museum, but this is a very real fear  
22 that they have, that this can become a target, simply  
23 for commemorating and celebrating a holiday or just a  
24 population that has contributed so much to our city.

Is DCLA taking any steps to address these concerns, and is there anything that we at the Council can do to support these efforts?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Culture is such an important aspect of the fiber of New York City on so many levels. And so, not only symbolically, but also economically, we have taken steps to demonstrate how profoundly we believe deeply in the power of the arts. And that's part of the reason why it was critical for us to bring back the Language Access Fund, which is going to provide that type of programming for organizations— that's 64 organizations that did not receive that funding last year, that we've doubled down on to make sure that language access is a part of their bottom line for their organization.

We brought back the Disability Forward Fund, which is supporting 42 organizations that are addressing the needs of our disabled community.

But also, this year, for the first time, we're really very proud that we were able to introduce the Equity Fund, which is providing 264 organizations located in underserved areas of New York City with a total of \$2 million in addition to their CDF awards.

1 This was funding that was not provided in previous  
2 years. We wanted to make sure that those  
3 organizations that are providing services in the most  
4 low income communities in New York City, that we are  
5 doubling down on greater investment in those  
6 neighborhoods and communities.  
7

8 And we are proud to administer the Cultural  
9 Immigration Fund, that I was proud to work with my  
10 colleagues when I was on that side of the table to  
11 administer the Immigration Fund, and we want to make  
12 sure that we double down on those programs. Increased  
13 levels of support for the Cultural Immigration Fund  
14 would certainly help us to bolster our support for  
15 our immigrants in this really challenging time,  
16 lifting them up, and making sure that they know that  
17 this city invests in those institutions and we make  
18 it a priority.

19 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you for that. I think  
20 it's a great initiative. It's one that I try every  
21 year to be expanded, because whether it's the  
22 organizations on Fourth Arts Block, the Clemente,  
23 Loisaida, there's so many organizations in my own  
24 district doing great work around this issue that are  
25 deserving.

With very little changes to the FY26 Preliminary Plan, do you feel that DCLA has adequate resources to meet the needs of all the funded cultural organizations both large and small?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I'm extremely proud of this administration. Mayor Adams wanted to make sure that we brought art and culture to every corner of New York City. He wanted to eliminate the concept of outer boroughs and make this one New York City. And I'm very proud that we have passed the three largest cultural budgets in New York City's history, solidifying our agency as the largest cultural funder in the nation. And this is a very profound investment in art and culture. And what I'm particularly proud about is that we were able to collaboratively work with the Mayor to increase funding for our local arts councils by 15%. This is the largest increase to our five arts councils in the Arts Council's history, and we are very proud that we're going to be able to support more artists to give them an opportunity to create. We understand and recognize that the previous years did not allow so many arts organizations and artists to implement the level and scale of projects that they wanted particularly with the rising cost of

1  
2 inflation. So this investment is going to give them a  
3 larger voice. It's going to allow them to create in a  
4 more secure way, and we're happy to be able to  
5 provide those resources at this time.

6 I feel very confident in our agency's ability to  
7 administer our awards and grants. We are very proud  
8 who is here today— We have Audrey St. Clair, who we  
9 recently hired, who is now going to be the Assistant  
10 Commissioner for the Programs Unit administering the  
11 CDF grants. We are very proud of that hire.

12 We also recently hired Angela Blocker, who is  
13 administering guidance and support for our Cultural  
14 Institutions Group.

15 So we are on a roll essentially in terms of  
16 filling positions, getting grants in, making sure  
17 that we get them out on time, and we're moving and  
18 proactively making sure that we get on the timetable  
19 that our arts organizations need in order to be able  
20 to bring resources to their communities.

21 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Okay. I appreciate that,  
22 because as soon as we adopt that budget we have to  
23 make sure groups get their money.

24 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: That's right.  
25

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: The Preliminary Plan did include an increase of \$3 million in 2026, and the out years, and that is for the additional cultural institution groups. That was announced in the Mayor's State of the City Address.

So how many new CIGs will be added, which institutions are being added to the CIGs, how much funding will be allocated to each of the CIGs, and how is it calculated?

LANCE POLIVY: Thank you Council Member Rivera. We are in a process right now where we are reviewing a number groups for admission to The Cultural Institutions Group. We are in ongoing dialogue with City Hall and with OMB about a number of candidates that we're considering. And we look forward to making an announcement in the coming months.

There is \$3 million that's been allocated for these new CIGs and the breakdown in terms of those will depend on the organizations and their operating budgets.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Okay, so what, you mentioned this a little bit just now, what metrics are being used to determine which would become CIGs?



COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Well I want to add, to begin with, there are very few organizations that would qualify to be a Cultural Institution Group. You have to number one, be on city owned property, so that's the first criteria in terms of recognizing. There are less than a dozen organizations that are not cultural institution groups that are on city-owned property.

So we basically start from that baseline in terms of organizations that are on city-owned property. But because an organization is on city-owned property, it doesn't necessarily mean that becoming a part of the Cultural Institutions Group would fit for that organization. Because the criteria to become a CIG is quite complex. And so we are working with organizations to determine— does this fit for your matrix in terms of your operations?

So that's one, but we also wanted to utilize this opportunity in a similar way that we did in 2019 for Weeksville. We want to make sure that organizations that were in communities, that had been underfunded systemically for generations, to be included into the Cultural Institutions Group, because it gives them the ability to have a level of stability that many of those communities had not previously benefited from.

1  
2       So in our criteria, in terms of identifying  
3 organizations, yes, city-owned property is the first  
4 form of that criteria, but also looking at ways in  
5 which organizations are serving communities that have  
6 been systemically underserved.

7       If you're looking at organizations that have been  
8 in existence for some time, that have been doing the  
9 work, that have providing that level of support for  
10 our communities. Those were the organizations that we  
11 are reviewing currently. We're not at liberty to  
12 announce who those organizations are because it would  
13 be premature at this time. Organizations are still  
14 working with their budgets. They're working with  
15 their funders. They're working with their  
16 corporations and their audiences to ask those  
17 questions— is this the best next move for us as an  
18 organization? So we're working with OMB. We're  
19 answering many of the questions that you just put  
20 forward, and we're answering those questions every  
21 single day.

22       So we're making sure that we are doing our due  
23 diligence and making sure that this is the right fit  
24 for the organizations that we're reviewing.  
25

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: There are many cultural organizations like Black Spectrum...

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Mm-hmm.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: like many, many others that could benefit from the support of the City funding for their energy costs, the other operational costs that they incur. Did the Agency reach out to any council members for input on the decision making process?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: We've spoken with many of the council members. Some are here at this dais. We've had conversations to discuss moving forward with the Cultural Institutions Group.

One of the things that we are really... one of the things that we are really excited about in this process is that this is going to allow us the ability to serve organizations. As you've mentioned from my time in the City Council, we created collaboratively what we know as the Theaters of Color Initiative. So organizations like you referenced, Black Spectrum Theater, and many others, have been a part of that coalition.

So there are many ways in which City support helps organizations, whether it's through the

1 Theaters of Color Initiative which is one way that we  
2 support and provide deeper resources into  
3 organizations that have been underserved. We also  
4 have what's known as the Energy Coalition, so  
5 organizations that are on city-owned property, when I  
6 was on that side of the table, we made sure that  
7 organizations that were on city-owned property, but  
8 were not cultural institution groups, are part of  
9 what's now known as the Energy Coalition, or the  
10 Energy Relief Coalition, or the Utility Relief  
11 Coalition as some may refer to it. This was the  
12 City's ability to be able to put those resources into  
13 those organizations to make sure that they have the  
14 stability to continue and to maintain.

16 So there are many ways of entry point that have  
17 been created by both the Council as well as the  
18 Administration to provide deeper support for  
19 organizations.

20 Status as a Cultural Institution Group is just  
21 one of those in the toolkit, but it's certainly not  
22 the only aspect to be able to do it. There are many  
23 others in terms of how we've considered this process.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Well speaking of stability, I will ask about finally baselining that \$45 million at adoption in a second, because I think that's critical, and that should be how we take this negotiation to the level at which the cultural groups deserve— because of so many years doing the same sort of thing, like asking for this money, and then the one shot being administered. We really have to baseline this funding, so we can get them to a point where they just are in a better place. After so many years of the same funding coming in, it's getting harder and harder for them to operate, as you know.

But first I'm going to go to my colleagues. Let's go to Council Member Hudson, followed by Brewer.

Council Member?

COUNCIL MEMBER HUDSON: Thank you so much, Chair, and good afternoon.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Good afternoon.

COUNCIL MEMBER HUDSON: As you know, many cultural institutions are facing budget constraints as our city's tourism sector continues to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in lower revenue. And as fringe costs for employees continue to rise, and the chair also mentioned inflation as a factor, as a

1  
2 result, many institutions have needed to reduce  
3 staffing and cut operations.

4 Have cultural institutions reached out to DCLA  
5 about the potential need for staffing and operations  
6 cuts as a result of budget reductions? And if so, can  
7 you broadly explain what you've heard?

8 LANCE POLIVY: Thank you for that question,  
9 Council Member Hudson.

10 We're in constant dialogue with our cultural  
11 partners, both CIGs and CDF recipients, about the  
12 fiscal challenges that their organizations are  
13 facing. And there's no way to sugarcoat that this is  
14 an extremely difficult financial time for arts and  
15 culture.

16 I think the commissioner put it best in her  
17 testimony, ringing the alarm bell that this is a  
18 crisis of lack of support through foundations,  
19 corporations, and individual support.

20 The City's support for arts and culture has only  
21 been rising over the last three years, and part of  
22 that is because of the unbelievable partnership of  
23 the New York City Council. And so we look forward to  
24 continuing to partner with the Council to pass a  
25 robust arts and culture budget. And in the meantime,

1 we are in regular conversations with each of the arts  
2 and culture organizations that are having  
3 difficulties. And just as the commissioner was  
4 saying, there's a broad toolkit in terms of what we  
5 can do to help provide them with programmatic capital  
6 and other administrative support. And we're doing  
7 that each and every day.

8  
9 COUNCIL MEMBER HUDSON: Thank you so much.

10 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I just wanted to add as well  
11 with NYC Tourism, I'm also going to be attending  
12 their annual meeting shortly after this. But this is  
13 also a partner that we're working with in terms of  
14 addressing, uh, bringing back those audiences that we  
15 lost during the pandemic and generating that level of  
16 support.

17 But I also wanna say that this is really an  
18 unprecedented time, and I think one of the great  
19 things about unprecedented times is that partners are  
20 coming to the table that had previously been working  
21 in silos. And so now our labor unions, now our  
22 cultural organizations, now the city Council, the  
23 administration, foundations and corporations are  
24 finally starting to get around the same tables, have  
25 the have similar conversations and are talking more

1  
2 in concert than I've seen in previous years. So the  
3 results of that is— what you've seen right in your  
4 own district at the Brooklyn Museum— is that through  
5 these types of collaborations, we are seeing more  
6 stability and partnerships when everybody recognizes  
7 we have to come to the table in ways that were  
8 unprecedented.

9       So we have to utilize this time to come forward  
10 and come together to collaborate and to shift it more  
11 from the emergency meeting to, this is our standard  
12 meeting, uh, to prevent these types of layoffs and  
13 challenges that so many of the organizations are  
14 facing.

15       COUNCIL MEMBER HUDSON: Thank you for that.

16       And I completely agree and applaud all efforts to  
17 bring as many people to the table as possible for  
18 additional funding.

19       And then to just use your terminology, I would  
20 also push the Administration to maybe explore  
21 unprecedented investments in the cultural  
22 institutions given the unprecedented times that we're  
23 in. Thank you.

24       COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Thank you. We are looking for  
25 unprecedented partnerships.



(LAUGHTER)

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: And we are going to look forward to some unprecedented investments and collaborations together, which we have been doing. And so I look forward to more of it.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: I was going to say my favorite thing about unprecedented times is setting a new precedent.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: That's right. There you go.

CHAIRPERSON HUDSON: There you go. There you

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: A \$45 million baselined and then room to grow. That's... at least, at least.

Okay, let's go to Council Member Brewer, please.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Thank you very much.

In terms of schools, I think the Bloomberg Administration actually made the schools do some kind of a blueprint to see whether or not they have arts funding, et cetera.

Again, difficult times, hard on the schools, but I just didn't know if there's any analysis by your organization as to whether or not the schools are doing what I think they should be doing in terms of the arts?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I thank you so much for the question and, and your question actually inspired our most recent hire, Audrey St. Clair, who comes from the Department of Education, and she's in The Arts and Education Department From DOE, now here at DCLA. And the purpose of that hire on so many ways was to bridge the gap for that exact question that you're asking.

Paul Thompson, who is head of the Arts Education Office for DOE, puts out an annual report every year that we actively participate in that tracks the progress in terms of investment in the arts, where are the cultural deserts, and we look forward to beginning the process on so many levels of how we utilize that blueprint in order to make funding decisions about where programming happens— whether it's during school hours or after school hours— and making sure that we fill those gaps.

But in full transparency, there is a long way to go in terms of addressing the very concern that you are bringing, but I share that concern with you. But this administration has made that a priority; it's something that we're going to invest in more deeply.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I appreciate it because I know where lots of times there's deserts in the school in terms of the arts.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: That's right.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: So I look forward to that. And...

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: And, Council Member Brewer, I just want to add to that because I agree with you. And that was the impetus for me, in many ways, of creating the CDF Equity Fund to put more cultural funding— \$2 million into those cultural deserts. This is just a seed planted on a concept that we both share, and we look forward to expanding that and doing more of it.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: So some of those deserts could include schools is what you're saying?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: It can include schools by way of arts organizations similar to CASA...

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Right.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: May decide to utilize their funding in schools...

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: That's what I...

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: or they can do it also in their own institutions.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay.

Number two, I'm confused about CDF. If there's... is there more money than in the past? Because a lot of organizations got less money. So I want to get, maybe not now, but a listing of, I mean, I know CDF very well, I've sat and I've read those things hours and hours... the applications.

So my question is, how do we get, between last year and this year, knowledge of difference in funding? Who got, you know, less? Who got more, et cetera? Because a lot of organizations got cut. And of course they're all calling me.

So how do you explain, if you got more money, how can people be cut?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Part of the major reforms of the CDF is that we raise the floor from \$5,000 to a \$10,000 grant.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Right.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: So anytime you raise the floor from \$5,000 to \$10,000, that's going to account for a decreased amount of funding in terms of the awards or the number of organizations that receive funding.

1           So the school of thought on that is, and  
2  
3       everyone, of course, has a different school of  
4       thought, we would rather give deeper investment to  
5       potentially fewer organizations. Not so few  
6       organizations, but I believe we're at 73%. Is that  
7       the correct number? Seventy-three percent of  
8       organizations that applied received CDF funding. So  
9       that's a very high percentage in terms of 73% of  
10      organizations receiving funding. And raising the  
11      floor from \$5,000 to \$10,000, is a part of the reason  
12      why there were reductions and or fewer organizations.

13           COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay. So if you could  
14      provide to the chair what I asked, because even  
15      though you... it sounds good what you said...

16           COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Mm-hmm?

17           COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I must have gotten the  
18      call from the 15% or whatever who didn't get money.

19           COMMISSIONER CUMBO: That's right.

20           COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Right? And I must have  
21      gotten the calls from all the organizations that  
22      didn't get as much.

23           COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Did you get any calls from  
24      anyone that did receive funding?

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I... of course not. Why  
would they call me?

(LAUGHTER)

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: But I am concerned that...

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: They got funded but they also  
got... lower at a lower amount.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: So...

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: And they got... So when  
some when you say some, 73%, yes, I don't wanna be  
specific here, but I can tell you they got a lot  
less, and they're freaked out. So I'd like to get  
that list from the chair...

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Will be more than happy to  
provide that list to you and all the members of the  
Committee so that we can review it collectively.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Yep.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: But...

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I know they can appeal,  
but it doesn't mean they're gonna get money.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: We just want you to  
understand the process and how we came to that  
configuration.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I guess I'm... All right.

But, you know, I know you have lots of new ideas, but I worry about those that don't fit into the new ideas and don't get more money. They all need money .

(TIMER CHIMES) They're all great.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: So let me just give you an example. Right? Part of what we heard from this panel was that many... you were getting these calls that organizations were saying, "Hey, we got zeroed out. We've been getting funding from DCLA for the past 25 years, and all of a sudden we got a rejection notice saying that we're not gonna get funded."

So we're getting those calls. So then we say, "All right, we put in the place to say if you've been consecutively funded by the Department of Cultural Affairs for six years, we will do an average of what you received over those last six years, and give you a safety net grant that's half of what you typically had been receiving over the last six years— just to make sure that you are not zeroed out, and that the funding dynamics that you have in your portfolio with foundations and corporations is not disrupted. We'll give you that safety net grant, and you'll be able to

1  
2 come back and apply next year for funding to get a  
3 multi year award."

4 That measure costs \$720,000. So that is also a  
5 measure that reduces the amount of funding available  
6 to the entire sector.

7 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay.

8 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: So we have to make those hard  
9 decisions. Do you want to provide safety net funding  
10 for long term cultural institutions that are doing  
11 that work, or you want to provide more funding to  
12 more organizations who did meet the threshold for  
13 that particular year?

14 These are really tough questions, and that's part  
15 of what essentially leadership is to make that  
16 decision. In this administration, we've decided that  
17 we want to secure organizations during a very  
18 challenging time.

19 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay. I mean, of course,  
20 the obvious answer is that we need more money. But  
21 that's something to work on with the cultural  
22 organizations and the heavy hand coming from  
23 Washington on the arts.

24 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Correct.  
25



COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: This would be the time to get more money out of the City for the arts. That's how I feel.

Finally, in your testimony, I think you mentioned that it's hard with corporations and foundations-- they have a new, you know, topic du jour every year.

So my question is, how do you deal with them? How do you help the, corporations understand the need, blah, blah, blah? Is there something that... does that go on or is that just a separate *everybody's on their own*?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I thank you so much for that question because something that I'm working on, we are scheduling roundtable discussions with many of our foundations and corporate leaders, so that we can start to have more in-depth conversations collaboratively versus one off conversations that have been held previously.

So in the next month, I'm going to be gathering with foundation leaders. We are working with grant makers for the arts. We want to sound the alarm, and I hope that part of the sounding can happen at this hearing to say that we need foundations, corporations, and individuals to recognize that we

1  
2 have created a sector that is so powerful to the  
3 viability of New York City that we cannot change our  
4 funding priorities once we've created this incredible  
5 sector and industry-- that whether people realize it  
6 or not, the entire viability of New York City rests  
7 upon the cultural activity of New York City. And it  
8 is irresponsible, on so many levels, to bring forward  
9 and to birth all of this excitement, and then to  
10 change mid course, and to leave an industry stranded.

11 So I'm hoping that this hearing, I'm hoping that  
12 many of the meetings and discussions that we are  
13 having, I hope the discussions that we're having with  
14 our labor unions are sounding the alarm that we  
15 cannot allow this sector in New York City to fail.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay. I appreciate that  
17 obviously. And I think we can do to help (sic). It  
18 does seem to me that freedom of expression, which is  
19 obviously a challenge today, should start with the  
20 arts. And that would be a great beginning, so thank  
21 you very much.

22 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Thank you.

23 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you, Council Member  
24 Brewer. We agree and we can start, \$45 million one-  
25 shot baseline, \$30 million more.

