

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL
AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES &
INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP
RELATIONS

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June 22, 2022
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HELD AT: HYBRID HEARING, COUNCIL CHAMBERS,
CITY HALL

B E F O R E: Chi A. Ossé, Chairperson

COUNCILMEMBERS:
Eric Dinowitz
Crystal Hudson
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A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

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1 COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES &
INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS

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2 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Good morning, ladies and
3 gentlemen, and welcome to the Council chambers.
4 We're here... We're gathered here today for the
5 hybrids committee hearing of Cultural Affairs,
6 Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations.
7 If there's anybody here that wants to testify, even
8 if you signed in already on our website, and you're
9 here personally, just sign in with the Sergeant at
10 Arms over at the table on the left... excuse me, on
11 your right. If you have any written statements, hold
12 on to those statements until your name is called to
13 testify. At that point, the sergeant will ask you
14 for it and disseminate that information to the
15 members. If you have any electronic devices that are
16 going to make noise during the hearing, please turn
17 the audio off. Okay? Please turn the audio off on
18 any electronic devices. If you have any questions,
19 just get the attention of one of the Sergeant At Arms
20 and we'll be more than happy to answer your questions
21 to the best of our ability. Okay. For the people
22 that are on Zoom. If you want to submit any written
23 testimony, you can do so at testimony... excuse me,
24 testimony@council.nyc.gov. Again, that is

25

2 testimony@council.nyc.gov. Chair, we're ready to
3 begin.

4 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: Good morning and welcome to
5 our oversight hearing on cultural institutions and
6 access for individuals with disabilities. My name is
7 Councilmember Chi Ossé, Chair of the Committee on
8 Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International
9 Intergroup Relations. I would like to thank everyone
10 for joining us here today, as well as online. Before
11 we speak about what true access means for people with
12 disabilities in the New York City culture sector, I
13 think it's important to frame this discussion within
14 the context and brief history of the struggle for
15 disability rights in America.

16 On September 13, 1960, the Social Security
17 amendments of 1960 were signed into law, ostensibly
18 protecting the civil rights of all people with
19 disabilities. For the first time ever, people under
20 the age of 50 were allowed to receive Social Security
21 Disability Insurance benefits. Then in 1964,
22 President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights
23 Act into law prohibiting discrimination and
24 segregation and public spaces, and employment
25 discrimination based on race, color, sex, religion,

2 or national origin. The Civil Rights Act served as
3 the foundation for the 1973 Rehabilitation Act,
4 acknowledging that discrimination and prejudice are
5 in fact, being expressed towards those with
6 disabilities in the United States, and banned
7 discrimination on the basis of disability for
8 organizations that received federal funds. In 1975,
9 the Individuals with Disability Act idea was signed
10 into law requiring equal educational opportunities
11 for all. Finally, in 1990, the Americans with
12 Disabilities Act, ADA was signed into law. The ADA
13 was modeled after the Civil Rights Act, and affirms
14 and protects the rights of those with disabilities
15 with regard to employment, government services, and
16 many other aspects of public life. While the ADA was
17 a huge step forward and acknowledging the need to
18 ensure equity for all Americans, it was nonetheless
19 an underfunded mandate. While many positive changes
20 have occurred, often compliance with ADA mandates
21 have been slow to become a reality, specifically in
22 the private and nonprofit sector. Making things
23 accessible often means making things more expensive.
24 At a recent nonprofit cultural event, organizers
25 shared with Council representatives that while their

2 aim was to protect to provide a cultural experience
3 that everyone could enjoy, the cost of providing
4 interpretation services rent upwards of \$30,000 for a
5 two-week event, for many organizations still
6 recovering from losses incurred due to COVID-19, this
7 presents a struggle. In 2015 pursuant to Local Law
8 46, New York City lawmakers were tasked with
9 developing a comprehensive Cultural Plan for New York
10 City. In 2017, the city released that plan entitled
11 CreateNYC, which included 92 recommendations. Many
12 recommended actions focused on the need to expand
13 arts and cultural resources to every community with a
14 promise to provide support to individual artists,
15 cultural workers, and audiences with disabilities.
16 In 2019, an update to CreateNYC was unveiled in the
17 form of an action plan. The action plan called for a
18 continuation of investments and funding for
19 underserved neighborhoods, and increased support from
20 the Cultural Institutions Group, otherwise known as
21 the CIC, and expanded access to arts and cultural
22 venues and arts organizations in order to meet the
23 needs, diversity, and inclusion for all.

24 This hearing seeks to explore the current state
25 of access to New York's cultural venues for

2 individuals with disabilities and their companions
3 and caregivers in hopes of gaining a better
4 understanding of what is needed to fulfill the
5 mandate of CreateNYC, and how DCLA and the city may
6 better support efforts to expand access and promote
7 engagement to all cultural institutions for people
8 with disabilities now and in the future. Our
9 cultural institutions are places where neighbors can
10 learn about new cultures and stories, engage in
11 dialogue that shifts societal narratives, and
12 experience joy and excitement. And it is key that
13 everyone is able to enjoy all that cultural community
14 has to offer. It is imperative that we provide
15 accommodations so that all our neighbors and the
16 visitors we welcome to our great city can access our
17 arts and culture, the key to what makes New York City
18 the vibrant and colorful city it is. Today we look
19 forward to hearing from the new DCLA Commissioner,
20 Laurie Cumbo, about the administration's commitment
21 to accessible programming and also look forward to
22 hearing from the advocates and other interested
23 stakeholders. I would also like to thank the
24 community members, artists and program staff who have
25 joined us today. We are grateful for your

2 partnership and look forward to learning how we can
3 better support you. I'd also like to acknowledge my
4 staff, my legislative and budget director, May
5 Vutrepan[sp?] Katana[sp?]. And my Chief of Staff,
6 Naomi Hopkins, as well as our committee staff who
7 made this hearing possible, Brenda McKinney, my
8 Committee Counsel, Christy Dwyer, my Legislative
9 Policy Analyst, and Alia Lee, the Finance Unit Head.
10 I will now ask our Committee Counsel to administer
11 the oath.

12 COUNSEL MCKINNEY: Thank you. If you can please
13 raise your right hand. Do you affirm to tell the
14 truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth
15 before this committee and to respond honestly to
16 Councilmember questions today?

17 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I do.

18 COUNSEL MCKINNEY: Thank you. Commissioner Cumbo,
19 you may begin your testimony.

20 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Good morning, and it
21 exciting to be on this side of the table today. I'm
22 so happy to be here with all of you. Good morning
23 Chair Chi Ossé, and members of the committee. I am
24 Cultural Affairs Commissioner, Laurie Cumbo. Thank
25 you for inviting me to testify on today's topic,

2 Cultural Institutions and Access for Individuals with
3 Disabilities.

4 And I just want to applaud this committee because
5 this is a really important hearing, and I'm so proud
6 that you have decided to do this at the early part of
7 your tenure as a City Councilmember. This will give
8 us all increased time and opportunity to advance this
9 cause collectively and together.

10 For years, the Department of Cultural Affairs has
11 dedicated tremendous energy and resources to ensuring
12 that our cultural community is both open and
13 welcoming to people with disabilities. We believe
14 that our cultural sector is going to truly thrive and
15 serve all New Yorkers, we must make sure that
16 everyone is given opportunities to participate.

17 Foregrounding disability access is a matter of social
18 justice, fairness and equity. For decades, we've
19 worked with cultural groups to increase access to
20 their institutions. Through our capital program, the
21 city has long been a partner in assisting cultural
22 institutions to become more physically accessible.

23 And while it's a critical component, physical access
24 is just one dimension of creating cultural
25 opportunities that connect people with disabilities.

2 With the DCLA's groundbreaking Diversity, Equity, and
3 Inclusion Initiative, and the 2017 release of the
4 CreateNYC Cultural Plan, which I was excited to
5 participate in, we initiated legislation that I
6 sponsored in the City Council. DCLA focused greater
7 attention on creating more cultural engagement with
8 and for people with disabilities, and not just as
9 audiences, but as artists and cultural workers.

10 Before expanding on that point, I want to
11 highlight the great work being done to ensure that
12 people with disabilities have every opportunity to
13 participate in the cultural life of our city as
14 audience members. With the joyful return to live
15 programming in full force, which I've seen our
16 Commissioner participating in with the greatest
17 energy that the city has seen, our fellow city
18 agencies are making accessible cultural programs easy
19 to find and connect with. At the Mayor's Office for
20 People with Disabilities, they maintain the list of
21 cultural and recreational resources for people with
22 disabilities, including institutions that offer
23 reduced fares and accessible programming, and NYC and
24 companies accessible NYC includes guides to make many
25 attractions accessible for people with disabilities,

2 from whole neighborhood cultural attractions to
3 specific institutions. Cultural organizations are
4 themselves also leading the way with comprehensive
5 web pages, accessibility focused map, and reserve
6 services and hours for people with disabilities and
7 their caregivers. We've encouraged groups in these
8 efforts by, among other things, offering guidance on
9 best practices for accessibility information, and
10 public event notices and invitations. While groups
11 aren't legally required to follow the same local
12 regulations as government agencies, we push them to
13 provide event accessibility information upfront in
14 email blasts, invitations, and social media as
15 practical ways to demonstrate that people with
16 disabilities are welcome at the venue, and to provide
17 information necessary to allow meaningful access to
18 programs. Beyond the simple yet impactful practices,
19 many cultural organizations provide induction loops
20 and other assistive listening devices and offer
21 programming and hours specifically designed for Neuro
22 diverse audiences. Recently, the administration has
23 worked to spread the word about a new requirement to
24 improve access at movie theaters for people who are
25 deaf or hard of hearing. There's more that can and

2 needs to be done to include people with disabilities
3 as audiences, but excellent models exist across our
4 cultural community, and we look to further promote
5 and expand on the great work that's already being
6 done.

7 As part of CreateNYC, DCLA committed to investing
8 capital funds in accessibility infrastructure
9 projects. In the first year alone, DCLA provided
10 over \$15 million in city capital funds for
11 accessibility projects. That's why I'm so happy that
12 we were able to work with the City Council to expand
13 capital funding to our cultural institutions this
14 year, which is going to allow us to do so much more.
15 These funds continue to support a range of projects
16 such as garden-wide accessibility improvements at
17 Brooklyn Botanic Garden. This project is fully aimed
18 at increasing access to BBG for people with
19 disabilities, such as replacing street slopes and
20 stairs with ramps at multiple locations in the
21 garden, and replacing lifts. We've also supported
22 the installation of new and refurbished elevators at
23 groups including Anthology Film Archives, Flushing
24 Town Hall, and Carnegie Hall to name a few. A new
25 elevator may not sound radical, but they are

2 transformative tools in opening up access to spaces
3 within institutions. Organizations are also using
4 capital projects as opportunities to carefully
5 rethink how all audiences can engage with their
6 programming, including people with disabilities. For
7 one example, theater for new audiences, Polonsky
8 Shakespeare Center in Brooklyn was designed so that
9 people using wheelchairs could have prime seats for
10 viewing performances, not just sit in the back of the
11 theater as it was traditionally done.

