



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

**Oversight Hearing: Cultural Institutions and Access for Individuals with Disabilities**

**Wednesday, June 22, 2022, 10:00AM – City Council Chambers**

**Testimony Presented by New York City Department of Cultural Affairs  
Commissioner Laurie Cumbo**

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Good morning, Chair Ossé and Members of the committee. I am Cultural Affairs Commissioner Laurie Cumbo. Thank you for inviting me to testify on today's topic: Cultural Institutions and Access for Individuals with Disabilities.

For years, the Department of Cultural Affairs has dedicated tremendous energy and resources to ensuring that our cultural community is both open and welcoming to people with disabilities. We believe that for our cultural sector to truly thrive and serve all New Yorkers, everyone must be given opportunities to participate. Foregrounding disability access is a matter of social justice, fairness, and equity.

For decades, we've worked with cultural groups to increase access to their institutions. Through our capital program, the City has long been a partner in assisting cultural institutions to become more physically accessible. And while it's a critical component, physical access is just one dimension of creating a cultural opportunities that connect with people with disabilities. With the DCLA's groundbreaking diversity, equity, and inclusion initiative and the 2017 release of the CreateNYC cultural plan – initiated thanks to legislation I sponsored in the City Council – DCLA focused greater attention on creating more meaningful cultural engagement with and for people with disabilities. And not just as audiences, but as artists and cultural workers.

Before expanding on that last point, I want to highlight the great work being done to ensure that people with disabilities have every opportunity to participate in the cultural life of our city as audience members. With the joyful return to live programming in full force, our fellow city agencies are making accessible cultural programs easy to find and connect with. At the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, they maintain a list of cultural and recreational resources for people with disabilities, including institutions that offer reduced fares and accessible programming. And NYC & Company's Accessible NYC includes guides to many city attractions for people with disabilities, from whole neighborhoods' cultural attractions to specific institutions. Cultural organizations are themselves also leading the way with comprehensive webpages, accessibility-focused maps, and reserved services and hours for people with disabilities and their caregivers. We've encouraged groups in these efforts by, among other things, offering guidance on

best practices for accessibility information in public event notices and invitations. While groups aren't legally required to follow the same local regulations as government agencies, we've pushed them to provide event accessibility information upfront in email blasts, invitations, and social media as practical ways to demonstrate that people with disabilities are welcome at the venue, and to provide information necessary to allow meaningful access to programs. Beyond these simple yet impactful practices, many cultural organizations provide induction loops and other assistive listening devices, and offer programming and hours specifically designed for neurodiverse audiences. Recently, the Administration has worked to spread the word about a new requirement to improve access at movie theaters for people who are Deaf or hard of hearing. There's more that can and needs to be done to include people with disabilities as audiences, but excellent models exist across our cultural community.

As part of CreateNYC, DCLA committed to investing capital funds in accessibility infrastructure projects. In the first year alone, DCLA provided over \$15 million in City capital funds for accessibility projects. These funds continue to support a range of projects, such as Garden-wide Accessibility Improvements at Brooklyn Botanic Garden. This project is fully aimed at increasing access to BBG for people with disabilities, such as replacing steep slopes and stairs with ramps at multiple locations in the Garden, and replacing lifts. We've also supported the installation of new and refurbished elevators at groups including Anthology Film Archives, Flushing Town Hall, and Carnegie Hall. A new elevator may not sound radical, but they are transformative tools in opening up access to space within institutions. Organizations are also using capital projects as opportunities to carefully rethink how all audiences can engage with their programming, including people with disabilities. For one example, Theatre for a New Audiences' Polonsky Shakespeare Center in Brooklyn was designed so that people using wheelchairs could have prime seats for viewing performances – not just in the back of the theater, where older designs often require them to sit.

As I alluded to earlier, CreateNYC helped drive work to more meaningfully include people with disabilities in our city's cultural life not just as audiences, but as artists and cultural workers. The Disability Forward Fund (DFF) was launched in 2018, and provided dedicated grant funding for 22 arts groups in its inaugural year. Since FY2019 DCLA has provided over \$1.5M toward DFF grantees, fostering greater accessibility through a wide range of projects. DFF invested both in programs aimed at making mainstream institutions more accessible, and in programs deeply rooted in and committed to the experience of people with disabilities. Programs supported by DFF have included support for students with disabilities to create original documentaries about their experiences; new and expanded residency programs for dancers with disabilities; development of theatrical productions centering experiences of people with disabilities; expanding American Sign Language programming at museums; exhibitions of work by artists with disabilities; and job training programs for people with disabilities, opening up career pathways in the arts sector. Through our Cultural Development Fund, the agency continues to provide support to organizations doing this essential work, including \$500,000 in the current fiscal year.

The CreateNYC Language Access Fund, launched by DCLA in 2019, also sought to foster a more open, accessible cultural sector. This fund supported a variety of programs that addressed and highlighted access for users of American Sign Language (ASL). Nearly \$200,000 was awarded to ASL programs in the first two years of the fund. These included amazing programs like the Theater Development Fund's Accessibility Program for Students, where our support allowed TDF to offer six Broadway matinee performances interpreted through ASL for young people whose primary means of communication is signing. Our grant to the Alliance of Resident Theaters helped create their Advanced Theatrical ASL Interpreters program to ready qualified signers for a career in theater-specific interpretation, providing a robust roster of interpreters to meet the high demand of NYC's non-profit theater companies while also deepening relationships with Deaf audiences and artists industry-wide.

DCLA has worked closely with the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities (MOPD) on a range of programs, most notably to offering technical assistance for cultural groups seeking to hire people with disabilities. In 2019, we co-hosted with MOPD "Disability and Inclusion in the Cultural Workforce," an event attended by more than 150 representatives of over 90 cultural organizations. Attendees heard personal perspectives from people with disabilities working in the arts. They also learned about local, state, and regional resources offering support in developing more inclusive recruiting, hiring, and retention practices. This program expanded on a similar event in partnership with MOPD in 2018 for the CIG. Thanks to these sessions, we've heard stories of cultural groups making direct hires from MOPD's incredible NYC: At Work program, which recruits, pre-screens, and connects New Yorkers with disabilities to jobs and internships. Cultural groups: you need to check this program out if you haven't already! For our cultural sector to be truly inclusive of all residents, we need to make sure we're welcoming talent from every community into employment and decision-making roles.