But let's get to the CDF thing, because I know that you want very desperately to fund these amazing institutions.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Mm-hmm.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: But we have to talk about the CDF funds specifically. We have the numbers where we have \$60 million, 1,078 recipients, 73% funded who applied. But the timeline of the CDF disbursement—last year, CDF awards were announced very late because of the impending PEG cuts. This year organizations again received very late notice about their CDF and Council awards— even though there were no cuts in the budget. And these delays, as you know, they prevent organizations from effectively planning their program calendars and preparing for the next fiscal year.

Can you explain why the CDF announcements were so late last year, and are you taking any steps this year to better align the City's overall budget timeline?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Thank you for that question. I'm excited about that question. We've got good news to share.

FY26 applications will go out very soon, possibly at the end of this month to hit those early targets. Also, we sent FY25 CDF award letters to grantees last month. So we are getting back on track. We've made our call for panelists, ongoing, to allow more New Yorkers as possible to apply to serve on our city panel... on our City's panel lists. We are expecting panels to begin in the summer and to complete in the fall.

And as again, as I've said, we are thrilled to welcome Audrey St. Clair as our Assistant Commissioner of Program Services this month to oversee the Cultural Development Fund. Under her leadership, we are confident that we will launch the FY26 application so that awards will go out in a timely manner.

But I just want to add, all of the reforms that we listed, everything from safety net for organizations that were zeroed out, incorporating the city council members onto the panels, making sure that we brought back language access and disability, creating the cultural equity reform— All of these things, providing support for organizations that have recently completed a capital project— these are

monumental changes that may seem like things that are tinkering on the sidelines, but this is revamping the process and the policies in terms of how we make funding more equitable. And it did take time, but now that we've implemented, we are moving full speed ahead in order to make sure that we are getting grants into the organizations that serve our city. We are confident that with our recent hire we are going to be moving full speed ahead.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: But, Commissioner, the budget is adopted in June, so will you again miss the deadline?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: No, we're not. As I just stated, that the award letters FY25 went out last month.

We've made calls for our panel lists already. We are expecting panels to begin in the summer and to complete in the fall. So that is putting us closer to where we have traditionally always been. And we are working to, for the next fiscal year, to even have those panels for organizations to have a firmer understanding.

My goal is for, when the budget is adopted for us to have a greater understanding of how funding will

1  
2 be allocated. So we're getting closer to that every  
3 year.

4 But you can rest assure that award letters have  
5 gone out. And in the next two or three weeks, so that  
6 everybody that's watching at home, everyone that's in  
7 the audience, prepare to look on our website. In the  
8 next two to three weeks, the application will be up,  
9 and we are excited to review your applications this  
10 year.

11 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: All right. So let me just  
12 make sure that I understand and I'm asking the right  
13 question.

14 So the panels, ideally, used to be in the spring,  
15 and then the funds would be announced at adoption.  
16 And I think that is what... people are looking for  
17 that that planning opportunity.

18 So did the panels... (CROSS-TALK)

19 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: The panels will be at  
20 summer...

21 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: The budget... that's after  
22 the budget adoption. That's the issue. I know maybe  
23 you're saying we're getting closer to tradition. I  
24 think the tradition, as of the last couple years, has  
25

not been good enough. The timeline is not good enough.

So we want to move away and move back to...

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Mm-hmm.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: like the spring panels, having the announcements ready for budget adoption, and then people know exactly what they're doing in July and August. That might sound ideal, I think it's just pragmatic.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Okay so let me tell you what my dream is.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Okay, all right, all right.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: And not just dream, goal that we're working towards.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Okay, okay.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: My goal would be that July 1st, essentially, that we would know which organizations have met the threshold and the criteria, and that we're able to get those award letters out so that organizations know from July 1st to June 30th what they have to be able to plan and to program for.

In collaboration with the City Council, who would, on July 1st, make their recommendations and

1 priorities known for Cultural Immigration Fund, CASA,  
2 SU-CASA, Theaters of Color, that all of those  
3 programs and initiatives would be awarded July 1st.  
4 And that's something I've been working towards for  
5 the last four years.  
6

7 So the challenge is, our process was delayed—  
8 the City Council also continues to award  
9 organizations funding in October, November, up until  
10 March, for initiative funding that they are aware of  
11 the amount of funding they have, but are not  
12 submitting the organizations that they would like to  
13 fund right after budget adoption.

14 So we want to get into a place with the Council  
15 and the Administration where we are collaboratively,  
16 in lockstep, getting those award letters and grants  
17 and allocations for initiatives, as well CDF funding,  
18 out at the same time so that our agency can start to  
19 work like clockwork— that this is how we do it.

20 So I look forward to working with you, Council  
21 Member Rivera, and our administration to get into  
22 that lockstep so that organizations can understand  
23 their CDF award, as well as their council initiative  
24 simultaneously, at the same time. I'm not going rest  
25 until we get it done.



CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: I just, uh, I don't want it to be that the City Council's initiative process... it shouldn't hinder the DCLA process. Right? They're different. I agree that we work together to fund these groups, and there are certainly transparency resolutions that we pass, and there are initiatives that maybe the money will get decided post adoption. That is... nobody's perfect.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Mm-hmm.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: And sometimes it's just the reality of the initiative and funding.

I think that if we want to send letters in July, the panels can't start in the summer.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: No, I agree with you. We have to do it this year in that way, but the year after that certainly is not going to be that.

But this year, in an effort to bring us closer to getting to that goal, the only way we can do that is to release the application in the next two to three weeks. And it takes the amount of time that it takes to review the amount of applications, and to award the organizations, and to vet them as it does. It just takes the time that it takes. And then

1 afterwards, the following year, we would be able to  
2 implement exactly what we're discussing here.

3  
4 Now I would say the challenge is, of course, CDF  
5 is not necessarily dependent on City Council  
6 initiative funding. But what happens is, if we can  
7 get our agency and staff working on the same type of  
8 work at the same type of time, it speeds the process.  
9 Because if we're getting Council initiatives in  
10 November, January, March, they have to work to do  
11 that type of work when they could be working on all  
12 of these sorts of things together. It just creates a  
13 more streamline and that's where we want to get to.  
14 And I believe we can get to that. We just have to  
15 prioritize it and make it so.

16 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: I think the feedback from the  
17 groups are, like, if we have to dramatically shift  
18 the timeline then we should, because we can't speed  
19 up a process that starts late. You know?

20 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Right.

21 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: We want to do what... there  
22 are so many people in this room that are willing to  
23 go. Spring, like, let's get these panels done.  
24 Because I'll...

25 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: That's right.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: have an organization like Theatre for the New City on First Avenue, a beloved community theater, getting their letter in February. (INAUDIBLE) getting their letter in February, that they actually had tens of thousands of dollars cut.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Right.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: And while, you know, everyone should be informed, correspondence is key too. Was there any correspondence sent to the organizations informing them there that there would even be that much of a delay that had transpired?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: We informed them not that there was going to be a delay; we informed them of what the timeline was going to be.

So we also informed organizations what it was going to mean for our agency if we raised the floor from \$5,000 to \$10,000, how that was going to impact the total funding level for the organizations.

Many of the organizations that were part of the cultural plan, that were part of the town halls, were asked what the implementations were or things that they wanted to see?

There was an outpouring of support from raising the floor from \$5,000 to \$10,000, and that has

1  
2 implications. And these sorts of dynamics changed the  
3 total amount of funding that we have to allocate.

4       So these are part of the reforms that the field  
5 was aware of, but yes, it impacted their bottom lines  
6 in that process.

7       Lance is going add to that.

8       LANCE POLIVY: Yes, Council Member Rivera. We  
9 communicated with the field, and we sent an email  
10 with an expectation of what the timeline would be and  
11 when they could anticipate that award letters would  
12 be coming out.

13       CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: But, you know, just try to...  
14 I know you all do this, but these are groups that are  
15 trying to plan their year.

16       COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Mm-hmm

17       CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Their fiscal year is starting  
18 the same time our fiscal year is starting, and they  
19 get a letter in February. You know? It's just... it's  
20 unfair. It's not... it's certainly... I just feel  
21 like it's a real disservice to the organizations. If  
22 we have to move up the process so that way July 1 is  
23 the goal, and I get it, you know?

24       COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Mm-hmm.  
25

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: July 1 is the dream. It's the goal. But we cannot have the panel start at the same time we hope to get the letters out. Right? It just doesn't make sense.

So how we get there, the people in this room, and across the city, they're willing to put in the effort. We'll get... we have 37 council members and their staff being represented at these panels. We'll work to make sure these people continue to show up.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Mm-hmm.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: So we just need the Admins' commitment. Because this is a lot of money— over a thousand organizations— and \$10,000 makes a big difference— \$20,000, \$30,000, \$90,000, \$500,000...

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: That's right.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: So we just want the Administration to commit to actually... to really implementing a process that makes sense. And I know you want it, too, so let's make it happen.

I just want to just put that out there. Because we have the City Council's initiative process. That should not hinder the DCLA process. And we really want to make sure that we're adopting a budget, making those announcements, the letters are going

1  
2 out; we're working on reforming procurement, because  
3 we also know that back pay and reimbursement is  
4 significantly delayed.

5       So there's a ton of things that we have to do as  
6 a team. And I just want to extend my appreciation  
7 that you recognize that the system, as it stands, is  
8 really fundamentally flawed.

9       COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Mm-hmm.

10       CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Okay. I appreciate that.

11       All right, so let me...

12       COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I do want to say this,  
13 though...

14       CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Yeah, please, please.

15       COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I don't want to just receive  
16 fundamentally flawed, because that would mean that it  
17 is a process that is almost unfixable— or that what  
18 happened was not as a result of major transformative  
19 change that has moved the agency in a far more  
20 equitable place.

21       So the time that it took to move the agency into  
22 bringing back language access, bringing back  
23 disability, creating a cultural equity fund,  
24 increasing local arts councils by 15%, providing  
25 funding for organizations that received a capital

1 allocation, the additional support that they need to  
2 open their new facilities. These are things and  
3 measures that took time in order to implement, and  
4 essentially a rule change that allows us to be able  
5 to make these fundamental changes— that's going to  
6 allow us to operate and move the agency forward in a  
7 far more efficient, equitable way that's now more  
8 streamlined.

9  
10 So we are moving in a direction that's going to  
11 bring us into a place of a more streamlined and  
12 equitable approach about how we fund organizations.

13 But I hear you, and I can't reiterate it enough;  
14 I don't want to sound like I'm beating a dead horse  
15 in that way, but I have absolutely sat in the same  
16 seat that many of those organizations that are  
17 calling Council Member Brewer, that are calling you,  
18 that are calling me. I've lived it. I've eaten it.  
19 I've not eaten it.

20 And I understand what it means to run a not for  
21 profit organization and how these delays in your  
22 timeline, your delays in funding— but really,  
23 probably the most heartbreaking, is the delay in  
24 being able to pay people— and them not being able to  
25

pay their rent, provide after school programming for their own children, and to put food on the table.

So I really get it. And I understand the immediacy and the importance and the power of making sure that we are exhausting all resources to get this funding back in a timeline that better serves the institutions that we represent.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Yeah. And I hear you. I know... I know these things take time. It's just that the timing of the letters just seemed to be... that problem just seemed to be getting worse and worse.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: That's right.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: But I understand sometimes to clean things up, you've got to get a little messy.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: We got messy.

LANCE POLIVY: But we're cleaning now. Got our gloves on...

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: We're cleaning now.

LANCE POLIVY: We've got our cleaning supplies. And what I can tell you is that we went from an application that was launched in mid May last year, to telling you that the application is going to launch this year in the next two to three weeks.



1                   So it's very concrete how we make up time. It  
2  
3 means that the application has to launch earlier than  
4 it did the prior year. So we're going to make up that  
5 time this year. And then next year, we can do the  
6 very same thing and keep winning back these valuable,  
7 valuable weeks to get on your timeline.

8                   So there's no band aid that we can rip off and  
9 say awards will be in July in FY26. But what we can  
10 do is get this application launched, get the process  
11 finished, all of those weeks earlier this year, and  
12 then relaunch right again, and keep gaining back this  
13 valuable period of time like we are this year.

14                  COMMISSIONER CUMBO: And that's why he's my  
15 general counsel.

16                  CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Well and I think these are  
17 honorable goals. It's just these are real  
18 organizations. They've lost real dollars. They've  
19 lost stability. And ,you know, that's what I keep  
20 coming back to, just making sure that we move with  
21 the groups that are doing the work. And I know you  
22 feel that way.

23                  Okay, so let me ask about City Canvas.

24                  COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Mm-hmm!

25                  CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: That's nice.

(LAUGHTER)

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: So DCLA released the inaugural gallery for its City Canvas program July 2024. And I know we're working on capital eligibility and ensuring that a lot of groups have access to this program, and I and I appreciate your partnership in that. The program aims to beautify hundreds of miles of temporary construction fences and sidewalk sheds through art installations, enhancing community aesthetics, fostering a sense of pride and safety.

What's the current status of the program?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Let me just say, I'm so excited about this program. Not to brag, I passed it while I was a city council member, and I'm happy to implement it as a commissioner.

And your support on this particular legislation has been critical in order for us to be able to place art onto scaffolding across New York City. I'm sure many of you are benefiting from it, and seeing it in your own districts, and how we're beautifying our communities on so many levels.

We now, in the agency, we have 10 artists who have now submitted works of art for approval. So when a developer or a city agency or someone that's doing

1 construction, wants to utilize the ability for City  
2 Canvas art to be placed on scaffolding, they are able  
3 to do so.  
4

5 Even our own agency has scaffolding up on it, and  
6 we will be placing art on those canvases very soon.  
7 We look forward to implementing that.

8 Do you want to expand on where we are legally  
9 with the City...

10 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Yeah, and like the...

11 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: City Canvas program?

12 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: And the agency process for  
13 hiring the artists to design the art installations?

14 LANCE POLIVY: Of course. We did an open call to  
15 solicit artist submissions for those 10 preapproved  
16 artworks. And we got numerous submissions, and then  
17 had a panel convene to review those artworks and to  
18 select the 10 preapproved artists— who then went out  
19 and did the designs that you now see on our website.

20 So those are designs that any member of the  
21 public can... any building owner can choose to put on  
22 their building when they have sidewalk shed, fence,  
23 or netting on their property.

24 The program is also going really well with  
25 building owners who choose to do individualized

1 commissions that are specific to one individual site  
2 instead of picking one of the preapproved designs.  
3 And those have actually been more popular over the  
4 course of the last year or so since the 10  
5 preapproved designs were implemented.  
6

7 And I think continuing to partner with the  
8 Council on the bill that you referenced to make  
9 capital eligibility a reality for these projects will  
10 mean even more adoption. Because if you think of the  
11 number of City capital projects going on throughout  
12 New York City, and equitably throughout the five  
13 boroughs, it just means that there could be so much  
14 more art beautifying the city on City Canvases.

15 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: And I just want to thank you  
16 for your collaboration and making it permissible for  
17 us to paint directly onto the scaffolding. That  
18 ability to clean up that legislation to make sure  
19 that artists who want to create directly onto the  
20 scaffolding— versus the vinyl— are now able to do  
21 that.

22 And to Lance's point, our ability to see it as a  
23 capital eligible process will create artwork all  
24 throughout the city. And this is going to be very  
25 fundamental on so many areas, particularly in our

1  
2 NYCHA developments, where scaffolding is up and it  
3 just creates such a blight. The ability for  
4 communities that have had scaffolding up- because  
5 this administration wanted to make sure we took  
6 scaffolding down where we could- but in areas where  
7 we could not- I can't tell you how exciting it is to  
8 be able to walk the community and for a grandmother  
9 to see her grandbaby's picture or a photo or a  
10 painting of their grandchild. Or to have a mom, you  
11 know, see her son's artwork placed on scaffolding. I  
12 mean it does the community so much good, to something  
13 that was once a blight, to being something that  
14 they're calling people to come see.

15       So it's really an exciting project that uplifts  
16 the community and creates a level of vibrancy that so  
17 many communities need. And I'm happy to have had your  
18 collaboration on it.

19       CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: And I appreciate your vision.  
20 Because, you know, in the Council we talk a lot about  
21 sidewalk sheds and scaffolding. And we're gonna pass  
22 a few bills that I cosponsored to reform the process,  
23 you know, it's a big quality of life issue.

24       But for you to look at it as turning a blight  
25 into an attraction...

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Mm-hmm.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: You know, we already passed  
our bill, and we want to do more.

So I just... that reform that's taking place, and  
the way that we've been able to complement it in  
supporting artists, I just hope that, you know,  
doesn't... that it also shows up in the conversation  
we're about to have in a in a week or so or whenever  
we pass these bills.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Mm-hmm.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: And I'll always be sure to  
give credit where it's due, you know. Like I said,  
this was your vision, and I know we want more artists  
and more boroughs and more districts for the program.  
So thank you for talking a little bit about the  
selection process.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I do like that you said the  
next week and a half though. I like that.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: We're gonna, You know, we're  
trying to do good things...

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: All right!

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: were. We work hard. Yes, so  
thank you for that.

1 And just to wrap it up— So ,you know, the CIGs  
2 that a lot of them are facing these uncertain  
3 futures. You mentioned the reality of Brooklyn  
4 Museum, and there are others that have gone through  
5 it already. And I know no one, no one wants to lay  
6 off an employee.  
7

8 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: That's right.

9 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: It's like as a as a boss, as  
10 a director, as a person...

11 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Right.

12 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: It's the last thing you want  
13 to do...

14 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Mm-hmm.

15 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: is to take that away from  
16 someone.

17 So how can DCLA support the institutions to  
18 assure that they don't have to reduce services or let  
19 go of staff? And what type of non-monetary support  
20 can DCLA provide to struggling organizations?

21 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: We thank you so much for the  
22 question.

23 On so many levels we have began the conversations  
24 with our labor unions. We are having conversations  
25

1  
2 with the executive directors of the institutions,  
3 working with you and the City Council.

4 But as far as the Administration goes, on so many  
5 levels, and I know you said not only monetarily, but  
6 I think the most powerful thing that we can do is to  
7 bring the different members of the cultural portfolio  
8 together to be able to discuss how we're going move  
9 forward collaboratively.

10 This Administration has demonstrated its  
11 commitment to arts and culture year after year. But  
12 we need to be able to work together. Because  
13 traditionally what happens is, cultures go to their  
14 foundations, they go to their corporations, they go  
15 to government, they go to individuals, as well as  
16 earned income measures in order to bring funding  
17 together. And they have those conversations separate  
18 and apart in their own silos.

19 What we're trying to do in this administration is  
20 to bring those silos together in conversation with  
21 us, so that we can collaboratively plan, and for them  
22 to understand how the decisions that they're making  
23 are impacting the field as a whole.

24 So I would say our most powerful tool is to be  
25 able to convene and bring together the many different



1  
2 partners that support the cultural sector and  
3 continue to work with the City Council— but also to  
4 work with our labor unions, in a very meaningful way,  
5 that we haven't seen in previous years, uh, to make  
6 sure that we are in full support and collaboration of  
7 our institutions.

8 LANCE POLIVY: It's also to use the bully pulpit.  
9 I mean that's why we're here today, and we're sharing  
10 so clearly what we're hearing from our constituents—  
11 so that other people know they're not alone. It's not  
12 just one organization, it's not just two, it is so  
13 much of the New York City arts and culture community  
14 that's being impacted by these set of systemic  
15 challenges that they're facing right now. So you've  
16 been shining a light on that, we're shining a light  
17 on that, and I think it helps organizations to know  
18 that there's power in numbers; we are going to be  
19 committed to solving these problems collaboratively.