12 As I alluded to earlier, CreateNYC helped drive
13 work to more meaningful people with disabilities in
14 our city's cultural life, not just as audiences but
15 as artists and cultural workers. This is critical.
16 The Disability Forward Fund, also known as DFF, was
17 launched in 2018, and provided dedicated grant
18 funding for 22 arts groups in its inaugural year.
19 Since fiscal year 2019 DCLA has provided over \$1.4
20 million toward DFF grantees, fostering greater
21 accessibility through a wide range of projects, and
22 this is just the beginning. DFF invested both in
23 programs aimed at making mainstream institutions more
24 accessible, and in programs deeply rooted in, and
25 committed to the experience of people with

2 disabilities. Programs supported by DFF have
3 included support for students with disabilities to
4 create original documentaries about their
5 experiences, new and expanded residency programs for
6 dancers with disabilities, development of theatrical
7 production centering experiences of people with
8 disabilities, expanding American Sign Language
9 programming at museums, exhibitions of work by
10 artists with disabilities, and job training programs
11 for people with disabilities, opening up career
12 pathways in the art sector.

13 Through our Cultural Development Fund, the agency
14 continues to provide support to organizations doing
15 this essential work, including \$500,000 in this
16 current fiscal year. That is why we are so proud of
17 the funding that we were able to partner with the
18 City Council, over \$40 million of an increase to be
19 able to do more work that was just mentioned.

20 The CreateNYC Language Access Fund launched by
21 DCLA and 2019 also sought to foster more open
22 accessible cultural sector. This fund supported a
23 variety of programs that addressed and highlighted
24 access for users of American Sign Language, also
25 known as ASL. Nearly \$200,000 was awarded to ASL

2 programs in the first two years of the fund. These
3 included amazing programs like the theatre
4 development funds, accessibility program for
5 students, where our support allowed TDF to offer six
6 Broadway matinee performances interpreted through ASL
7 for young people whose primary Communication is
8 signing. Our grant to the alliance of resident
9 theaters helped create their advanced theatrical ASL
10 interpreters program to ready qualified signers for a
11 career in theater specific interpretation, providing
12 a robust roster of interpreters to meet the high
13 demand of New York City's nonprofit theatre
14 companies, while also deepening relationships with
15 deaf or hard-of-hearing audiences and artists
16 industry wide.

17 DCLA has worked closely with the Mayor's Office
18 for People with Disabilities on a range of programs,
19 most notably offering technical assistance for
20 cultural groups seeking to hire people with
21 disabilities. In 2019, we co-hosted the MOPD,
22 disability and inclusion in the cultural workforce,
23 an event attended by more than 150 representatives of
24 over 90 cultural organizations. Attendees heard
25 personal perspectives from people with disabilities

2 working in the arts. They also learned about local,
3 state, and regional resources offering support and
4 developing more inclusive recruiting, hiring, and
5 retention practices. This program expanded on a
6 similar event in partnership with MOPD in 2018 for
7 the SIG. Thanks to these direct sessions, we've
8 heard stories of cultural groups making direct hires
9 from MOPD's incredible NYC at Work Program, which
10 recruits, pre-screens, and connects New Yorkers with
11 disabilities to jobs and internships. Cultural
12 groups, you need to check this program out if you
13 haven't already. For our cultural sector to be truly
14 inclusive of all residents, we need to make sure
15 we're welcoming talent from every community into
16 employment and decision-making roles. Within the
17 agency, we're also making sure our service for the
18 cultural field and for New Yorkers are accessible to
19 everyone. For instance, DCLA's material for the arts
20 took its Third Thursday and gallery programs virtual
21 and they launched the Online Education Center to help
22 arts educators adapt to the new remote environment.
23 Thousands of art educators have access this amazing
24 new tool since the start of the pandemic. Like so
25 many organizations did during the pandemic, MFTA

2 discovered that digital programming was a powerful
3 way of connecting with people who might not be able
4 to participate in person for a variety of reasons,
5 including disability. This reflects a broader trend
6 we saw throughout the pandemic. In addition to
7 keeping us connected to one another through trying
8 times, online meetings and programming opened up
9 cultural experiences to people who previously faced
10 barriers to accessing them. With our partners at the
11 Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment, and NYC
12 and Company we created VirtualNYC to help amplify
13 virtual programs and connect to new audiences. We're
14 thrilled that live experiences are now returning to
15 our city. And we'll continue to support efforts to
16 make in-person programming accessible to everyone.

17 At the same time, we're pleased that hybrid
18 programming looks like it's here to stay. For the
19 many people who can now experience a new and broader
20 range of cultural activities, the expansion of online
21 Cultural Access has been one of the bright spots on
22 an otherwise difficult couple of years, and I'm
23 looking forward to more programming that brings the
24 hybrid to life. To encourage group's efforts to
25 inclusively reach online audiences in the fall of

2 2020 DCLA hosted Accessibility and Inclusion in The
3 Virtual Space: How Cultural Organizations Can Adapt
4 and Connect. It featured representatives of the NYC
5 Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, Museum
6 of Modern Arts, Arts and Culture Access Consortium,
7 Dances for a Variable Population, and the Queen's
8 Theatre discussing best practices to increase access
9 for audiences during the COVID 19 pandemic and
10 beyond.

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

24 Again, what we do at DCLA is focused on uplifting
25 our cultural constituents, so I want to recognize the

2 incredible work that groups are doing around the
3 city. At Lincoln Center, the Access Ambassadors Job
4 Training Initiative for high school students with
5 disabilities reached 140 Student Ambassadors this
6 year. At Queen's Theatre, last month's Forward
7 Festival featured nine days of performances by
8 artists with disabilities working across disciplines,
9 from circus, to theatre, to dance. At BAM, education
10 youth programs offer Relaxed Performances for Neuro
11 Diverse Audiences. At Wave Hill in the Bronx,
12 attendants who accompany visitors with severe
13 disabilities are given free admission. Staten
14 Island's Arts Teaching Artist Institute last year
15 offer training specifically for art educators
16 interested in working with people with disabilities.

17 We also support the work of groups whose missions
18 are rooted in disability access, inclusion and
19 artistry, such as Museum Access Consortium, Theater
20 Breaking Through Barriers, and Art Beyond Sight just
21 to name a few.

22 In conclusion, I applaud you making this a high
23 priority in your first term. I've championed greater
24 access for people with disabilities to a range of
25 resources for years. And as a Councilmember, I

2 sponsored legislation that would establish mental
3 health coordinators in each city agency to offer
4 support for city employees. If we want to create a
5 cultural sector that truly engages every New Yorker,
6 we need to focus on disability inclusion and access
7 and continue to move our community forward and close
8 collaboration with a dedicated advocates doing work
9 in this area. We look forward to championing more
10 work on this issue together. Thank you for the
11 opportunity to testify. I'm happy to answer any
12 questions that you may have. And we have so much
13 more to share. And we certainly look forward to your
14 questions. And I just want to close by saying: We
15 are so excited to partner with the City Council on
16 this particular initiative. This is something that
17 the previous Council was really excited about.

18 And for me, this testimony was also a little bit
19 difficult, because I'm not a strong advocate for the
20 word "disability". I really see people that are
21 given the... the label of dis disability or disabled
22 is really having a super ability. So the ability to
23 be able to sign, to read Braille, to be able to
24 navigate the city with a service dog or with a stick
25 through... a walking stick through the MTA and our

2 transit system. Those are really very, super-powered
3 people, not to mention all of the challenges that
4 they have in navigating the challenges of raising a
5 family, going through the workforce. And so I hope
6 that in the future, we're able to come up with better
7 language, because language matters, and to be labeled
8 disabled to me, I wouldn't want it for myself, and I
9 certainly wouldn't want that for my child. So I
10 think it's important that we, as time goes on, that
11 we begin to change the language so that people feel
12 more inclusive, and that they are not seen as having
13 a deficit, but actually have a gift as a result that
14 none of us have. So I just wanted to put that out
15 there and hope that we can continue the conversation
16 about how to be more inclusive in the city.

17 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: Thank you so much for that,
18 Commissioner. I do want to acknowledge some of my
19 colleagues on the committee, Councilmember Sandra
20 Ung, Councilmember Eric Dinowitz, as well as
21 Councilmember Amanda Farias, and Councilmember
22 Crystal Hudson.

23 Now I will go into the question portion of our
24 hearing. I wanted to start -- and you definitely
25 touched on this a bit during your testimony -- but

2 what steps is DCLA taking to ensure that our cultural
3 community can expand accessibility for all New
4 Yorkers?

5 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I'm so happy that you asked
6 that question, because it allows me to expand on
7 something that I'm excited about. The first major
8 thing that we are doing and have been doing is our
9 capital program. As we stated in the testimony, over
10 \$15 million in capital in previous fiscal years were
11 spent on capital improvements to make sure that our
12 institutions are more accessible. All new
13 construction that begins in the City of New York, has
14 to be done in compliance to make sure that
15 institutions are making and building their spaces
16 with their appropriate accommodations to make sure
17 that all people are welcome. We're looking forward
18 to continuing the programs that we've started within
19 the Department of Cultural Affairs. The funding
20 programs that we have, through the CDF process, allow
21 us to make sure that we are incentivizing the
22 opportunity for organizations to recognize that
23 accessibility is the direction that the city is going
24 in. And we look forward to working also with our
25 city agencies in terms of employment opportunities,

2 and making sure that all New Yorkers, those with
3 disabilities... ugh... that those that have
4 challenges are also welcomed in our New York City's
5 workforce and making sure that they are recruited,
6 nurtured, and welcomed into our city agencies and
7 beyond.

8 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: Thank you and regarding
9 capital projects, what is the status of capital
10 projects that are devoted to increasing
11 accessibility?

12 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Well, each project that we
13 take on in the Department of Cultural Affairs has a
14 complete cycle in life. So there's no one size fits
15 all. Every organization, some organizations are
16 undergoing ramp and elevator renovations, other
17 projects are doing projects to become more accessible
18 in ways of entrance ways, and making sure that our
19 bathrooms and changing rooms are more accessible. So
20 these are not necessarily the more attractive
21 projects that people are cutting ribbons on, but
22 these are the types of projects that really matter.
23 And every project has its own cycle, in terms of when
24 it's completed. During the pandemic, a lot of the
25 cycles -- if you have specific projects that you want

2 to ask about -- during the pandemic, a lot of the
3 cycles were... they slowed down a bit while we were
4 addressing issues during the pandemic, but each
5 project will have its own timeline. And if there are
6 specific projects, we could talk further about it.