Within the agency, we're also making sure our services for the cultural field and for New Yorkers are accessible to everyone. For instance, DCLA's Materials for the Arts program (MFTA) took its Third Thursday and gallery programs virtual, and they launched the Online Education Center to help arts educators adapt to the new remote environment. Thousands of arts educators have accessed this amazing new tool since the start of the pandemic. Like so many organizations did during the pandemic, MFTA discovered that digital programming was a powerful way of connecting with people who might not be able to participate in person for a variety of reasons, including disabilities.

This reflects a broader trend we saw throughout the pandemic. In addition to keeping us connected to one another through trying times, online meetings and programming opened up cultural experiences to people who previously faced barriers to accessing them. With our partners at the Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment and NYC & Company, we created Virtual NYC to help amplify virtual programs and connect it to new audiences. We're thrilled that live experiences are now returning to our city, and we'll continue to support efforts to make in-person programming accessible to everyone. At the same time, we're pleased that hybrid programming looks like it's here to stay. For

the many people who can now experience a new and broader range of cultural activities, the expansion of online cultural access has been one bright spot during an otherwise difficult couple of years.

To encourage groups' efforts to inclusively reach online audiences, in the fall of 2020 DCLA hosted "Accessibility and Inclusion in the Virtual Space: How Cultural Organizations Can Adapt and Connect." It featured representatives of the NYC Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, Museum of Modern Art, Arts and Culture Access Consortium, Dances for a Variable Population, and Queens Theatre discussing best practices to increase access for audiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

With respect to funding opportunities, to further increase access for all qualified organizations, Cultural Development Fund applicants now receive enhanced support in the application process. This year, DCLA also hosted virtual application seminars on Zoom to reach an ever-wider constituency of applicants. Our agency's Disability Service Facilitator helps ensure that agency programs and communications are accessible. And even on social media, every picture we post includes Alt Text so that everyone can be informed and engaged. So this commitment to inclusion truly reaches every part of our work at the agency.

Again, what we do at DCLA is focused on uplifting our cultural constituents, so I want to recognize the incredible work that groups are doing around the city. At Lincoln Center, the Access Ambassadors job training initiative for high school students with disabilities reached 140 student ambassadors this year. At Queens Theatre, last month's Forward Festival featured nine days of performances by artists with disabilities working across disciplines, from circus to theater to dance. At BAM, education and youth programs offer relaxed performances for neurodiverse audiences. At Wave Hill in the Bronx, attendants who accompany visitors with severe disabilities are given free admission. Staten Island Arts' Teaching Artist Institute last year offered training specifically for arts educators interested in working with people with disabilities. We also support the work of groups whose missions are rooted in disability access, inclusion, and artistry, such as Museum Access Consortium, Theater Breaking Through Barriers, and Art Beyond Sight to name just a few.

I applaud you making this a high priority in your first term. I've championed greater access for people with disabilities to a range of resources for years, and as a council member I sponsored legislation that would establish mental health coordinators in each City agency to offer support for city employees. If we want to create a cultural sector that truly engages every New Yorker, we need to focus on disability inclusion and access and continue to move our community forward in close collaboration with the dedicated advocates doing work in this area. We look forward to championing more work on this issue together. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

New Yorkers for Culture & Arts

NY4CA.org

June 22, 2022

Cultural Affairs Committee Hearing on disability access

My name is Lucy Sexton and I lead the cultural advocacy coalition New Yorkers for Culture & Arts. Our organization's stated purpose is to create a future where every New Yorker can engage in the community strengthening, life enriching power of culture. When we talk about New Yorkers we need to remember that 22% of our citizens have some form of disability. That is more than one in five people in this city. We can't possibly work for every New Yorkers right to engage in culture without removing barriers that keep a fifth of our neighbors from experiencing it.

During the past few months, the cultural sector came together in a united ask for funding in the city budget. Called CultureVIBE the plan called for the creation of a Disability Fund. This rose from a discussion among many smaller cultural organization

who desperately want to make their spaces and programs more accessible, but simply didn't have the funds to do what it would take. Everything that makes work more accessible to audiences and artists comes with a cost. Hiring ASL interpreters, providing visual description, renovating doors, hallways and bathrooms, providing programming with visual descriptions or tailored to neurodiverse participants are necessary and costly undertakings.

If the DCLA had a dedicated fund that organizations could apply to to help cover these costs to make programming more accessible to artists and audience, it would be a great start. If There could also be capital money specifically dedicated to making spaces ADA compliant. Then you would begin to see the full range of New Yorkers engaging in culture and art.

I will end by citing the Stanford Social Innovation Review article on the Curb-Cut Effect.

[https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the\\_curb\\_cut\\_effect](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_curb_cut_effect)

Disability activists drew attention to the difficulty of navigating curbs in a wheelchair. After much advocacy the near ubiquitous cuts in curbs to allow wheelchair users to get on and off curbs at

crossings were instituted. And low and behold those curb cuts also make it easier for people pushing strollers, for people pulling roly bags, and more. In short the article points out that when we make things more accessible for folks with disabilities, it often benefits a large portion of the non disabled population. So when we have cultural spaces that are more usable for disabled artists and audiences, we will have spaces more welcoming for all New Yorkers. Truly this is the future we are working toward---where the dignity of every person is respected and we all feel that improvements for some are improvements for all.