20 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: And that's why I also  
21 appreciate your testimony, because there are a lot of  
22 challenges that we have that we're gonna tackle  
23 together...

24 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Certainly.  
25

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: But you always mention the bright spots. Right? The celebrations and, you know, the block parties, all of that. I think they're such great moments because, you know, joy is important.

So I hope to see you at something joyful very, very soon. Not that this isn't great. But always love seeing you out there.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Because you really are such a champion and a cheerleader. You know, in terms of accountability and transparency, that's something we're always going to work on together...

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: That's right.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: And we're certainly going to hold each other accountable. So I appreciate your partnership.

I don't have any more questions. I just want to thank you, and I hope you have a great day.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Thank you. I want to thank for hosting this hearing. Thank you for your partnership. And we are going to continue to work together to create some unprecedented opportunities

for arts and culture moving forward. So thank you so much, Council Member Rivera.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you.

(PAUSE)

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Hello, hello, thank you so much for your patience. I now open the hearing for public testimony.

I remind members of the public that this is a formal government proceeding and that decorum shall be observed at all times. As such, members of the public shall remain silent at all times. The witness table is reserved for people who wish to testify. No video recording or photography is allowed from the witness table.

Further, members of the public may not present audio or video recordings as testimony, but may submit transcripts of such recordings to the Sergeant at Arms for inclusion in the hearing record. If you wish to speak at today's hearing, please fill out an appearance card with the Sergeant at Arms and wait to be recognized. When recognized, you will have two minutes to speak on today's hearing topic: The Preliminary Budget.

1  
2 If you have a written statement or additional  
3 testimony you wish to submit for the record, please  
4 provide a copy of that testimony to the Sergeant at  
5 Arms.

6 I also remind the crowd, I know many of you have  
7 been here before, and I appreciate it every time you  
8 come to City Hall to provide testimony. We do put two  
9 minutes up, so you will hear the bell to bring your  
10 testimony to an end. Of course, it's not so you stop  
11 in the middle of what you're saying. Just please wrap  
12 up your last thought.

13 You may also email written testimony to  
14 Testimony@council.nyc.gov within 72 hours after the  
15 close of this hearing. Audio and video recordings  
16 will not be accepted.

17 And just know that the testimony that you provide  
18 in full will always be a part of the record. And the  
19 good council members, of course all of us, we review  
20 these testimonies in full to ensure that we really  
21 grasp your work and your voice. So, thank you very,  
22 very much.

23 I will now call the first panel: John Hyslop—  
24 Oh, John, okay, yeah, of course, sorry if I... I know  
25 so many of you, and I will still mess up your name,

and I just want to extend my apologies in advance—  
Deborah Allman; and George Olken.

It's very nice to see.

JOHN HYSLOP: Good to see you.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: And start when you're ready.

JOHN HYSLOP: All right.

Good afternoon, Chairperson Rivera, and committee members. Thank you for giving us this opportunity to testify on behalf of the nearly 4,000 public library workers we represent, including librarians, clerical workers, call center reps, stock handlers, maintainers, custodians, public safety officers, and more. We are grateful that last year, together with the City Council, we successfully resisted cuts to libraries budgets. But it must be acknowledged that when budgets stay the same, while the cost of everything else goes up, cuts have to be made by the libraries to stay level.

Library workers still need the City to increase funding to libraries because libraries are understaffed. Across almost every title there are long standing vacancies. Neighborhood library branches are opening with two staff members and no librarian. This means library workers are doing work

1  
2 that used to be done by two or three people. It means  
3 canceling programs and patrons waiting longer for  
4 help writing resumes or connecting with services.  
5 Under staffing is bad for communities who depend on  
6 libraries to be reliable open public institutions.

7       And library workers are underpaid. Librarian  
8 salaries start at \$66,000 to \$68,000 a year, which is  
9 too low for New York. And a new clerical worker  
10 starts at less than half of that at only \$33,000. A  
11 new custodian starts at \$37,000. And our public  
12 safety officers, who are so desperately needed to  
13 keep our patrons and workers safe, start at \$39,000.  
14 These are not living wages. In the past libraries  
15 have used their budgets to increase salaries above  
16 the minimum rates to recruit and retain valuable  
17 public servants.

18       With this funding increase, we encourage the City  
19 Council and Mayor's office to press the Library  
20 Systems to enter into tripartite negotiations with  
21 library worker unions to find answers to our staffing  
22 and retention problems. When books aren't in place on  
23 the shelves, when the bathrooms aren't clean, when  
24 patrons don't feel safe, the community suffers.

GEORGE OLKEN: And while we welcome seven-day service, first we need to staff libraries adequately for six-day service and to pay workers wages that will allow us to live and thrive in New York City.

Sunday branches are staffed by low wage volunteers who compete for a few hours of overtime to make ends meet. It isn't right that lifelong public servants have to work six days plus second and third jobs to pay their bills.

The libraries are advocating for fund... the library administrations are advocating for funding to close their deficits and meet inflation. The unions are advocating for a generational investment that, through negotiations, will pay a living wage and address our recruitment and retention problems. Finally, we'd be able to fill vacancies, adequately staff six-day service, open closed branches, fight book bans, educate people of all ages and create a city and a future for us all.

While public institutions are under threat everywhere, our unions keep public libraries open and welcoming to all. Everyone says they love libraries. Our workers deserve to see that love in an ongoing budget commitment from the City.

So thank you for your consideration and we  
welcome questions.

DEBORAH ALLMAN: Good afternoon, I'm Deborah  
Allman, President of the New York Public Library  
Guild and also a children's librarian.

Yesterday, I worked out of a library in which I  
was a children's librarian for many years. A young  
man who regularly attended my programs and visited  
the library as a child was sitting at the circulation  
desk. I knew this child well, and I would give his  
friends assignments to keep them busy and out of  
trouble. And he would tell the other children in the  
library that he worked for the New York Public  
Library. (LAUGHTER) This young man is now a union  
member and he has a job. And he had nothing but  
praise for the library workers and the work that we  
do.

It is not in our job to be a mentor, but we are.  
It's not in our job to be a caregiver, but we are.  
It's not in our job to be a counselor, but we are. It  
must be acknowledged that without the dedication of  
library workers, and fully staffed locations, that  
the library could not provide these vital services to  
the community.



1           You cannot work in a library and not have a love  
2           for the community. Please show us by funding  
3           libraries and making sure that we get what we deserve  
4           in this funding. Thank you. (TIMER CHIMES)  
5

6           CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Perfect. Thank you.

7           There's something I didn't get to say earlier  
8           when the Libraries were testifying, but something I  
9           mentioned outside, which is I also just feel like we  
10          all have these stories of the people inside of the  
11          library that have affected us so positively. Just  
12          names and personalities and experiences that will  
13          take with us forever. And that generational  
14          investment, I think that's important. That's phrase  
15          we should... I'll certainly be using more, so thank  
16          you.

17          I just had a question because we all want seven-  
18          day service. It's coming to more branches as you  
19          mentioned. But you mentioned that six-day service  
20          currently needs support. What are you seeing right  
21          now? What are you experiencing in terms of that that  
22          overtime? I don't want to call it the... you said  
23          competing, but like what is... what's the story with  
24          overtime and six-day service, and how can we actively  
25

you know, how can we be better in advocating for what  
you need as employees?

JOHN HYSLOP: So right, now Queens has problems  
staffing six-day service.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Okay.

JOHN HYSLOP: On Saturdays, an email... during the  
week an email goes out to the whole branch, "We need  
emergency coverage at x branch. Are there volunteers  
for that overtime?" Sometimes I get it, sometimes I  
don't. We've had branches throughout the year close  
because we don't have enough staff. We have... so the  
biggest issue is hiring and staffing that... and  
funding, getting that money so we can fund these  
vacancies. That... That

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Right and you need a  
compensation package that's attractive.

JOHN HYSLOP: That as we talked about, yes.

But also the libraries need to have, and our  
fellow CEO presidents talked about that, we need  
consistent funding. Because they're not able to hire  
consistently. Because every year they have to... they  
have to, you know, fight for a budget that we may not  
get. And that... but our biggest concern now is six-  
day service.

1 Obviously Sunday service is great and we talked  
2 about it in our testimony. Staff need that money  
3 because we don't get paid enough. So we do fight for  
4 those slots. But, you know, six-day service hiring  
5 more people, getting... making our salaries more  
6 attractive so people can come— because we have a huge  
7 retention problem. I mean all of us can testify,  
8 we're losing people now. We're not even being able to  
9 fill these positions.  
10

11 GEORGE OLKEN: Yeah. And I'll add, I mean, what  
12 happens is a library will open and there'll be just  
13 two people there and maybe no librarian.

14 I got a call recently from a worker who was,  
15 like, pulling their hair out because, you know, 12  
16 boxes of books show up that need to be processed by  
17 the clerical workers. So one person's in the back  
18 room doing that. The other person's on the desk. The  
19 place is full. And they're hoping a third person  
20 shows up before lunch, right, so that they can go on  
21 break. And so that library's open. But can we really  
22 do the programs that we want? And how long will that  
23 staff be able to do it before they burn out?

24 So I think that's the real thing. It's not just  
25 opening the branches. It's not just having them open.

We want them to be properly staffed so that people can... we can fully provide for community.

And then Sunday, again, it's overtime so that means people are taking... we have plenty of volunteers. I mean we can definitely... I think if you're talking about 10 more branches across the city, there's enough people who are wanting that overtime that we can staff that if there's the money obviously to fund it. But I think it is a shame that folks who are working five days a week are having to work that sixth day to make ends meet.

And so how do we build up enough staff so that it can be spread out more and how do we build up wages enough so that people, okay they do it sometimes but they don't have to be doing it constantly? I mean I have people who like want every Sunday. Know they need to work six days every week— maybe they have another job, too, just to make ends meet, and that seems like a shame in a public job.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Agreed. I just want to thank you all, and thank you for your story. Because I can't wait until my babies prefer the librarian over me. (LAUGHTER) You know, I just... I have so much love and respect for you all. Honestly, I really do.

And I think so many people do as well, and that's why last year a 175,000 New Yorkers wrote to City Hall and said, "Invest in our library systems." But we have to go beyond the basic investments and restoration of cuts, and we have to do better.

So thank you.

PANEL: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: All right next panel, June Lei. Oh, June! Okay, that's great. Maribel Cosme-Vitagliani, Margo Isabel Cohen Ristorucci.

Start whenever you're ready. Thank you for being here.

JUNE LEI: Thank you, good afternoon. First I wanted to give my thanks to Chair Rivera and fellow committee members. Thank you so much for your service and your leadership.

My name is June Lei and I am a born and raised New Yorker of District 2, a proud public school alum, and a full time Public Programs Producer at the Brooklyn Museum where I have worked as an intern, a contractor, and a full time staff member since 2015.

For the past three years, I've also served as the secretary of our DC 37 Local 1502. So I speak to you today as an elected representative of nearly 200

cultural workers at the Brooklyn Museum, the Brooklyn Children's Museum, and the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

At the Brooklyn Museum last month, management attempted to lay off nearly 50 workers to balance a financial deficit of \$10 million, a deficit that ran through \$60 million in ten years despite rising executive salaries.

Thanks to the advocacy of you and your colleagues and our union's collective power, we averted the layoffs this year with a timely grant from the City Council. Thank you truly.

The City's investment in our jobs, our cultural sector, and our creative community means we retain the expertise we need to serve and uplift our communities in Brooklyn.

Our unit at the Brooklyn Museum is made up of 150 workers who are the stewards of our city's culture and history, including curatorial assistants, librarians, art handlers, framers, collection management, exhibitions, and provenance experts, educators that work with a myriad of audiences including youth and elders. We are cultural and performance producers, engineers, electricians, carpenters, painters, AV technicians, public safety

and security guards, administrators, and people who have dedicated decades of their lives to an institution that we hold so dearly.

Our members have parents and even grandparents who worked at the Brooklyn Museum too. This city, a place of hope and creativity (TIMER CHIMES) to so many people, is anchored by its cultural institutions. Can I keep going?

I speak before you today to ask that we together put art and cultural workers at the forefront of our future. The City's cultural sector generates \$110 billion of economic activity. The investment that the City makes in arts institutions is returned at exponential proportion.

As job conditions for art workers grow more precarious, I urge the Council to increase public funding to the arts as an economic engine and as an urgent policy matter. Workers who make between \$40,000 and \$80,000 a year deserve strong pensions, good health care, and stable jobs, and we deserve accountability for greater... and greater transparency.

New Yorkers know that culture is for us, by us, and I also ask that the Department of Cultural

Affairs make information about the use of public funding by the Cultural Institutions Group available and accessible online.

Thank you for your partnership with workers to make arts and museums a place for creativity, critical thought and learning and a place to have a sustainable career. Chair Rivera, thank you for your time.

MARIBEL COSME-VITAGLIANI: Hi, I'd like to also thank Chair Rivera and the council members for your advocacy for cultural institutions and their workers.

My name is Maribel Cosme-Vitagliani, and I've been an employee at the Brooklyn Museum for almost seven years. I've also been an Executive Board Member for DC 37 Local 1502 for the last three years. And for the record, my father is also a DC 37 member in Local 374 at the New York Public Library, so we are a proud Union family.

I'm here to talk about how museums are essential pillars of the community, culture, and history of the city. At the Brooklyn Museum, our workers foster meaningful conversations about art and culture, both modern and ancient.



I work in the conservation lab at the Brooklyn Museum where my department is responsible for preserving the museum's encyclopedic collection of over a 140,000 works of art representing roughly 600 years of history. This work is essential for exhibitions and the museum's overall function.

And also to note: my colleagues and I, across Conservation, Collection Management, and Art Handling have highly specialized knowledge, training, education, and expertise in order to do our jobs.

When the museum announced layoffs of 47 staff members in February of this year. My colleagues and I were deeply concerned for the safety of our workers as well as the art. We have nine art handlers in our museum, who move hundreds of artworks a week, for the care and maintenance of a collection that is a cultural gem of our city.

The threat of reducing our already understaffed team poses serious danger and risk of injury. Just in the last nine months, we've had two injuries among our art handlers due to the understaffing, overlapping scheduling of projects, and inflexible deadlines.

Fewer staff also means slower response times and emergencies such as water leaks, fires, and or structural failures... (TIMER CHIMES)

Can I continue?

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Yeah, just wrap up so we can get to your coworkers.

MARIBEL COSME-VITAGLIANI: structural failures and storage areas of exhibition spaces, many of which have occurred within the last year.

Conservation, Collection Management, our Handling teams play a key role in emergency preparedness plans, but with too few workers they may not be able to respond quickly enough to prevent irreversible damage to collections and or potential injury to staff and visitors.

I urge the City Council to please increase funding of cultural institutions, so that museums can continue to serve our communities, while ensuring fair wages, job security, and workplace safety for the professionals who sustain them. Thank you for your time.

MARGO ISABEL COHEN RISTORUCCI: Echoing June and Maribel, I want to extend gratitude to Chair Rivera,

and your fellow committee members for the space to  
advocate on behalf of Local 1502 of DC 37.

My name is Margo, and I'm the Public Programs  
manager at the Brooklyn Museum. I was born and raised  
in Brooklyn; I'm an alumni of a New York City public  
high school, and I'm a current graduate student at  
the City University of New York.

I've been working at the museum since 2014, and  
I'm a member of our Executive Board, Local 1502, and  
also our clerical shop steward.

In the past week, since management attempted to  
lay off 47 of our indispensable colleagues, in an  
unprecedented fashion that breached both active union  
contracts. What has given me the most strength and  
purpose is organizing, alongside fellow union members  
and neighbors throughout Brooklyn, who understand  
intrinsically that the value of spaces like the  
Brooklyn Museum comes down to its people. The people  
whose labor makes art experiences and community  
gatherings possible and also the people who come  
through our doors and imbue the museum with meaning.

As the Manager of Public Programs, I've had the  
distinct honor of collaborating with artists and  
community organizations to produce live music, dance

parties, performances, workshops, community forums,  
artist talks, and literary readings.

Our flagship program, First Saturdays, was  
founded more than 27 years ago to open the museum's  
doors to the public. Since then, it has become a  
beloved community staple, bringing 10,000 to 15,000  
people to the museum for a night of free programming  
on the First Saturday of the month.

I am devastated to share that the museum canceled  
two months of First Saturday in the wake of announced  
layoffs, and similarly is reducing relevant, low cost  
public programming that serves families, seniors, and  
adults of all ages in the next fiscal year.

The museum's proposed layoff, intended to reduce  
our public programs team, which is comprised of only  
four full time unionized producers who organize  
nearly a hundred programs a year (TIMER CHIMES) to  
only two. The museum did not explain how they expect  
two producers to oversee a dozen simultaneous  
performances and programs as we often do on First  
Saturdays. We cannot continue to produce the  
programming that has become so important to us and to  
our neighbors without workers.

I'll just finish.

The Brooklyn Museum is attempting to close a deficit created by management, created by years of flagrant financial negligence on the backs of unionized workers. I ask that you consider financial support, so that we may avoid layoffs and continue to sustain the free and low cost public programming that our communities depend upon. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: I just want to thank this panel. It is something I should have done with... thanked Chair De La Rosa for her work and her leadership on this issue. I know you all... you have been working there for years, and I appreciate you stepping up also into these leadership positions. I know they're not easy, and you represent a very, very diverse group of workers.

So, I agree that the City has to step up in an unprecedented way. And I thank you, I thank all of you for your advocacy. Thank you.

I wanted to, uh, Melody, who is here, is that okay if we bring up Melody now?

UNKNOWN: (INAUDIBLE)

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Of course!

You're Abby, right?

DR. ABIGAIL EMERSON: (INAUDIBLE)

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you to Melody Emerson-Simpson. And you put it on your form. So, I'm going to say it, age seven.

And Abby Emerson, thank you for being here. I wanted to make sure that we got you up to the dais, because I know you probably have a very busy schedule, Melody, so I wanted you to testify as soon as you could.

DR. ABIGAIL EMERSON: I'll go first.

Good afternoon, my name is Dr. Abby Emerson; I'm a former DOE teacher, current educational researcher, and an education professor. I'm also a parent to three children, one of which is Melody here. I'm also a member of NYC Plan, the Public Libraries Action Network.

Part of my job takes me around the city to different public schools where I supervise and support teachers in training. When I'm bouncing between schools, libraries have proven to be the one place I can go that does not ask me to pay money for something. Library spaces are crucial to the way I work in the city and I'm especially grateful for them during the cold winter months when I have off hours between observations.

In my neighborhood, the library is an essential place of community. I know that when I visit, I will see babies, children, elders and everyone in between coming together to deepen their lives in different ways. There are folks like me just looking for a place to do some work, to apply for jobs, print some papers. There are children building foundational literacy skills, and there are those who simply need a welcoming space for a few hours. When I was nursing, it was one of the few spaces in the city I was able to get support and privacy to pump milk for my kids.

My daughter is a strong reader. That is in large part due to her amazing teachers over the last few years, but an absolutely massive part of that is our library use. Literally any book she desires is at our fingertips through our local branch or the incredible hold system. She has the privilege to be incredibly discerning about what she reads, graphic novels robust at the moment, and yet still have limitless options because of our library system. Last year when our branch closed for three weeks for HVAC repairs she cried.