7 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: And in terms of knowing which
8 spaces need those types of investments, is there
9 something alongside the... the CDF application...?
10 Or how do you intake which community, or cultural
11 organizations, or establishments need those
12 improvements?

13 CHAIRPERSON CUMBO: Well, many organizations
14 right now, what happens is that when they apply to
15 the city, either to the City Council or to the
16 Department of Cultural Affairs, they decide what
17 initiatives, or what project, or what capital
18 improvements they need at that particular time. So
19 some may decide that they need a brand new HVAC
20 system. Some may see that they need additional
21 lighting. A lot of organizations have come to us
22 with roof repair. So it's something that's in the
23 formula to make sure that organizations... but I
24 imagine that many organizations have to prioritize
25 capital improvements, particularly during COVID, that

2 have anything to do with HVAC systems, making sure
3 that their organizations have the proper ventilation
4 in their institutions, that they also have the
5 ability to have roof repairs that need to be made.
6 So organizations have the opportunity to prioritize
7 what are their needs, but we certainly look forward
8 to making sure that they understand and know that the
9 City of New York is prioritizing, making sure that
10 accessibility is a huge part of the capital future of
11 the City of New York.

12 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: And do you have a breakdown of
13 where these accessibility capital projects are by
14 borough and/or organization size?

15 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: We can get that for you,
16 certainly. That's certainly something that we can
17 do, and I'll make sure that my team gets that
18 information to you in terms of by borough where our
19 accessibility projects happening, so that we both can
20 have an opportunity to go on a walking tour to see
21 those institutions and to see the capital
22 improvements that they are making to be accessible to
23 the City of New York.

24 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: Absolutely. And how is DCLA
25 helping to make the cultural space and community more

2 accessible for those who are immuno...
3 immunocompromised, especially as the city begins to
4 lift COVID protocols and mask mandates?

5 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Can you ask that question
6 once more?

7 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: Yes. How's DCLA helping to
8 make the cultural space and community more accessible
9 for those who are immunocompromised due to COVID-
10 19...

11 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Right.

12 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: ...still being prevalent in
13 our city?

14 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: So one thing that many
15 institutions have done, because many people during
16 the COVID pandemic... While New York City is open,
17 and people are coming back to the institutions, many
18 people still don't feel comfortable entering into our
19 institutions at this time. So many organizations, as
20 you've seen it over the summer, have taken their
21 programming outdoors so that people will feel safe in
22 -- I don't want to say a post-pandemic, because we
23 are still living through a lot of the challenges of
24 the pandemic -- but many organizations have opened up
25 their facility and are doing outdoor programming.

2 Many are doing hybrid and virtual programs. The
3 virtual format has been very helpful to many people
4 who still do not feel comfortable coming into our
5 cultural institutions and our cultural spaces. Many
6 institutions are also continuing mask mandates and
7 many others, we've done a lot of programming in terms
8 of supporting and helping the sector be able to help
9 their staff to manage the expectations that many
10 visitors have when they come to their institutions.
11 Some institutions still require mask mandates, other
12 institutions don't require mask mandates, and to deal
13 with the delta of how people feel, being asked to
14 wear a mask in some places and not in other places.

15 But as it pertains to the disability community.
16 It's really important that we recognize that there
17 are many initiatives that many organizations that
18 I've outlined here are actually doing to making their
19 spaces more accessible.

20 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: And in 2017 the DCLA adopted
21 CreateNYC, and has created an action plan based on
22 that initiative. How did the agency work with a
23 disability community to create an action plan that
24 centers their needs.

2 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: The disability community was
3 at the forefront of the CreateNYC program. And as a
4 result of that, that's what spawned in many ways, the
5 capital program and the amount of funding that went
6 into that program. It also created the opportunity
7 through our Cultural Development Fund, to be able to
8 create a space within the Cultural Development Fund,
9 where organizations are able to apply specifically
10 for accessibility funding. So that's something that
11 we want to continue to do in the future years. We
12 were funded in this administration for a Cultural
13 Equity Fund. So we're looking to be able to have
14 that type of funding and programming as part of an
15 initiative to further fund the disability community
16 throughout this process.

17 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: Were there any... Or could
18 you name any groups in particular that DCLA worked
19 with in those conversations?

20 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: That preceded me before I
21 got here, so I'll definitely have to look at the very
22 specific organizations that worked with the
23 Department of Cultural Affairs for CreateNYC. But
24 we'll definitely get back to you and let you know
25 more about who were the cultural partners from the

3 disability community that helped shape and inform
4 CreateNYC.

5 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: Thank you. And has the agency
6 also looked at this plan in an intersectional way to
7 address everyone's specific needs and accommodations?
8 For example, black and indigenous people of color,
9 who are disabled, low income disabled folks as well?

10 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I think the great benefit
11 that came out of the pandemic -- and this is part of
12 looking at the bright side of things that happened or
13 came out of the pandemic, and you've been on these
14 calls as well -- the culture at Three Calls have been
15 really informative in terms of bringing together the
16 full breadth of the Department of Cultural Affairs
17 organizations that we fund. And through the culture
18 at Three Call, we've been able to talk with so many
19 organizations from the BIPOC community. Since I've
20 come into... into this particular position, I've had
21 an opportunity to meet with so many different
22 organizations throughout the BIPOC community, in
23 order to discuss greater ways that we can support one
24 another, to support the industry, and to be able to
25 create more accessibility for the BIPOC community, as
well as for those that are disabled. So it's

2 important that we continue to have those
3 conversations together, and again, looking at the
4 Cultural Equity Fund and its creation for the first
5 time in the city, this is going to give us a strong
6 foundation for us to be able to move forward.

7 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: Thank you for that answer.

8 And what is the DCLA's progress on implementing the
9 CreateNYC action plan as it relates to expanding
10 access to arts and cultural venues, and organizations
11 for New Yorkers with disabilities?

12 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I would say that what we
13 should focus on at this time is again what was
14 written in the testimony and I just want to express
15 it: Programmatic funding, the Disability Forward
16 Fund is something that came out of CreateNYC, we need
17 to better-fund that, and we need to work
18 collaboratively on both sides of the table in order
19 to be able to do that. Capital funding again is
20 another outcome of it. Elevators, ADA access.
21 Another is employment collaborations, MOPD'S,
22 NYC:ATWORK Program, agency plus sector practices,
23 inclusive-but-accessible meetings, social media, et
24 cetera. But I think the most powerful thing that we
25 can do is just what you're doing right now: This

2 hearing at this tenure in your career is a really
3 powerful tool to be able to highlight this, to let
4 the agency as well as the advocates know that we're
5 continuing to talk about this, and convenings are
6 probably the most powerful way that we can work
7 collaboratively together to continue this
8 conversation that you're starting so early in your
9 tenure. This gives us a long runway to be able to
10 make real instrumental changes, budgetary changes,
11 the ability to work together on so many of these
12 different initiatives.

13 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: I wholeheartedly agree. And
14 thank you for acknowledging that as well. The
15 Americans with Disabilities Act, ADA was passed in
16 1990, again, with the attention of having a plan in
17 place by 1992, to determine what was accessible and
18 what needed to be changed. However well-intentioned,
19 the ADA was underfunded mandate. Disability
20 advocates and the cultural community have said we
21 don't need another study; we know what the problems
22 are, and that is a lack of funding to provide
23 accessibility. The burden falls on the organizations
24 to provide expensive accommodations to ensure
25 inclusivity and not every organization, especially

2 smaller organizations are able to bear that financial
3 cost. And this is something that you know, we've
4 discussed at Culture@3, especially with those smaller
5 cultural organizations that want to be, you know, ADA
6 accessible, but do not have sometimes the means to
7 create those spaces. So how is DCLA working to
8 support cultural organizations to ensure that they
9 can provide accommodations to their community?

10 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Thank you so much for that
11 question. This is really something at the bedrock
12 and foundation of why I'm excited to be the
13 Commissioner of the New York City Department of
14 Cultural Affairs. What we can do is to continue to
15 work together. And as I always say, we can always do
16 more with more. The more resources we're able to put
17 together collaboratively, the more we're able to work
18 in terms of increasing initiatives on the Council
19 side, increasing funding on the administrative side,
20 gives us the bandwidth to do so much more together.
21 So really, the answer is we need more resources and
22 more dollars to be able to continue to work
23 collaboratively. But again, I have to bring it back
24 to: So much of what happened on the federal level,
25 we don't actually have jurisdiction in order to

2 enforce or to make happen. What we do have the power
3 to do together is to incentivize, to promote, and to
4 let all agencies and organizations know that a
5 pathway forward in New York City is driven through
6 accessibility and access for everyone. And that is
7 what's going to be rewarded in this administration.
8 That's what's going to be focused on in this
9 administration. And that's what we need to do,
10 collaboratively and together. And this hearing is
11 really an incredible platform to do just that.

12 But I continue to want to emphasize, we need to
13 fight together collaboratively for more access by
14 creating more accessibility through our capital
15 program, more employment and training opportunities.
16 These are initiatives that can be accessed or created
17 through the Council side, as well as the ability to
18 have specific funds and line items specifically for
19 cultural institutions that recognize and want to move
20 forward with accessible programs like you spoke of
21 that have just been far too expensive for too long.

22 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: And just to follow up on that,
23 through your conversations with some of these
24 cultural organizations and the institutions as well,
25 what would be your estimated -- and you can

2 definitely get back to me later on this -- estimated
3 price tag for what that would look like to fully
4 provide the adequate funding that would allow these
5 cultural organizations to become as accessible as
6 they can be, and want to be?

7 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Wow, what a dream question.

8 [laughter]

9 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: It helps us work through what
10 we're asking for, you know, in the next... next
11 budget dance.

12 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: You know, the New York City
13 Department of Cultural Affairs funds over 1000
14 organizations. And we would have to do an assessment
15 to understand on the capital side, what would be the
16 final number for every organization, if they put
17 together their wish list for capital improvements to
18 be completely accessible for the CDF organizations,
19 small, midsize and large institutions to put together
20 a number? I would be... it's almost asking me how
21 many stars are in the sky? I just really... It's...
22 it's a dream, and it's something that we should
23 certainly strive for, and I think it would be
24 important for us to be able to go back to our
25 cultural community and say, if you had your wish

2 list, as an organization to become completely
3 accessible, what would that look like? And what
4 would that cost? And that way, we have an idea
5 collaboratively and together on what we can do in
6 terms of pushing the budget collaboratively through
7 partnership of how we can meet those goals of the
8 organizations that we fund in the New York City
9 Department of Cultural Affairs.