## **Testimony to the Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations**

### [Oversight - Cultural Institutions and Access for Individuals with Disabilities](#)

*Submitted to City Council Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations on June 22, 2022*

*Prepared by Dance/NYC*

*Presented by Ariel Herrera, Research and Advocacy Manager*

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Thank you for your consideration of this testimony, submitted on behalf of Dance/NYC ([dance.nyc](http://dance.nyc)), a service organization that reaches over 5,000 individual dance artists, 1,200 dance-making entities, 500 non-profit dance companies, and the many for-profit dance businesses based in the metropolitan New York City area. Its areas of service are of special benefit to BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and Peoples of Color), immigrant, disabled, low-income and small budget dance workers. Dance/NYC is the only service organization for the dance sector in the metropolitan NYC area, and its action-oriented research and advocacy seek to represent and advance the interests of the dance field. It embeds the values of justice, equity, and inclusion into all aspects of its operations and frames the following requests through the lens of those values.

**Dance/NYC joins colleague advocates working across creative disciplines in thanking you for your leadership and requesting the City to advance presenting landscape for integrated and disability dance artistry by:**

#### Funding

- Expanding dance making and creative opportunities for disabled dance artists and companies performing integrated and disability dance artistry, through targeted grants, residencies, and rehearsal space subsidies
- Increasing access and inclusion in DCLA-funded cultural capital projects for artists, cultural workers, and audiences with disabilities

- Allocating discrete funds for disabled artists' access purposes, such as additional travel (especially for touring companies), personal care assistants, sign language interpreters, and other accessibility costs that are often not accounted for by funders and presenters
- Improving DCLA's communications practices and technology, including website accessibility, and ensuring applications are accessible to disabled applicants, through planning, providing technical assistance, and allowing for adequate time frames (six weeks minimum) and flexibility in deadlines for grant applications
- Expanding purview of funding to ensure small-budget groups, fiscally sponsored artists, and independent artists are served

### Employment Opportunities

- Supporting organizations that promote disability arts and employ, support, and serve New Yorkers with disabilities
- Partnering with DCLA grantee organizations on professional development and capacity building to increase employment of artists and cultural workers with disabilities

### Education and Training

- Expanding dance education opportunities for disabled children, particularly in the public schools, and ensuring accessibility in public school buildings and their dance facilities
- Expanding opportunities for training, certifying, employing, and investing in disabled dance educators
- Growing partnerships between integrated and disability dance artists and companies and schools

### Audience Development and Engagement

- Growing and engaging audiences in integrated and disability dance artistry by creating opportunities for shared learning among presenters, artists, and audiences about audience engagement
- Promoting and addressing full accessibility in marketing, communications, and outreach to disabled audiences

## Accessibility

- Addressing infrastructure (buildings and technology) issues through dedicated capital funding to ensure all performance spaces are accessible and ADA compliant for audiences, artists, and cultural workers
- Providing bussing services for afterschool arts programs for disabled students

## **Dance/NYC is committed to addressing issues of disability equity and justice, and since 2014:**

- Has produced 3 reports on Disability. Dance. Artistry. ([2015](#), [2016](#), [2018](#))
- Hosted and organized numerous dialogues, convenings, and town halls on disability and dance
- Created the Disability. Dance. Artistry. Fund to generate dance making and performance by and with disabled artists to advance artistic innovation and excellence and further disability rights
- Provided Social Justice Fellowship to recognize the critical role that disabled dance workers and arts practitioners play in social justice movements
- Established a residency program to expand opportunities for dancers with disabilities and to advance accessibility and equity

But much more needs to be done.

**Proper funding is essential for the longevity and cultivation of disabled dance artistry.** Dance/NYC studies show that disabled dance artists face significant challenges to accessing funding and that opportunities for funding for disability dance artistry are limited. Assessment of study participants show that disability and disabled artists are viewed skeptically by most funders, and that what is already a challenging funding landscape for any dance maker is worse for disabled artists. When segmented by budget size and structure, those integrated and disability dance artistry companies and independent artists with the smallest budgets are most challenged in securing funding to perform their work, a finding that is echoed in the wider dance field.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Blake, C. and Jacques, N. (2020). *Defining “Small Budget” Dance Makers in a Changing Dance Ecology*. Accessed at <https://www.dance.nyc/programs/research/2020/10/Defining-Small-Budget-Dance-Makers-in-a-Changing-Dance-Ecology/>, 24 June 2022.

The crisis of affordability that exists for New York City and the high costs of accessibility render these funding challenges more acute for disabled artists, who face the added burden of accessibility costs, from travel to personal care assistants and sign language interpreters often not accounted for by funders and presenters. The needs for affordable spaces to perform, rehearse, and develop work, which are critical for the wider dance sector,<sup>2</sup> are magnified for disabled artists, who also have to contend with accessibility issues. Dance artists also face a range of challenges unique to touring: a lack of time on the ground, weaker presenter relationships and knowledge of space, unfamiliar audiences, and the high costs of travel and accommodation, especially in New York City.

**Targeted funding** can work as a tool to generate dance made and performed by and with disabled artists, as demonstrated by the success of [Dance/NYC's Disability. Dance. Artistry. Fund.](#) But the long term success of integrated and disability dance artistry will be determined by broadened and sustained field and public engagement. This includes expanding employment opportunities for artists and cultural workers with disabilities; investing in dance education for children with disabilities; training, certification, and employment of disabled dance educators; and audience development and engagement in integrated and disability dance artistry.

**Understanding, communicating, and executing the minimum compliance requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) remain a struggle for many presenters.** Participating artists in Dance/NYC studies reported a myriad of issues, ranging from inaccessible restrooms and entrances to signage, as well as information gaps about the availability and status of accessible services, such as audio description, captioning, and sign language interpretation in performance venues.

A concurrent focus on accessibility needs of both audiences and artists, from front of the house to backstage, must take place to more fully realize inclusion. The same

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<sup>2</sup> Webb Management Services (2017). *Advancing Fiscally Sponsored Dance Artists and Projects*. Accessed at <https://www.dance.nyc/programs/research/2017/08/Advancing-Fiscally-Sponsored-Dance-Artists-Projects/>, 24 June 2022.

programs and venues that may be accessible to disabled audiences may present serious barriers to disabled artists — from proscenium stages without wheelchair ramps to inaccessible backstage restrooms or lack of ASL interpreters for Deaf artists to be able to communicate and participate in production cues and decision-making.