With the rise of the science of reading which emphasizes phonics, access to quality literature is essential for young people in our city. Right now the Preliminary Budget proposes \$480 million which is only 0.42% of the overall budget. (TIMER CHIMES) Almost done.

While the overall City Budget has increased nearly 25% in the last five years, the Library Budget has not increased at the same rate. In fact it has not even kept up with inflation. Given how important libraries are to New York City communities, NYC Plan is asking that Libraries receive 0.5% of the overall budget, not just this year but every year.

Establishing this baseline of support would ensure that library workers are able to sustain these important community hubs. Thank you for your time and consideration.

MELODY EMERSON-SIMPSON: Hello, my name is Melody Emerson-Simpson and I live in Brooklyn, District 36. I'm seven years old, and I am in second grade. I love libraries. The books are so great. I have lots of books in my house, and the only graphic novels I have are from the library. But I like all the books I get from the library. Sometimes I get chapter books, too.



My school does not have a library in it, so the library near my house is important to me.

Another reason why I love libraries is they have computers. I can practice using a computer to do fun stuff. I go to the library after school some days. It was a great place to go when it was too cold to go to the park. Please help libraries have enough money for books.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you for your testimony. So, I guess your favorite thing about libraries are the books?

MELODY EMERSON-SIMPSON: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Okay, that's great. I just got a graphic novel for a young New Yorker in my life, and it was called "The New Kid" by Jerry Craft, which is about being new in a space that you're unfamiliar with and acceptance and being friendly. So if you have a list of recommendations, I'd say that's a good one. And thank you for patronizing our libraries. It's very, very important to have your voice and your testimony here today. Thank you.

DR. ABBY EMERSON: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Okay, Lisa Gold, Coco Killingsworth, Lucy Sexton, Kimberly Olsen, and David Freudenthal.

LISA GOLD: All right, thank you.

Good afternoon, Chair Rivera, members of the City Council, and friends from the Department of Cultural Affairs.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Lisa Gold, and I am the Executive Director of the Asian American Arts Alliance or A4. We are a 41-year-old nonprofit service organization that works to ensure greater representation, equity—the E word—and opportunities for Asian American Pacific Islander artists and arts organizations of all disciplines across this great city. In fact, we are the only organization in the nation that does that.

I also am a member of the Cultural Equity Coalition and a facilitator of the Culture at Three Call

I am here today to join my colleagues in asking the City to baseline \$75 million for Culture in FY26, with the ideal goal to increase Cultural funding to 1% of the City Budget, and to also fully fund the City Council initiatives, especially the Cultural

Immigrant Initiative and the Coalition of Theaters of Color.

Small organizations like ours are currently in danger as Washington reels One Executive Order off after another in an attempt to suppress our voices and deny our existence. With rollbacks of corporate and federal support for DEI, we are really suffering.

Just yesterday, my colleague attempted to boost a post on Instagram about a program from ours from the Bandung Residency, which promotes Black and Asian solidarity, and the post was rejected. So this work is important, obviously, they wouldn't be trying to silence us if it weren't, and without City funding, we cannot make it happen.

The AAPI community is one of the most diverse and fastest growing ethnic groups in New York City, making up almost 18% of the city's population, yet we receive less than 2% of Department of Cultural Affairs funding.

The arts obviously play a critical role in the city and the lives of our constituents, bringing understanding and tolerance (TIMER CHIMES) in a time of increasing division and intolerance.

I just wanted to say that communities of color as a whole rely on City funding much, much more than private and predominantly white institutions. And in this climate, when the federal government is doing all it can to erase us, it is critical that our city government can ensure equitable support to the arts and culture sector and to keep our city the cultural capital of the world. Thank you for your work.

COCO KILLINGSWORTH: Good afternoon, Chair Rivera, and members of the Committee. Thank you so much for this opportunity to testify.

My name is Coco Killingsworth; I'm the chief Experience Impact Officer at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and I'm the Chair of the Cultural Institutions Group.

I'm here to testify on behalf of the CIGs, a coalition of 34 cultural organizations across all five boroughs.

We are here today to support culture for all and to say with my full chest a request for \$75 million in baseline increase to the DCLA Budget in FY26.

I want to thank the Council for prioritizing culture and for your advocacy and securing a restoration for institutions in FY25.

1  
2       However, our cultural institutions continue to  
3 face challenges, and the FY26 Preliminary Budget  
4 again falls short of ensuring that our institutions  
5 have what they need in order to fully serve New  
6 Yorkers and attract tourists to our great city.

7       Baseline support for the CIGs and the whole  
8 sector has long been stagnant. This flat funding is  
9 effectively a cut as costs continue to rise. I',  
10 gonna say that again— this flat funding is  
11 effectively a cut as our costs continue to rise.

12       Furthermore, the ongoing budget dance to secure  
13 one-time funding, each year, creates an incredibly  
14 unpredictable environment, limiting full time  
15 employment and resulting in sporadic time limited  
16 public programming over dependable consistent access  
17 for New Yorkers.

18       Arts and culture generates \$110 billion in  
19 economic activity annually, and we are vital to the  
20 city's economy. Our cultural sector is also central  
21 to the success of city's tourism, industry, and  
22 workforce.

23       The CIGs alone employ 15,700 full and part time  
24 staff, of which almost 6,000 are union members.  
25 Furthermore, CIGs offer career pathways and training

opportunities for more than 6,000 New Yorkers each year.

Investing in culture is investing in safe public spaces for all New Yorkers of all walks of life. More than a 120 million people attend performances and go to museums each year; 2.5 million students participate in our educational programs every year—I'm saying million, billion—these are the numbers that we're doing all the time.

Our institutions position New York City as a world class cultural hub and as a leader in STEAM education. We provide lifelong learning opportunities for older adults and accessible programming for neurodivergent audiences and audiences with disabilities.

Investing in culture is investing in New York. Period. We ask; although, I'm gonna say more, we ask for the Council to baseline \$75 million in culture to ensure our sector can survive and thrive.

Thank you for this opportunity. Thank you for your support.

LUCY SEXTON: My name is Lucy Sexton with the cultural coalition New Yorkers for Culture & Arts. We are so grateful to the Council, and the

Administration, for reversing last years cuts to culture. I want to add that while the cuts were restored, our sector is not repaired. We are seeing layoffs at large organizations and small, and groups facing deficits across the board. The federal administration is launching daily attacks on arts, culture, and on the science and education spaces in which we work. It is dangerous and damaging.

In addition to the incredible damage done by the current delays in funding, that you spoke about earlier with the commissioner, I want to say that the number of staff at DCLA must be increased. I believe they now have only nine program officers covering nearly 1,200 grantees. It's not working.

We are asking for a \$75 million addition to the baseline in order to stabilize the sector, and the agency. FYI, for the past 10 years, Culture has received just .21% of the City Budget. The \$75 million will get us back to .25%— a downpayment on the full 1% of the budget needed by the creative sector, which generates 13% of the City's economy.

We know that the City is dealing with so many urgent needs due to the chaos in federal funding. The Social Impact of the Arts Project's updated data

1 showing that neighborhoods with robust cultural  
2 assets have improved outcomes in education, mental  
3 health, public safety, longevity, and more. In low  
4 wealth communities in particular, those communities,  
5 low wealth communities, with strongly supported  
6 culture and arts, their student test scores are 91%  
7 better than in low wealth areas lacking in cultural  
8 assets.  
9

10 We know those communities will be hit hardest by  
11 federal cuts. While you struggle to provide jobs,  
12 healthcare, and so much more, please invest in  
13 culture, to keep our communities whole, connected,  
14 educated, and economically and emotionally healthy  
15 during this time. Thank you for your... (TIMER  
16 CHIMES)

17 KIMBERLY OLSEN: Thank you, Chair Rivera, fellow  
18 council members, as well as council staff for your  
19 time today.

20 My name is Kimberly Olson, and I'm proud to be  
21 the Executive Director of the New York City Arts and  
22 Education Roundtable. I'm here to testify as part of  
23 the It Starts with the Arts Coalition, as well as the  
24 Coalition for Equitable Education Funding, calling on  
25



our city to prioritize funding for arts education in New York City schools and communities.

The Department of Cultural Affairs and Cultural Development Fund are essential resources in New York City's arts education community, enabling hundreds of organizations to deliver essential arts education programming across all five boroughs. These programs, including in school instruction, after school programs, field trips, arts partnerships, and teen programs, funded by the CDF Fund, cultivate not only the next generation of arts workers and audiences, but prepare our city's young people with the skills necessary to enter the 21st century workforce.

Last week's Education hearing revealed that approximately 300 schools are still lacking a certified arts teacher, a persistent issue for over a decade, leaving thousands of students without dedicated arts instruction. Furthermore, the roll out of the class size mandate, proposed changes to the foundation aid formula, and shifting federal funding threatened to widen the arts education access gap for years to come. However, more than 700 organizations partnered with schools last year to bridge that

access gap, broaden access to world class artists,  
and provide external funding to schools.

Unfortunately, delays in CDF Award Letters, as  
well as gross delays in New York City Public Schools'  
MTAC contracting process, averaging about 16 to 28  
months, per a recent member survey we conducted,  
impede these efforts, causing not only lost  
educational opportunities, but financial hardship,  
both for organizations and also the 5,000+ teaching  
artists we estimate to be working in our city.

As a result, teaching artists, a vital workforce  
within our city's cultural and education landscape,  
face unstable employment and inconsistent  
compensation. The fluctuating numbers of certified  
arts teachers adds another layer of complexity to  
this, (TIMER CHIMES) as teaching artists are  
increasingly relied upon to fill gaps in arts  
instruction, yet often lack the same job security and  
benefits.

Investing in arts education is an investment in  
our city. I join my colleagues in calling on a \$75  
million baseline to support arts and culture, along  
with, of course, an arts teacher in every school.  
Thank you so much.

1  
2 DAVID FREUDENTHAL: Chair Rivera, staff, I'm David  
3 Freudenthal from Carnegie Hall; I thank you for the  
4 chance to reinforce the pretty remarkable testimony  
5 we just heard from my colleagues on this panel. That  
6 was some good case making for why the City's  
7 investment in culture pays dividends for us all— for  
8 the economy, for education, for workforce  
9 development, for our deep investment in the human  
10 services, and the ways that culture is a real partner  
11 to our city in getting this work done.

12 The Council has ... The council gets this. The  
13 Council understands the need. And for we're super  
14 grateful that you elevate why this work matters in  
15 the budget fight ahead. And we're really glad to be  
16 able to provide those case studies, those examples of  
17 the way that organizations like ours... sorry,  
18 Carnegie Hall a member of the CIG. We're part of that  
19 public/private partnership.

20 I Reinforce how important that \$75 million is at  
21 a time of real, real risk and uncertainty to our  
22 sector. You know, we're suffering... it's financial,  
23 it's the chaos that's created by all of this. And it  
24 makes it harder for us to deliver on these essential  
25 services. The reality is, you know, in many ways,

1 we're thriving. Like, ticket sales at Carnegie Hall  
2 are fantastic, you know, people are coming to the  
3 Hall. People are... you know, New Yorkers are coming,  
4 visitors are coming. Places like Carnegie Hall and  
5 Brooklyn Museum, our cultural colleagues, Brooklyn  
6 Academy of Music are the reason that people, you  
7 know, want to visit, and we're essential.

8  
9 What's at risk for places like ours in this time  
10 of enormous financial uncertainty and real budget  
11 limitations, is our ability to provide those  
12 services (TIMER CHIMES) to New Yorkers is also part-  
13 beyond our concerts- our work with all those human  
14 services agencies. And those are the things that, you  
15 know, for all of us are harder to do in this times of  
16 fiscal uncertainty. Thank you for your consideration.

17 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you. I'll just ask a  
18 very sort of general question. I mean many of you  
19 were here for the Administration's testimony, and I  
20 think we know the commissioner really... like this is  
21 her thing, right? She... founder, cheerleader, all of  
22 those things.

23 The most helpful thing to help the cultural  
24 sector, to support cultural workers, to really  
25

highlight that making a career as a cultural worker is something that is available and sustainable.

What is... what would be the biggest step for us? It would be the \$75 million, right? And just...just in a, I guess, in a nutshell, or as concisely as you can, why, right? Because I feel many people... I try to outline this in my testimony but it's hard to do in a couple minutes. You don't have people's attention span, you know what mean?

But you all have been still serving throughout these past five years, through the pandemic, pivoting to digital, all of these things that you've done.

What would that \$75 million mean and what message does send to the globe about how New York City stands behind culture?

COCO KILLINGSWORTH: If I can just briefly do my best to answer that.

It is, as we said, we were so grateful for last year and that \$45 million which was, you know, and we've talked about things being unprecedented. And it was unprecedented, but it really still effectively got us back to the ground floor and to start the dance again of this year and of really stating what we need.

1 Our funding, our baseline has not increased in  
2 decades. We've submitted really helpful data to the  
3 Council, to our colleagues across the board, to look  
4 at when the City has invested in culture, what the  
5 return has been, but also as the City's budget has  
6 grown by 90%, Culture's budget has grown by 10%. That  
7 is why you see this instability. That is why you see  
8 institution after institution facing structural  
9 deficits. These are not deficits just created one  
10 year or even just by one pandemic which was  
11 crippling. These are structural deficits that we  
12 are... the investment that's being put into our  
13 sector does not match what the cost is.

14 And we are, you know, speaking for institutions,  
15 we want to employ cultural workers. We want to be a  
16 place for families. We want to keep New Yorkers in  
17 New York. And our institutions right now are serving  
18 more New Yorkers than we are tourists. Our numbers  
19 are back up, and most of those people are coming from  
20 New York. And a lot of those people, I speak for the  
21 cultural institutions as we are a public/private  
22 partner, they're coming at free or reduced cost which  
23 is deeply important to us. But that also inhibits our  
24 ability to... we're not Broadway, we're not, you  
25

1 know, we can't charge x amount of dollars for each  
2 ticket.  
3

4 So these are the challenges that we're facing and  
5 so the truth is the City's investment has to catch up  
6 with the demand. And that way we can be even  
7 stronger. We are not facing the PEGS that we faced  
8 last year which we're deeply grateful, but what is  
9 happening on the federal level is even more chaotic  
10 than the PEGS.

11 So this \$75 million baseline is what it takes to  
12 get us to a point where we are going to be able to...  
13 we can ensure that we are building institution and  
14 that we have the stability that we need to keep doing  
15 the work that you're expecting us to do.

16 LUCY SEXTON: I would just add that it's jobs. You  
17 say," I'm going to hire you this year if I get the  
18 money. And, then, by the way, don't get it next year,  
19 so the job isn't there." Right? That's not a way to  
20 run anything. And you don't build a strong sector  
21 with that if you can't count on your funding.

22 And if we have to fight for this funding, and we  
23 don't know if it's here or there, that's why  
24 baselining it makes a difference. It tells us who we  
25 can hire and that it can be a real job.

1  
2 And I would just say, also, just to add to you,  
3 that you want to make sure this taxbase stays in New  
4 York City. I lived through the 70s. We lost our  
5 taxbase. Then we'd lose everything. This is why  
6 people are here, so they can go to BAM, so they can  
7 be part of this city. So keep your taxbase.

8 DAVID FREUDENTHAL: I'll just underscore the  
9 workforce development side of it that you heard  
10 earlier from the science institutions. So many of us  
11 have deep investments in providing opportunities for  
12 professional development for pathways to careers in  
13 arts administration or for us it's in the music  
14 industry.

15 But this is a place where we are really investing  
16 about the future. New York is exceptional in the  
17 level of job opportunities that there are in careers  
18 in the arts, and we're doing the work to make that  
19 happen. All of us.

20 KIMBERLY OLSEN: I'll add too also in terms of  
21 what my colleagues have said. For arts education in  
22 particular, that's very much an interagency effort in  
23 supporting arts in our schools and communities.  
24 However, that same inflation piece that Coco had  
25 mentioned, within New York City Public Schools, when



1  
2 you account for inflation, we're actually spending  
3 about \$40-41 million less on arts education than we  
4 were seven, eight years ago.

5       Also, while I agree in terms of it is that  
6 funding component enabling us to have sustainability  
7 within the workforce, especially on my end when it  
8 comes to teaching artists, it's also all in the  
9 timing. Making sure that we have those award letters  
10 on hand towards the beginning of the fiscal year,  
11 understanding what money we have available. I can't  
12 tell you how many organizations I speak with that are  
13 only able to start arts education programming now in  
14 mid March or April that is supposed to end in June.  
15 That does not make a sequential arts education. It  
16 can't... We would be up in arms if we said we could  
17 only have social studies two months out of the year  
18 or science or math. This has to be... it's very much  
19 all in the timing in that way.

20       CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: It's amazing how critical  
21 correspondence can be. Right? I really thank you all,  
22 because I think that that instability that you  
23 mentioned, with the jobs and everything, that was  
24 created by this accumulation, right, of financial  
25 deficit that the City just never addressed.

1           So I thank you all. I thank this panel. I know  
2           that we talk a lot offline, my team and your teams,  
3           so I ask you these questions because every time I  
4           hear from you, I just gain, you know, a valuable  
5           perspective or nuggets of information. So thank you  
6           for always being so gracious. Thank you.

7           PANEL: Thank you.

8           CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Ryan Gilliam, Eleni DeSiervo,  
9           Francine Garber-Cohen, Judith Insell, Kate Madigan.

10          (PAUSE)

11          CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Actually can we bring up Sami  
12          Abu Shumays? Yes, Sami, if you can come up.

13          (PAUSE)

14          CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Okay, who would like to  
15          start? Judith? Okay, great, thank you.

16          JUDITH INSELL: Good afternoon, Chair Rivera, and  
17          committee members. My name is Judith Insell, and I'm  
18          the Executive Director of the Bronx Arts Ensemble, a  
19          53-year-old organization that annually provides over  
20          2,000 residents of the Bronx with free of charge,  
21          live performances presented by professional  
22          musicians, employing Local 802 members— which of I am  
23          one— in multiple music genres like classical music,  
24          Latin jazz, and global music.

Some of you may remember me from my multiple testimonies last year. In FY24, Bronx Arts Ensemble, for the first time in over 40 years, was zeroed out of critical funding from the Department of Cultural Affairs Cultural Development Fund. Receiving this news eight months into the fiscal year triggered a tremendous deficit for our organization—our budget—resulting in the loss of employment opportunities during the spring of 2024 for Bronx based musicians and the canceling of scheduled live performances for Bronx neighborhoods.

I am pleased to announce that the Bronx Arts Ensemble has had funding from the Cultural Development Fund restored for FY25, but at 50% less than what our organization has received in the past.

So our struggle to serve the communities of The Bronx continues. For reasons beyond my comprehension, New York City's current budget has decreased the funds allocated for the arts and culture sector from .25% to point .21%

Given that our sector generates a \$110 billion in economic impact for New York City, why would the city government lessen its investment in arts and culture?

For this reason... for this fiscal year, for FY26, there must be a commitment (TIMER CHIMES) to make a solid investment in our sector by providing a baseline allocation of \$75 million to arts and culture, working towards bringing the sector to a 1% allocation in the near future.

I urge the Mayor and the City Council to approach this upcoming funding cycle, and beyond, with the understanding that cultural sector of New York City is an industry that drives the economic engine of business, and supports the building of communities by providing safe spaces for citizens to come together in the Bronx and all boroughs.