10 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: Many cultural advocates have
11 expressed to me an interest in the creation of a city
12 grant, or funds for organizations to receive money to
13 pay for accommodation resources, such as
14 interpreters. Fiscal implications aside, is the
15 creation of this fun feasible for DCLA to provide for
16 our cultural community?

17 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: To be able to have us a line
18 item, if you will, within the agency to fund specific
19 programs like signing interpreters, and that sort of
20 thing? Is that your question?

21 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: Yes. Yes.

22 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Well, we have something that
23 exists similar to that: The Disability Forward Fund
24 and Language Access Fund. The CreateNYC Cultural
25 Plan, reported study found individuals connected to

2 cultural resources were correlated to better outcomes
3 and health, safety and education. And so when we
4 have the ability to have those within our
5 institutions, it creates more accessibility. What
6 needs to happen is that the Disability Forward Fund
7 and Language Access Fund that we currently have, we
8 need to do more with it. If we have more, we can do
9 more. But the wonderful part is, is that the
10 foundation already exists for it. We've already
11 created an opportunity to have that space within our
12 agency. And now we just have to better fund it.

13 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: I agree.

14 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: And we look forward to doing
15 that with you.

16 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: Yes. What are DCLA's efforts
17 to provide guidance to organizations who do not know
18 where to begin with providing accommodations,
19 especially newly formed organizations?

20 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: That I would say we would
21 have to do more on in terms of for newly formed
22 organizations, we need to do more to be able to
23 better-assist newly formed organizations with
24 understanding how to infuse accessibility into almost
25 the founding and the new creation of the institution.

2 I remember when I founded MoCADA, the Museum of
3 Contemporary African Diasporan Arts, maybe about
4 20... almost 25 years ago now, there wasn't that kind
5 of blueprint in terms of how to do this, and how to
6 make your institution more accessible. And so there
7 are so many things that we can do with those
8 advocates who are doing this work, in terms of
9 perhaps when we do our CDF trainings, we can start to
10 infuse more of that in terms of accessibility, but
11 also what are the resources that organizations can go
12 to, in order to understand how to formulate their
13 institution to make it more accessible from the very
14 beginning, so that it just becomes second nature in
15 terms of how you begin and start an institution is
16 infused with accessibility.

17 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: Also, I wanted to ask another
18 question related to the action plan. We know that
19 DCLA has been posting updated data for CreateNYC in
20 the action plan. Have you considered changing or
21 updating the action plan to do the pandemic or to
22 reflect the changes thereof?

23 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Well, the action plan is a
24 ever-living, ever-growing document that's always
25 going to evolve and change with the agency. The

2 CreateNYC document tends to grow and evolve with each
3 Commissioner. So under Commissioner Tom Finkelpearl,
4 this was really his brainchild that came out of the
5 work of yours of advocates who had been pushing for a
6 plan for the City of New York. Under Commissioner
7 Gonzalo Casals, he was not able to move the Cultural
8 Plan in a very robust way because he was dealing with
9 the pandemic and the challenges of that. As the
10 Commissioner of Cultural Affairs now, newly appointed
11 three months in, I really want to take the work that
12 was created and continue to evolve and grow and
13 expand on the Cultural Plan. Because that plan
14 really provides a strong foundation. And given the
15 dynamics of the pandemic, which has shown us so much.
16 I mean, if we were to go back to what was it would be
17 a complete lost opportunity, and we would have missed
18 the boat in so many ways in terms of how to reset,
19 and to make sure that accessibility is at the
20 foundation and at the bedrock of any future plans
21 that we do within the City of New York as it pertains
22 to culture. So in my new capacity as Commissioner, I
23 really look forward to not only having been a
24 legislator, and working to work with my colleagues to
25 pass the Cultural Plan, but now having an opportunity

2 to evolve and grow the Cultural Plan along with each
3 of you here on the committee.

4 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: Another question that is, you
5 know, definitely one that I want to get out because
6 it is something that I've heard from advocates is
7 about companion seating and admission tickets for the
8 working attendants and aides for individuals with
9 disabilities who need to attend cultural events are
10 not always able to secure a ticket at a reduced cost.
11 What can the administration do to ensure a fair and
12 equitable plan across the board, so cultural
13 organizations can ensure everyone who wants to attend
14 a Broadway show, museum or theater performance can do
15 so?

16 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: We share in this desire and
17 this shared goal. We think that it's incredible and
18 that it's... it's something that is so needed
19 throughout the City of New York. As I pointed out in
20 my testimony at Wave Hill in the Bronx, attendants
21 who accompany visitors with disabilities are given
22 free admission. Staten Island Arts Teaching Artists
23 Institute last year offered training specifically for
24 art educators interested in working with people with
25 disabilities. We also support the work of groups

2 whose missions are rooted in disability access,
3 inclusion, and artistry, such as Museum Access
4 Consortium, Theater Breaking Through Barriers, and
5 Art Beyond Sight to name just a few. But in our role
6 in the Department of Cultural Affairs, we don't have
7 the legal jurisdiction or authority to enforce this
8 to happen, but what we can do is to incentivize it,
9 to promote it, and to make sure that organizations
10 know that this is a priority for the City of New
11 York, and to look favorably upon those organizations
12 that do this kind of work in terms of making sure
13 that accessibility is at the foundation of their
14 mission statement, but that they also wake span to
15 actually do this work, and to then to make sure that
16 we highlight those organizations, that we make sure
17 that those organizations are the ones through NYC &
18 Co, and many others that we raise up and explain that
19 this is what we want to see in the City of New York.

20 So it's critical that we recognize that we
21 promote that we incentivize that this is the
22 direction that we want to move into, and that this is
23 the direction that the city's going in, particularly
24 in a post-pandemic City of New York.

2 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: Would you be interested,
3 during your tenure on working alongside the Council,
4 on potentially putting something together that would
5 incentivize, you know, our cultural organizations and
6 institutions on, you know, providing those reduced
7 ticket costs to attendants to... that... that assist
8 people with disabilities?

9 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I would welcome, and love,
10 and be really excited by the opportunity to sit with
11 the committee and to be able to talk about best
12 practices, what's already happening in the sector,
13 and how we can work collaboratively to improve on
14 best practices and best models, and what we can do
15 collaboratively to make that happen.

16 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: Happy to hear it. What is
17 DCLA doing to bring in more members of the disability
18 community to our city's cultural institutions and
19 events? I know you touched on some of these and the
20 testimony, but I would definitely love to hear a bit
21 more. What outreach is being done to the community,
22 and is the city taking about... talking about
23 accommodations that are provided when doing the
24 outreach? For example, is the city doing targeted
25

2 outreach about getting more members of the disability
3 community to attend summer stage for example?

4 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: The Department of Cultural
5 Affairs is doing a great deal of work to encourage
6 group's efforts to inclusively reach online
7 audiences. In the fall of 2020. DCLA hosted
8 accessibility and inclusion in the virtual space, how
9 cultural organizations can adopt... adapt and
10 connect. It feature representatives of the New York
11 City Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, the
12 Museum of Modern Art, Arts And Culture Access
13 Consortium, Dances for a Variable Population, and
14 Queens Theatre discussing best practices to increase
15 access for audiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and
16 beyond.

17 So these opportunities to have convenings are
18 really the most powerful way that we can outreach and
19 from those convenings, to capture that information,
20 and to continue to create a relationship so that
21 information can be free flowing, and that we can
22 collaborate in that way. So I would say that
23 convenings have been what we have been doing, and we
24 certainly need to do more of it.

2 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: Thank you. And can you
3 provide an ETA for when the report for the 2021
4 action plan, which is a legally required report, will
5 be available?

6 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: So the updates are actually
7 on the CreateNYC Action Plan website. So you can
8 actually see them there. I would say that the actual
9 formal outcomes will be... have to come to you, I
10 guess, within the next month or so.

11 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: Thank you. And those are all
12 the questions that I do have. I do want to
13 acknowledge that Councilmember Louis is also here in
14 attendance, and I will yield to my colleagues for
15 questions.

16 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Thank you. I'm excited to
17 see so many familiar faces.

18 COUNSEL MCKINNEY: Next we will we'll go to
19 Councilmember Dinowitz. Thank you.

20 COUNCILMEMBER DINOWITZ: Good morning.

21 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Good morning Councilmember
22 Dinowitz.

23 COUNCILMEMBER DINOWITZ: It's good to see you.

24 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Very good to see you.
25

2 COUNCILMEMBER DINOWITZ: And Lance,
3 congratulations on the new job. It's... I almost
4 want to turn around and see both of you behind me
5 right there. It's... This is like the reunion of
6 the century. Commissioner, I really value and
7 appreciate the way you spoke about concerns with
8 language around disability. I really, you know...
9 I...

10 COUNCILMEMBER DINOWITZ: As a teacher? As an
11 educator, yes I know.

12 COUNCILMEMBER DINOWITZ: I really appreciate
13 that. And I like the way you framed it. It's like a
14 super ability. You know, I remember it was always so
15 inspiring that my students who struggled to read
16 would achieve the same if not more than some of
17 their... their peers without disabilities. The
18 families, of course, put in so much more love and
19 work to provide for their children. So I really
20 appreciate that. You know, there's a word that I
21 kind of bristle at, and that's "accommodations". You
22 know, it's not because we don't need them, but it's
23 this sort of idea to me that we design things for
24 a... I guess, a majority, or a good chunk of the
25 population, and then figure out how to accommodate

2 people later, which... and so I also value that
3 you're talking about access as a bedrock of new
4 institutions, that we should be universally designing
5 things...

6 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I agree.

7 COUNCILMEMBER DINOWITZ: ...for everyone to
8 access. You spoke a lot about capital. And I think
9 my feeling is when most people talk about
10 disabilities, they think about wheelchairs, right?
11 When you look at an accessible parking space, it's a
12 little cartoon of a person in a wheelchair. But
13 disabilities are so much more than that. So I want
14 to put capital to the side and just ask about the
15 programming. You mentioned a few examples in your
16 testimony about accessible programming. And you
17 know, as just a reminder, not all disabilities are
18 physical, right, and not all disabilities, you can't
19 see all of them. There are... Some are invisible.
20 But does DCLA assess the quantity, the number of
21 accessible programs for, as you mentioned
22 neurodiverse people, people with a vision or hearing
23 impairments... Do you assess the number of those
24 programs available to people in New York City and the
25 quality of those of those programs.