**Accessibility costs money.** Investment in capital funding to support infrastructural improvements for ADA compliance, as well as operational support for ongoing accessibility services, such as web accessibility, audio description, captioning, sign language interpretation, and capacity building for staff is critical and much needed. This is especially true for small budget arts and cultural organizations operating without capital reserves. Both capital funding and operational support are necessary not only to achieve ADA compliance but also to shift the paradigm to full inclusion and equity for disabled audiences, dance artists, and cultural workers.

Cultural access benefits all. Research indicates that targeted attention to disability access features and the diversity of experiences possible for disabled audiences can create exponential value. It provides new entry points of learning and generative creative engagement for both the artists and disabled and nondisabled audiences, advancing artistic innovation not only for performing integrated and disability dance artistry, but also for the wider field of creative production.

**There is an urgent need for the New York City government to play a leadership role in elevating a philosophy and setting standards and practices of access and equitable participation for disabled people in cultural institutions across the city.**

Internationally recognized as one of the world's leading cultural centers, New York City needs to do a better job of serving its disabled citizens, audiences, and artists. It is time for the City to enact new policies, expand programs, and establish dedicated funding to advance inclusion and cultural access for all New Yorkers.

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## **Testimony for June 22, 2022, hearing on Cultural Institutions and Access for People with Disabilities for the Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations**

Access for people with disabilities in cultural institutions is a frequent issue. For institutions which are on City land and who get funding from the City, the City is also responsible to make sure the institutions and any work they have done will be accessible. City workers must approve the plans and the funding, and many times, the projects are not fully accessible. This process needs to be tightened up so that plans are not rubber-stamped by the City.

Hardly ever do I go to a botanic garden for the first time or a museum for the first time and not have an access problem. What entry door is accessible? Is the elevator or lift working? Where is it? Does it hold a heavy motorized wheelchair and the person in it? People with disabilities are not sure where the accessible route is because of lack of signage. This is called way-finding. This is a huge problem and it is cheap to solve. A map is not the entire answer. Wheelchair users do not want to go to a dead-end or a set of stairs. But then where do we go?

I would like to stress that when new or renovated features or improvements are made, there is no excuse to make something inaccessible, but it happens so often! It is always more expensive to add accessibility after you do the work than to do it in the first place. I can give some examples because I love to go to museums and outdoor gardens.

1. Brooklyn Botanic Garden (BBG) had an inaccessible new path to the Japanese Garden from the Washington Avenue entrance. It was curvy and steep and had no railing. One frequent visitor had developed a mobility disability and then could not use that path. Eventually BBG developed a solution but by then, years later, she had died from her illness.
2. BBG also made a new Children's Garden and had hired a company to help make sure that it was accessible. It was wonderful and accessible except for one section which required children to walk from one embedded stump slab to another along a path. How did that slip through? I have no idea. Children with mobility disabilities could not use it, nor could caregivers with disabilities. Several years later, they made it accessible.
3. Also at BBG, there is a wonderful overlook in the Herb Garden but no signage telling wheelchair users how to get to the overlook by a ramp that is further down. It needs 2 signs. I have suggested signs several times to no avail. They did put a sign there that said stairs ahead, but that is not the point because that pathway is accessible and leads to the overlook.
4. At BBG, they have a living roof that people with disabilities cannot get close to because they scrapped the original plans for an elevator. They promised that they would not let any visitors go to the roof but visitors who are able-bodied go to the roof every day BBG is open.

5. There have been ongoing access problems at BBG for years in the Native Plant Garden (the entrance and the meadow) and Japanese Garden (by the bridge) that are never addressed, even when we ask them to fix it. There are lips of several inches high where the path does not meet something hard like a cement or wood pathway.
6. At a recent visit to Queens Botanical Garden, my first visit, I could not go to the ticket booth to pay because it is on an "island" surrounded by a curb. It was probably made with drivers in mind, but that entrance is open to pedestrians, too. The director of the Queens Botanical Garden wants to rectify the inaccessible elements and is new to the job, but whomever from the City who approved the plan should have thought about accessibility since it is the law and allows everyone to enjoy cultural entities.
7. I gave up on the Brooklyn Academy of Music because it was so inaccessible around 2004. I had too many bad experiences there, tried to get them to change, and gave up because they were not interested. I have no idea if they are more accessible now. We did not have independent access to the movie theater and had to be escorted. We had to sit in the very back of the theatre. I live in Brooklyn but wrote BAM off.
8. I just went to the Brooklyn Children's Museum with my family last week and it was wonderfully accessible! Everything was wonderful there.
9. I love the Brooklyn Museum. It needs to have better wayfinding, but it is great. I was there a few months ago and could not find the elevator after I went to the Warhol exhibit. I get lost every time I go there.
10. NY Aquarium. I went to the Aquarium last week, too, with family. All the doors are so difficult to open. Last year, I could not reach the soap dispensers in one bathroom. I complained after I got back home and they fixed it. Otherwise, it has always seemed accessible to me. I enjoy it and miss the walrus. The show area has been accessible for years. The movie area used to be kind of inaccessible. I'm not sure about it now because we did not go to the movie.
11. I have not been to the Weeksville Heritage Center yet. Nor have I been to the Bronx County Historical Society, the Bronx museum of the Arts, NYC Ballet or the Studio Museum in Harlem. I have not been to Flushing Town Hall, Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning, MoMA PS 1, or the Queens Museum or Queens Theatre. I do not remember New York City Center or the Public Theater.
12. The New York Botanical Garden (NYBG) goes out of its way to make itself accessible to people with disabilities. Over the years, they have been receptive to making displays in their store and area with plants for sale accessible to people with mobility disabilities. They replaced their sporadically working lifts in the conservatory as well as the one to the library. They made a path in the woods that wheelchair users can go on. I love NYBG and go there often.
13. Wave Hill is very inaccessible to people with mobility disabilities. I went there a few years ago and do not plan on going back. I could not get near the flower garden to see the flowers except from a distance. The bathroom door needed superhuman strength to open and I could not do it.
14. The Bronx Zoo is accessible, but the roundabout way needed to get to some features like the bears is really tough. I think they could use better signage. Some bathrooms are impossible to

use with a wheelchair. However, I love the Zoo and take my grandchildren there or go by myself.