The current federal government has set in motion a new crisis for all nonprofit arts institutions in New York City. Now more than ever, 1,800+ institutions need our local government to support us with as much funding as possible. Without sufficient city government support, there will be an overall negative effect to the City's economy.

The Bronx Arts Ensemble urges you to remember one thing when it's tackling the FY26 Cultural Budget—Allocating a \$75 million baseline for nonprofit arts

institutions is essential for the survival of New York City. Thank you very much for your time.

FRANCINE GARBER-COHEN: Dear Members Council Members, I am Francine Garber-Cohen, President and Producer of the Regina Opera Company, Incorporated, located in Sunset Park. For 55 years, Regina Opera has offered year-round, fully-staged operas and ticketed and free concerts in Southwest Brooklyn.

At these performances thousands of Brooklyn residents, many of them retirees, are able to meet friends - getting them out of their homes where many live alone. Regina Opera provides affordable entertainment for audiences who may not otherwise attend live opera performances. Some are on a fixed incomes and cannot afford the tickets to the Metropolitan Opera. But in order to provide these services, Regina Opera, like other arts organizations, needs increased support from New York City.

In order to have the funding we, as group, we ask for a baseline of \$75 million in Fiscal Year 2026.

Flat funding is really a cut since operating costs rise sharply each year. As with most smaller arts companies, we work with a small reserve fund. As

soon as funds are received, they are spent. These are "high velocity dollars". Money goes directly into the hands of artists and staff who spend it immediately on rent, food, taxes, and other necessities. It also goes to theater owners, and local businesses for upkeep.

The investment on the arts is an investment in NYC. The arts bring in tourism, which also has an economic impact on New York City Budget. Thank you.

(TIMER CHIMES)

KATE MADIGAN: Good afternoon, Committee Chair Rivera and staff. My name is Kate Madigan, Government Affairs Coordinator at The Public Theater. I am here to advocate for The Public Theater's survival and for the Council to stabilize the entire arts and culture sector by baselining \$75 million in the budget to properly fund DCLA and its CAG and CDF recipients. This decision would help support the nonprofits that serve New Yorkers. Thank you for this opportunity to speak.

With shifting federal policies, every cent from the New York City government is crucial to protecting nonprofit organizations. This budget cycle, The Public Theater has made various discretionary and

capital requests to the Council to support our free programming and infrastructure. Each free Shakespeare in the Park production at the Delacorte Theater costs the Public Theater approximately \$3.5 million to stage. With a standard two-show summer season and community pageant, the public spends over \$8 million producing free programming for the people of New York City each summer. This iconic NYC summer tradition serves approximately a 100,000 New Yorkers and visitors annually, all for free. Sustaining this beloved summer programming, as well as the public's free and low cost programming that takes place in its Astor Place Theaters, has been a challenge, particularly after the pandemic.

Just two years ago, our organization had to lay off almost 20% of full time employees in order to address ongoing financial challenges created by inflation, divestment from the arts by private donors/foundations, and a reduction in audiences caused by the pandemic.

Despite these efforts to close the gap, we still face budget deficits which, left unaddressed, threaten to permanently close The Public Theater to New York and the world.

1  
2 It is not only The Public Theater in a dire post-  
3 pandemic financial crisis, the live performing arts  
4 sector is in need of permanent government investment  
5 to remain viable. Without The Public (TIMER CHIMES)  
6 Theater, and other non profits ensuring free and low  
7 cost programming, entertainment will be completely  
8 privatized by greedy individuals and it's  
9 inaccessible to millions of New Yorkers. Thank you.

10 RYAN GILLIAM: Hi, Chair Rivera, I'm Ryan Gillum  
11 of Fourth Arts Block. I'm an artist and organizer  
12 working in the Lower East Side.

13 I just want to say that my colleagues have been  
14 incredibly eloquent with many arguments here for the  
15 increased \$75 million. I'm going to just add another  
16 argument to all of that, but coming from my work as  
17 an artist.

18 The world is rarely what we would like it to be,  
19 but I think I share with many people in this room,  
20 the conviction that the world became significantly  
21 more dangerous and totalitarian in January 2025.

22 We're in a culture war where hostilities towards  
23 the people of this city are led by our own  
24 government. Our immigrant communities, our trans  
25 communities, our students, our institutions of



learning, our scientists, our environmentalists are under attack. We have had the City's bank accounts raided and the City's independence undermined. We've been informed that efforts to address historical injustice will earn us punishment and retaliation, and we're only at the beginning.

For New York to stand strong, for us to actually be a sanctuary city, we need all our allies. Artists and cultural workers have long histories of standing in solidarity with communities, of creating the stories, the iconography, the photos and the poetry that amplify our experiences, of creating the banners, the street theater, the music and the spectacle that focus direct action, of creating circles for art making, writing, listening and sharing, places of reflection and healing, of creating sanctuary spaces, organizing spaces, spaces for dialogue and learning, of creating the murals that voice our grief, the dances that keep us sassy, the films (TIMER CHIMES) that break our hearts open, the songs that call us closer, the comedy that restores our lightness, the celebrations that help us remember why we're fighting.

Artists are critical allies in the times we're facing, and this is a moment not to weaken arts and culture but to strengthen it.

SAMI ABU SHUMAYS: Hello, I just wanna start by thanking you for always, Chair Rivera, being really strong on the details and really questioning the Administration throughout your entire time as Chair for the last year and a half. It's been really great to see.

I'm Sami Abu Shumays, and I'm Deputy Director at Flushing Town Hall, one of the small CIGs, and also a steering committee member of the Latinx Consortium of New York, and the Cultural Equity Coalition of New York.

Flushing Town Hall serves Queens and all of New York City with extraordinarily diverse, culturally relevant programs— the exact sort of thing this administration wants to cut— including music, dance, visual arts, and theater programs, arts education programs, and regrants and professional development programs for artists in Queens.

In the 2026 Preliminary Budget, our operating support allocation dropped from \$803,000 to \$375,000, which is a cut of \$428,000 or 53% of our operating

support. That's 12% of our total budget of \$3.7 million, and could necessitate us having to lay off up to seven or eight of our full time employees, which is greater than 40% of our only 19 full time employees.

Like our other colleagues in the Cultural Institutions Group, we use city funds to pay the salaries of full time employees.

So all the cultural institutions are in difficult financial positions, CIG and the CDF especially. I don't need to tell you what you already have spoken about earlier today, but I'll just say that as a steering committee member of the Cultural Equity Coalition of New York, we see the need from the sector expressed in the CDF Impact Surveys conducted by Dance NYC and ART New York over the last three years, and we're advocating for baseline operating support for the CDF organizations.

You don't have to make new CIGs to give baseline operating support to freeze everyone at the same level, which would also solve (TIMER CHIMES) all of the delay processes that you were just talking about an hour ago.

I'll just add one more thing about Flushing Town Hall, or two brief things.

One is that our operating support seems to have grown from \$350,000 in FY2011 to the current \$800,000, but we were at \$770,000 in FY2007. So essentially, we're stagnant for the last 18 years. We dipped and then we came back up.

And the last thing I'll say about us specifically is that it's great that the City is considering adding new CIGs— \$3 million for five institutions might be \$600,000 each. Our baseline still isn't \$600,000. Our baseline is still \$375,000, and we've been in the CIG for 30, serving one of the most diverse communities in New York City.

So, we hope that you add more CIGs, but we hope that you baseline all the existing organizations, CIGs and CDF organizations— \$75 million.

(LAUGHTER)

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: I got it. No, and I appreciate you saying that. That's why I wanted to ask about their metric and how they're trying to figure out how to add groups. Because I feel like, obviously, there's so many people I want to add to be a CIG, because I just find they embody what it means,

1  
2 in my humble opinion, to be a cultural institution  
3 and group. There are so many locally in my district  
4 and beyond, and I try to mention just one, that is on  
5 city-owned land, that ,you know, could use the  
6 operational and energy assistance, in terms of what  
7 it would mean to become CIG beyond those expenses.  
8 But I am not sure exactly what the plan is going  
9 forward. That is why I try to pay attention to  
10 details. It's not always easy, uh, sometimes with the  
11 answers that we get from the Administration.

12 One question for the panel is just, do you feel  
13 like, whether you're a CIG or not, that the response  
14 from the Administration has been adequate- especially  
15 with the CDF debacle?

16 JUDITH INSELL: I would say, no, it's not  
17 adequate. Again, if we are going to actually, as this  
18 was said many times earlier today, if we are actually  
19 going to plan for what is to come, if we are actually  
20 going to thrive, we are all, I think, almost every  
21 organization here in this room is just surviving. So  
22 that's what you just heard from a CIG. That's what  
23 you heard from a community based organization like  
24 mine. All across the board, we just survive. That is  
25 not how creativity thrives. So there are two... there

could be a lot more creativity actually going on in New York if we had more recourses. And that's a fact.

So, no, I don't think it's an adequate response. You can look at all the factors that go into the application process, through the disbursement of money, through who is getting the money, the amount, everything, it is not adequate in my viewpoint. As a professional in this industry, it's not adequate.

RYAN GILLIAM: I think we are in extraordinary times. I really do. I think that what you're hearing consistently is that it isn't even just like one source of erosion or undermining, it's on multiple fronts. And now there's a direct attack being aimed at the cultural sector. And I do think that that is because of where the cultural sector stands. I also think that it has to do with how many... people who are donors towards arts and culture have lost some faith in what arts and culture does and the difference that it makes. And I think that we needs as many allies in arguments as we can to move forward at this time. But I don't think this is a moment like other moments, and I don't think the Administration's response has been significant in recognizing that.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: No, I appreciate your honesty. I just, I go back to some of what we've seen that doesn't necessarily have anything to do with the commissioner or even DCLA itself, just how our mayor has sort of let this transpire. And it's heartbreaking, and it's very, very frustrating.

And I appreciate what you said, because erasing the identities is something that we have heard from multiple groups, from multiple-sized groups. So how do we expect creativity to thrive when you're worried about making payroll?

So, thank you, thank you all for your work. I really do value each and every one of you. And I appreciate your testimony today.

Eleni DeSiervo, DJ McDonald, Lauren Comito, Angel Hernandez, and Mike Schnall.

(PAUSE)

ELENI DESIERVO: Good afternoon, Chair Rivera, members of the Cultural Affairs Committee, and staff. I'm Eleni Desiervo, Senior Director of Government and Community Relations at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the economic and social impacts of New York City's

arts and cultural sector and the critical need for city investment. We are part of 11 arts and arts education nonprofits on the 16 acre campus and a member of the Cultural Institutions Group. We join our colleagues across the sector calling for a \$75 million baseline increase to the Department of Cultural Affairs Budget, investing in cultural institutions, programs, artists across New York City.

Cultural is an economic powerhouse bringing in a hundred and \$110 billion or 13% of the City's economic activity. Collectively, we employ a workforce of 89,000+ artists, union members, educators, and spend hundreds of millions of dollars investing in local vendors and contractors. This has ripple effects on our city's economy, keeping New Yorkers employed and our spaces open to continue welcoming our neighbors and global visitors alike.

Cultural spaces serve as civic centers and community anchors. Studies continue to support the vast health and wellness benefits of the arts, improving mental health, development, and healthy aging. We see this from our audiences with dementia who attend Lincoln Center Moments, fostering



meaningful engagement, emotional well-being, and a sense of community among its participants.

Additionally, an education in the arts has been proven to help with student engagement, developing interpersonal skills, reduce stress, improving focus, boosting academic achievement.

Annually, tens of thousands of New York City Students are served by the 11 organizations serving in schools, experiencing the magic at Lincoln Center, and in community spaces in many of your districts.

We know what attracts people to New York City and keeps New Yorkers as the buzzing energy of its cultural and arts ecosystem. Now more than ever, it is important to invest in this sector. Funding culture brings citywide economic resiliency and growth, invests in tourism, (TIMER CHIMES) encourages community, and lays the foundation for an equitable and educated New York City.

Thank you again for your time and for helping secure New York City's standing as the heart and center of arts and culture in The United States.

MICHAEL SCHNALL: Good afternoon, Chair Rivera, on behalf of Adrian Benepe, our President and Chief

Executive Officer for Brooklyn Botanic Garden, thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Because of planned dramatic cuts in 2024, BBG held staff vacancies, shut down new initiatives, and passed the deficit budget for the first time ever. Fortunately for The Garden, and all of our CIG colleagues, the proposed mayoral cuts were ultimately reversed, but the specter held us in a painful limbo. As we approach the new fiscal year, we are treading lightly and hoping to remain in the black.

Even as the City has held its contributions to cultural flat for many years, it has mandated expensive increases in wages and unfunded health care and pension mandates. And in an era with rampant inflation and post-COVID visitation losses, this amounts to an unsustainable tax on the City's public institutions.

The simple fact is that fighting every year for City funding is a destabilizing dynamic in an already challenging environment.

Because the city's culture funding has not kept pace with inflation and other rising costs, the CIGs are forced to suppress their core functions. For the Garden and our 33 other cultural counterparts, this

1 is not just... we just we don't just want to survive,  
2 but we want to thrive. And the City must reset its  
3 commitment in FY26 and baseline the \$75 million in  
4 the DCLA budget.  
5

6 As Adrian often says, any school aged child knows  
7 that plants need water and sunlight to survive. And  
8 New Yorkers know that to have a thriving and world  
9 class cultural sector, we need money to thrive. Help  
10 us do that and commit the \$75 million in the budget.  
11 Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

12 ANGEL HERNANDEZ: Good afternoon, Chair Rivera and  
13 the Committee, thank you for giving me the time to  
14 present. My name is Angel Hernandez, and I am  
15 Director of Government Relations for the New York  
16 Botanical Garden.

17 Today, I sit in solidarity with my colleagues  
18 here in the cultural world and echo what has become a  
19 mantra over the last several years— to permanently  
20 baseline and increase DCLA's budget to \$75 million in  
21 the upcoming fiscal year.

22 In the face of today's uncertainties, a permanent  
23 baseline would put to end the countless hours and  
24 resources spent in advocacy for an idea that seems so  
25

normal— financial stability that allows us to serve  
our communities.

At NYBG, such investment would allow us to keep  
staffing Karol's Community Urban Farm, a site located  
at Castle Hill NYCHA Houses. Our community composting  
program can also continue, without doubt, and be  
spared the ongoing struggle to keep that initiative's  
budget fully restored.

Our garden's educators can continue work with our  
students to the Edible Academy School Partnership.  
And progress to the Sci Network NY Coalition can  
continue where NYBG, along with other seven science-  
based institutions, offered valuable paid internships  
to 1,100 city high schoolers during last fiscal year.

As for future endeavors, we partnered with three  
other city botanical gardens to create the Rooted in  
Accessibility Initiative that enhances and expands  
accessibility programming at our sites, which is, by  
the way, the very first of its kind, while our  
capital project to reconfigure our Mosholu gate  
entrance focuses on improving our grounds' access by  
including a new welcome center, a café, and other  
retail spaces, all the potentials for job growth and  
economic development.

Yet all this amazing work stands in jeopardy without stability in the in the Cultural Budget. This is why our advocacy for the next fiscal year must be heard and heeded. Let us keep, for good, what gets allocated to us at adoption, and increase the baseline to historic levels so that (TIMER CHIMES) we can uphold our end of the deal with the City and serve its citizens with crucial benefits and opportunities that they deserve the most. Thank you.

DJ MCDONALD: Good afternoon, Chair Rivera, always a pleasure to see you. Good afternoon, staff, thank you for allowing me to testify today. I'm DJ McDonald, and I represent the Dance Parade.

Last week, the New York Times reported that more than 230,000 immigrant migrants have arrived in New York City since spring 2022 and become our new neighbors. Though their arrival may have been more Port Authority than Statue of Liberty, they challenge us. They challenge us as a community, as a city, as neighbors, in familiar ways that are never assured. But they add just the latest verse in a song of cultural infusion that goes back at least 400 years here.

As New Yorkers, we claim pride in the city's tidal restlessness and its ability to drink in the rivers of humanity and give back to the world creative responses in their suffusion that often reimagines traditional forms and transmutes its alloys into brilliant gold. Thus, they become part of the city's world beating cultural economy.

I believe it's imperative, especially at this time, to invest in the shared vision manifest in our collective transformative cultural inheritance. And I invite you all, all of you here, to experience an embodied version of what I mean when you join 10,000+ other dancers from the globe-spanning mosaic of city life, and me, beginning at noon on Saturday, May 17th in the nineteenth century, only in New York City, dance parade and dance fest, that you helped make possible and make free to all New Yorkers, new and old, and their families and visitors alike.

As grateful as we all remain (TIMER CHIMES) for the support of the City, I know you understand the math, you gave us 99 to one. I'll give you one of these— George Washington on the front— oh, Book of Mormon— Utah in the back, one quarter to a \$100 Benjamin Bill, that's what we're asking for at the

\$75 million level, and I thank you for continuing to restore in what the city produces for around the world.

LAUREN COMITO: Good afternoon, my name is Lauren Comito; I'm a librarian here in New York City and Executive Director of Urban Librarians Unite, an organization that focuses on supporting library workers in cities across The U.S.

Thank you so much to Chair Rivera and the Committee for allowing us to speak today.

I have a whole written testimony, but I got a text about 15 minutes ago that just made me so mad that I rewrote the whole thing.

So we talked a little bit earlier with the Library presidents about how federal funding is about less than 1% of the City Library Budgets and that is true. But federal policy decisions have the ability to change the culture around libraries' ideas, freedom of speech and freedom of thought. The Department of Education has issued a statement on its official website saying that "book banning is a hoax and isn't real."

Across the globe, Department of Defense libraries are being forced to take down Black History and

Women's History Month displays and to remove books like "Freckleface Strawberry" from their collection, meaning that active duty service members don't have the same rights that they are allegedly fighting for.

IMLS as, of last Friday, is being forced to wind down and as of today, the listserv of the American Indian Library Association, which was hosted by the Smithsonian Museum, is now offline. They're no longer allowed to be hosted there.

Society as a whole in The U.S. should be better than this, but I know that New York City is. Our libraries are a place where everyone gets together. This is a library town, and we have the opportunity to fully fund libraries to make up for the cuts that come from inflation, to increase funding and have more hours, and show the rest of the country what it looks like when we have a real, well-funded, robust public common good that everyone can access regardless of language, race, socioeconomic status, or anything else.

We can keep this going here and we should. (TIMER CHIMES) It's the moral high ground, and I hope we'll take it this year.



CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you for that. I mean I mentioned this earlier, but ,like, trying to just straight up erase people. It's just horrifying. So thank you for that. I always... I appreciate your advocacy very much, because book banning is real and it's happening all over the country.

I do want to ask about the Cultural Funding if that's okay. So the \$75 million, I'm on message, you all know that, how do you wanna see the \$75 million sort of like split between the CDF and the CIGs? Do you have an idea? Is that ongoing? You're like...

UNKNOWN: (INAUDIBLE)

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: That's fair. That's fair.

I just wanted to know if there was ,like, a conversation that had been had over sort of the operational deficits of multiple organizations, but that's certainly something we can talk about in the next few weeks, months.

ELENI DESIERVO: Yeah, Yeah. I think we're all focused on securing the \$75 million for the sector right now, and those are ongoing conversations.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Okay.

MICHAEL SCHNALL: I'd also wanted to say, don't be necessarily distracted by that number. I mean, it's important...

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Yeah...