2 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I'm going to allow... I'm
3 gonna start, and I'll turn it over to Sarah Cobb, as
4 well to also expand on that. I appreciate your
5 desire to want to talk about language. I think it is
6 also important. And as an educator yourself, I know
7 that language is incredibly important for you when
8 you're dealing with students and young people, and
9 how they present themselves.

10 I want to highlight the great work being done to
11 ensure that people with disabilities have every
12 opportunity to participate in the cultural life of
13 our city as audience members with the joyful return
14 to live programming and full force, our fellow city
15 agencies are making accessible cultural programs easy
16 to find and connect with. At the Mayor's Office for
17 People with Disabilities, they maintain a list of
18 cultural and recreational resources for people with
19 disabilities, so perhaps we need to do more in terms
20 of promoting that this exists. And we can work
21 collaboratively together to make that happen.

22 COUNCILMEMBER DINOWITZ: I'll be hon... It took a
23 little bit of searching to find it, but it's
24 definitely there. And the other part of the
25 question, though, was... You know... It's... The

2 programming may exist, but do you continue to work
3 with the disability community to ensure that... that
4 the programming that exists at these institutions
5 actually meets... meets their needs? That it
6 would... do you under... (crosstalk)

7 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I understand exactly.

8 COUNCILMEMBER DINOWITZ: Okay.

9 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I would say at this
10 juncture, I do not know the answer to that question
11 yet. I don't know how they actually capture how
12 effective the modes of accessibility that they've put
13 in place -- whether that's closed caption or whether
14 that's signing -- the different elements that are put
15 in place to make sure that it's more accessible. I
16 think that's a great question in terms of: How do we
17 capture that? And how do we move forward to making
18 sure that the accommodations, are they meeting the
19 expectations and the needs of the audiences who
20 actually need those services? So I think that that's
21 something that we can continue to work on
22 collaboratively, to think about: How do we make sure
23 that the issues that people are facing as a result of
24 the accommodations that we've put forward? If
25 they're not meeting those needs, how can we improve?

2 And if they are, then we can kind of check the box in
3 terms of something that we are doing good that we
4 need to expand upon.

5 COUNCILMEMBER DINOWITZ: Right. I think an
6 example, I think, that we looked at in the Council
7 last year was the supertitles at the movies. And a
8 lot of the feedback that we got was that the devices
9 were available for people with vision impairment...
10 or sorry... with hearing impairments. But the
11 devices were also... were often broken or didn't
12 match up with the movie. So things like that, you
13 know, constantly assessing not just the existence of
14 the programs, but that they are actually meeting the
15 needs of people with disabilities. So, you know,
16 we'd love to follow up on... on that. Because, you
17 know, again, it's nice to check a box on a website,
18 but this isn't about us. It's about people, everyone
19 in our city having access to our cultural
20 institutions in a meaningful... a meaningful and
21 positive way.

22 I have one more question.

23 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Yes.

24 COUNCILMEMBER DINOWITZ: Okay. You mentioned
25 again, in your testimony, you mentioned some of the

2 work being done with high school students. I'm
3 wondering what sorts of systemic approaches there are
4 to working with other city agencies to do outreach
5 to... to people with disabilities, to ensure they
6 know both the... the job prospects available, the
7 work being done there, and also accessibility to the
8 institutions. And I'll give two examples, though
9 it's not limited to these two. I... The Department
10 of Finance, we have a list of people who are have
11 disabilities who get DRI, rent exemptions. So we
12 have an agency where people are, you know, declare
13 that they have a disability. Are you working, for
14 example, with Department of Finance to do outreach to
15 those very tenants who get rent freezes? And of
16 course, the big one for me, the Department of
17 Education: We know exactly which students have an
18 IEP. Is any work, you know, systemically... Not...
19 not a teacher who goes out there are a principal who,
20 you know, really, you know, goes the extra mile and
21 figures this out for their students, but with... with
22 The Chancellor, with the Department of Education,
23 really making this systemic effort to ensure that
24 students with disabilities have the job opportunities
25 that you laid out here, and have the educational

2 opportunities that are specific to students with
3 disabilities? And other cultural institutions?

4 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I got... That's an awesome
5 question. I'm going to actually turn it over to
6 Sarah Cobb, who is doing a lot of work on that, and
7 she will address that question.

8 COUNCILMEMBER DINOWITZ: Good. And let me say
9 hello. We didn't serve together in this chamber. So
10 I'll say hello, I'm Eric.

11 MS. COBB: Nice to meet you. I'm Sarah Cobb with
12 the Department of Cultural Affairs. I serve as
13 Disability Service Facilitator for the agency. And I
14 just wanted to say in response to your question --
15 which I agree is critical question -- that the
16 Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities is... I
17 would say, is a central spoke and hub in terms of
18 providing extraordinary outreach to the disability
19 community. And we, in turn promote on social media
20 and in our own webinars and meetings, such as the
21 Commissioner has mentioned, pushing information out
22 to the community. But for example, the Mayor's
23 Office for People with Disabilities has what we're, I
24 believe, bi-weekly meetings with the disability
25 community on the range of programming, in particular

2 new efforts during the COVID period, with the
3 disability community to ensure that all of the
4 information that was available from the Department of
5 Health, Department of Education, Mayor's Office of
6 Emergency Management, got out to that community. And
7 likewise, you know, pushes out information on social
8 media and on its website. So I think that partnering
9 with MOPD has... has been a very important part of
10 our effort to reach the community. But we continue
11 to have our own dialogue with the community and
12 welcome input at all times. I think continuing that
13 communication and dialogue is critical.

14 COUNCILMEMBER DINOWITZ: Yeah, I think it's
15 wond... and again, in the testimony... really
16 wonderful that these plans like this were made
17 actually with the disability community. And it's...
18 it's rare that I have to say that that's, you know, a
19 surprising thing. But we know, often, communities,
20 whether they're disability or any other community
21 that are impacted by the decisions aren't always at
22 the table. So that you're doing that as a great. My
23 question, I guess was more about the interagency
24 discussions. And we can go on and on. You know, the
25 DOT provides accessible parking permits. Does the

2 DOT... Is there any talk with the DOT about making
3 sure people with disabilities who apply for those
4 permits also know about the incredible work you're
5 doing? As I mentioned, DOE with IEPs. You know, I
6 mentioned our finance tree and Division Of... You
7 know, we have all these agencies that work with the
8 disability community in different ways. And I so
9 value that you are also working with the disability
10 community. I'm asking more about the interagency
11 discussion and how we can really do that outreach and
12 reach more people than we are reaching now.

13 MS. COBB: Really got it. I'm also very
14 interested in the interagency conversations, and
15 again with MOPD is really the mothership, we have
16 now, as you may know, a network of Disability Service
17 Facilitators throughout the city agencies. So we
18 meet on a monthly basis and Disability Service
19 Facilitators exchange information and gain
20 information from MOPD and from each other, then go
21 back to our own agencies and share information
22 from... from our colleagues across the city. So that
23 is a been a very active source of sharing, and we are
24 able to put out information based on those calls.
25 That is a very important way of reaching our own

2 community about the information, say that might
3 otherwise be siloed in another community or another
4 agency.

5 COUNCILMEMBER DINOWITZ: Okay, this is my last
6 question. I just want to try to get you know that...
7 Thank you. All right. So I just want to make
8 sure... So, if I am a person who receives DRIE,
9 Disability Rent Increase Exemption, does that mean
10 that I am also receiving direct outreach from DCLA or
11 from the culture institutions? Because I'm now a
12 person that, you know, the city knows has a
13 disability. And there are... Whether it's reduced
14 ticket prices or, you know, accessible exhibits,
15 would I then be getting that direct specific outreach
16 from DCLA?

17 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I want to actually bring up
18 at this time, Emily Sweet, who is the General Counsel
19 and Deputy Commissioner for the Mayor's Office for
20 People with Disabilities to further expand on your
21 question.

22 COUNCILMEMBER DINOWITZ: Sure.

23 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I definitely want us to
24 benefit from the wealth of knowledge that she has
25 actually running this agency.

2 COUNSEL MCKINNEY: Commissioner, if we can just
3 swear her in as a witness. Thank you, do you affirm
4 to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but
5 the truth before this committee and to respond to
6 Councilmember questions, honestly?

7 MS. SWEET: I do.

8 COUNSEL MCKINNEY: Thank you.

9 MS. SWITT: Hi, I'm Emily Sweet, Deputy
10 Commissioner and General Counsel of MOPD. To address
11 your specific question about whether, you know,
12 cultural information is specifically shared
13 through... to people who agencies are able to
14 identify as people with disabilities, I'm not aware
15 of that. But that's something that is a great idea,
16 and something that we could look into.

17 COUNCILMEMBER DINOWITZ: Yeah. (crosstalk) I
18 didn't mean to interrupt you, I apologize.

19 MS. SWEET: No, that's okay. But as, as Ms.
20 Cobb testified, we do have regular meetings with the
21 disability community, with advocates and members of
22 the disability community, and those are very well
23 attended. And that's a great opportunity to share
24 information with organizations, and we really rely on
25 the organizations to then send information out. So

2 that's... So, no, we don't do directly with people
3 identified as people with disabilities.

4 COUNCILMEMBER DINOWITZ: It's... it's very clear
5 that, you know, DCLA is definitely going in the right
6 direction. And our institutions are in the right
7 direction, when it comes to, you know, accessibility,
8 universal design, and, you know, being inclusive of
9 everyone. I'm really appreciative that you brought
10 up Wave Hill. That's in my district, and they just
11 did a... a accessibility project a few years back.

12 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: That's right.

13 COUNCILMEMBER DINOWITZ: But I think... You
14 know, we also acknowledge that there's always going
15 to be more work to do, whether it's physical
16 accessibility, or accessibility in programming, as I
17 mentioned earlier, and I think that as a city, who
18 has identified in one way or the other, whether
19 through IEPs, whether through parking permits,
20 whether through rent exemption, that we have an
21 incredible opportunity not just to have these
22 programs and these institutions in existence, but to
23 really, you know, do that outreach, and to make sure
24 that people know that they live in a city, whose
25 Institute whose arts and cultural institutions are

2 supportive and of them and accessible to them. And I
3 would highly encourage... I would highly encourage
4 all of you to figure out a way to talk to other
5 agencies, to make that a reality, to really make sure
6 that our... our neighbors with disabilities, have
7 access to our institutions and have the knowledge of
8 them. And I will just remind all my colleagues, and
9 anyone who's watching that, you know, many of us may
10 not have a disability now, but we are one step away,
11 we are one accident away, we are one anything away
12 from having a disability. You know, our... We never
13 know what... what the needs of our children are going
14 to be. Any single one of us can have a disability.