15. The American Museum of Natural History is a maze for wheelchair users. We are constantly trying to find an accessible path. They need better wayfinding so we do not end up at the bottom of stairs. I like the content, just not the layout.
16. Carnegie Hall is old but manageable with the elevator and clear explanations on their website.
17. I find Lincoln Center to be inaccessible in many ways. The outdoor concerts in the park are poorly managed as far as seating for people with disabilities goes. I suggested better and safer marking in the garage where people at the outdoor concerts can use the restrooms. We do not want to compete with vehicles. It is unsafe. I finally gave up on Lincoln Center outdoor concerts.
18. I don't know if the Walter Reade Theatre at Lincoln Center comes under your jurisdiction, but it is very inaccessible. It needs a full audit by someone who does not work for Lincoln Center. The bathroom door was impossible to open. I had to make many calls to see if they were accessible and to buy a ticket and then they said that it is first come first seated, but wheelchair users have to sit in certain seats in a stadium seating configuration! I finally ended up in a seat in the very back row and even that was hard to get because they had to move a chair or two and did not want to.
19. The Metropolitan Museum of Art is very accessible. I was there last week. They could use better wayfinding, though. I ask guards where to go but I cannot always find where I am trying to go.
20. The Museum of the City of New York is ok. They could also use better wayfinding signs.
21. The Museum of Jewish Heritage is accessible. They could use better wayfinding signs, too. I was recently there.
22. I've been to the Museum of the Moving Image and the New York Hall of Science but cannot remember their access.
23. I went to Snug Harbor Cultural Center and Botanical Garden. It is not made for someone in a wheelchair who is dropped off at the entrance. There aren't enough wayfinding signs at all. Getting around there is a mystery. There are so many roads and unmarked gardens and buildings. I remember a beautiful long arch but it had a big lip to try to get into and through it. I wanted to go to the Chinese Scholar's Garden but I had to wait until a stranger came by to ask her to tell them I wanted to go in because it is locked and payment for a ticket is in a building with steps. Then when I wanted to leave the Chinese Scholar's Garden, I had to get someone to tell them to let me out the locked gate. That isn't right. I did go to the Museum and it was accessible.
24. I love the Staten Island Zoo. I take my grandchildren there. I learn something every time I go. It is pretty accessible.

In conclusion, some of these institutions make more of an effort to be accessible than others, and wayfinding is often a problem for wheelchair users and others. Inaccessible elements and practices need to be identified and rectified, but better oversight of new projects will keep them from making things inaccessible in the first place. I would like to add one more thing: often, bathroom doors are inaccessible by having door closers (on the top) that create too much force. Please have the institutions look into this. They should be way less than 5 pounds of pressure.

Thank you for inviting me.

Jean Ryan, President, Disabled In Action of Metropolitan NY  
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Lakshmee Lachhman-Persad  
Paulding Avenue  
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June 24th, 2022

To whom it may concern:

I am writing on behalf of myself and my family, that includes my sister Annie who is a wheelchair user. We enjoy the arts and cultural institutions and write about them here: <https://www.accessibletravelnyc.com/nycexperiences> so that other people with disabilities can see positive disability representation with accessible information being at the forefront. I also contribute accessible articles here <https://www.nycgo.com/plan-your-trip/basic-information/accessibility/> with a very famous video of our family exploring the city with a wheelchair.

I am sending in our written testimony asking for more funding for all of New York City's cultural institutions. These institutions bring us tremendous joys, positive health benefits, family memories, education and a sense of belonging to a community. More funding is needed to make places accessible for all kinds of disabilities, accessible classes/programming and for outreach to our community. I am requesting that with the funding, these institutions be held accountable for hiring staff with disabilities and working with disabled artists to uplift their work.

Thank you for your time in reading our testimony and giving favorable consideration to how important the arts are for everyone.

Lakshmee Lachhman-Persad  
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# LINCOLN CENTER

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## Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, Inc. Oversight - Cultural Institutions and Access for Individuals with Disabilities June 22, 2022

Chair Ossé and members of the Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations, thank you for holding today's hearing and for raising the importance of expanding access for individuals with disabilities to New York City's arts and cultural institutions. My name is Miranda Hoffner, Associate Director of Accessibility and Guest Experience.

At Lincoln Center we have strengthened our commitment to positioning the arts at the core of daily life as a civic hub, presenting socially engaged artistic works while meeting community needs. We recognize that our approach to accessibility for people with disabilities must mirror that commitment by transforming our stages and civic spaces to be more inclusive of audience's identities and access needs by design, not as an afterthought.

One approach to eliminating barriers to participation is building accessible accommodations into the audience experience whether in-person or online. Accommodations such as accessible entrances, accessible seating, companion seating, FM assistive listening systems, American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation, captioning, audio descriptions, large print, and braille programs are available for all performances and events across our campus. As part of free Atrium and Summer for the City programming accessible restrooms, noise-reducing headphones, chill out spaces, visual directions, alternatives to standing in line, and welcome staff trained in inclusive practices have been designed into the audience experience. Online we have an accessibility menu built into our website, as well as accessibility embedded in our social media with captioning and posting content available with ASL.

For nearly 40 years Lincoln Center has been an institutional leader developing targeted programs around the experience of audiences with disabilities. **Passport to the Arts**, one of our longest running access programs, provides free and inclusively designed classes, performances, and behind the scenes experiences with world class artists, in person and virtually, for children, teens, and adults with disabilities who are unable to attend mainstream performances. **Lincoln Center Moments** uses performance and facilitated art making to reconnect people with dementia with the joy, healing, and community that the performing arts provides. In FY22 we had nearly 1,000 participants. **Big Umbrella Outdoors**, a large-scale festival created exclusively for those with autism and other developmental disabilities is a powerful proof of concept for how to make outdoor festivals accessible for neuro-diverse audiences, featuring artists with disabilities on the main stage and providing coaching for artists to create accessible work for audiences with autism. Last summer over 500 individuals participated in the Big Umbrella Festival which was part of ReStart Stages. **Access Ambassadors**, designed to help combat the high unemployment rate for people with disabilities, provides weekly lessons on job readiness for high school students with disabilities along with onsite experience greeting guests at Lincoln Center performances. This year we had our largest cohort to date with 140 student ambassadors participating from 7 New York City schools.