MICHAEL SCHNALL: But the things that I mentioned, these unfunded mandates that are coming in constantly for pension benefits, healthcare premiums, they continue to rise. The City mandates it, and we're left holding the bag. So even with \$75 million baselined, it still doesn't catch us up to those increases that just keep rising. And we have nothing to say or do or even have an ability to advocate against those benefits, because we all want our employees to have those benefits. We all want the pension program to be healthy. But we also need help, because there are uncontrolled expenses that continue to rise that are outside of that \$75 million

So if there's a way to also talk about that, that would be super helpful.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: I think that's fair. I think that's the pivot. It's not about where each dollar is going, it's about sustaining the sector and these unfunded mandates. So I appreciate that.

ANGEL HERNANDEZ: And we always want a fair share with split between both sectors...

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Equity, yeah...

ANGEL HERNANDEZ: However, when it gets to the Agency, it's, you know, it's a different story.

And when we mentioned \$75 million, it's historic levels, but it's *historic*. There's as my colleague is saying, costs, they're still rising. Inflation is still rising. So we just want to get back to a level where it's comfortable for us to function.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Yeah, I mean, you all have seen the same money incoming for like the past decade and nothing has gone down in terms of expenses.

Well, thank you to this panel. I appreciate you all so, so much.

Next panel will be Vipassana Vijayarangan, my apologies, Dylan Flesch, Harry Weil, Devon Mercurius, and Javon Walker-Peters.

VIPASSANA VIJAYARANGAN: Thank you, Madam Chair, and esteemed members of the Committee for your support of public libraries.

I'm Vipassana Vijayarangan, I'm with the New York City Public Library Action Network, and I would not be here with a broken arm if I didn't really, really

1 care about public libraries. I believe they're vital,  
2 especially in these times. I appreciated hearing  
3 folks both on the Committee and off the Committee  
4 talk about... recognize that public libraries are  
5 democratic institutions. I would go one step further  
6 to say, at this point, they are the largest and most  
7 democratic government institution in this country.  
8

9 Over the last year, I, an immigrant South Asian  
10 New Yorker, used my local Brooklyn Public Library  
11 branch to print documents to apply for the extension  
12 of my permanent resident card; ate lunch from a cafe  
13 that trains and is run by refugees; used it as a  
14 workspace; attended a fair on addiction and recovery--  
15 that helped me support my friends dealing with  
16 addiction and recovery-- and when I was unemployed, I  
17 sought guidance from the Career Center-- not to  
18 mention the innumerable number of books that I have  
19 put on hold and borrowed, including several books  
20 that are from my country of origin, but are so  
21 expensive that I would have to spend hundreds and  
22 hundreds of dollars if I was living there.

23 Being able to rely on public libraries makes New  
24 York City affordable for me. Dennis Walcott from  
25 Queens Public Library spoke about new arrivals going

1 to the public library for help. New York was very  
2 friendly to me, so I didn't need that. But when I had  
3 to move to D.C. for the first time, I didn't know  
4 anyone there. It was a pretty hostile federal  
5 government situation, and I was lonely and my first  
6 friend was a librarian. He probably heard me crying  
7 in the stacks, and was ,like, (TIMER CHIMES) "I'm  
8 gonna check what's up," and he was the last person I  
9 said goodbye to when I left.  
10

11 The repeated cycle of Libraries fearing cuts,  
12 advocating for more funds to meet the needs of New  
13 Yorkers, then magically stretching those funds to do  
14 the best they can, is a prequel to the playbook of  
15 fear that we see in the federal government. As  
16 several folks have said, the Libraries need a  
17 baseline. New York City Public Library Action Network  
18 is calling on the Administration to commit to 0.5% of  
19 the City's Annual Budget. I like to think about this  
20 as a commitment to democracy every year. Every year  
21 you're committing at least, at least 0.5% to  
22 democracy.

23 Libraries are a medicine to the assault of  
24 democracy at the federal level. The Books Unbanned  
25 program provides books by queer and trans authors to

1  
2 queer and trans teens across the country. Funding  
3 healthcare benefits to library workers counters the  
4 harm of decimating Medicare and Medicaid, and  
5 Libraries need way more than these asks. It shouldn't  
6 be up to librarians to soothe every teary patron who  
7 comes in. Thank you for your time.

8 (PAUSE)

9 DYLAN FLESCH: Thank you, Chairperson Rivera, and  
10 this committee for the opportunity to testify.

11 My name is Dylan Flesch, and I'm a patron of the  
12 Brooklyn Public Library as well as a member of NYC  
13 Plan, the Public Library Action Network.

14 I live in Sunset Park and my wife, Ellie, and I  
15 became parents one year and two days ago after a  
16 four-day labor. The night before my son, Griffin, was  
17 born, on our third night in the hospital, I submitted  
18 written testimony for last year's edition of this  
19 hearing. I say this not to illustrate that I love  
20 libraries, although I do, but I've loved them long  
21 enough to know that love doesn't pay their bills. I  
22 say this to point to the predictable and tired nature  
23 of this funding fight.

24

25

Griffin got his library card when he was two-months-old, and we've been able to access hundreds of books that we wouldn't have been able to otherwise.

We visit the Sunset Park branch of BPL frequently. Roxanna, the wonderful branch manager, greets Griffin and other little ones by name and provides amazing programming with the resources they have. But they, like most branches across all three systems, are short staffed and spread thin. We desperately need to hire more library workers and raise library worker pay. It's the first thing that needs to happen in order to safely expand service hours, and everything we love about the library is brought to us directly by library workers.

I'm calling on you to seize this rare opening, a year without a cut on the table, and join NYC Plan in fighting for library funding to be increased to at least half of 1% of the total City Budget. This would equal \$92 million more for Libraries than what is currently included in the Preliminary Expense Budget. (TIMER CHIMES) Yes, this is double what the library leaders are asking for. This half percent commitment should additionally become the minimum benchmark for all future library expense funding discussions.

Join me and NYC Plan in fighting for at least half of 1%, 0.5%, for public libraries.

DEVON MERCURIUS: Good afternoon, Madam Chairwoman and esteemed committee members, my name is Devon Mercurius, and I serve as the Senior Director of Programs at Reel Works. Reel Works is a filmmaking and storytelling nonprofit based in Gowanus, Brooklyn. I oversee teams that have led free arts education programs serving K-12 students across New York City for 24 years—from our Brooklyn office to schools in every borough, year-round. Throughout those years, we have served thousands of students, guided by our belief: Change the storytellers, change the world. Our students have written, directed, crewed and produced award-winning student documentaries, narrative films, and animations. Thanks to our workforce readiness program, MediaMKRS, hundreds have gone on to successful careers in film and television.

A comprehensive education should prepare students to provide for themselves and contribute to society. At Reel Works, students gain both technical skills—camera operation, video editing, sound production, cinematography—and essential life skills like



collaboration, communication, and critical thinking.

Reel Works is part of a larger arts education community that serves our great city—offering vital programs and creative spaces for youth, including English language learners and neurodivergent participants.

The arts have always been a foundation of innovation and strength. Before we could fly, we drew it—inspiring engineers. Before we landed on the moon, we wrote about it—inspiring astronauts. Before smart devices became reality, we imagined it on screen—showing the world what was possible. Investing in arts education is investing in the future. Thank you.

JAVON WALKER-PETERS: Good afternoon, my name is Javon Walker-Peters, and I am a proud 2014 Reel Works alumnus. I wanted to get up here and testify about what it is like to be an alumni in a film program and how it might impact a New Yorker's life.

Growing up, I always loved storytelling, but I never knew how to tell my own stories. That changed in high school because a friend introduced me to a program called Reel Works. It sounded like an amazing opportunity, so I applied thinking it would be easy to get in, but I was rejected multiple times.

I didn't give up, and before long I was finally allowed into their program called Reel Impact, in 2014, where I learned the fundamentals of filmmaking and storytelling and the impact of it all.

Once in, I kept moving forward—first to the Summer Lab, where I learned the challenges of collaboration, then to the Fall Lab, where I realized my voice and experiences mattered. And thanks to that, I made a film about grief, violence, prejudice. Through Reel Works, I didn't just learn how to shoot, edit, and direct—I learned how to make impactful stories, lead, and support fellow artists.

After high school, Reel Works didn't stop supporting me— thanks to them and their programs, I was able to join their MediaMKR Program, which led to me working at CBS and the Maysles Documentary Center in Harlem. There, I saw editors that looked just like me, and it ignited my passion for video editing.

But at home, I was told filmmaking wasn't sustainable, especially someone who looked like me. However, on the other hand, I was pressured to go college but couldn't afford it. Feeling lost, I turned to Reel Works again, and they introduced me to their workplace readiness course. Thanks to this, I

was able to work on five TV shows and movies that same year. After being taught everything I needed to know about handling, not only a workplace, but also the industry.

At 19, Reel Works reached out with another opportunity (TIMER CHIMES) asking if I would be interested in assistant teaching. And I finally thought, this is my way to give back to the community that helped me so much. So I did it. I taught for three years. And I didn't really think about the impact had until I decided to leave, and a student told me that seeing someone who looked like them, really helped them decide to become a director some day. And it got me thinking, if it weren't for Reel Works, people like me and that student wouldn't have the ability to tell the stories that need to be told. And I just ask that you guys think about providing more funding to film programs and art programs, so that stories like mine can be amplified and told. Thank you guys so much.

HARRY WEIL: Great. Hi, Chair Rivera and members of the Committee. My name is Harry Weil; I'm the vice president of education and public programs at the Green-Wood Cemetery. Yes, you heard that right, I

work at a cemetery, but we are a very active place with over 300 public programs each year.

From tours to art installations to concerts and the catacombs, we ensure that our 478 acres, in the heart of Brooklyn, are welcoming and accessible to everyone, and that is due in no small part to City funding. I'm here along with all the colleagues in this room to advocate for increased funding for all New York City arts and cultural institutions. Such funding allows Greenwood to offer important free community programs.

Each year our Day of the Dead Community Ofrenda invites thousands to leave mementos, offerings, remembrance for departed loved ones. The related Day of the Dead Afternoon had over 3,500 attendees in 2024 who partook in celebrating this important holiday with food, performances, and hands on activities, contracting dozens of local artists and food vendors from the Sunset Park community.

Most importantly, this funding supports our death education programming. Death education is an area that focuses on grief and loss and mourning. Whether it's guided small group conversations, hands on workshops, lectures, or practical training exercises,

our goal is to get attendees comfortable with the uncomfortable.

In 2024, our Death Education Program served 2,500 participants who range in age from teenagers in middle school to seniors in their eighties and nineties. This work is critical, especially at a time when New Yorkers are experiencing increased levels of depression, anxiety, and general mental distress.

We hope to expand our work to schools, houses of worships, and to other disenfranchised community groups who often experience grief that isn't openly acknowledged, socially validated, or publicly mourned.

We work with artists and advocates in the community to fund those artists to produce programs that are active and engaging for all community members.

So on behalf of Green-Wood, I urge the Council to invest in these critical initiatives, not just at Green-Wood, but also across the city. Thank you.

(TIMER CHIMES)

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you so much. Thank you to this panel. I can't echo that enough, I think grief and the way grieve and the forms it takes in

our experiences is not necessarily I think what people like to define it traditionally. And I appreciate your advocacy so, so much. So, thank you, thank you very much. Thank you to this panel. And thank you for sharing story, too. I hope to see some of your work very soon. Representation is important.

Okay, Cynthia Carrion, Melinda Wang, Lindsay Werking-Yip, and Valerie Lewis.

(PAUSE)

CYNTHIA CARRION: Hi, good afternoon. Thank you, Councilwoman Rivera, and members of the Committee.

I am Cynthia Carrion, I am the Director of Government and Community Affairs at El Museo del Barrio. El Museo was founded in 1969 with a visionary group of artists, parents, educators, and activists who recognized the need for a space dedicated to Latinx art and culture, one that would reflect the voices, histories, and creative expressions of our community. More than 50 years later, our mission remains just as urgent. The same needs that inspired our founding— cultural responsive education, community centered arts programming, and equitable access to the arts echo even louder today.

As New York City's Latinx population continues to grow, so too does the demand for institutions like ours to provide spaces and representation, learning and empowerment. We are unapologetic of who we are and who we serve. Earlier today we heard about this being unprecedented times— like many of our peers, the proposed elimination of the NEA, NEH, and IMLS leave nearly \$1.1 million in multi-year funding in limbo for El Museo. Just to reiterate, going after culture is going after community.

El Museo's work extends far beyond exhibitions. We are a hub for community, education, engagement, and economic activation. Our programming reaches thousands of New Yorkers each year through programming such as Three Kings Day Parade, Día de los Muertos, Super Sábados, Uptown Bounce, which we do together with the Museum of City of New York, but also our bilingual arts education. Now more than ever, in a time where things like, El Museo del Barri, just in its name, can be a target.

However, despite strong demands for our programming, our current capacity limits (TIMER CHIMES) our ability to meet the demands of New York in City Public Schools. Although we host over 300

school groups yearly, 250 remain on our wait list due to limited operating days.

Again, we stand with our colleagues in asking for the City to support our inclusion in the Coalition of Theaters of Color. Our state of the art theater is an underutilized gem in East Harlem, and this support would help us bring unrepresented artists to ensure East Harlem has access to dynamic theater and programming.

Again, as a cultural institutional group, and El Museo del Barrio is part of a network of 34 institutions— again, we ask that the \$75,000 million baselined increase to the Department of DCLA, but also key City Council initiatives such as CASA, SU-CASA, Art as a Catalyst for Change, Cultural Immigrant Initiatives, and the Coalition of Theater of Colors. Our schools, our community, needs us now more than ever. Thank you.

JIRINA RIBBENS: Hello, good afternoon, Council Member Rivera, and representatives of our cultural sector, and the staff here present. I thank you for letting me address this Cultural Affairs Budget Hearing.



My name is Jirina Ribbens, and I am the Executive Director of Ice Theatre of New York, we dance with knives on our feet.

Since our founding in 1984, it has been our mission to create ice dance as a performing art. We every year present over 30 performances to about 12,000 viewers, and we serve 1,500 children annually and introduce them to skating. One of our participants 20 ago is now a manager in Riverbank State Park, so we're also a pipeline to careers.

ITNY fully supports the ask of our community, even though I personally want to ask for the 1%, I thin, ideally. But happy to stand with my colleagues in asking for this baseline funding. We need more funding. We need easier and more timely processes. We need some stability in the funding stream so we can adequately plan and do not live in fear of getting not funded again— especially if we've already implemented the programming and find out eight months into the season.

We're among the lucky ones who did receive funding from DCLA for FY25, and our expected funding for FY26 is actually gonna be down from last year, and it's been down since 2022.

For a small nonprofit, the lack of funding prohibits our growth. We're like a perpetual startup, every year we're broke ,you know, 40 years of this. We cannot grow, and hence we struggle to expand our programming. The basic costs for running an organization increase annually, and the funding is just not keeping up. Our loyal private patrons support us, but it's harder and harder to convince younger people to give to the arts (TIMER CHIMES) because they haven't received the arts education and don't understand how vital the arts is for our community.

Our sector is in crisis, and we deserve more public support. My colleagues have said that it hasn't kept up with the budget, and I really think 1% for Culture for a city that depends so much on cultural sector for its economic output and for attracting visitors is just a minimal investment.

So I thank you for your attention and for your support for our cultural sector.

MELINDA WANG: Good afternoon, and thank you to Chair Rivera and the Committee for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Melinda Wang, and I am the Research and Advocacy Manager at Dance/NYC. Our

organization serves and represents the estimated 6,000 dance workers and 1,700 dance entities of our city. We are also a member of the Cultural Equity Coalition.

Dance and the arts are an inextricable part of thriving community life; 65% of dance organizations program in public space, making our neighborhoods more vibrant and allowing the working families of our city to participate in shaping our culture as part of their everyday lives.

Our organizations enrich our students with over 700 arts organizations partnering with New York City public schools in the last school year.

This interconnectedness shows cultural assets are associated with improved outcomes in health, schooling, and safety. They create the conditions for healthy economies— with the dance industry alone contributing an estimated \$300 million annually to the City's economy. Despite this, dance workers are facing enormous threats. Forty percent of dance organizations classify their financial health as “weak” or “very weak”, and over half don't hold a reserve, meaning even modest fluctuations in funding threaten to shut down organizations.

I want to add that organizations are still recovering from cuts. In the Fiscal Year 2024, Dance/NYC and ART New York conducted a survey of about 149 CDF grantees, and 69% of those organizations experienced cuts.

Dancers and choreographers earn an average of just \$23,000 from dance, which means their total income from dance is 82% less of just the average rent for an apartment in New York City. Despite this, 64% of dance workers fund their work from their already worn down pockets, reflecting the scarcity of external income sources. Amidst this backdrop of precarity, our industry faces further threats with federal attacks that are going to come down hardest on the BIPOC, immigrant, queer, and (TIMER CHIMES) disabled dance workers who are already worse off.

That's why Dance/NYC is joining our colleagues and calling for a \$75 million base baseline increase for DCLA. We have the power to meet this moment with an important message: In the face of regressive political forces, New York City supports the varied culture of all New Yorkers and supports the cultural workers that reflect that diversity.

Increased stable funding is key to making sure our workers can eat and pay rent and get back to the work they love, making New York City more prosperous, livable, and connected for all who call it home. Thank you.

LINDSAY WERKING-YIP: Good afternoon My name is Lindsay Werking-Yip, and I am the Director of Development for the American Composers Orchestra. I'm very grateful to testify alongside these many wonderful cultural workers and for your time today.

ACO is a grateful recipient of multi year DCC funding, and I join my colleagues in encouraging the Council to support baseline funding for the arts programming in FY26 with a \$75 million baseline increase for the Department of Cultural Affairs.

At ACO, we see the impact of these dollars in so many ways. Starting in 2023, we partnered with the Manhattan Academy of Arts and Language to provide music education to students who were all new immigrants to New York City. Over the course of the semester, 25 students each received 18 hours of instruction in group percussion or voice classes. In all of ACO classes, students create original works

rooted in their personal identity, lived experiences,  
and community history.

At the end of the semester, one teacher noted,  
"This program provided therapy through music.  
Students were very happy to find out that the music  
from their countries of origin was validated through  
this program."

On another day, the students were hurrying their  
academic teacher along through her lesson plan,  
"Hurry up," one of them said, we don't want to miss  
music today."

In our funding from the Department of Cultural  
Affairs, if it were to decrease or disappear, we risk  
losing these programs and supporting these children.  
We also risk losing a generation of arts workers who  
rely on sustainable, reliable employment to make  
their lives here in New York City.

In addition to music education each year, ACO  
provides citywide concerts, workshops, and new music  
readings. We provide a living wage to hundreds of  
artists annually.

Our Earshot Initiatives are the first ongoing  
systemic program for building relationships between  
composers and orchestras across The Americas. And

1 since 2020, we have tripled our national footprint,  
2 increasing from six to 26 partners across 17 U.S.  
3 states and Canada. All of these partners (TIMER  
4 CHIMES) are providing jobs to our artists.  
5

6 I encourage the City Council to increase funding  
7 for the DCA and initiatives like CASA, SU-CASA, and  
8 more. This funding will ensure that New York City  
9 will remain a thriving cultural hub with artists  
10 making their work and homes here for generations to  
11 come. Thank you.

12 VALERIE LEWIS: Greetings, and thank you,  
13 Committee Chair Rivera and distinguished members of  
14 the Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and  
15 Intergroup Relations. My name is Valerie Lewis and I  
16 am the Executive Director of Third Street Music  
17 School Settlement, a 130-year-old nonprofit community  
18 music school currently based in City Council District  
19 2 with partnerships in 11 additional City Council  
20 districts throughout all five boroughs. Founded in  
21 1984, Third Street's mission is to ensure access to  
22 essential arts education for those who seek its  
23 enrichment. Today, we serve over 6,000 students with  
24 music and dance instruction. And through the arts, we  
25

bring strength to individuals and we create vibrant communities.

There's an abundance of evidence demonstrating that participation in arts education programs can positively impact the trajectory of a student's life. Students who engage in music instruction outperform non music students in assessments of math, reading, and second languages. K through 12 students who study the arts are more likely to earn a bachelor's degree and are prepared with the discipline, problem solving, and collaborative skills needed to succeed in adulthood.

Third Street and our peer organizations here today contribute immensely to the vitality of New York City. However, funding shortfalls have threatened the sustainability of our programs out of New York City's unparalleled cultural sector.

Third Street CDF funding has been cut over 50% over the last three years introducing unprecedented challenges for the delivery of our mission. Further cuts will force us to cut programs, reduce financial aid, and eliminate faculty positions; thereby denying members of our community access to vital creative opportunities and endangering the livelihoods of



dozens of teaching artists. We currently have 150 teaching artists at Third Street.

I join my colleagues here in advocating for a baseline funding increase of \$75 million for DCLA, as well as an increase to the CDF funding cap which will provide stability for New York City cultural organizations. (TIMER CHIMES) Additionally... may I continue? I implore the Council to increase support for music education through a new music education initiative aimed at supporting school arts partners and integrating music instruction into youth programs.

I don't have to tell you, culture and art are critical to a vibrant New York City, and I urge the City Council to invest in arts and culture thereby investing in the well-being of all New Yorkers. Thank you for this opportunity.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you. I would love to that. We are also trying to do a cultural worker initiative, but ,you know, we'll see in the next few months how negotiations go. But I appreciate the idea, because I really do believe that arts education leads to an appreciation, in addition to all of the things that you mentioned that are so important for

our well-being and our identity. So, thank you to  
this panel, thank you for your work, I appreciate it.

Okay, Dohini Sompura, Jenny Dembrow, Martha  
Bowers, Sarah Cecilia Bukowski, Anais Reyes, and  
Kimberly Rose.

DOHINI SOMPURA: Good afternoon, Chair...

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Oh, wait, I'm so sorry, we  
actually made a six person panel. So we need one more  
chair. Did somebody not show up? Oh... I am so sorry  
to interrupt, please begin.

DOHINI SOMPURA: Good afternoon, Chair Rivera; my  
name is Dohini Sompura, and I'm Director of  
Government Affairs at the American Museum of Natural  
History.

AMNH is one of 34 esteemed cultural institutions  
that make up the New York City's Cultural Institution  
Groups or CIGs. At a time when cultural institutions  
face growing financial challenges, AMNH remains one  
of the few museums in New York City that continues to  
offer pay-as-you-wish admission for New Yorkers.

Institutions like AMNH serve an essential  
community of resources, investing in culture means  
investing in safe public spaces accessible to all.  
Furthermore, as public funding for the sciences faces

1  
2 increasing uncertainty, CIG reaffirm New York City's  
3 leadership as a global cultural hub and institutions  
4 like AMNH that are science focused, a science pioneer  
5 in education and STEM education.

6 As you've heard many times today through a public  
7 testimony with my fellow CIG colleagues, AMNH is  
8 requesting \$75 million in baseline funding to DCLA.  
9 The investment will help stabilize arts and cultural  
10 funding, secure essential operational support, and  
11 address long standing shortfalls in DCLA's budget.

12 For far too long, DCLA's baseline funding has  
13 remained stagnant, failing to keep pace with  
14 inflation and rising operational costs, including  
15 union wages and benefit escalation. It is time to  
16 protect the future of the City's cultural  
17 institutions, because when we invest in culture, we  
18 invest in the heart of New York City itself.

19 With my remaining time, I would like to talk  
20 about a new initiative that AMNH is proposing around  
21 cultural workforce.

22 AMNH would like to expand the scope of our  
23 workforce development programs and build connections  
24 between city agencies and youth by facilitating  
25 career exploration opportunities for future

1 employment in New York City agencies. City jobs offer  
2 not only financial security through competitive wages  
3 and benefits but also opportunities for long-term  
4 professional growth, skill development, and  
5 advancement within various sectors.  
6

7       The program, STEM2City: Connecting STEM Talent to  
8 NYC Careers, will span one year, with a focus on  
9 cultivating strong partnerships with city agencies.  
10 The program will culminate in a career fair (TIMER  
11 CHIMES) designed to connect youth with hiring  
12 managers. In addition, AMNH would like to expand our  
13 current Museum Education Experience Program, which is  
14 currently serving college aged students, for high  
15 school students so that they are exposed to museum  
16 careers at an earlier age, thus exposing them to the  
17 cultural workforce as an opportunity for employment  
18 in the future.

19       SARAH CECILIA BUKOWSKI: Thank you, Chair Rivera;  
20 I am Sarah Cecilia Bukowski, and I am here today as  
21 an Union arts worker and a dancer with the  
22 Metropolitan Opera, and Governor of the American  
23 Guild of Musical Artist. I'd like to thank you, the  
24 Committee, the Council for your ongoing support for  
25 the City's arts and culture sector, and to join my

colleagues today in calling for your continued investment in the form of \$75, million baseline for DCLA as we work toward 1% for Culture.

And my message to you today stems from my core belief that artists are workers and our industry really needs your support.

The CDF and CIG programs provide support to 10 AGMA signatories and thus to thousands of union arts workers in this city.

And, of course, you've heard all of the case making from my colleagues here today about how an investment in the arts is an investment in our economy, our workforce, our communities, and our cultural identities.

I'm here to tell you that this funding is crucial to my livelihood and to the livelihoods of thousands of union and non union arts workers.

And of course we all know how the pandemic exposed just how vulnerable arts workers are particularly those who lack labor protections. And five years on many of us are still recovering. And our wages, even my union wages, at one of the largest arts institutions in this city, continue to be

stagnant in the face of inflation, rising costs of living, and the climate of mounting uncertainty.

So all of this tells me that a truly thriving arts sector is going to depend on stable baseline funding and long term investments to support strong union jobs and union growth that can set standards so that all arts workers can build careers in the arts and can build lives in the arts beyond just gigs. That's really important to me as a worker as well.

So I stand here today with thousands of other arts workers to call on you (TIMER CHIMES) and to let you know that we're counting on you to support arts and culture by fully funding DCLA. Thank you.

JENNY DEMBROW: Good afternoon, Chair Rivera and members of the Committee. My name is Jenny Dembrow, and I'm the Executive Director of the Lower East Side Girls Club. I've been with the organization since its founding in 1996 when there were three Boys Clubs. We operated out of community rooms, schools in over two dozen locations until we moved into our 35,000 square foot facility in 2013. In our nearly 30, thousands of young people and their families have benefited from our free programming and championing of the arts.

The Girls Club connects young women and gender expansive youth throughout New York City to healthy and successful futures. We nurture safe spaces where young people can dream big, find their passions, connect to peers and careers through free year round programming.

In 2022, we expanded by launching the Center for Well-Being and Happiness, CWBH, which promotes intergenerational community care through accessible arts and wellness programs.

Arts education is too often inaccessible. We are addressing this gap. We share healing centered art practices, develop artistic skills, champion creative expression, imagination, and facilitate career pathways.

Our class offerings include painting, illustration, dance, poetry, comics, screen printing, mosaics, music, animation, photography, film, and podcasting. And that's just in this realm.

At CWBH, adult members access dance and music workshops and creative expression classes.

Members artwork has been showcased at MoMA, MoMA PS1, art fairs, and the United Nations, among other locations

Our Art+Community Gallery and the CWBH Gallery provide a vital community space for public art exhibitions, workshops, artist talks, and community gatherings.

In 2024, we hosted 30 art events. Thousands of New Yorkers benefit from our free public arts programming and events annually.

Currently, we are navigating a challenging financial reality and stand at a critical inflection point between a \$3 million mortgage for purchasing our CWBH space in 2019, rising costs due to inflation (TIMER CHIMES), our revenue has fallen behind.

These fiscal challenges pose an imminent risk to our ability to provide the vital services to so many people rely on when the need is greater than ever. We are requesting \$2.5 million from the City Council to support the stabilization of our organization.

Our mission is more urgent than ever. As we search for a way forward, we aim to secure our legacy as a transformative force in the Lower East Side and expand our impact for generations to come— and also echoing the \$75 million investment. Thank you.

MARTHA BOWERS: Good afternoon, Chair Rivera and staff members. Thank you for your work on behalf of



our cultural sector and for your patience for hanging  
in here for this long day.

My name is Martha Bowers, and I am the founder of  
Hook Arts Media, which is a community based cultural  
organization in Red Hook, Brooklyn.

After 30 in January, I retired and passed the  
organization on to our first leader of color. And  
I'm... she's gonna be a terrific leader. And over the  
years that I was there, we served probably over 18 to  
20,000 young people, most of them— almost all of them  
from historically marginalized neighborhoods such as  
Red Hook, Brownsville, East New York, the South  
Bronx, and parts of Queens.

I've been madly rewriting my testimony, because  
you've heard so much today, but I think what I want  
to say most about my job, that I will miss deeply, is  
is about the young people.

And the thread that ran through all of our  
programs, and I hope will continue to, is this idea  
of critical pedagogy— that artists are citizens and  
their talents as filmmakers, poets, dancers, theater  
makers that are engaged with their civic communities  
are a potent force for change.

And I see the disinvestment in arts hitting our low income communities particularly hard and our young people are always hit the hardest.

If we do not invest in this next generation of change makers, what we see we have now in Washington may be, unfortunately, the future.

So I think most of all I want to say, support this generation of young people who are going to be such an important force, that change makers have always come from the margins and often come from youth movements. And the arts is central to building that activism. (TIMER CHIMES) And \$75, go, more the better. Thank you very much.

ANAIS REYES: Greetings, Chair Rivera and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Anais Reyes, and I am the Curator at the Climate Museum.

We are the first museum in the U.S. focused climate change. We use cultural programs to educate visitors about climate and get them involved in civic action. We recently secured a permanent home near Hudson Yards, that will open in 2029, and are currently in the process of finding and fundraising for a temporary home in the interim.

I'm here with an urgent request for you today, that you uphold the cultural and civic fabric of New York City's climate leadership— climate and cultural leadership— by expressing your support for the Climate Museum both individually and through the Speakers Initiative.

Research from Yale showed that in 2024, 75% of people across the five boroughs were worried about climate change. Three out of four people feel anxious and overwhelmed and most feel very isolated and feel that no one really cares.

Through exhibitions and events, the Climate Museum uses the power of the arts to acknowledge people's worries and lived experiences, to connect people to tangible actions they can take, and build an empathetic, civically engaged, and empowered community in the process.

Put simply, our work is transformative. A peer reviewed study from George Mason University recently found that after seeing our exhibitions, visitors left more aware of just how much others are concerned about climate change, more hopeful that it can be solved, and more confident and determined to speak out about it. We are providing an essential service

to New Yorkers, moving visitors from despair and isolation to communal engagement. This is how we fulfill our civic responsibility as a cultural organization and do our part for the betterment of the city.

We all know our values and rights are currently under attack— as many of the previous speakers have talked about today. Now is the time to stand together for those values and for climate and cultural and civic leadership in New York City.

Today I'm asking for your support in helping us to continue doing this vital work.

First, we have submitted several member item requests including to members of the Committee (TIMER CHIMES), and we appreciate your partnership past, present, and future.

Second, we have also submitted a request as part of the Speaker's Initiative and asked for your support with Speaker Adams.

Finally, we will reach out to your office separately about a Resolution in support of the Climate Museum's Mission and Development that Chair Gennaro has introduced.

Thank you again for your partnership and for your time today.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you to this panel. What I will miss are these exact spaces that I get to be in with all of you. It's the best. And I think that commitment to practice from you all and artists, uh, is something that we should really be supporting. And that goes across the board— funding for your organizations, I think housing preferences, and creating housing for artists is important, too.

So, we are going to try to work on this on multiple fronts. So I just want to thank you all for being here and for your patience today. Thank you.

All right, we might need a sixth chair, Sergeants.

Aya Hayashi— this is the last in person panel, and I just want to thank you all for your patience. Sharon Brown, Jessica Jackson, Nicole Gardner, Melissa Riker, Nicole Touzin. And if there is anyone that I did not mention, and you have filled an appearance card or you have not, please feel free to approach the sergeants so that we can make sure that your voice is heard and your testimony is recorded.

After this, we will be proceeding to Zoom  
testimony.

(PAUSE)

DR. HAYASHI: Chair Rivera, thank you for your  
steadfast commitment to ensuring that arts and  
culture remain accessible to all communities.

My name is Dr. Aya Esther Hayashi, and I am the  
Development Director at The People's Theatre,  
formerly known as People's Theatre Project. We create  
theater with and for immigrant communities to build a  
more just and equitable world.

Thanks in part to an investment of \$25.7 million  
by the city of New York, the Council, And Borough  
President Levine, we are building The People's  
Theatre: Centro Cultural Inmigrante which will be the  
largest Latine operated theater in the state.

With my colleagues, am here today to advocate for  
a baseline \$75 million. More specifically, I advocate  
for an increase in the Coalition of Theaters of Color  
Initiative, also known as CTC.

The CTC initiative was established in 2004 to  
address inequities for theaters and cultural  
organizations that serve communities of color, and it  
is the only city council initiative that supports

cultural organizations of color across our city's demographics, Latine, Black, Asian, Indigenous, and immigrant.

The FY25 budget allocation for CTC stands at \$5.7 million supporting 66 organizations. However, it has not seen an increase since 2020. Funding increases and new additions to the Coalition result in proportional increases for all member organizations maintaining equity within the initiative.

Like all of the CTC members, The People's Theatre is uniquely positioned within our community, serving as a hub of artistic excellence and beacon of trust and community care. Together, we serve millions of New Yorkers of all ages, ability, races, and ethnicities, and immigration status. Yet so many of us who lead them are directly threatened by the current federal administration. An increase in the CTC budget will benefit individual organizations and uplift the entire network of theaters of color that serve as lifelines for our communities.

We urge this committee and City Council to recognize the essential role that the CTC plays in our city and to increase its funding in the FY26 budget.

Thank you for your time, leadership, and dedication to cultivating an equitable cultural sector.

SHARON BROWN: Hello, My name is Sharon Brown. Before I begin, remember Israel, release the hostages, let Yahweh's people go, defend Israel.

Okay, we need to make sure that we fund libraries and build more libraries, and this is a 24-hour city. We have to do something about the 24-hour status.

So, we have to have arts and things like that that go around the clock, not 24 hours consecutively, but we have to have something going on to live up to our name in the arts department.

We also need to add the Judaism and Christianity, Christian music, and different things in the mix into that. So the Judaism and Christianity, we need to add the psalms from the bible. They can sing the psalms and do all kind of plays for the holidays. There are many Jewish holidays, many Christian holidays. We can have the arts get together and do something for that around those clock hours.

So, for the 24 hours, if they have something in the mornings and then sometimes in the evenings, or have a special programming at libraries, at cultural



centers, museums, they can do things concerning the Jewish and Christian community. We have music, we have arts, we have plays and movies and things that we can screen. We have a lot of Jewish and Christian movies that have come out now, so we can have that put into the mix screened at libraries, screened at museums, Christian paintings, and we need to get Christianity and Judaism back in the mix.

We are currently putting the bible back into schools, and it's already implemented in Oklahoma, and we need to make sure that we're putting (TIMER CHIMES) it in the arts as well. Thank you.

MELISSA RIKER: Good afternoon, Chair Rivera, members of the Council, and staff members.

My name is Melissa Riker; I'm a dancemaker and advocate based in District 10, Inwood. I lead two small nonprofit organizations, Kinesis Project Dance Theater and Manhattan Theatre Source, which produces the EstroGenius Festival

I founded and co-run two collectives, Women in Motion and the Pandemic Emergency Coalition Dance Rising. (TIMER CHIMES) It's my calling to bring attention to brave art and artists. In my own work as

a choreographer, I make large scale outdoor dance in New York City parks and public spaces.

I appreciate the testimony of the commissioner, supportive statements by the council members, and bright spots in the discussion of collaboration.

My interests are directly tied to the health of culture, the ability for me as a leader to support platforms for underserved voices, underheard voices, and pay the people who choose to join me in my own art, and to make art accessible and available for every New Yorker.

I believe in the availability of art and artists to create dialogue in spaces where there is none, to offer trust, teach self healing, empathy, and confidence in a way that the echo chamber of social media, our current federal government, and funding landscape cannot.

Last year, in 2024, I was thrilled to receive a small award from LMCC, a program directly supported by the generosity of this council. I scheduled rehearsals and brought dancers into the studio in early spring. However, that grant was then incredibly late, and, in the end, that sweet and generous grant created substantial damage, as it reflected poorly to

my team my ability to pay artists on time. Now in  
this year, we don't even know who the grantees are.

New York City can be proud of its art and  
artists. We want you to be proud, but this pride must  
be paired with respect. New York City must treat us  
with respect as workers, with better understanding  
for creative timelines, not assuming that we can  
survive without support because we are resilient and  
because we've made it this far. Pressure is  
exponential over time.

We are resilience, but it is simply unkind to  
lean on our resilience asking us to be the frontline  
against fascism, misinformation, guiding  
intergenerational neighborhood communication to  
support our city.

To be very real, (TIMER CHIMES) I barely have  
time to create the art I am put here to make, to make  
the difference you, I, and my community know I can as  
a maker of large scale public dances.

My request to the Council and Administration is  
centered on funding and deeper community. Add \$75  
million to the arts, culture baseline, and bring us  
into the conversation. Ask us what process looks like

to imagine with you, to fund with you, consider  
breaking the ceiling and move towards 1% for Culture.

Please continue to push your colleagues to  
understand that the public facing arts of New York  
City do not exist without the creators of that art—  
and that we live in every single district of New York  
City. Thank you.

NICOLE GARDNER: Hello, Chair Rivera.

I'm Nicole Gardner, Director of Advancement at  
Building for the Arts, and I'm here to talk about Off  
Broadway, the baseline, and capital funding.

We were founded as the 42nd Street Development  
Corporation 1976, and we helped revitalize Hell's  
Kitchen by founding Theatre Row. And Theatre Row is  
still going strong, supporting 3,000 artists and 300  
theater companies every year with subsidized spaces  
to create and perform.

Off and Off-off Broadway theater in NYC is still  
in crisis, and we see it in the large number of  
companies closing, cutting back production or losing  
their spaces. So increasing the baseline is crucial.

At Theater Row, we're struggling too, but we're  
still striving to put production back in reach for

New York City's small theater companies and  
independent artists.

However, our outdated lighting systems are  
breaking down, and artists in our spaces are starting  
to spend their limited production funds to bring in  
outside lighting to achieve their visions. So we need  
capital support to replace our obsolete systems with  
modern LED lighting. That way artists won't have to  
spend their limited budgets on renting equipment from  
a third party.

Using our equipment will save each group \$1,300  
or more per week. And that's how this project will  
have a radiant effect— putting over \$2 million back  
into the production budgets of small New York City  
theater companies and independent artists over the  
first ten years of the system's use. And the project  
will also make Theater Row more environmentally  
sustainable.

The vibrant voices and the generative artists  
that come out of small nonprofit and indie theater  
are the lifeblood of New York City's theater  
ecosystem. But while Broadway has started to recover  
post-COVID, the Off and Off-Off community is truly  
struggling.

We urge you to help us maintain New York City's (TIMER CHIMES) status as a destination for culture by adding \$75 million to the baseline for DCLA. And additionally, we ask that the Manhattan Delegation support our funding, uh, support our capital request for Theater Row to keep Off and Off-Off Broadway alive and creating for New York City. Thank you for your consideration and support.

JESSICA JACKSON: Good afternoon, committee members. My name is Jessica Jackson, and I'm the Director of School Programs and Education at the Bronx Children's Museum.

Imagine a child walking into a museum for the first time eyes wide, hands reaching out, a world of possibility. That's what happens every day at the Bronx Children's Museum. For many children in the Bronx, we are their first museum, their first exposure to the arts, their first book in their hands, and their first time seeing themselves reflected in the stories we tell.

Since opening our building two years ago, after more than a decade of outreach, the Bronx Children's Museum has become a lifeline for families. We serve

one of the most culturally rich yet historically underfunded boroughs in New York City.

In 2024 alone, we welcomed 50,000 children and families. We featured 79 artists and authors, many from the Bronx, giving the kids the chance to see themselves in creative spaces. We hosted field trips despite major barriers to arts access in New York schools. We distributed over 5,000 free books in a borough where there was only one book for every 259 children. We trained teachers equipping them with tools to bring creativity into the classroom, because when arts programs are cut, it's children in the Bronx who suffer the most. We provided Sensory Days for neurodiverse children and their families, ensuring all kids have a space where they feel safe, welcome, and celebrated.

But now our ability to serve children is in jeopardy. The Bronx has one of the lowest preschool enrollment rates in New York City. Research shows that children who don't attend preschool are 25% more likely to drop out of high school. Families rely on us as an early learning space, yet we don't have the funding to meet the overwhelming demand.

Sensory inclusive programming is underfunded, and families ask us for more Sensory Days, but without stable funding we can expand the programs neurodiverse children desperately need.

As one visitor passionately wrote, "I have so much pride in this museum. Let's take care of it. Let's make sure it continues to provide hours and hours of learning opportunity and safe fun for Bronx kids for years to come." (TIMER CHIMES)

But we can't do this alone and that's why we urge the city to baseline \$75 million to Culture. The children of the Bronx deserve more, not less. On behalf of the Museum and the children of the Bronx, we thank you.

NICOLE TOUZIEN: Good afternoon, Chair Rivera, staff, and members of the Committee, and thank you very much for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of Dancewave where I serve as Executive Director.

I'll use my time to illustrate the impact that the City's investment in arts and culture has through Dancewave, a 29-year-old organization providing inclusive and empowering dance education in New York City.



Dancewave is a fiscally responsible and values-led organization, investing nearly \$1 million each year, compensating artists and arts workers who contribute to and stimulate our local economy.

With the City's support, we provide direct services to an all-ages audience of 6,200 people each year and connect with upwards of 24,000 people via digital engagement efforts.

In 2024 alone, we engaged 5,000 New Yorkers with free dance programming across all five boroughs; provided 800 early and mid-career artists with access to subsidized rehearsal space; connected 500 young artists with year-round, free, and low cost performance training with renowned choreographers; facilitated 400 high schoolers transitions into higher education and careers in the arts; and empowered 88 artists as entrepreneurs, who earn an average of \$1,800 a month through innovative resource sharing model.

While data illustrates Dancewave's community impact, I'll quickly share a few words of artist, Theanne Welsh, "As someone who believes that arts experiences should be accessible to all people, I want organizations like Dancewave to be able to

thrive. Dancewave's programs empower people who may not otherwise have equitable access to resources or opportunity."

Theanne, and many others, know that Dancewave steadfastly serves and delivers for the people of New York. We go above and beyond, filling persistent gaps in city services, and our work is made possible by, and can only continue with increased (TIMER CHIMES) investment from the City.

I join my colleagues in asking for the Committee's full support in advocating for increase in baselined arts and culture funding in the amount of \$75 million for FY26.

There's no New York City without arts and culture, and the City must invest in the organizations that make arts and culture possible. Thank you so much.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you so much to this panel. I am very, very excited for the work ahead, but I know that you will need our support. So, thank you, thank you for your testimony, and thank you for waiting this long. I am very, very grateful. And I'll see you in the Bronx.

1 All right, we are going to pivot to Zoom  
2 testimony. Wait— actually, let me just sure, if there  
3 is anyone left in the Chambers who would like to  
4 testify in person, please submit an appearance card.  
5

6 And let me just thank the Sergeants at Arms who  
7 have not sat down, and have continued to keep this  
8 hearing running. And, also to Regina Paul and Sandra  
9 Gray, and Christina Yellamaty, and Eddie Amador,  
10 thank you so much. Because people have thanked you,  
11 but I want them to know, your names are super  
12 important.

13 All right. Let's pivot to Zoom here. I see some  
14 people online, and I... That concludes the in-person  
15 portion of our public testimony. We will now move to  
16 remote testimony. If you are testifying remotely,  
17 please listen for your name to be called. Once your  
18 name is called, a member of our staff will unmute  
19 you. You may then start your testimony once the  
20 Sergeant at Arms sets the clock and cues you to  
21 begin.

22 (PAUSE)

23 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: I see some people online, and  
24 I see some names here of individuals that are not  
25 online. So I am just going to read through a list:

Benjaman Garcia, Kevin Lee, David Shane, Frank  
Wachtel, Vicki Madden, Michael Kranz, Faridah  
Gbadamosi, Melissa Soto, Tawny Tidwell, Nathaniel  
Morgan, Alex Stein.

(NO RESPONSE)

(PAUSE)

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: All right, we are going to  
move to the individuals who have waited patiently,  
who are still with us. We are going to start with  
Sofia Harrison.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Starting time.

SOFIA HARRISON: Good afternoon, Chair Rivera,  
esteemed council members, my colleagues, and all  
other present.

I am Sofia Harrison, the Founder And Executive  
Director of Arts House Schools of Music, Dance, and  
Fine Arts. As the only cultural institution in Coney  
Island, Brooklyn serving artistic and cultural needs  
of children and senior citizens year round, Arts  
House Schools believes it is our responsibility to  
engage both youth and seniors in meaningful  
activities. We immerse ourselves in community life,  
maintaining a presence at school and street fairs,  
community meeting events, and participating in

cultural and artistic celebrations. These activities effectively communicate beauty, foster an appreciation for diversity, and help create lives filled with meaning and purpose. Our approach inspires the belief that the entire community benefits when the arts are woven into the fabric of our society.

For the past 19 years, Arts House Schools has worked hand in hand with our local council members to provide our community with exposure and experience in the arts. Our council members have supported the arts as a means of recovery after Superstorm Sandy and the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly for senior citizens, community centers, and public schools. They have also provided funding for scholarships and free programs during after school and out of school times. They have remained committed to ensuring that every member of their district leads a well rounded life, always including the arts.

I join my colleagues in requesting an increase in the baseline budget for the Department of Cultural Affairs by \$75 million. We can no longer afford to be starving artists. The cost of living is rising from rent to eggs to health care. Increasing the budget

will not only stabilize our sector, but also benefit the city both this year and in the years to come.

Without the Council's continued support and fight for arts and culture, and a commitment to the well-being of the entire person, the essential work of more than 1,000 nonprofit organizations and independent artists in New York City will not be possible. (TIMER CHIMES) We, as vital organizations and workers, provide...

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time has expired, thank you.

SOFIA HARRISON: (BACKGROUND NOISE) (INAUDIBLE) and city of whether we are employees, students, or attendees with enriching, well rounding lives experiences today, tomorrow, and in the future. Thank you.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you for your testimony. Next we have Mariame Kaba.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Starting time.

MARIAME KABA: Good afternoon to the committee members. I am grateful for the time to speak on behalf of our New York City Public Libraries.

I don't have to impress on the Council just having listened to everybody who's gone forward

before how critical New York City libraries are to  
our city.

I was born and raised here in New York City. My  
local library helped to raise me, and I think the  
same is true for countless children and young people  
in this city.

As critical infrastructure, and a necessary third  
space open to all, we need robust funding for our  
libraries, and instead, what we've gotten is  
decreasing funding that has not kept up with  
inflation over many years.

As a member of New York City Public Library  
Action Network, I call on for a budget that robustly  
supports public libraries, and we can begin by  
allocating at least 0.5% of the total New York City  
Budget to support operating costs of New York City  
public libraries. And our calculations suggest that,  
the current number is 0.42%, and that is wholly  
inadequate.

I live in the city. I will live here through  
until I retire, and I want my taxes to enhance the  
standard of living of everyone in this city. Our  
libraries are necessary for a flourishing city, and

we need to fund them robustly. Thanks so much for listening and for your work.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you for your testimony. Next we have Potrirankamani Queano Nu.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Starting time.

POTRIRANKAMANI QUEANO NU: (SPEAKING FOREIGN LANGUAGE) Thank you, Council Member Rivera for helping us today.

My name is Potrirankamanis Queano Nu, (INAUDIBLE) founder and Artistic Director of Kinding Sindaw, a 33-year-old New York based cultural organization that (INAUDIBLE) reclaim, preserve, and recreate the indigenous living tradition amid the now Philippines diaspora. Kinding Sindaw serves as (INAUDIBLE) only resource for libraries, public schools, libraries, colleges, and other institutions.

I'm here to testify that culture and arts is the heart and soul of New York City. The heart pumps the blood life to all organ systems of the body. Without culture and arts, New York industries will atrophy and die.

It's the culture and arts that makes New York relevant, and the funding towards the culture and arts is a must. It's a lifeblood, the oxygen of New



York City. Imagine New York without culture and arts.  
We want New York alive, breathing, thriving, and  
kicking.

Kinding Sindaw, together with other organizations  
for culture, all urgently plea the budget of \$75  
million be added to the baseline, which is  
(BACKGROUND NOISE) (INAUDIBLE) budget allocated to  
DCLA, the agency that we, culture and arts  
organization, depend on funding to continue the  
health and culture of the organization.

And I think that's it. Like, you know, it's the  
funding of the City that keeps us alive and be able  
to continue what we're doing. And I have been... we  
have been existing as a small organization, but our  
services has gone all over the city. We reached a lot  
of public schools, especially during their assembly  
and libraries. And we became the source of  
information of the unwritten history and oral  
tradition of the Philippines. It's very much related  
to the indigenous people of the (TIMER CHIMES) world  
currently (INAUDIBLE)... (CROSS-TALK)

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time is expired, thank you.

POTRIRANKAMANI QUEANO NU: Thank you so much.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you.

Lauren Miller?

LAUREN MILLER: Thank you council members and Chair Rivera. My name is Lauren Miller, I use she/her pronouns, and I am one of the Co-Directors of HERE Arts Center, a downtown performance institution which for 31 years has been a creative home for trans artists, queer artists, immigrant artists, and artists and audiences of all identities, backgrounds, and intersections from New York City and around the globe. We are here today to join our colleagues across the arts to ask this body to prioritize a baseline of \$75 million in the FY26 DCLA Budget, and finally begin to secure the future of culture in our beloved city.

We consistently make the same case to the Council every spring, and prove it to New Yorkers all year round - the arts are essential to the city's wellbeing. We drive our local economies, secure our public health and safety, we are the core of our cultural life. Studies consistently prove that every dollar invested in the arts is multiplied by the economic activity we generate, not to mention the truly astounding outcomes that the arts have on improving quality of life issues that are really

important to every New Yorker, uh, particularly in  
working class communities.

HERE takes seriously our responsibility to  
maintain a safe and generative space for artists who  
are being marginalized by the agenda of the current  
Federal administration. New York City likewise has a  
responsibility to meet their needs, and bolster all  
of us against these threats- threats not only to our  
funding, but to our very existence.

The arts desperately need security, and securing  
DCLA's baseline funds is absolutely essential to our  
survival through these unstable times. Without an  
increase to the baseline which would guarantee our  
funding for the coming year, the lives and  
livelihoods of artists will be made even more  
precarious.

But with \$75 million in baselined funds, arts  
organizations will have just a little bit more of the  
stability that allows us to imagine the future. And  
with that vision, we can empower artists to  
articulate their own, and imagine the just futures we  
deserve.

I also want to stress how vital it is to our  
survival that applications, contracts, and payments

be made in a timely fashion. For two years running, we have received CDF award notifications more than halfway through the fiscal year, which causes severe cash flow strains, and further reduces our ability to plan for our future and execute those plans effectively. Investments into fully staffing and funding DCLA as an (TIMER CHIMES) agency...

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time has expired, thank you.

LAUREN MILLER: and creating accountability... Thank you, Council Member, I appreciate you.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you, thank you for your testimony and for being so patient.

I am going to now call on Sarah Calderon?

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Starting time.

SARAH CALDERON: (INAUDIBLE)

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Uh, Sarah Calderon?

SARAH CALDERON: (INAUDIBLE) Hi...

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: We can see you, we can hear you.

SARAH CALDERON: Sorry, I wasn't called before.

Thank you, Chair Rivera and City Council.

CRNY is a \$125 million statewide initiative that provided guaranteed income for 2,400 artists and

worked with a hundred community based organizations  
to provide artist employment and benefits.

There is a huge demand for this work— 22,000  
artists applied for guaranteed income, and 2,700  
artists applied to employ artists to help support  
their mission based work.

I am here to help make the case to our leaders at  
City Hall that New York needs to dedicate concerted  
budgetary resources to supporting creatives and  
artists in the city, and urge you to allocate  
resources for an intergovernmental effort to advance  
this work.

As we've already heard, right? New York's  
creative economy is a critical contributor to our  
overall economy, but we face enormous challenges as  
you've heard from all of my wonderful colleagues  
earlier today.

Despite the outsized impact on the economy,  
artists often live on the edge of hardship and  
economic uncertainty— 60% of artists in New York are  
making less than \$25,000, and more than half of  
artists have no financial safety net and carry  
unmanageable debt. Right? We also found that 63%  
reported that if there was an unexpected \$400

emergency that came up, they would be unable to pay for it.

We are asking; therefore, that we both have a baseline of \$75 million for the Budget for 2025 which is, again, only .25¢ for every \$100 that's the New York City spends on culture... or spends in general.

But we are also asking that we think about feasible, creative, and sustainable policies and programs for creative workers to access high quality health care benefits, and to think across sectors in ways that could help support artists better.

One solution is portable benefits, which enables nontraditional workers to accumulate employer contributions, and maintains benefits that stay with the worker across their different jobs and gigs. And possibly to (TIMER CHIMES) (INAUDIBLE) support portable benefits program.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time has expired, thank you.

SARAH CALDERON: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: And now we go to... Thank you so much for your testimony, Ms. Calderon.

Christopher Leon Johnson?

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Starting time.

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Yeah, hello, hello,  
Chair Rivera.

My name is Christopher Leon Johnson. So, thank  
you for having this hearing. Thanks for (INAUDIBLE)  
out here for all of us.

It starts with the arts. The funding of those...  
libraries will be funded. I think the libraries need  
to be open from 7:00 a.m. in the morning until  
midnight every day. The city has money for that every  
day- 7:00 a.m. to midnight... nighttime, because  
everybody works all day. And if I get off work at  
10:00 p.m. (INAUDIBLE) the library. All libraries all  
five boroughs need to be open from 7:00 a.m. to  
midnight.

While we're it, I'm calling on the (INAUDIBLE)  
starting with you, Ms. Rivera, because I know that  
your district has a Deliverista hub, Deliveristas to  
e-bike charging station in Union Square. I think it's  
the Greenwich Village around by the by the train  
station, by Ester Place. I'm calling on the City  
Council, and I'm starting with you, Mrs. Rivera. I  
know you have a limited amount (INAUDIBLE) City  
Council, because your term limited, but the one thing  
you should do is allow all libraries to allow the

Worker Justice Project and the Street Vendor Project to have a office inside... a room inside their inside libraries, especially one on 40th Street and 5th Avenue with the (INAUDIBLE) Foundation, one, the new one with (INAUDIBLE).

I'm calling on the City Council to have a office dedicated to deliveristas and street vendors inside every library location, which will allow them to be able to use the bathrooms... and bathrooms and stuff like that and be educated, and especially push for more ICE protections inside a library to make sure that nobody gets deported inside of a library.

I think a library is somewhere you need be safe, (INAUDIBLE) the preservation of two nonprofits, the Walker Justice Project and Street Vendor Project that they're gonna be preserved this year in this budget. They need to get this... keep on getting the funding for their budget. At the same time, the City Council needs to put that e-bike charging hub outside the City Hall, the Deliverista the hub outside City Hall, which is what done by one (INAUDIBLE) Black man named (INAUDIBLE) Stewart. And I'm calling on the commission (INAUDIBLE)...



SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time has expired, thank  
you.

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: (INAUDIBLE) Cultural  
Commissioner to, uhm, make that happen. So, thank  
you. And one more thing? Can I have a few more  
seconds, please? Can I get a few more seconds? Uh,  
yeah, like, I said, they need this. The Workers  
Project needs this to be inside the City... inside  
all of their libraries. We need to protect our  
deliveristas. We need to protect our street vendors.  
And the city council should allow the street vendors  
to sell their stuff inside the libraries. They need  
to protected inside a library. That's the one place  
that you know, no matter what, you'll be safe inside  
of a library. And we need more funding... We need to  
bring back the private (BACKGROUND NOISE) (INAUDIBLE)  
the public safety (INAUDIBLE) all the libraries  
(INAUDIBLE) contract with security, to secure ties  
(INAUDIBLE) bring back secure... We need to increase  
the funding for the peace officers inside all the  
libraries. We need more peace officers in the  
library. They keep us safe. Peace officers in the  
library make me feel safe. And I know that we  
(INAUDIBLE) arts. Keep all the libraries open.

Shoutout to the City Council. Shoutout to you Carmen (sic) Rivera. I love you because you do a great job as a Chair of the Cultural Committee. I'm going miss you. And, like, I said, we need to make this happen. Fund our security... Fund our public safety officers. The ones that look like cops. Fund them. We need to keep... make sure they fund it. I love them all. So...

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you.

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: shoutout to you, Carlina Rivera, make it happen. And...

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you.

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Take care. I know you gotta go, but shoutout to the... shoutout to all the libraries, shoutout to the Brooklyn Public Library, shoutout to the Queens Public Library, shoutout to the New York Public Library. Shoutout to everybody. Shoutout to (INAUDIBLE). Shoutout to everybody, man.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you, appreciate you.

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Fund the libraries. Fund the libraries. Fund Deliveristas. Fund the street vendors. I love the migrants...

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: All right, Thank you...

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Thank you, your time is way  
expired.

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: (INAUDIBLE)

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Okay, thank you.

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Thank you. Thank you.  
Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you.

If anyone is present in the room or on Zoom, who  
has not had the opportunity to testify, but wishes to  
do so, please raise your hand or use the Zoom Raise  
Hand Function.

Okay, well, let me just thank this team once  
again. Amongst the financial challenges, and the  
political chaos, it is clear that we need to increase  
our investment in human services and our workforce  
for this very important generational investment.

So thank you all. And seeing no one else who  
wishes to testify, this hearing is adjourned.

(GAVEL SOUND) (GAVELING OUT)

C E R T I F I C A T E

World Wide Dictation certifies that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings. We further certify that there is no relation to any of the parties to this action by blood or marriage and that there is interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date April 14, 2025