15 And... and again, I appreciate the work you're
16 doing to make the city and our arts institutions
17 accessible for everyone. We want to keep moving
18 forward on that. So I thank you for your... your
19 time. Chair. I thank you for the extended time.
20 Thank you.

21 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I think that I think that
22 how you summarized this is so accurate in terms of:
23 While we're here today to discuss art and culture,
24 it's really a complete agency-wide, citywide,
25 comprehensive, organic approach that needs to happen

2 because we are essentially undergoing an evolution.
3 And as you said... So that... We don't see things
4 that we don't create for the whole, and then try to
5 create some sort of special accommodations. That we
6 build, and we create, understanding that everybody
7 has differences, and that everybody has different
8 needs, but we have to create a city that accommodates
9 those differences and those needs in everything that
10 we do. So that we're not adding on, in addition to,
11 or making people feel otherwise or outside of, or not
12 having the ability to experience the city in the same
13 way or with the same ease as someone else. And we
14 have the intelligence, the resources in order to do
15 that. So I certainly look forward to working with
16 you on that. As I spoke earlier, in terms of
17 language is so important and so critical. It's
18 important that we continue to evolve, recognizing
19 that many people in the community appreciate and
20 fought hard for the designation of disabled or
21 disability. And many others are also looking to see
22 themselves differently in many ways, as well, and to
23 see that they have many attributes or super abilities
24 that others don't have. So there's a lot of
25 communication in terms of how we're changing even in

2 the BIPOC community, as an African American woman, no
3 longer for myself wanting to be seen as a minority,
4 or underserved or underrepresented, or having to wear
5 titles that downplay my existence in order to get
6 resources, help, and support on a grant application
7 by checking the minority box. So we need to
8 recognize that everybody has assets and value and
9 that they don't have to undermine their value in
10 order to get support. And I think that that's part
11 of the evolution that we're seeing in the BIPOC and
12 the disabled community in terms of seeing ourselves
13 differently and our whole selves that are so diverse
14 and so different.

15 COUNCILMEMBER DINOWITZ: Thank you.

16 COUNSEL MCKINNEY: so with that this concludes
17 the administration portion of the hearing and we will
18 move to public testimony in just one moment. There
19 are no more Councilmember questions. There are no
20 Councilmembers online.

21 We will just take a couple of minutes and I will
22 read the names of the panelists for our first public
23 panel. The first public panel will be in-person
24 only. Thank you.

25 [2.5 minutes of silence]

2 COUNSEL MCKINNEY: Okay. At this point, I will
3 read the names of the first panel. And apologies:
4 For the record, my name is Brenda McKinney, and I'm
5 the Committee Council, for the Committee on Cultural
6 Affairs, Libraries and International and Intergroup
7 Relations at the New York City Council.

8 The first panel will be again all in-person. It
9 is for individuals, Lisa B. Lewis, Lucy Sexton,
10 Sheila Lewandowski, and Eman Rimawi-Doster.

11 Apologies in advance for any unintended
12 mispronunciations, and thank you. We will wait two
13 minutes for panelists to approach the table.

14 [1 minute of silence]

15 Okay, we're going to move to public testimony.
16 So we'll begin with our first panel. We're changing
17 the order slightly based on how our panelists are
18 sitting. So we'll be moving from left to right at
19 the table beginning with Eman Rimawi-Doster, excuse
20 my pronunciation, then Sheila Lewandowski, Lucy
21 Sexton, and Lisa Lewis.

22 So please wait for the Sergeant for the Sergeant
23 to call the clock, and then you can begin your
24 testimony. For those testifying in person, there is
25 a large clock on the wall, and it will be two

2 minutes. The first person again is Eman Rimawi-
3 Doster. And you may begin when the Sergeant calls
4 the clock. Thank you.

5 MS. DOSTER: Hi, good morning. My name is Eman
6 Rimawi-Doster. It's all good. It's a little bit of
7 a complicated name. And thank you so much for having
8 me here at the hearing on Cultural Affairs,
9 Libraries, International and Intergroup Relations.

10 Normally, I'm here from New York Lawyers for the
11 Public Interest talking about accessibility and
12 Access-A-Ride around our city. But today I wanted to
13 talk about arts and culture since that has been a big
14 part of my life for my entire 38 years. I also
15 wanted to share a comment from Mike Schweinsberg,
16 who's the president of the 504 Democratic Club and
17 Elizabeth Axel who's the president and CEO of Art
18 Beyond Sight, and they wanted to share. We know that
19 Commissioner Cumbo is a regular visitor of the 504
20 Democratic Club, and she is an active and educated
21 supporter of the disability community when she was in
22 City Council, and we look forward to continuing with
23 her support. She knows our community priorities and
24 we assure that intersectional Disability Rights,

3 Disability Justice, and Disability Pride are at her
4 heml.

5 So in addition to having been an organizer for 25
6 years, I've also been an active... active artist and
7 creative writer, I began organizing in high school at
8 15 to get a poetry performance group started. At
9 that same time I was diagnosed with lupus. It's been
10 my part of my life my entire life. From performing
11 all over the city at poetry readings, including Youth
12 Speaks, which is now Urban Word, which works with
13 high school students who perform spoken word poetry,
14 and participating in facilitating writing workshops
15 with the Asian American Writers Workshop, to being
16 accepted to a high school journalism program with New
17 York University for diversity of young women of color
18 to teaching creative writing classes to children ages
19 7 to 21 at the YMCA, to working on multiple murals
20 throughout the years, with multiple organizations, to
21 starting a clothing line for amputees and other
22 disabled folks to wear things that we actually wanted
23 to wear, to being a disability consultant for
24 multiple comic book companies, including DC Comics,
25 to being a regular panelist on museums and
institutions, and intersectional arts, race to

2 disability and culture I have done it all as a
3 disabled New Yorker. And there's nothing wrong with
4 saying the word.

5 I recently talked to students at the KAPPA,
6 Knowledge and Power Preparatory Academy in the Bronx,
7 and coupled with a cut program called the Center for
8 Urban Pedagogy, they got funding to work on an
9 accessibility program. And they did a whole
10 presentation with a very beautiful 'zine of words and
11 art and poetry and my statements, which I was very
12 impressed by. And it reminded me of when I was 15
13 years old.

14 My statement is much longer so I can stop on
15 that. But it's just talking about the importance of
16 involving disabled New Yorkers in the arts. It's
17 been part of my entire life. And I'm not just...
18 Yes, I am a disabled person, I have lupus, I am an
19 amputee, but I'm also very much an artist. And we
20 have to be proud about our identities. And I am very
21 proud to be a disabled person, and it took me a while
22 to get there because of how society sees me. I am a
23 whole person. And I just want to be treated that way
24 with... in everything in New York City. So thank you
25 so much.

2 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: Thank you so much.

3 COUNSEL MCKINNEY: Thank you so much for your
4 testimony. Before we call the next witness. I
5 neglected to add that we will be accepting written
6 testimony up to 72 hours after the hearing. So after
7 the start of the hearing, testimony can be sent to
8 testimony@council.nyc.gov. Or please feel free to
9 reach out to the Chair's office or the committee
10 staff for assistance with that. We'll move to the
11 next panelist now, which is Sheila Lewandowski. You
12 may begin when ready.

13 MS. LEWANDOWSKI: Thank you. I'm glad that
14 you'll take written because this is not finished.
15 And I'm actually not going to read it all. I'm going
16 to respond to some of the what the Commissioner is
17 saying, the DCLA said, but my name is Sheila
18 Lewandowski, co-founder and executive director of the
19 Chocolate Factory Theatre in Long Island City,
20 Queens. I identify as middle aged cisgender, white
21 woman of Eastern European heritage dealing with an
22 undiagnosed and relatively unseen disability. We
23 have a show opening tonight, where the lead artist is
24 recognized disabled as well. And we are planning a
25

2 full renovation with... with a lot of support from
3 the city.

4 I'm going to jump ahead. I want to talk a little
5 bit about capital. So we do need capital support.
6 And one of the problems with capital for smaller
7 organizations, or organizations with budgets under \$1
8 million outside of the center of Manhattan is some of
9 the rules and thresholds. If you're not in a city-
10 owned building, you have to have a project that's a
11 minimum of \$500,000. So if you want to redo your
12 sidewalk, you want to redo a bathroom, these... all
13 of these things fall with underneath... under that.
14 They also take an incredibly long time to get
15 through, so I feel like there needs to be some
16 changes on those thresholds. Maybe a tiered... a
17 tiered system for capital, and to make things more
18 accessible. We need larger spaces. I heard you say,
19 you called Culture Three yesterday talking about
20 strollers. So lobbies: This idea of space... that
21 every single inch of it must be used, it actually
22 must be more flexible. And the whole culture of
23 organizations needs to change. One of the things I
24 think would be really helpful is for DCLA to help
25 each, you know, organizations customize a 10 or 20

2 year plan, or 5 or 10 or 20 year plan. Because I
3 think for myself, the whole culture had to change
4 around when I can come in. I have to be able to
5 change my schedule now, like at different moments, I
6 have to have a place to lay down. And I'm... you
7 know I'm you look at me and you don't think that, but
8 every any person can have... have a disability.

9 Education: Can we better define it in a way that
10 even the word disability is accessible, so that it is
11 inclusive of all these different things. That helps
12 me. Then I can say to people, "Well, are you
13 accessible?" Now I know how to respond to that to
14 audience and/or artists. But right now, there's a
15 shame involved in our "oh, we're not accessible", and
16 so we don't even fully respond to what is going to
17 be... how we're going to be able to welcome people
18 with all different kinds of abilities.

19 So I have some other notes. I had questions of
20 just go quick. I'm curious to know what the
21 department... what percent of Department of Culture
22 funds supports programming? Because programming
23 changes are very expensive to do, and we need them.
24 The labor to provide sign language. The labor to
25 provide translations. We have 75,000 people a year

2 look at our video archive, but it would cost us a
3 fortune to put in all of the... you know, the
4 captioning. So I have lots of other thoughts on
5 this, but I will I will email them in. Thank you
6 very much, Commissioner.

7 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: Thank you.

8 COUNSEL MCKINNEY: Thank you so much. And we
9 will... We'll also be holding all questions to the
10 end of each panel.

11 The next panelist is Lucy Sexton from New Yorkers
12 for Culture In The Arts.

13 MS. SEXTON: Thanks so much. Thanks to the
14 Chair. Thanks, Councilmember Dinowitz. Thanks
15 Brenda. Oh, hold on. Let me get there. My name is
16 Lucy Sexton, I lead the cultural advocacy coalition,
17 New Yorkers for Culture And Arts. Our organization's
18 stated purpose is to create a future where every New
19 Yorker can engage in the community strengthening life
20 enriching power of culture. When we talk about New
21 Yorkers, we need to remember that 22% of our citizens
22 have some form of disability. That is more than one
23 in five people in the city. So we can't possibly
24 work for every New Yorker to engage in culture

3 without removing barriers that keep a fifth of our
4 neighbors from experiencing it.