As part of Lincoln Center's wider commitment to accessibility and inclusion, we recognize that access needs must be integrated in the creative process. We have expanded partnerships with local community organizations to bring works by artists with disabilities to our stages. Our Spring season at the Rubenstein Atrium featured free performances from neuro-diverse theatre company **E.P.I.C. Players**. This season as part

of Summer for the City we have internationally renowned breakdancing crew **ILL-Abilities**, made up of professional artists with and without disabilities, multiple **Adapted Dance Classes with Mark Morris Dance Group** for people with mobility concerns, and Ping Chong & Company's **Inside/Out...Voices from the Disability Community** gives prominence to the real stories of people with disabilities, in their own words.

In celebration of Disability Pride Month in July we have a full slate of performances. **Access is Magic** brings together disabled artists to share the many dimensions of disability-centric nightlife with ASL song-signing, creative captioning, choreographic offerings, and music. **Deaf Broadway** returns to Lincoln Center with an ASL production of Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*. For the first time orchestral performances are made accessible through haptics, providing vibrations through wearable backpacks, wrist and ankle bracelets for people who are Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing for our **Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra** at **Music: Not Impossible**.

As an institution we recognize that accommodations and programs for people with disabilities is never a "one size fits all" solution. Being a truly welcoming and accessible civic space is an ongoing process and will continue to evolve. With the reopening of David Geffen Hall in October, there will be a new **tactile map** of our campus available for blind and partially sighted visitors in the new welcome center. In preparation for Summer for the City, we held focus groups with people who were blind, low vision, and use mobility devices to try out the Oasis, New York's largest outdoor dance floor, before opening night to make sure it was accessible and welcoming to their needs.

Lincoln Center is a proud member of the City's 34-organization Cultural Institutions Group (CIG) and was established to be an artistic and civic cornerstone for New York City. Founded for the purpose of cultivating, fostering, and centering socially-engaged arts programs within civic daily life, Lincoln Center is a 16-acre campus that is home to eleven arts and arts education nonprofits, presenter, civic partner, and an iconic New York City destination. Lincoln Center presents hundreds of events that are free or low-cost for all New Yorkers.

Lincoln Center is committed to New York City as a place where everyone is welcome and where they belong, and we continue to engage as lifelong learners to do better as an arts, education, and civic hub for all.

I thank the members of the Committee for your time. Thank you again for your continued leadership.

Please reach out should you have questions or would like to hear more about Lincoln Center's plans.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of Miranda Hoffner.

Eleni DeSiervo  
Senior Director, Government Relations  
Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, Inc.  
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New York, NY 10023  
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## Summer for the City

### **Our Commitment to Accessibility and Inclusion**

Lincoln Center's approach to accessibility mirrors our commitment to transform performing arts spaces to be more inclusive of our audiences' identities and access needs by design, not as an afterthought or add-on.

Accommodations upon request is one approach to eliminating barriers to participation at performances. As part of Lincoln Center's wider commitment to accessibility and inclusion, we recognize that access needs must be integrated in the creative process, that the work on our stages reflects our differences and interconnectedness, and that we are creating a space where everyone feels welcome.

**We seek to create a more inclusive experience for our audiences by providing a range of accommodations for all performances, no request necessary. Accommodations for Summer for the City performances will include, as applicable:**

- Accessible seating, with companion seats and designated aisle seats
- Accessible entrances to all outdoor venues
- Accessible, gender-neutral restroom on 62nd Street between Amsterdam and Columbus, as well as accessible gendered restrooms near the Damrosch bandshell and the Concourse level, beneath the Plaza
- FM Assistive Listening Devices with headsets and neck loops for all amplified performances
- Alternative to standing in line for entry by checking in to the Welcome Center Tent in Josie Robertson Plaza 30 minutes before doors open for performances in Damrosch Park, The Oasis and Hearst Plaza
- Noise-reducing headphones, earplugs and fidgets to borrow
- Chill Out Space in Damrosch Park, offering reduced noise, crowds and visual stimulation, for guests to take a break and reenter when they're ready
- Visual directions, describing arrival instructions for neurodiverse communities, are available online
- Signage at entrance and online to note strobe effects, if applicable
- Guests able to enter and leave venue as needed throughout performance, as capacity allows
- Staff trained in inclusive practices

**In addition to the list above, select events will include:**

- Live captioning, displaying text of all spoken words and sounds to provide access to Deaf, hard-of-hearing, and neurodiverse communities, in English on personal handheld devices
- American Sign Language interpretation
- Audio description, sharing the visual elements for people who are blind or have low vision, over single earpiece receiver
- Live guided verbal description tours for guests who are blind or have low vision

We recognize that the list above is not exhaustive and that accommodations are never a "one size fits all" solution. Please contact the Access Team by email [access@lincolncenter.org](mailto:access@lincolncenter.org) or by phone at [212-875-5375](tel:212-875-5375) to discuss your specific access needs or accommodations so that we may explore other accommodations we may be able to offer. While there is no deadline for notice, please reach out as soon as you know that you plan to attend a program so that we may have enough time to identify the best options to fill your request.

## ADVANCE | MORE OPERA

The Association for the Development of Vocal Artistry and Neighborhood Cultural Enrichment  
Manhattan Opera Repertory Ensemble  
Ansonia Station Box 231152, New York, NY 10023

### Testimony to the New York City Council

Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations

Oversight - Cultural Institutions and Access for Individuals with Disabilities

T2022-1412

Submitted by

Cheryl Warfield

Professional Opera Singer, Teaching Artist, Producer and Founder of ADVANCE-  
MORE Opera

Wednesday, June 22, 2022

Good afternoon. Thank you, Chair Osse', and committee members for hearing my testimony. First, let me thank the City Council for the historic increase in the FY 23 budget for arts and culture. We are grateful for your belief in what we do.

I am Cheryl Warfield, a professional opera singer, and founder and artistic director of MORE Opera, a community based nonprofit vocal arts organization blazing a trail in culturally responsive musical programming and arts education in NYC. I testify today as interim secretary for the New York Opera Alliance, or NYOA, a consortium of small independent opera companies, united in making opera available for every New Yorker.

Through the leadership of our president, Marianna Mott Newirth, NYOA began a conversation with our cohorts about able-ism last February with a panel of DeafBlind activists to discuss how opera presenters could make productions more accessible.

The understanding and awareness provided during the discussion inspired the desire to make DEI changes. However, certified interpreters and other means for accessibility are cost prohibitive for most organizations under \$100 K. The communities with the least access to culture (and its benefits) are often systematically left out of government funding. I urge the Council and Administration to target DEI funding to equip New York institutions with the tools, resources, and information needed to stop able-ism.

June 22, 2022

Page 2 of 2

I am extremely proud of the leadership role NYOA has taken to help educate against able-ism and believe it serves as a model for cultural groups throughout our city. Culture at 3 and New Yorkers for Culture and the Arts are also working to increase awareness and accessibility for all. Thank you for this important hearing and for the opportunity to provide testimony.

Respectfully submitted,

/s/

Cheryl Warfield Singer, Educator, Producer and Founder,  
ADVANCE-MORE Opera

[www.moreopera.com](http://www.moreopera.com)



**New York City Council Written Testimony June 22, 2022**  
**Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Intergroup Relations**

Dear Esteemed Council,

Thank you for the opportunity to share my observations with you all as you consider the important decision of where and how to allocate the budget. My name is Lisa B. Lewis. I am the founder of Omnium Circus.

**Omnium** (Latin for "of all and belonging to all"), **A Bold New Circus** is a not-for-profit organization founded in 2020 on the belief that full inclusion and representation in the arts leads to self-actualization, increased tolerance and a better society. Omnium features a diverse cast and crew with multiple abilities, demonstrating to audiences that anything is possible - all people can achieve their greatness regardless of their challenges (physical, emotional, neurological, or societal). Omnium is the first fully inclusive, fully accessible circus performing arts company in the nation. Providing comprehensive access for all audiences at every single performance unites diverse communities through shared joy and laughter. Omnium sees the circus as a force for unity and systemic change through entertainment, education and employment.

I founded Omnium because there was no space providing access for families at every show. One in four Americans has a disability. If your child has autism, you can bring them to the one show which is sensory friendly, what if you have 2 other kids, one has baseball practice that day, the other has a different activity, or a different access need but that one is scheduled for a different day in the run, your family is now torn and you cannot attend the event together. I was speaking about a year ago with an incredible gentleman named Eric Weihenmayer, who climbed to the top of Mount Everest. Eric is blind. He made it all the way to the summit of Mount Everest, and he'd never witnessed a circus. He's got a family. He's got kids. Had he never been? No, he's been. His kids always said, "dad, this is just too complicated. Just listen to the music." So ours was the first experience he had and he was blown away. The audio description allowed him to share this joyful experience with his family. Something so many families are able to take for granted. Over the 30+ years I have been working in this field for another circus, I have spoken with many families for whom lack of access prevented their ability to attend performances.

Disability is the one thing that genuinely unifies all people. It doesn't care what color you are. It doesn't care to what socioeconomic level you were born. It doesn't care if you're male, female, non-binary - it doesn't care. By providing access, we not only



include 25% more people, we include their caregivers, family and friends-the other 3 out of 4. We create a welcome space in our arts community for all audiences.

It is not difficult to provide access, however it does cost money and organizations struggling to make ends meet often do not have the additional budget thereby losing potential audiences and blocking 25% of New Yorkers from equitable access to the arts, limiting both potential revenue for the theatres and the audiences they can serve.

Moving beyond audience access into representation...One cannot dream of becoming that to which they have never been exposed. As an inclusive performing arts company, we pride ourselves in a balance of races, ethnicities and abilities. We must provide interpreters for rehearsals, additional travel costs for those with mobility needs, both visual and auditory cueing systems for technical staff and performers...The budget mounts quickly and for a fledgling nonprofit, like ourselves. The cost can be prohibitive.

As you consider allocating the budget, I implore you to include more funding for access so the Arts community of NY can truly welcome 4 out of 4 people as both audiences and participants in the greatest industry our city has to offer.

Diversity is having a seat at the table.  
Inclusion is having a voice, and  
Belonging is having that voice be heard.

Thank you for listening.

Lisa B Lewis  
Founder/Executive Director  
**Omnium: A Bold New Circus**  
718-875-0428  
646 863 7094 (video phone)  
[www.OmniumCircus.org](http://www.OmniumCircus.org)



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**From:** OPrak OperaPraktikos <info@operapraktikos.org>  
**Sent:** Thursday, June 23, 2022 4:34 PM  
**To:** Testimony; District36  
**Cc:** moreopera@gmail.com; Chris Batenhurst; Greg Moomjy; Marianna Mott Newirth  
**Subject:** [EXTERNAL] Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations - Cultural Institutions and Access for Individuals with Disabilities, T2022-1412

**To the testimony Committee on Cultural Institutions and Access for Individuals with Disabilities, T2022-1412  
June 22, 2022.**

We would like to thank the Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Intergroup Relations for holding this important hearing on Cultural Institutions and Access for Individuals with Disabilities. We are a newly founded, interabled opera company, Opera Praktikos (OPrak), and our mission is to make opera accessible. We are a team consisting of Gregory Moomjy, an Artistic Director who is a man with cerebral palsy using an electric wheelchair, and Marianna Mott Newirth, a Librettist and Executive Producer who is a 58 year old able-bodied woman.