5 During the past few months, the cultural sector
6 came together in a united ask for funding in the city
7 budget, Culture Vibe. The plan called for the
8 creation of a disability fund. This rose from a
9 discussion among many smaller cultural organizations
10 who desperately want to make their spaces and
11 programs more accessible, but simply don't have the
12 funds to do what it would take. Everything that
13 makes work more accessible to audiences and artists
14 comes with a cost: Hiring ASL, providing visual
15 description, renovating doors, hallways, bathrooms
16 providing programming with visual descriptions or
17 tailored to neurodiverse participants, and making all
18 events programs and programming hybrid, so they're
19 available online as well as in person. They are
20 necessary and costly undertakings. If DCLA had a
21 dedicated fund that organizations could apply to, to
22 help cover these costs to make programming more
23 accessible to artists and audience, it would be a
24 great start. I want to point out that the Disability
25 Forward Fund is for programming, not for
organizations to improve accessibility for all

2 artists and all audiences to all their programming,
3 not just disability focused work. So this is a new
4 fund we are calling for. Then you would begin to see
5 the full range of New Yorkers engaging in culture and
6 art. And to address Councilmember Dinowitz's
7 suggestions of interagency coordination for people
8 with disabilities. I would say that New Yorkers for
9 Culture and Arts has long advocated for a position in
10 the administration responsible for coordinating
11 cultural work in the many agencies in which we... in
12 which culture appears, right?, from disability to
13 aging, to education, to mental health, to criminal
14 justice, it would be a necessary addition to our city
15 administration.

16 I'll end by state citing the Stanford Social
17 Innovation Review article on the curb-cut effect.
18 It's pretty famous. A disability activist drew
19 attention to the difficulty of navigating curbs in
20 wheelchairs, if they use wheelchairs. And after much
21 advocacy, we got the near ubiquitous cuts in the
22 curbs to allow wheelchairs to get on and off. Lo and
23 behold, those curb cuts have also made it easier for
24 people pushing strollers, for people pulling roly
25 bags and more. In short, the article points out that

2 when we make things more accessible for folks with
3 disabilities, it often benefits a large portion of
4 the non-disabled population. So when we have
5 cultural spaces that are more usable for disabled
6 artists and audiences, we will have spaces more
7 welcoming for all New Yorkers. Truly, this is the
8 future we are working toward where the dignity of
9 every person is respected. And we all feel that
10 improvements for some are improvements for all.

11 Thank you.

12 COUNSEL MCKINNEY: Thank you very much. We'll
13 now move to the last witness on this panel, which is
14 Lisa B. Lewis. Thank you.

15 MS. LEWIS: Thank you very much. Thank you very
16 much for welcoming me this morning. And thank you
17 for the opportunity to share my observations with you
18 as you consider these very, very important decisions.
19 My name is Lisa B. Lewis and I am the founder of
20 Omnium Circus. Omnium means of all and belonging to
21 all. We're a not-for-profit organization that I just
22 founded in 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, in the
23 belief that full inclusion and representation in the
24 arts leads to self-actualization, increased
25 tolerance, and a better society... things you all

2 already know. We feature a diverse cast and crew
3 with multiple abilities, demonstrating to audiences
4 that anything is possible, that all people can
5 achieve their greatness regardless of their
6 challenges -- physical, emotional, neurological or
7 societal. Omnium is the first fully inclusive, fully
8 accessible circus performing arts company in the
9 nation, providing comprehensive access for all
10 audiences at every single performance, unites diverse
11 community through shared joy and laughter. Omnium
12 sees circus as a force for unity and systemic change
13 through entertainment, education, and employment.

14 I founded Omnium because there was no space
15 providing access for families at every single show.
16 One in four Americans, one in five New Yorkers has a
17 disability. If your child has autism, you can bring
18 them to the show on sensory friendly day. But what
19 if you have two other kids? One has baseball
20 practice that day, the other has a different
21 activity, the other has a different need? You can't
22 come to the same show on the same day with your
23 entire family. That divides families not unites
24 them, and your family is now torn. I was speaking
25 about a year ago with an incredible gentleman named

2 Eric Weihenmayer, who climbed to the top of Mount
3 Everest. Eric is blind. He made it all the way to
4 the summit of Mount Everest, and yet he had never
5 witnessed a circus. He's got family, he's got kids,
6 he'd been to the circus, and his kid always says,
7 "Dad just sits there and listen to the music. We
8 can't explain it. It's too much." There was no
9 audio description. Our circus has audio description
10 at every single performance.

11 Over the 30 years I've been working in this
12 field, I've spoken with a lot of families who... for
13 whom lack of access prevented their ability to attend
14 performances. Disability is one thing that unifies
15 people. It doesn't care what color you are, it
16 doesn't care what socioeconomic... to what
17 socioeconomic level you were born. It doesn't care
18 if you're male or female or non-binary, it doesn't
19 care. As everyone has said by providing access, we
20 include all four out of four people five out of five
21 people. We include caregivers, family friends, not
22 only the person with the disability, but the entire
23 community that surrounds them, and together we can
24 enjoy the arts. Moving beyond audience access into
25 representation, one cannot begin to dream of becoming

2 to that to which one has never been exposed. As an
3 inclusive performing arts center... performing arts
4 company. We pride ourselves in balancing races,
5 ethnicities and abilities. We must provide
6 interpreters for rehearsal. The additional funding
7 that has been mentioned here would be a godsend to
8 us. We are a new organization and being under three
9 years, we don't qualify for a lot of the larger
10 fundings. As a smaller organization new to the
11 scene, access to interpreters, to assistance with
12 that would be life changing. We're doing a show next
13 Saturday we have to deaf performers. And I have to
14 do the interpretation. And I'm not a certified
15 interpreter, because we couldn't afford an
16 interpreter all day. That's not okay. We're making
17 due. But improvements would be so welcome. And I
18 want to leave you with one, quote: "Diversity is
19 having a seat at the table. Inclusion is having a
20 voice. Belonging is having that voice be heard."
21 Thank you for welcoming all of us to belong. And
22 thank you for listening.

23 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: Thank you so much to each of
24 you for testifying. I appreciate each of the
25 sentiments that you've shared. It definitely helps

2 me out within my role as Chair on this committee. I
3 know that Councilmember Dinowitz wants to share some
4 words?

5 COUNCILMEMBER DINOWITZ: Yeah. First, I just...
6 It's... it's not often the case, but I want to
7 acknowledge, you know, just give a shout out to
8 Commissioner Cumbo, who's still here listening to
9 testimony. I know, very often the commissioners
10 are... you know, they leave after they testify. So
11 thank you. Just to... Eman... I said.

12 MS. RIMAWI-DOSTER: Hi.

13 COUNCILMEMBER DINOWITZ: ...and Sheila, I also
14 want to thank you for in the different ways you said
15 embracing the term "disability". And you know, and I
16 think that's there's... as you said, no shame in and
17 I really appreciate that, as it is kind of making it,
18 "this is who we are, and this is part of how we talk
19 about it and how we address it." And Eman, you
20 mentioned something about DC Comics and writing
21 workshops, I just want to invite you anytime you want
22 to come to the 11th Council District, and talk about
23 or do workshops with children, young adults, about...

24 MS. RIMAWI-DOSTER: Your dad and I do Access-A-
25 Ride workshops on a regular basis. And I've gone out

2 to senior centers with him a number of times. So I
3 would gladly come out there and talk to anybody about
4 anything artistic, because it's important. And what
5 I want to do is... I didn't have any examples of
6 myself, seeing someone older with lupus, like, you
7 know, famous people did not come out with their
8 autoimmune disorders when I was a teenager. And so
9 if I had that example, to say, Oh, I could be the
10 next Toni Braxton, or Nick Cannon, or... or Lady
11 Gaga, because they all have lupus. That would have
12 been a great example for me. So I would absolutely
13 come talk to those children. I love kids. So...

14 COUNCILMEMBER DINOWITZ: That's... Thank you.

15 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: I wish one of our members on
16 the committee were here. Shahana Hanif.

17 MS. RIMAWI-DOSTER: Yeah, I'm familiar with her
18 as well. Yeah. And I think that she's amazing. And
19 we need more representation in City Council around
20 that, because it's... we need to normalize
21 disability. And when you normalize disability, you
22 don't "other" us, you make us part of the community.
23 And when you other people, whether it's, you know,
24 race, class, gender, or disability, suddenly you're

2 dehumanizing them, and I just want to be treated like
3 the human being, and that includes access, you know,

4 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: Thank you for being here
5 today.

6 MS. RIMAWI-DOSTER: Thank you for having me. I
7 appreciate it. I mean Access-A-Ride did make me
8 late, but I made it.

9 COUNSEL MCKINNEY: Alright, thank you so much to
10 this panel. That concludes panel one. I will read
11 the names of the second panel.

12 The next panel will be fully remote and this will
13 be our last panel of today. Pending that no one...
14 no other register witnesses attend.

15 Please note that hearing registration is still
16 open, you can sign up to testify, please sign up on
17 the registration page and we will be monitoring. You
18 can also submit written testimony of just 72 hours
19 after the close of the hearing. The next panel,
20 panel two, and the final panel will be Cheryl
21 Warfield from Advance More Opera, Beth Prevor,
22 Miranda Hoffner, from Lincoln Center, and Ariel
23 Herrera. We will just wait one moment before moving
24 to testimony.

2 Okay, and just like with remote hearings, Ms.
3 Warfield, will be first. You may begin your
4 testimony when the Sergeant calls the clock. There
5 will be a two minute clock. Thank you.

6 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

7 MS. WARFIELD: Good morning. Thank you Chair
8 Ossé and committee members for hearing my testimony,
9 and thank you to the City Council for the historic
10 increase in the fiscal year 23 budget for Arts and
11 Culture. I'm Cheryl Warfield, a professional opera
12 singer and founder and artistic director of More
13 Opera, a community based nonprofit blazing a trail in
14 culturally responsive musical programming and arts
15 education in New York City. I testify today as
16 Interim Secretary for the New York Opera Alliance, or
17 NYOA, a consortium of small independent opera
18 companies united in making opera available...
19 available for every New Yorker. Through the
20 leadership of our president, Mariana Mott Neuwirth,
21 NYOA began a conversation with our cohorts about
22 ableism last February with a panel of Deaf and Blind
23 activists to discuss how opera presenters could make
24 productions more accessible. Hearing their stories
25 inspired the desire to make DEI and accessibility

2 changes. However, certified interpreters and other
3 accommodation resources are cost prohibitive for most
4 organizations with budgets under \$100,000 per year.
5 But communities with the least access to culture and
6 its benefits are often systematically left out of
7 government funding. I urge the Council and
8 Administration to target dedicated funding to equip
9 New York institutions with the tools, resources, and
10 information needed to stop ableism. I am extremely
11 proud of the leadership role NYOA has taken to
12 educate against ableism and believe it serves as a
13 model for cultural groups throughout the city.
14 Culture@3, and New Yorkers for Culture and the
15 Arts...

16 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time expired.

17 MS. WARFIELD: ...are also accessibility for all.
18 Thank you for this important hearing, and for the
19 opportunity to provide testimony.

20 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: Thank you.

21 COUNSEL MCKINNEY: We'll now... we'll now move to
22 our next witness, Beth Prevor. You may begin when
23 the sergeant calls the clock.

24 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

2 MS. PREVOR: Thank you, I want to thank the
3 Council for this opportunity to talk about access in
4 the arts. I am the Executive Director of Hands On
5 Signed Interpretive Performances, a small nonprofit
6 providing access services to theaters for the deaf
7 community. This morning, I'm here to express my
8 concerns about access specifically as it relates to
9 sign language interpreters. My essay this morning is
10 about money. When we talk about access money, it's
11 oftentimes what we're not supposed to talk about.
12 But the reality is, as more deaf artists raise our
13 stages, we need more interpreters for rehearsals,
14 which means we need more training. If we then follow
15 the full arc of the arts theaters then need money for
16 sign interpreter performances, so that deaf audiences
17 can attend and see their community on stage.
18 Theaters need information, they need referrals, they
19 need help in providing services like Hands On. But
20 honestly having said all that, we are often unable to
21 know how to guide them in that pursuit. The
22 unfortunate reality is that for all our talk about
23 equity access and inclusion, until there is an
24 outside source of money for services such as sign
25 language interpreters, along with a centralized

2 resource for information, I fear that true equity is
3 going to be hard to achieve. I do this work because
4 I love the theater. We started hands on so deaf
5 audiences will be able to attend theater that had
6 been inaccessible to them. Now, 40 years later,
7 we're seeing amazing things. We're not only
8 providing access to audiences, but seeing more
9 representation from deaf artists onstage backstage,
10 and everywhere else in the arts. All this comes with
11 a cost both monetarily and in the human resource
12 needed our interpreters. We need more interpreters,
13 more of us who are qualified and trained. We are a
14 finite resource that is being stretched to the limit.
15 And we are metaphorically speaking, "drowning". My
16 testimony this morning is to stress that until
17 someone somewhere creates an outside source of money
18 for services, achieving true equity is going to be
19 hard to realize. I leave you with that final plea.
20 We need your help. Thank you for your time and
21 attention.

22 COUNSEL MCKINNEY: Thank you for your testimony.
23 We'll now move to the next witness, which is Miranda
24 Hoffner, from Lincoln Center.

25 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time will begin.

2 MS. HOFFNER: Thank you. Good afternoon to cero
3 psi and the members of the committee. Thank you so
4 much for raising the importance of expanding New
5 York's access and cultural institutions... expanding
6 access to New York's cultural institutions for the 1
7 million New Yorkers living with disabilities. My
8 name is Miranda Hoffner, I'm the Associate Director
9 of Accessibility. And just to share a visual
10 description, I'm a white woman in my early 40s. I
11 have red curly hair and wearing a tan blazer in green
12 tarp and a headset, and my pronouns are she her.
13 Lincoln Center has been serving this community for
14 nearly 40 years. With the Department of programs and
15 services for people with disabilities that was
16 created in 1985. It was the first department of its
17 time, at the time that a major performing arts
18 organization. Today after this prolonged period of
19 isolation due to the pandemic it is even more
20 important to assure ensure that our programs are
21 accessible for all New Yorkers, as people are hungry
22 to reclaim spaces to gather. New York's Lincoln
23 Center's approach to accessibility mirrors the
24 transformation of our performing arts spaces to be
25 more inclusive of our audiences identities and access

3 needs by design, not as an afterthought or add on.

4 We recognize that the access needs must be integrated
5 in the creative process for all of our work, and that
6 our stages must reflect differences and
7 interconnectedness, and that we're creating space
8 where everyone feels welcomed.

9 We ensure accessibility and five ways: We name
10 it. We have a commitment to accessibility and
11 inclusion that's clearly posted on our website for
12 each season and each event page. That includes all
13 access accommodations available for each event. As
14 previous folks who have testified have mentioned,
15 that certainly comes as a... as a great cost to
16 ensure accommodations and inclusion and the support
17 of City Council is... is integral in being able to
18 provide those accommodations to standard. Number two
19 is the environment. Lincoln Center has made strides
20 to ensure that our physical and online spaces are
21 accessible for people with disabilities. All of our
22 buildings include accessible entrances, accessible
23 seating, companion seating, assistive listening
24 devices and large print programs. We regularly offer
25 American Sign Language Interpretation Captioning,
Audio disruption programs. Ad we also, number three,

2 proactively incorporate feedback from the disability
3 community. As an institution, we recognize that
4 accommodations and programs for people with
5 disabilities is never a one-size-fits-all solution.
6 Being truly welcoming and accessible as a civic space
7 is an ongoing process. We program with
8 intentionality, we are proud to celebrate Disability
9 Pride month in July, we have a range of programs that
10 feature disabled and deaf artists, including feature
11 of Deaf Broadway. And lastly, jobs. We have a
12 program called Access Ambassadors, the job training
13 initiative for high school students with
14 disabilities, to learn how to work in the arts field.
15 We had over 140 New York City students who
16 participate in this program. It was the largest
17 cohort we've had to date. And we find it incredibly
18 important to build... build capacity and provide jobs
19 for folks with disabilities within the arts. Lincoln
20 Center is committed to New York City being a place
21 where everyone is welcomed and where they belong, and
22 we continue to engage with them where they can
23 continue to engage as lifelong learners in the arts.
24 We seek to be a civic hub for all.

25 Thank you.

2 COUNSEL MCKINNEY: Thank you so much for your
3 testimony. We'll now move to the last witness on
4 this panel. This is also the last witness for this
5 hearing. I will check for anyone we inadvertently
6 missed at the end of this panel. But the next
7 panelist is Ariel Herrera. You may begin when the
8 sergeant calls the clock. Thank you.

9 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time will begin.

10 MR. HERRERA: Thank you for the opportunity to
11 speak to you today. My name is Ariel Herrera, and I
12 am the Research and Advocacy Manager for Dance/NYC.
13 Visual check, I am an Asian American of Filipino
14 descent. I have black hair and wear reading glasses,
15 and I'm currently wearing a gray shirt. Dance/NYC is
16 the only service organization for the dance industry
17 in the metropolitan New York City area. And it's
18 action-oriented research and advocacy seek to present
19 and advance the interests of the dance sector.
20 Dance/NYC is committed to addressing issues of
21 disability equity and justice, and since 2014 has
22 produced three reports on disability dance artistry,
23 hosted and organized numerous dialogues, convenings,
24 and town halls and disability and dance, created the
25 Disability Dance Artistry Fund to generate dance

2 making and performance by and with disabled artists,
3 establish a residency program to expand opportunities
4 for dancers with disabilities, and to advance
5 accessibility and equity. But much more needs to be
6 done. Dance/NYC joins colleagues advocates working
7 across creative disciplines in thanking you for your
8 leadership and requesting the city to expand dance
9 making and creative opportunities for disabled dance
10 artists and companies performing integrated and
11 disability dance artistry through grants,
12 residencies, and rehearsal space subsidies, expand
13 dance education opportunities for disabled children,
14 particularly in public schools, ensuring
15 accessibility in public school buildings and their
16 dance facilities, expand opportunities for training,
17 certifying, employing, and investing in disabled
18 dance educators, and last but not least, address
19 infrastructure buildings and technology issues to
20 dedicated capital funding to ensure all performance
21 spaces are accessible and ADA compliant for both the
22 audience and performing artists. The city government
23 must invest in arts and culture in every community
24 and build a city where every New Yorker...

25 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time expired.

3 MR. HERRERA: ...community is strengthening Power
4 of Culture. We call on your leadership to make
5 access to the arts with disabled people a priority
6 for the city's Cultural Plan and invest in dedicated
7 funding for disability arts. Thank you so much.

8 COUNSEL MCKINNEY: Thank you so much for your
9 testimony. This concludes the public. This
10 concludes the panel, but it also includes the public
11 portion of our testimony. We are not seeing anyone
12 else logged in who is registered. But for the
13 purposes of the record, I will read names, and then
14 we'll check for anybody that we have inadvertently
15 missed. So Jean Ryan from Disabled In Action of
16 Metropolitan New York, or DIA, Benjamin Marzel from
17 the American Museum of Natural History and Clifton.

18 Okay, and at this point, if we have inadvertently
19 missed anyone, and you were on the Zoom and would
20 like to testify, or you were in the room, and we have
21 not noted you, or we do not have your witness slip,
22 if you can please raise your hand in Zoom or just let
23 us know that you're here in person. We'll wait one
24 moment.

25 Okay, and we're not seeing any hands. So we will
move to the Chair for final remarks. Thank you.

3 CHAIRPERSON OSSÉ: Thank you to everyone that has
4 testified. Our cultural community is certainly a
5 staple of New York City. Locals and tourists alike
6 visit our cultural institutions, from our museums to
7 our Broadway shows, to our concerts and performance
8 venues. To experience the stories and sites that
9 bring us joy and excitement, the beauty of arts and
10 culture is that it is meant to be shared with all who
11 seek it, is meant to unite and bridge us all, no
12 matter who we are. When the proper accommodations
13 are not available for those who need it, it is a
14 disservice to the mission of the arts and culture, a
15 space that welcomes all, because we are now excluding
16 instead of including, and not everyone is able to
17 enjoy the beauty of what this community has to offer.

18 As I mentioned at the start of this hearing, it
19 is imperative that we make the cultural community a
20 space that's supposed to embrace welcome, welcoming,
21 and community inclusive for all. People with
22 disabilities should be a focal point, not an
23 afterthought. And I urge Commissioner Laurie Cumbo,
24 even though I know that she will be on my side and
25 the Department of Cultural Affairs, to ensure that
our cultural community is open for all. As Chair of

2 the Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and
3 International Intergroup Relations. I look forward
4 to working with the administration, advocates and the
5 cultural community as a whole to bring inclusivity
6 and accessibility to all.

7 Thank you all for your time today. And with
8 that, I hereby adjourn this hearing.

9 [Gavel]

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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 07/31/2022