As we all know, the arts create life-affirming change and are a crucial element of what makes New York City vibrant. As such, it goes without saying that people with disabilities have a right to access the city's diverse cultural offerings; this is what we are passionate about and is what drives the work we do.

After meeting at an Opera America conference in midtown circa 2016, the two of us formed a lasting friendship based on a mutual love of opera as well as a desire to see our beloved art form become authentically inclusive. We decided to form an interabled opera company six months ago and are on the verge of qualifying for 501c3 status. Making opera accessible is our mission. Giving people opportunities to overcome challenges including class, economic status, and physical impediments is our vision.

Our first production was a free public offering at Campos Community Garden, last month, bringing Handel's baroque masterpiece, *Orlando*, into the heart of the Lower East Side. Performing at Campos allowed us to provide healthy, accessible facilities that were flexible and easily accessible to people in wheelchairs and those with other mobility devices. The small cast of 5 singers performed in and amongst the audience sitting in the garden. This made it possible for the audience to become part of the whole production and is an example of what accessible opera can be. A special shout-out to Chris Batenhurst and Loisaida United Neighborhood Gardens (LUNGS) who supported our effort to make opera in the garden.

As members of the New York Opera Alliance (NYOA), we are fully committed to furthering accessibility inclusion in the arts. We know full well that disability is not a monolith. People across the wide ranging spectrum in the disability community can come together and connect with those who are able-bodied to revel in shared experiences. For example, a DeafBlind man came to one of our productions in the garden and was as much a part of our opera as the three people sitting in wheelchairs, as the 75 other folk sitting and standing around the garden. It was an equalizing event and we seek to support venues like Campos that make it possible for us to continue mounting egalitarian productions. Our aim is to champion people with disabilities in the audience, on the stage and in the back office. Our goal is to become a model for other performing arts organizations that want to learn how to become more inclusive.

The work is just beginning and we seek your support and collaboration in this endeavor. We know from first hand experience, that once the disability community is given access to the performing arts, true inclusivity naturally follows.

We would like to acknowledge Cheryl Warfield who testified via Zoom on the day of your hearing, speaking on behalf of NYOA and our emerging endeavors. We offer our continued support and involvement on this subject and look forward, with interest, to the next steps taken after this hearing.

Respectfully and with gratitude  
Gregory Moomjy & Marianna Mott Newirth

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### **Opera Praktikos**

Co-Founders

Gregory Moomjy | Marianna Mott Newirth

Artistic Director      Executive Producer

[info@operapraktikos.org](mailto:info@operapraktikos.org)



### **Recently Completed Production:**

ORLANDO

[May 27&28 June 2,10&11](#)



NYC Council Testimony - Disability: <https://council.nyc.gov/testify/>

Beth Prevor  
Hands On Sign Interpreted Performances, Inc.  
[beth@handson.org](mailto:beth@handson.org)

I attended the City Council hearing on Accessibility in the Arts yesterday, June 22, 2022.

There are a few additional comments I wanted to make along with my testimony, which I submitted yesterday.

To begin, I must express my concern over the Commissioners' comments concerning the word disability. Disability is not a negative word unless you think it is, and it concerns me that the Commissioner spent a fair amount of time talking about the word and how the word disability itself is something that should not be used. As someone who is disabled and an active member of the community - disability is a part of my identity and I am proud to belong to this community. When the word is looked at as something negative it continues a stereotype of marginalization and negativity that we are working to remove. Euphemisms, or other language that seeks to make those who are not disabled more comfortable – such as differently able, possessing superpowers, etc. are not beneficial to our community and I strongly urge everyone to be in more conversation with members of the community. The disability community is not a monolith and I'm sure my views are not shared by every person with a disability, which only makes it even more important to be thoughtful and inclusive when topics of disability are discussed.

For other matters talked about yesterday, after speaking with several friends and colleagues who are themselves disabled artists and administrators and active members of the arts/disability community – they had no idea about the panel yesterday. Directly reaching out to the disability community is not an easy task – there is not one disability community but many individual networks so that reaching out to one group does not necessarily reach others. That is one reason why one of my requests in my initial testimony talked about a centralized source of information. I was focusing specifically on the Deaf community, but I will say that a centralized source for all the arts and disability is desperately needed. Not only for the disability community, but for the cultural/arts community as well.

Sometimes the political rhetoric that is espoused by our leaders can make things look better than they really are. Much of what was expressed yesterday, while I don't want to disregard the positive events that are happening, are small steps and still far from making our city and our arts organizations truly accessible. Hearing from community members and those directly impacted is the only way to get a broader perspective of what is really happening. I urge more direct outreach to the arts/disability community for feedback.

The comments by Chair [Ossé](#) and Council member Dinowitz show that the Council is thoughtful and concerned about access to the arts in NYC. I hope this is only the beginning of more inclusive conversations with the community about how we can make NYC a more inclusive and accessible city.

Thank you for your time.

Best  
Beth Prevor

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Emily Sweet

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: NYC Mayors office for ppl w Disabilities

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

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in favor  in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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Name: LUCY SEXTON

Address: 1606th Ave 10013

I represent: NEW YORKERS FOR CULTURE & ART

Address: 160 Sixth Ave 10013

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in favor  in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Lance Polivy

Address: 31 Chambers St

I represent: NYC Dept of Cultural Affairs

Address: 31 Chambers St

◆ Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms ◆

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 in favor  in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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Name: Sara Cobb  
Address: 31 Chambers St  
I represent: NYC Dept of Cultural Affairs  
Address: "

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 in favor  in opposition

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(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Laurie Cumbo  
Address: 31 Chambers St, F12  
I represent: NYC Dept. of Cultural Affairs  
Address: "

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 in favor  in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Lisa R Lewis  
Address: Atlantic ave  
I represent: Omnium Circus  
Address: same

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in favor     in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Sheila Lewandowski

Address: 38-33 24<sup>th</sup> ST.

I represent: The Chocolate Factory Theater

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

*Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms*

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

*Appearance Card*

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in favor     in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Eugene Kirilov - Dosky

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: MYSELF

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

*Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms*