

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS,
LIBRARIES, AND INTERNATIONAL
INTERGROUP RELATIONS

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March 9, 2021
Start: 10:14 a.m.
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HELD AT: Remote Hearing (Virtual Room 2)

B E F O R E: Jimmy Van Bramer
CHAIRPERSON

COUNCIL MEMBERS:
Laurie Cumbo
Dharma Diaz
James Gennaro
Mark Gjonaj
Francisco Moya

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

Gonzalo Casals, Commissioner
Department of Cultural Affairs

Sheila Feinberg, Deputy Commissioner
Department of Cultural Affairs

Dennis Walcott, President and CEO
Queens Public Library

Linda Johnson, President and CEO
Brooklyn Public Library

Tony Marx, President and CEO
New York Public Library

Shantel Johnson, Case Manager/Social
Worker
Queens Public Library

Christine Zarett, Curator
Langston Hughes Community Library and
Cultural Center

Damla Beck, Young adult Librarian
Brooklyn Public Library

Russell Granet, President and CEO
New 42

Ronaldo Barber
Local 1482

John Hyslop, New York City resident

Sarah Levinson, Deputy Director of
Education and Public Engagement
Guggenheim Museum

Kimberly Olsen, Executive Director
New York City Arts and Education
Roundtable

James Claffey, President
Local One

Lisa Alpert, Vice President of
Development and Programming
Greenwood Cemetery

Francine Garber Cohen, President
Regina Opera

Alejandra Duque Cifuentes, Executive
Director
Dance NYC

Lauren Comito, Board Chair
Urban Librarians Unite

Tara Brody, Teen Librarian
Queens Central Library

Margaret Connors McQuade, Deputy Director
Hispanic Society Museum and Library

Jessica Chen, Artistic Director
J Chen Project

Carol Ochs, Executive Director
52nd Street Project

Christina Perry
League of Independent Theater

Sade Lythcott, CEO
National Black Theater

Yashiris Moreta, Vice President of
Operations for Capital Projects
New York Historical Society

Atiba Edwards, COO
Brooklyn Children's Museum

Lucy Sexton
New Yorkers for Arts and Culture

Sarah Espanol, Children's Librarian
Glendale Branch
Queens Public Library

Josselyn Atahualpa, Program Coordinator
Queens Memory
Queens Public Library

Svetlana Negrimovsky, Neighborhood
Library Supervisor
Brooklyn Public Library

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3 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Stream is up.

4 Sergeants, can you start the recordings?

5 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: PC recording rolling.

6 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Cloud recording is up.

7 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Backup is rolling.

8 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Sergeant Martinez, could
9 you give us the opening, please?

10 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Good morning and welcome
11 to today's remote New York City Council preliminary
12 budget hearing of the Committee on Cultural Affairs,
13 Libraries, International and Intergroup Relations.
14 At this time, would all panelists please turn on
15 their video? To minimize disruption, please silence
16 your electronic devices and if you wish to submit
17 testimony, you may do so via email at
18 testimony@council.nyc.gov. Once again, that is
19 testimony@council.nyc.gov. Thank you for your
20 cooperation. We are ready to begin.

21 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you.

22 Good morning, everyone and welcome to this hearing of
23 the Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and
24 International Intergroup Relations. I Council member
25 Jimmy Van Bramer, Chair of this committee and we are

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2 now formally in session. As I have mentioned in
3 previous years, this marks the 23rd straight year
4 where I am in attendance at this hearing. The first
5 11 as a staff member for the Queens Public Library
6 and this is my 12th as the Chair of this committee.
7 So, nearly a quarter of a century of budget hearings
8 on cultural affairs and libraries. This afternoon we
9 will be discussing the fiscal year 2022 preliminary
10 expense and capital budget for our three great public
11 library systems. For FY 22, the administration is
12 proposing a \$403.2 million subsidy for the systems.
13 The 22 prelim capital commitment plan which covers
14 fiscals 2021 to 2025 and includes \$903.7 million for
15 the systems. The 10 year capital strategy, which is
16 released every two years, provides 830.6 million and
17 fiscal years 2022 through 2031 four capital
18 construction and reconstruction projects for the
19 systems and I am sure that we will be hearing a lot
20 from our three presidents and CEOs about the capital
21 plan for sure, particularly the long term commitment
22 by the city to our three systems. Now, since the
23 beginning of the Covid 19 pandemic, our three library
24 systems quickly pivoted their work to provide online
25 and virtual services and programs when neighborhood

2 branches were forced to close. A year later, more
3 branches Re: opening in the ways that are safe for
4 people to access the incredible materials and service
5 as of our three library systems. But I want to point
6 out and I think it is incredibly important to point
7 out that the three systems, even while these
8 community libraries were closed for traditional
9 public library service, worked closely and incredibly
10 important with the administration and with all of the
11 various city agencies, as well as local communities
12 to provide lifesaving services. And I mean that.
13 During this time of incredible difficulty and even
14 fear, our public library systems were not only making
15 2020 Census outreach possible, they were-- and still
16 are in many cases-- using the library branches as
17 Covid testing sites and working very closely Helping
18 Hospitals, Test and Trace Corps, and even serving as
19 polling locations when we had our elections. I think
20 it is fair to say that the sense of isolation over
21 the last 12 months has been incredibly powerful and
22 daunting for so many of us and our public libraries
23 have always been a place where people connect--
24 connect to one another, connect to ideas and feel
25 hope. And even in this most challenging of years,

2 our three public library systems have not failed to
3 fulfill their mission to the people of the city of
4 New York. And so, as we always say, because it's
5 always true, it's more important than ever that we
6 stand by our three public library systems and the
7 courageous-- and I mean courageous-- men and women
8 who work for our public library systems who have
9 continued to work and to serve even as they
10 themselves were confronting what everyone else was
11 confronting. So, this is the time, even in these
12 challenging times, to look at this budget with a lens
13 toward equity knowing that are libraries have always
14 been that first line of defense, right? That first
15 place where those with the least stand to gain the
16 most simply by having access to their public
17 libraries. Now, we are, of course, disappointed to
18 see a reduction to operation subsidies to the systems
19 with a total reduction of 4.3 million in FY 2021 and
20 J proposed \$10.3 million reduction in fiscal 22.
21 Even though that may sound like a small amount of
22 money relatively speaking, our libraries need the
23 funding to be able to do this work and I might add
24 that the proposed reduction in in 22 is one that cuts
25 to the bone in ways that could seriously impact the

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2 libraries abilities to do their work and maintain all
3 of their staffing levels as they currently know them.
4 So, for FY 2021, the Council allocated \$15.4 million
5 through Council initiatives supporting the city's
6 First Readers program on literacy and the digital
7 inclusion and literacy initiatives. These programs
8 have helped keep our libraries connected to their
9 constituents, our constituents during the pandemic
10 and highlight the need for a continued commitment to
11 our libraries by the city of New York. It is
12 essential that the budget that we adopt this year be
13 transparent, accountable, and reflective of the
14 priorities and interests of the Council and the
15 people we represent. Our libraries are truly the
16 most democratic institutions we have in our city.
17 Continuing to provide New Yorkers in every
18 neighborhood with educational resources, services,
19 and programs. So, I look forward to active
20 engagement with the administration over the next few
21 months to ensure that the fiscal year 2022 adopted
22 budget meets the goals the Council has set out and
23 meets the needs of the people of the city of New
24 York. And you cannot do that without supporting our
25 public libraries. You cannot do that without

2 supporting our public libraries. So, I want to
3 recognize members of the committee who are here with
4 us today. I believe Council member Francisco Moya,
5 Council member Mark Gjonaj, Council member Dharma
6 Diaz. And if there are any other Council members who
7 are here, the staff will text me or let me know. I
8 appreciate that. I think I got everyone right now.
9 I also want to recognize the staff who have worked to
10 put together the hearing and that includes Jack
11 Bernatawitz, my legislative director, Matt Wallace,
12 my Chief of Staff, as well as the committee's
13 counsel, Brenda McKinney, our legislative policy
14 analyst, Kristi Dwyer, and our principal financial
15 analyst, Aaliyah Ali. So, with that, I will hand it
16 over to our counsel for today to recognize that our
17 three presidents and CEOs and begin the testimony on
18 behalf of the libraries, but I just want to say
19 personally, before I do that, I just want to thank
20 Dennis Walcott, Linda Johnson, Tony Marks, and their
21 teams because I know and I see members of your team
22 throughout all of these little boxes-- on behalf of
23 the city of New York, thank you. I know that this
24 has been incredibly challenging year for you all, as
25 well as you and your teams and do you have not

2 stopped surveying the people of the city of New York.

3 We are in all, quite frankly, of how quickly

4 libraries pivoted and adopted and served in so many

5 ways. As Dennis knows, the I have been tested for

6 Covid at several Queens public library locations over

7 the last 12 months and I am always amazed at how--

8 not amazed because I know, but just thrilled to see

9 the libraries step up for the city and, of course,

10 the city needs to continue stepping up for our public

11 libraries. So, with that, thank you and I will hand

12 it over to our staff person who is going to tell us

13 where we go from here.

14 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so much,

15 Chair Van Bramer. I am Anastasia Zumina. I'm the

16 legislative policy analyst at the New York City

17 Council. I will be moderating today's hearing and

18 calling panelists to testify. I apologize in advance

19 for any mispronunciation due to my Russian accent. I

20 will do my best. So, before we begin, I want to

21 remind everyone that you will be on mute until I call

22 on you to testify. After you are called on, you will

23 be unmuted by the host. Please listen for your name.

24 I will periodically announce who the next panelist

25 will be. Council member questions will be limited to

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2 five minutes. Council members, please note that this
3 includes both your questions and the witness is
4 response. Please also note that we will not allow a
5 second round of questions at today's hearing. For
6 public testimony, the I will call up individuals in
7 panels. Council members who have questions for
8 particular panelist should use the raise hand
9 function in Zoom. You will be called on after
10 everyone on that panel has completed their testimony.
11 For public panelists, once I call your name, a member
12 of our staff will unmute you and the sergeant-at-arms
13 will give you the go-ahead to begin speaking after
14 setting the timer. All public testimony will be
15 limited to two minutes. After I call your name,
16 please wait a brief moment for the sergeant-at-arms
17 to announce that you may begin before starting your
18 testimony. I will now call on the following members
19 of the administration to testify. Gonzalo Casals,
20 Commissioner, Department of Cultural Affairs. Sheila
21 Feinberg, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Cultural
22 Affairs. Philippa Shawl, director of finance. I
23 will deliver the oath to all three of you and after I
24 will call upon each of you individually to respond to
25 the oath. Please raise your right hands. Do you

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2 affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth, and
3 nothing but the truth before this committee and to
4 respond honestly to Council member questions?
5 Commissioner Casals?

6 COMMISSIONER CASALS: I do.

7 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Deputy
8 Commissioner?

9 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER FINDER: I do.

10 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Ms. Shawl?

11 PHILLIPA SHAWL: I do.

12 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you.

13 Commissioner Casals, you may begin your testimony
14 when you're ready.

15 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Commissioner,
16 before you testify, bit of housekeeping because I
17 think the order of this, I am trying to figure out.
18 I believe to that libraries were on it 10 and DCLA
19 was on subsequent. But I am trying to confirm that
20 with the committee staff right now, but as we do
21 that, we have the newest member of the committee who
22 has joined us, so it give me an opportunity to both
23 welcome Council member Jim Gennaro back from
24 formerly. And that is heartfelt, but it is also a
25 stall tactic because we are trying to figure out the

2 order of who goes first. And I'm sure it's okay with
3 all of you. Both our library presidents and CEOs and
4 Commissioner Casals, but I apologize for any
5 inconvenience here. So, welcome, formerly Council
6 member Gennaro. And so if this is all right with
7 everyone, I am told that the Department of Cultural
8 Affairs has won the coin toss and we will hear from
9 Gonzalo and then we will go right to the three
10 presidents and CEOs. Is that all right with our
11 presidents and CEOs? Okay. I think I got the thumbs
12 up from everybody. All right. I apologize, again,
13 for that. So, Commissioner Casals, if you could
14 begin your testimony.

15 COMMISSIONER CASALS: I think this is a
16 historical precedent, Chair. We would always go
17 after the libraries. Thank you to the libraries to
18 allow us to go first. Good morning, Chair Van Bramer
19 and members of the committee. I am here today to
20 testify today regarding the Mayor's proposed
21 preliminary budget for fiscal year 2021. I am joined
22 by my colleagues, Deputy Commissioner Sheila Fienberg
23 and finance director Philippa Shawl. I'll start with
24 a review of the figures from the preliminary budget.
25 The FY 22 budget for DCLA is \$143.6 million which

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2 includes \$107 million for cultural institution
3 groups, \$28.5 million for the cultural development
4 fund, \$1.25 million for energy in groups on to UCLA
5 property, and \$6.9 million for agency operations and
6 other expenses. At this point in the budget process,
7 these figures do not include any funding items
8 typically added at budget at adoption like city
9 councilmember items and Mayoral increases. This
10 represents a 4 million decrease from this point in
11 the budget process last year or at 2.7 percent
12 decrease. We are committed to maintaining robust
13 funding for New York's cultural community, despite
14 the extraordinary fiscal challenges caused by the
15 pandemic. The agency's current FY 21 budget now
16 stands at \$187.5 million. This includes a one
17 million-dollar cut implemented as part of the
18 [inaudible 00:17:21] that all agencies were asked to
19 meet. Despite the ongoing fiscal challenges faced by
20 the city, this budget remains high by historical
21 standards and an important source of support for
22 cultural nonprofits across the city. One year ago, I
23 was appointed Commissioner of DCLA. In the early
24 days of the pandemic, no one could predict the
25 severity of the challenges that lay ahead. At my

2 last days as director of Leslie-Lohman Museum, we
3 participated in a weekly check in call with peer
4 institutions to determine when to open, thinking that
5 the temporary shutdown would be measured in days. I
6 know we weren't alone and there estimating the impact
7 of the pandemic would have on our cultural
8 institutions and our whole city. Since then, we all
9 have seen and experienced loss, trauma, and an
10 upheaval of our daily lives, but not everyone has
11 been impacted by the pandemic in the same way. What
12 we're facing is really a triple crisis. The public
13 health crisis of Covid 19, the crisis caused by the
14 systemic racism and inequities in our society, and
15 the unprecedented economic crisis. In the cultural
16 community, despite going through tremendous
17 suffering, fear, and loss alongside their fellow New
18 Yorkers has been incredibly resilient in dealing with
19 this scenario. And still to continue to connect with
20 New Yorkers in ways that they need it most. Early
21 on, DCLA worked with cultural groups to transform
22 their public facilities into station sites for
23 ambulances, Covid testing sitings, and food pantries.
24 Now, as we look to recovery, we're transforming
25 cultural spaces into vaccination site and spaces for

2 healing and wellness. We have partnered with Mayor's
3 Office of Media Entertainment and New York City and
4 Company to collect and highlight the incredible range
5 of mutual offerings and we convened the sector to
6 discuss urgent topics and connect them with resources
7 for opening safely and programming outdoor spaces.

8 More than 1000 cultural development fund recipients
9 to change their scope of work in the FY 20 and FY 21
10 applications so they could continue to receive city
11 support and provide cultural services to New Yorkers.

12 As the Commissioner, I want to commend my team for
13 their enthusiasm, passion, and careful [inaudible
14 00:19:38]. Even as they dealt with the challenges
15 brought by the pandemic. There is so much work to do
16 and on the one hand we need to focus on the recovery
17 of the cultural sector itself. Layoffs, loss of
18 revenues, and Council programs have devastated the
19 organizations we work with. We conducted a survey
20 early in the pandemic that tried to measure this
21 loss. What it showed was not surprising. Over half
22 \$1 million in lost revenue and 78 percent of our
23 artists working in arts locations have been laid off,
24 among other findings. Thanks to the Council's
25 continued partnership, we were able to target

2 investments to these hardest hit areas in FY 21.

3 Just yesterday, we closed our response to the follow-
4 up survey and results of which will be released later

5 this spring. We hope it will contribute to a

6 powerful tool for advocacy and help direct resources

7 where they are needed most. We also need to focus on

8 culture's contribution to the city's recover as a

9 whole. Culture is essential to every community in

10 New York City. While it provides local jobs and

11 makes healthier, safer neighborhoods. It's also a

12 cornerstone of New York City status as a world

13 cultural capital, attracting artists and visitors

14 from all over the world. What is good for culture is

15 good for New York City. We are just starting down

16 the road to recovery. We look forward to working

17 with you in the weeks and months ahead to our budget

18 that supports the needs of our culture and community

19 at this critical time. And to fighting for a fair

20 and equitable recovery for all New Yorkers. Thank

21 you for the opportunity to testify today and I'm

22 happy to answer any questions that you may have.

23 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you,

24 Commissioner Casals. And I apologize to all involved

25 for the little switcheroo, but I didn't get an

2 opportunity to adequately introduce you, Commissioner
3 Casals. You know, I was just noticing, because this
4 week is such an important week in so many ways-- and
5 triggering in many ways because everything started to
6 happen this weekend I went back and looked at my
7 schedule for this week last year and noticed that
8 your appointment as Commissioner was a year ago. I
9 want to say March 11 or something like that, right?
10 March 11 you became the Commissioner for the
11 Department of Cultural Affairs and your entire tenure
12 has been generating a pandemic and, obviously, you
13 were personally impacted in a very serious way. So,
14 I just want to say to you also, Commissioner Casals,
15 and Queens resident, you know, we are grateful for
16 your leadership and stewardship, really, of our
17 community and grateful to have you in that position.
18 I will talk more a little bit about the Department of
19 Cultural Affairs. And I kind of like the synergy of
20 going back-and-forth between our public libraries and
21 our cultural community because you are also part of
22 the same whole, right? You all are interconnected
23 and do we need equally important work. But because I
24 gave such a tremendous introduction and CEOs of our
25 public library systems, I want to return to them and

2 asked them to deliver their opening statements and
3 then, with all of your blessing, we will go a little
4 back and forth between you all and get to the heart
5 of the matter in terms of the 22 prelim budget for
6 both of you. So, public library systems, the ball is
7 in your court and whichever order you have chosen to
8 go.

9 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Chair, if I may, I
10 have in order here, if that would be okay. So, the
11 first panel would be Queens Library and that would be
12 Mr. Dennis Walcott, President and CEO of Queens
13 Library and then we will also have Ms. Johnson,
14 President and CEO of Brooklyn Public Library, and we
15 have Mr. Tony Marx, President and CEO of New York
16 Public Library. So, if we could begin with Mr.
17 Dennis Walcott, please, whatever you are ready.

18 DENNIS WALCOTT: I am ready. So, thank
19 you very much. And if I may say to the Chair, to my
20 colleagues, to the Commissioner, and to all the
21 people that are participating, porches morning to all
22 of you. It is a lovely day as far as whether it wise
23 is concerned and I hope you are all well. My name is
24 Dennis Walcott and I am the president and CEO of the
25 Queens Public Library and I am glad that the Chair

2 talked about going to the Queens Public Libraries for
3 his testing because it would be a violation on my
4 part from a HIPPA point of view to indicate that.

5 But it is always an honor to see the Chair, just like
6 we saw each other, I think it was last week, at

7 Sunnyside. So, even in a safe environment, we try to
8 make sure we keep up with each other. So, Mr. Chair,

9 I want to start out my presentation by thanking you
10 for your years of service, both as an important

11 member of the Queens Public Library team, but also
12 your capacity as Chair. Your advocacy, your support,

13 you are constantly asking us the right questions and
14 it has really led us extremely well and has benefited

15 all three systems in ways that we can't even talk
16 about in a hearing because it would take too long.

17 So, personally and collectively, I know my colleagues
18 will do this, as well. We want to first start by

19 saying a big thank you to you for all that you have
20 done and continue to do, as well. And that is not

21 part of my written testimony. That is--

22 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you.

23 Thank you.

24 DENNIS WALCOTT: It's truly from the

25 heart. But as we know, we have been living,

2 unfortunately, in a pandemic environment which has
3 affected every individual, business and government
4 and it has changed the way we interact with one
5 another, has forced us to reconsider all things we
6 take for granted. And Queens was at the epicenter in
7 the beginning, as far as the virus in the outbreak in
8 the United States nearly one year ago. Many of our
9 communities were devastated and we all have grappled
10 with heartbreaking losses of family members, friends,
11 colleagues, and or neighbors and our condolences to
12 all who were part of this and reviewing this who have
13 suffered losses, as well. Throughout this pandemic,
14 the Queens Public Library has been there for our
15 communities. As the Council member indicated in his
16 introduction, we, the three systems, have evolved
17 rapidly and turned as far as the public once the
18 shutdown was given. When we were faced with the
19 physical closure of our branches, we never stopped
20 serving. We developed a full range of programs and
21 services within the first two weeks of our closure.
22 Here at Queens Public Library, we established a full
23 calendar of virtual activities featuring some very
24 popular programs such as our beloved children's story
25 time, our Zumba classes, our weekly hip-hop DJ

2 sessions which proved to be extremely popular to
3 where it became more than once a week. We increased
4 it to two times a week with Ralph McDaniels on
5 Instagram live. We organized virtual author talks,
6 book clubs, workshops on how to arts and craft, and
7 civic judgment, murders, and other diverse cultural
8 programs. We developed online programs and more than
9 a dozen languages rather quickly. Last month alone,
10 the Queens Public Library hosted a 24 hour Black
11 Health Summit and Healing virtual summit to focus on
12 issues including mental health, health equity,
13 parenting, civil rights, and racism in
14 disproportionate effects of the virus and over 7000
15 people viewed this event session and the number
16 continues to increase since we still have it posted,
17 as well. And the recordings are always available on
18 our website. We have posted over 10,000 virtual
19 programs with 182,000 live attendees with tens of
20 thousands more viewing the recorded material when
21 their schedules allowed. We added over 50,000
22 items-- this is just Queens alone-- to our digital
23 collection in order to meet the demand of our
24 customers in a virtual world and our e-books, E
25 magazines, and other multimedia circulated nearly 2.1

2 million times-- an amazing number. We remain
3 committed to equitable access to library materials
4 and services through programs such as our always, as
5 you know, Chair, Mail A Book, our correctional
6 outreach services, our partnership initiatives with
7 homeless shelters, homebound customers with the means
8 to having library materials delivered to their doors.
9 We saw an increase of 100 program registrants in 2020
10 of that particular program. In 2020, we mailed over
11 17,000 items to over 900 homebound customers via the
12 Mail A Book program. Our correctional library and
13 sent over 600 books to Rikers Island. Between April
14 and May 2020, QPL distributed over 2000 items such as
15 board games, writing journals, pens, and other
16 stationary items to over 700 families in six domestic
17 violence shelters and the borough of Queens and we
18 had mailed 13 boxes of books to veteran shelters
19 serving 255 people. Between October and December
20 2020, we hosted seven stop mobile library tours
21 throughout Queens, informing the public about to go
22 service and virtual programming, registering people
23 for library cards and making Wi-Fi available to 250
24 people in their communities. To address the digital
25 divide, we-- exacerbated by the pandemic, we loaned

2 475 mobile hotspots to students in 2020 through our
3 ongoing collaboration with the Department of
4 Education and we are working to secure additional
5 items for the public and needs remain in amendments.
6 I won't read the entire testimony because I know you
7 have a jampacked schedule, but I just want to say
8 that we have increased, all three of us, our services
9 and so many ways. As you indicated, Council members,
10 you were tested. Currently, the Queens Public
11 Library has three testing sites up. Q Gardens Hills,
12 Lefferts, and Windsor Park. To date, we have had
13 60,000 people who have come through our doors to be
14 tested and that number continues to grow. We serve
15 as a learning lab and, as you indicated, we have done
16 census work. We are just there to serve the public.
17 We re-tasked our budget to make sure we have more E
18 materials in place and we have safety always in mind,
19 both for our great staff who have been doing this. I
20 just happened to be the face in front of you and the
21 staff has been out in the trenches doing this on a
22 regular basis. And one of the things that all of us
23 have experienced is the adapt-- I always say I'm not
24 going to say that word. The ability to adapt to the
25 changing environment and that, to me, has been the

2 most significant thing on the part of our staff. At
3 this moment, 36 of our libraries are open to the
4 public with to go services. Since we opened for to
5 go service in July, we have seen over 800,000 visits.
6 Think about that. During a pandemic with not even
7 all of our libraries open, we have seen 800,000
8 visits at our locations and more than 350,000 check
9 out of box and other physical material with many more
10 on hold. And since December 2020, our to go
11 locations have allowed people to pick up remote
12 printing, which is also turning out to be very
13 popular service. So, we've been doing a lot, Council
14 member. Now, the impact of the budget-- let me take
15 a second to address that from my Queens perspective.
16 As you indicated, the Mayor's fiscal year 2022
17 preliminary budget includes the 1.2 million one time
18 reduction in the operating subsidy during this
19 current fiscal year and a devastating \$2.9 million
20 reduction to our fiscal year 2022 operating budget.
21 While no one welcomes any reduction to their
22 operating budget, we understand the times we live in.
23 But as the picture I just painted you, we continue to
24 provide the necessary service and service that
25 connect [inaudible 00:32:37] to those who,

2 unfortunately, may not have someone in their lives.

3 We have been working diligently to minimize the

4 impacts of these cuts, however, the 2.9 million cut

5 for fiscal year 2022 means that our collection budget

6 will be reduced from current levels and we will not

7 have all the necessary staff to operate at an optimal

8 pre-pandemic level. As of now, we do not project

9 having to lay off any staff, however, it is very

10 important that the Council reauthorize the libraries

11 initiative to prevent the loss of additional 3.3

12 million with the QPL over the next fiscal year. This

13 loss, coupled with the administration cuts, would

14 equal roughly \$6.2 million cut to our fiscal 2022

15 budget. That would be devastating. We have had to

16 make significant investments to protect our staff

17 with PPE and other material and we have to continue

18 to plan for that as we open up more and more

19 locations. In addition, you talked about in your

20 introduction, Council member and, Chair, the ability

21 to deal with capital. This fiscal year, while we did

22 not receive any capital funding from the

23 administration and, we are very fortunate and

24 grateful to have received the total of 18.6 million

25 from the Council, including 4 million in unrestricted

2 funding that allows us to address shortfalls and
3 projects. While the administration has been
4 supportive of the libraries, we have not received, as
5 you well know, substantial new funding in the cities
6 fiscal 10 year plan for-- since fiscal year 2016.
7 So, every day, Council member, we are facing
8 challenges and our libraries continue to adapt. So,
9 a true recovery for all starts with strong libraries,
10 as you indicated and, especially in partnership since
11 I see the Commissioner of Cultural Affairs there with
12 our cultural institutions. We are the backbone, the
13 lifeblood, the energy of our great city in every
14 community in this city needs us more and more.
15 Thanks to your leadership, we continue to serve, but
16 the challenges will be great as we move into the
17 future. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

18 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you for
19 the incredible work you and, obviously, all of your
20 team members and that good and wonderful staff of the
21 Queens Public Library do for the people of Queens.
22 Thank you.

23 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Chair.
24 We will now hear from Ms. Linda E. Johnson, President
25 and CEO of Brooklyn Public Library followed by Tony

2 Marx, President and CEO of New York Public Library.

3 Ms. Johnson, please when you are ready.

4 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: You can't
5 speak, Linda? Uh-oh. Can we unmute Linda Johnson?
6 There you go.

7 LINDA JOHNSON: There we go. Thank you,
8 everybody. In particular, to my colleague, Dennis
9 Walcott, whose testimony I could have given myself in
10 a particular congratulations before I think everybody
11 on the committee and in the city and the
12 administration. Chairman Van Bramer, congratulations
13 on having crossed the breakeven line more years at
14 these hearings as an elected official than as a
15 library-- That's really saying something.

16 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Yes.

17 LINDA JOHNSON: I didn't think I would
18 ever miss so much that he is opportunities for all of
19 us to be together in the chamber. I miss the
20 painting of George Washington and, of course, the
21 company level you fine folks. But, for the time
22 being, this will have to do. And so, it is with deep
23 gratitude to Speaker Johnson, Majority Leader Cumbo,
24 you, Chairman Van Bramer, finance Chairman Dromm, and
25 Laurie Cumbo from Brooklyn, Majority Leader and

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2 welcome to Council member Diaz, as well one of ours.

3 And thank you to the Brooklyn Delegation and the
4 entire City Council for supporting New York City's
5 libraries. We deeply appreciate your efforts to
6 ensure that Brooklyn Public Library can continue to
7 serve the 2.6 million residents of our borough. Our
8 patrons who range from infants to older adults have
9 relied on us through the many months of the pandemic
10 and they will continue to rely on us as they rebuild
11 their lives in its wake, whether they are seeking
12 trusted vaccine information, improving their resumes,
13 or learning to read. In turn, we rely upon the
14 city's support and we urge you to maintain the
15 Council's \$3.3 million investment in Brooklyn Public
16 Library from last year and to reject the proposed
17 2.85 million dollars cut in the fiscal year 2022
18 preliminary budget. All told, more than \$6 million
19 of our operating funds are at stake. We understand
20 that daunting financial challenges that the city
21 faces and we have absorbed a peg of \$1.2 million in
22 the current fiscal year, but a \$6 million loss,
23 combined with slashed state funding reduced private
24 revenue and increased pandemic related expenses would
25 force us to leave staff positions unfilled and reduce

2 service levels which would impede our ability to meet
3 the needs of our patrons at a critical juncture. I
4 admit, year after year I claim it is never been more
5 important to support the work of libraries which has
6 always been true, but-- and I think you will all
7 agree-- never more so than now. I feel a little
8 like the, you know, the girl who cried Wolf, but we
9 truly are at a juncture. I know that you all
10 recognize the perilous nature of this moment. Public
11 libraries are well positioned to help New Yorkers
12 build their lives and reconnect to their communities.
13 If there is one thing we have proven this year, it is
14 that we are capable of rapidly adapting to meet the
15 needs of our patrons. Nearly a year ago, when our
16 city went into lockdown, Brooklyn Public Library
17 pivoted on every front. We made it easier for
18 Brooklynites to get digital library cards and
19 expanded our digital collection to keep pace with
20 soaring E checkouts. Our staff began producing
21 virtual programs nearly overnight. To date, we have
22 offered more than 7000 high quality free virtual
23 programs for nearly 1 million attendees from
24 personalized job assistance to homework help to grief
25 support groups. Just last week, NPR featured our

2 children's librarian, Tenzin Kalsang, whose Tibetan
3 English story times have attracted more than 20,000
4 viewers at a time. Far more, obviously, then we
5 could have ever fit into Tenzin's Williamsburg
6 branch. Despite all the challenges of 2020, our
7 program attendance surpassed our pre-pandemic record.
8 For those unfamiliar with virtual platforms, our
9 librarians provided one-on-one phone training. One
10 older adult wrote, quote, after six months of being
11 alone, your wonderful classes came to me. I, again,
12 begin to feel that I am still a person able to
13 create, learn, and interact socially with the new
14 group of understanding people. And for the millions
15 of thousands of Brooklynites with insufficient
16 broadband access at home, we launched the Brooklyn
17 Reach Project, installing antennas on our rooftops to
18 extend a reliable unlimited Wi-Fi signal 300 feet in
19 every direction. We started with the highest need
20 neighborhoods and will soon have antennas on 53
21 branches across borough. As the weather warms, we
22 will introduce outdoor seating at several branches
23 and expand our laptop loan program. We are also
24 eager to pilot outdoor book browsing and resume
25 outdoor program-- and resume outdoor programs. Our

2 outdoor programs in the fall of 2020 you were a
3 resounding success. Open-air Ask a Tech sessions
4 provided free tech assistance to patrons adapting to
5 new technology. University open-air offered free
6 classes in Prospect Park and our Open Streets
7 initiative at Mequon Library in Bedford Stuyvesant
8 offered story time and other literacy programs for
9 children and their caregivers. We began welcoming
10 patrons back to our libraries last July, in tandem
11 with New York Public Library and Queens Public
12 Library following the recommendations and guidelines
13 of public health officials. Having reconfigured our
14 workspaces and implemented new cleaning ventilation,
15 PPE, and workspace distancing protocols, all of our
16 branches not currently under construction or serving
17 as learning labs are open to the public in limited
18 capacity. A total of 48 branches are now offering
19 grab and go to lobby service. Patrons can pick up
20 library books, art supplies, tax forms, and more.
21 And we are also offering on-demand printing at 10
22 branches. Whatever it is safe to progress to the
23 next phase of reopening, we will welcome our patrons
24 back for limited computer and in branch browsing as
25 well as appointment be services. We are not simply

2 waiting for the pandemic to end. We are actively
3 helping the city fight Covid 19 as we have been for
4 much of the last year. In partnership with New York
5 City Test and Trace Corps, Brooklyn Public Library
6 branches have served as PPE distribution and pop up
7 testing sites. Since August, our librarians and
8 staff have distributed more than 250,000 masks and
9 connected over 44,000 people with accurate
10 information about testing, vaccine safety, and
11 insurance coverage and they are also helping priority
12 populations sick your vaccine appointments. We are
13 cautiously hopeful that as more and more New Yorkers
14 are vaccinated, we will be able to welcome them fully
15 back into their local libraries. Many patrons have
16 expressed their eagerness to spend more time in their
17 branch to find more books, use our technology, have
18 space to work, or meet their neighbors. One family
19 wrote, and I quote, we can't wait to be back in our
20 neighborhood library on a normal basis. Another
21 quote, thank you for being a beacon within our
22 community during this challenging year. My family
23 cannot wait to spend time inside our local branch
24 again. We expect demand to grow with the expansion
25 of service and that in person full-service hours will

2 require intensive staffing. A reduction of \$6
3 million in fiscal year 2022 would jeopardize our
4 service position at the very moment our patrons help
5 to spend time inside their local branches once again.
6 Likewise, I am afraid but just as we can safely and
7 fully reopen our buildings, we will be forced to
8 contend with closures due to the failing heating and
9 cooling systems and leaking roofs. Last year, as
10 every year, I came before you with the same dismal
11 report. Over 1 million square feet of city owned
12 facilities without adequate funding to maintain them.
13 But we received no capital funds from the
14 administration in fiscal year 2021. We were able to
15 keep going because of the funding allocated by the
16 Council. This year, we, again, submitted a 10 year
17 capital plan proposal. Given the pandemic, we scaled
18 our submission back to \$198 million over 10 years for
19 the most urgent infrastructure upgrades, three sorely
20 needed branch overhauls, and funding to cover \$40
21 million in shortfalls in fiscal year 2022 alone. To
22 our great disappointment, our proposal was not
23 accepted. It is indefensible to refuse the long term
24 funding necessary to maintain the public libraries
25 are patrons rely on. In shortfalls on existing

2 projects. The cost of projects stalled by the
3 pandemic is steadily growing and we are struggling to
4 restart priority renovation projects that have long
5 languished. With the city's help in recent years,
6 Brooklyn Public Library has been able to revitalize
7 select branches, but we still shoulder approximately
8 \$250 million in deferred maintenance. The lack of
9 any new capital funding from the administration means
10 we must attend only to the most critical projects
11 without addressing countless infrastructure needs and
12 preventative work. Year after year, I am forced to
13 come to you hat in hand-- I should say hard hat in
14 hand-- for limited capital dollars to determine
15 which projects advance and which stave. It is
16 irresponsible, it is inefficient, and it is unfair
17 to our overburdened communities. I implore you to
18 fund library's capital plans for the coming year and
19 beyond. Dipping into our operating budget to solve
20 urgent capital demands will have dire consequences
21 for public service which, in turn, have dire
22 consequences for our city. In order for the people
23 to recover from the pandemic, all the suffering it
24 has wrought, and all the inequities it has laid bare.
25 They need spaces and public resources. Public

2 libraries are trusted by every generation located in
3 every neighborhood, and serve absolutely everyone.
4 We are uniquely positioned to help New York recover
5 and to rebuild a more Democratic, more cohesive city.
6 I urge you to preserve this work and to support this
7 work and to preserve our budget. Thank you.

8 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you,
9 Linda. And let me just say hard hat in hand may be
10 one of your wittiest pieces of testimony in the
11 several years that we've worked together, but to
12 drive home the seriousness of the point, you know, we
13 will come out of this and people will flock to our
14 public libraries more than ever, right? Because the
15 need for all those programs and services and
16 information will always exist, but the almost
17 desperate need to reconnect with neighbors and other
18 people and to simply be in those spaces that we all
19 loved for so long but that we couldn't access--
20 certainly not in the way that we traditionally did.
21 People are going to be driving into their libraries
22 in unprecedented numbers. And I don't mean driving
23 in cars necessarily, but just they will be voting
24 with their feet and so the physical plants, the
25 actual libraries have to be kept up. They have to be

2 maintained. They have to be repaired. They have to
3 be rebuilt I made new and better all the time. And
4 so, I just want to, you know, hammer home the point
5 that not funding libraries in capital is a
6 dereliction of duty in my opinion. We absolutely
7 need this administration to recognize that they just
8 recovery and a recovery that is forward thinking and
9 forward-looking into the future has to include our
10 public libraries being adequately funded in the 10
11 year capital plan because the numbers of folks going
12 in, right, in the industry-- we call it gate count--
13 but the number of people that are going to be coming
14 into our libraries is going to just go off the
15 charts, I believe, into the future. People are
16 really, really going to want that connection. Those
17 wonderful programs and auditoriums and the reading
18 times. Everyone is going to want that when it is
19 safe to do so and I certainly hope that it will be
20 safe to do so at, you know, may be the end of this
21 year, the beginning of next year, whenever it is.
22 Folks are going to come back and they are going to
23 need the libraries in a state of good repair. And
24 so, you just want to thank you, Linda, for making
25 that point so powerfully that I want to amplify it,

2 from our perspective that the city Council, that the
3 administration must step up. It is absolutely
4 unacceptable to refuse that request on the part of
5 our systems to be meaningfully included in the city's
6 10 year capital plan and in the city of New York's
7 planning for the future. So, that is my soapbox for
8 the moment, but Tony Marx, I think you are ready,
9 willing, and able to speak.

10 TONY MARX: Indeed. Well, first, thank
11 you. It is always a pleasure to be following my
12 witty and eloquent colleagues, Linda and Dennis, and
13 hear about the great work that is happening in
14 Brooklyn and Queens. Thank you.

15 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: And, Tony,
16 before you go further, I just looked at the boxes on
17 my screen and see Majority Leader Laurie Cumbo is
18 with us, so I want to recognize her and the entire
19 committee is here. So, thank you very much. Sorry,
20 Tony.

21 TONY MARX: No. No. I want to thank you
22 for your amazing service. 23 years of doing these.
23 I think that qualifies for some kind of an award and
24 certainly our gratitude to you, to Speaker Johnson,
25 to the Majority Leader, to all the members of the

2 committee. Thank you for all of your amazing work in
3 support of libraries and for all of your work in
4 support of New York in this incredibly difficult
5 time. It was also a pleasure to hear from the
6 Commissioner of Cultural Affairs and I just want to
7 shout out, you know, you know, we have all been
8 locked up for a way to long and, you know, being able
9 to get back into the museum's and the cultural
10 institutions and the role that they have played
11 throughout this and keeping our spirit up has really
12 been astonishing. So, thank you to our sisters and
13 brothers in the culturals. So, as has already been
14 said, it's been now almost exactly a year since we
15 suspended services. It's just incredible. But in
16 this period, in this extraordinary year amid this
17 crisis, we have maintained our commitment to
18 equitable and accessible service by quickly,
19 astonishingly, pivoting to digital platforms, remote
20 offerings, partnering with the city on initiatives to
21 manage the impact of the pandemic and moving forward
22 with capital projects. All of that is only possible
23 because of our amazing staff, just a few of whom are
24 here with us, the senior leadership, and throw out
25 the front line, our colleagues at DC 37-- I see Val

2 is here. A shout out to the amazing work of everyone
3 who has made it possible to continue. And now we
4 face the challenges of maintaining our digital
5 offerings and growing them because we have learned
6 how pivotal they-- and how essential they are.
7 Continuing to expand our footprint for all the
8 reasons that you will have described as people are
9 eager to come back, and restoring our physical
10 services to help New Yorkers recover from this
11 crisis. The New York public library is currently
12 open. We have been open, effectively, one way or the
13 other, throughout as has been heard from our sister
14 institutions. We opened again in July with all the
15 various requirements for being safe in our track
16 record on that, I think, across the three library
17 systems has been nothing short of remarkable--
18 perhaps miraculous. We are now at 53 locations with
19 grab and go, together with the Andrew High School
20 Braille and Talking About Library. We are moving
21 forward with capital projects. We have moved forward
22 at Roosevelt Island. It opened for grab and go on
23 January 25th. The Inwood temporary space on the same
24 day. We remained willing throughout to reevaluate
25 our opening plans to make sure that we would adjust

2 to keep everyone safe and we continue to move
3 forward. That is all sort of-- and that enabled us
4 to shift fundamentally to pivotal. There was a
5 period when we talked about Library being only--
6 sorry. Digital. Our digital library cards we gave--
7 we issued 124,000 new library cards, 5.2 million
8 digital checkouts. 5.2 million digital checkouts.
9 Simply E sign ups of our e-book at and E checkouts
10 are up 60 and 40 percent, respectively. Our
11 community resource pages provided information,
12 crucial information, on wellness, housing, food,
13 security, tech connect, continue to train people for
14 the essential skills in the digital world. Online
15 job training, one-on-one coaching for interviews, all
16 of that continue. On the research library side, we
17 establish scan and deliver so you can order up
18 whatever you need from our really, you know,
19 unbelievable research collections. 14,000 of those
20 scans and delivers. Virtual consultations with
21 researchers who are the lifeblood of so much of the
22 creative community in New York that needs to continue
23 to be strong for us to be able to rebound. We have
24 had 2.8 million database items taken, again, for the
25 first time you don't have to come in. You can do it

2 from home. And that is been amazing. We recognize
3 that not everyone is capable for reasons that are not
4 their fault of using our digital offerings. We, even
5 throughout, even with the 53 branches, we also
6 established a new self-help program order upsets the
7 books based on, say, your kids interest, if you're
8 not an expert at finding that collection. We will
9 put a collection for you. Telephone story time.
10 35,000 summer reading book kits distributed and to
11 help people with access, we left our Wi-Fi on. I
12 think the three systems together, there were days in
13 which we had 1000 people walking through a pandemic
14 to sit outside in the cold to be able to go to school
15 or do their work. I hope I don't need to repeat
16 that. There are one to 2 million New Yorkers in this
17 situation. You have heard me before. It is way past
18 time for us to find a systemic solution. Meanwhile,
19 hotspot continues, as you have heard from our peer
20 institutions and we will keep going until we find a
21 solution. We are honored to have partnered with the
22 city and so many important civic initiatives from the
23 census toe voting registration. In the process or
24 the recognized ongoing 400 year crisis of race
25 relations in this country. The Schaumburg stepped up

2 with its amazing black liberation reading list.

3 35,000 checkouts. We worked with the city not just

4 at the beginning and the iPads through DOE, but Covid

5 testing sites, cooling centers, learning labs,

6 polling sites and we are now in the process of

7 preparing voter education program for the current

8 year. I know this is across three systems to help

9 people prepare for voting and, might I add, to help

10 some of us who need help understanding ranked voting

11 and how it works. I know I am alone on the call and

12 understand, you know, my queries on that. You have

13 already heard from my colleagues. The budget cuts

14 that had been proposed or if we don't get the

15 restorations that we need from you, that we will

16 simply not be able to meet the pent-up needs of our

17 community. They are going to come back to us. They

18 are eager to come back to us physically. We can't

19 let go what we are doing virtually. We have to have

20 the physical structures ready. The things that we

21 will have to start cutting will significantly hurt

22 our ability to meet the public's need at this crucial

23 moment. And it isn't just operating, as you've

24 heard. It's also capital. Our projects are now all

25 restarting and that includes five Carnegie's complete

2 redo, Melrose, Fort Washington, 125th Street, Hunt's
3 Point, and Port Richmond. The Inwood construction is
4 about to be underway. New Amsterdam has just been
5 completed in Roosevelt Island, as you heard. All of
6 these are aimed at maintaining and renovating our
7 rapidly aging buildings. I know the feeling. Only
8 possible through sustained funding. We have
9 submitted requests for \$427 million and we would like
10 to do complete renovations at Hudson Park, Eden
11 walled, West new Brighton, Francis Martin, [inaudible
12 00:59:48], County [inaudible 00:59:59] the state of
13 good repair efforts, HVAC, ADA, etc. In conclusion,
14 Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, we now
15 that this pandemic perhaps uniquely-- certain my
16 lifetime-- has not impacted everyone the same. It
17 has been terrifying and terrible for health and
18 social economic reasons, although reasons that the
19 cultural Commissioner went through, but it has been
20 concentrated in an unprecedented way on the bottom
21 20/25 percent of the economy and this city and, in
22 particular, are citizens of color. It has been like
23 nothing else, right? It's not like 2007 to nine,
24 right? It's not where everybody more or less took
25 some hits. Obviously, people who were more

2 vulnerable felt those much more powerfully then.

3 Now, the hit is completely, you know, concentrated on

4 the people who are least able to withstand that

5 additional hit who we have not served as a society

6 adequately up to now for all of our efforts and now

7 we have seen it show to us in ways that are just

8 heartbreaking amongst her citizens. So, we know that

9 as we-- that the recovery is going to be especially

10 hard for these folks who have borne the brunt,

11 really. Bore the brunt and been the essential work

12 cost. Been the essential New Yorkers throughout. We

13 know that we have to continue our virtual offerings,

14 research consultations, digitized material, material

15 e-books, programs, but we know that the physical

16 offerings, the physical coming together, the physical

17 learning together, being together, respecting each

18 other as to return. Will return. And for those

19 folks to have been most hit, that will be crucial

20 because those are also the folks the digital divide

21 at all of the other hits that they have seen. So,

22 we're going to focus. We are all going to focus.

23 We're going to use outdoor space. We know that this

24 summer it is not just summer slide. It's a year

25 slide that we have to deal with. I mean, you know,

2 your head wants to explode when you think about, you
3 know, how much we have to help folks catch up. So,
4 we are going to be focused on that. I know everyone
5 in the city is going to be focused on that. We have
6 been able to absorb the current year's peg and loss
7 of revenues. We understand reality and we are not
8 being picky here. We are being clear. We need the
9 restoration. We need to not be cut if we are going
10 to be able to meet the pent-up crucial demands
11 because we are the pivotal institutions to do that in
12 the city, as Linda and Dennis so eloquently
13 described. Finally, Mr. Chairman, if I can say, we
14 have prioritized our staff and the public's health
15 above all else and we have been able to do that while
16 meeting the public's need and really amazing and
17 innervated and expanded ways, but there is no way to
18 eliminate the risk of infections to hundreds that
19 work at our branches, our frontline workers, and all
20 of their colleagues. All of us that are committed to
21 the library's mission. We believe that library
22 workers should be prioritized as soon as possible for
23 vaccine eligibility so that we can continue our
24 crucial work and not put our colleagues or ourselves
25 or our loved ones at risk. As the budget process

2 moves ahead, we look forward to working with this
3 Council and the administration, as always, to ensure
4 that we adapt, that we continue to innovate, that we
5 hold our investments and our innovations that we have
6 learned from, our expanded opportunities, and restore
7 our physical offerings. All of that is essential for
8 us to serve all New Yorkers and to help the city's
9 strong and equitable recovery. Thank you, Mr.
10 Chairman.

11 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you,
12 Tony, and thank you to all three of our presidents
13 and CEOs of our three systems. Before I go back to
14 Commissioner Casals for a moment, I just want to say-
15 - and I do like the fact that all four of you are
16 sort of here now testifying together because there
17 are so many ways in which you all are connected. The
18 library systems in our cultural community and
19 organizations, but, you know, Tony, you mentioned
20 equity and access and, you know, the world on equity
21 and justice and how the pandemic has
22 disproportionately affected black and brown
23 communities and so many institutions are now talking
24 about these issues and seeking to make their
25 organizations more equitable, just representative

2 been trying to meet the moments that we find
3 ourselves in. In libraries certainly have their work
4 to do, but I do genuinely believe that because
5 libraries are in every community and always have been
6 and because libraries are free and open to all and
7 always have been, because libraries-- in a long time
8 ago did this work, sought to make sure that Emma
9 grants coming to this city new that there are public
10 libraries were a place of refuge, right? That
11 libraries were always a safe haven, no questions
12 asked. They come to the library. Our programs and
13 services here. This is a safe space. So, when you
14 talk about that, Tony, I think, about this moment and
15 where so many people that are jobless, so many people
16 are in lines at food pantries. Virtually every
17 neighborhood in the city of New York. Certainly, I
18 see a block and a half long line on my block and
19 since we have a very big food pantry here in
20 Sunnyside Gardens and, you know, libraries are needed
21 more than ever and very shortly, I hope, folks will
22 be able to come back in and you are going to need to
23 be there for them, right? Libraries are going to
24 need to be open to have all those programs and
25 services, to have the staffing necessary, to have the

2 buildings in the state of good repair and to be able
3 to do the work that is about helping those most in
4 need, right? Those who have been left out and left
5 behind. Our public libraries are always there for
6 everyone and so, incredibly important that we
7 maintain your funding and your budgets in these most
8 challenging of times. But I want to return to
9 Commissioner Casals briefly to talk a little bit
10 about your funding situation, as well. Everyone
11 knows how much I love the cultural community and how
12 hard we have fought for funding to the Department of
13 Cultural Affairs and, in particular, city Council
14 cultural initiatives. As you have done some
15 incredible work over the last several years, reaching
16 an all-time record high and funding at the Department
17 of Cultural Affairs. Obviously, the pandemic has
18 changed some of those factors, including a cut of
19 \$633,000 in FY 21 and a \$4.7 million cut, proposed
20 cut, and fiscal 22 that reduces Create NYC funding,
21 CDF and energy grants. Obviously, I am equally
22 disappointed to see cuts to our cultural community at
23 a time when funding is needed most. And while
24 culture never closed and our cultural community have
25 done amazing work in keeping the arts alive, it is a

2 sector, as you know, Commissioner Casals,
3 particularly in the performing arts, where they were
4 the first to close and, seemingly, going to be the
5 last to open in a way that is sustainable. So, it is
6 incredibly important that we meet the moment. So can
7 you talk a little bit about the funding reductions
8 that the department has seen and is facing and what
9 those impacts will be on our community.

10 COMMISSIONER CASALS: Of course. Chair,
11 and first, you know, I feel a little silly reminding
12 this to you after so many years and doing this work,
13 but, you know, this is the beginning of our budget
14 conversation. It's not unlike, you know, to have
15 numbers like this at this point, you know,
16 preliminary budget. And, again, given the context in
17 which we are living a three percent cut, it's not
18 extremely significant and I'm confident that, you
19 know, working with the Council, we are going to
20 arrive to a very successful budget for the Department
21 of Cultural Affairs. In particular, those cuts have
22 to do with savings that we were asked to do this
23 year, the peg. And we decided at the Department of
24 Cultural Affairs to do two things in terms of how
25 those savings were going to happen. One is we tried

2 to take as much savings from the operations of the
3 agency and then when we were forced to look at
4 cutting funding for our cultural organizations, we
5 very clearly decided that this was not the year in
6 which we can do that. We wanted to keep as much as
7 we could and we did. The integrity of the funds that
8 we were already promising to cultural organizations,
9 so we transferred some of those savings to FY 22.

10 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you very
11 much, Commissioner, and, yes, while it is early in
12 the process or we are just formally kicking off the
13 process today for cultural sin libraries in
14 particular, it is always better to start from a place
15 of not having cuts, right? Because we are always
16 sort of behind because we are fighting for
17 restoration as opposed to being in a place where we
18 could fight for additional programs and services and
19 funding and incredibly important. So, I know that,
20 you know, the open culture program is underway and we
21 have seen some exciting numbers in the first seven
22 days of the program being live in terms of
23 applications. We were told that there are at least
24 60 different organizations that have applied in the
25 first seven days with over 150 performances planned

2 across the city. And that is just in the first seven
3 days. I'm sure that number has already moved up as
4 more and more groups come to it. So, your thoughts
5 on both Open Culture, but also, you know, getting our
6 cultural community working again and how we all can
7 think out-of-the-box and get folks working. Get
8 artists working because, as you know, I think, in
9 your testimony, so many people in the cultural
10 community have lost their jobs.

11 COMMISSIONER CASALS: Yes. And for that
12 I have to give credit to you. I think, I believe
13 that you were just sitting in one of the open
14 restaurants last summer when you thought, you know,
15 what can we do for arts and culture and really
16 brought all of us together to think, you know, as you
17 said, outside the box. You know, how we can make
18 this happen. I really humbled by, you know, the
19 perception of the program, you know, and it told us
20 how much needed it is in terms of, you know, creating
21 jobs for our artists, but also give the opportunity
22 for cultural organizations to do the work that they
23 love to do, which is serving New Yorkers. As
24 probably you know, the state is relaxing the
25 guidelines for outdoor performances and we are seeing

2 now double the amount of people that we could bring
3 together in an outdoor performance to 200 people and
4 we are just continuing to have conversations with the
5 state and with cultural organizations to continue to
6 see how we can move forward as vaccinations and, you
7 know, things are getting better and really look
8 forward, again, to work with the Council to figure
9 out a budget that is going to continue to help the
10 sector in such an important year which would be,
11 hopefully, the year of the comeback.

12 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Absolutely.
13 Thank you. I have more questions, but I want to open
14 it up to Council member questions. I see Council
15 member Gjonaj has his hand raised. I'll ask him if
16 you would like to speak. And any other Council
17 members who are here if they want to raise their hand
18 or make known that they would like to ask a question.
19 Council member Gjonaj, are you prepared to ask a
20 question? Okay. We well--

21 COUNCIL MEMBER GJONAJ: Okay. I am--

22 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: There you are.
23 Okay, Council member.

24 COUNCIL MEMBER GJONAJ: Thank you, Chair.
25 Thank you for the very important hearing on public

2 libraries and cultural affairs and the future of our
3 libraries and DCLA. My specific question-- and you
4 probably recall this from last year and the previous
5 years, Chair, is to public libraries regarding
6 Westchester Square Branch. This is going on year 10,
7 I believe, of the project that has been funded. I'm
8 hoping I can get an answer and a recommitment to
9 having that branch finally acquired and built to
10 12,000 square foot. We need it in the area. I
11 believe it was 29.4 million that was allocated to the
12 funding of acquiring and building out. Do we have an
13 update on this?

14 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: There you go,
15 Tony.

16 TONY MARX: Thank you. Thank you,
17 Councilman. So, of course, we share your concern
18 about this. This project in its need has been going
19 on way too long. Before I arrived at the library.
20 Before, you know, all of us. I put in additional
21 efforts because it has taken so long. The price
22 continues to go up. You know, folks have been
23 incredibly generous in supporting that. I think we
24 are currently on-- the libraries and everything that
25 we need to do on our side. I think the hold up now,

2 as I recall, is the city purchasing formerly the
3 adjacent property where we will be building and we
4 are continuing to work with the city and we are eager
5 to get Westchester Square, you know, the great new
6 library that it has way too long deserved. We are,
7 Councilman, as frustrated as you are.

8 COUNCIL MEMBER GJONAJ: Thank you,
9 President Marx. In our last hearing last year when
10 this was brought up, I was assured that there will
11 was a short period of time and acquisition would be
12 completed of the property and the transfers to the
13 city of New York and then there would be the process
14 of construction. That was the last-- and there was
15 a strong assurance that we are going to make this
16 happen.

17 TONY MARX: Again, Councilman, I think
18 it's fair to say that we have done and continue to do
19 during this year everything we can to make this
20 happen, working assiduously, and I am not sure I have
21 a good answer for why the city hasn't moved on the
22 one remaining piece to get this thing moving in done.
23 It's, you know, ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous.

24 COUNCIL MEMBER GJONAJ: It is ridiculous,
25 President Marx. Is there anything that you cannot

2 sure my constituents and me that this will finally be
3 done? I mean, we've done everything and without
4 acquiring the property, there is no next time.

5 TONY MARX: You have done everything and
6 your predecessors have done everything. My
7 predecessors have done everything. You have my word
8 that we will say that this year, the coming year, we
9 will get this done one way or another. It's just
10 ridiculous. We will get the city off the hook in
11 purchasing more we will find a way forward. But
12 this, you know, I agree. They cannot continue.

13 COUNCIL MEMBER GJONAJ: The definition of
14 insanity is doing the same thing over and over,
15 President Marx and I think we're just replaying the
16 last several years hearings on the budget.

17 TONY MARX: Yeah. I feel the same
18 frustration. We also have with, you know, when we
19 are trying to do projects with DDC. You know, there
20 these structural issues that we keep running into and
21 they keep not only frustrating what the citizens need
22 in terms of a great new library, but they end up
23 costing the citizens of New York. In this case, two
24 or three times what it should cost because of the
25

2 delays and how that keeps adding up. It's outrageous
3 in my opinion.

4 COUNCIL MEMBER GJONAJ: You know, the word
5 outrageous, I think, doesn't really underscore. This
6 is more pathetic than anything else and I'm just sad
7 that we continue to have these conversations and,
8 ultimately, it's a delay that costs everyone much
9 money-- much more in the form of time and money and
10 limited resources.

11 TONY MARX: I agree. Let me talk with my
12 folks and see how we can do, you know, even more to
13 push and I will come back to you personally. You
14 have my word.

15 COUNCIL MEMBER GJONAJ: That would be
16 great. Thank you, President Marx. Thank you, Chair.

17 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you,
18 Council member Gjonaj. I wanted to go back to
19 something when President CEO Walcott mentioned that
20 800,000 Queens residents have gone to a one of the
21 libraries. I believe I got that right, Dennis,
22 right? 800,000 visits during the pandemic to one of
23 the Queens library locations that are open for grab
24 and go. That is a staggering number. Absolutely
25 staggering number in terms of the need. So, I

2 wonder, A, if Dennis can talk a little bit more about
3 that, but also the other systems, what are your
4 comparable numbers? Because I'm trying to get at
5 this incredible need and desire for public library
6 service that, even in a pandemic, nearly a million
7 people would, in person, go to their local Queens
8 library, and I assure New York and Brooklyn have
9 similar stories to tell.

10 DENNIS WOLCOTT: So, couple of things.

11 One, they have been throughout where some are
12 concentrated. Like Bayside, before we turn Cue
13 Gardens Hills into a testing site, Cue Gardens Hills,
14 once we started unfolding more and more libraries for
15 grab and go, Jackson Heights, Forest Hills, and we
16 have seen the numbers just continued to increase.
17 That is one aspect. Tony touched on another aspect
18 in that our Wi-Fi expansion-- and Linda also talked
19 about as far as what we are doing for the community
20 as far as Wi-Fi capacity, as well. People will come
21 outside in the brutal cold to take advantage to sit
22 in their cars, to come up personally and, like Linda
23 and Tony, we have Wi-Fi extender programs, as well,
24 where our Wi-Fi network goes out to roughly 150 yards
25 and at a number of our libraries. So they're taking

2 advantage of the services in that way, as well. So
3 we're seeing it now that we've also instituted the
4 remote printing services. That's extremely popular.
5 I mean, people are taking advantage of the remote
6 printing, as well, and so we have remote printing
7 available at all of our grab and go libraries and
8 then we have our fulfillment centers, as well. So
9 you see a number of programmatic activities that are
10 being maintained in a safe way while people are
11 coming in for books, materials for printing, for Wi-
12 Fi and basic core services that we're providing.

13 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Tony? Linda?

14 Anything to add? Linda is muted. Please unmute
15 President CEO Johnson.

16 LINDA JOHNSON: Okay. Yeah. Of course
17 our numbers are comparable to what Dennis has spoken
18 of. The astonishing thing is that, if you look
19 calendar year over calendar year, we've had an uptick
20 by 10 percent in program attendance year over year
21 and that just sort of sends home the fact that, you
22 know, because so much of what we're doing is virtual,
23 people are taking advantage in numbers that we would
24 be able to achieve otherwise. Having said that, the
25 real issue, of course, that the digi-- those on the

2 wrong side of the digital divide. And that's, of
3 course, the most heartbreaking thing and something
4 that we are trying to highlight and sharpen people's
5 focus because I think it's never been more deeply
6 understood than when you are trying to get your child
7 educated and you don't have sufficient broadband at
8 home to do that. But for those people who are
9 relying on our physical paces, we're doing, as I
10 explained in my testimony, everything we can. We
11 have had, since July, close to 400,000 visits. We
12 have tons of material in circulation and also, you
13 know, making huge efforts to bring it all back. The
14 material that was out when we closed, as well as the
15 material that is being reserved while we are in grab
16 and go phase. But checkouts have been well over 2
17 million during the pandemic.

18 TONY MARX: I think my colleagues have
19 said it all. I mean, I think, you know, what we see
20 in we've all talked about this. The sort of
21 concentration of impact of adverse impact of this
22 whole experience has doubled down on precisely the
23 people, for instance, who don't have digital-- you
24 know, overall the wrong side of the digital divide.
25 You know, and as Linda just said, you know, you can't

2 even go to school or go to your job or look for a job
3 or look for a school or, you know, anything. You
4 know, we are so passed the time to fix this and, you
5 know, I am hoping that, you know, given the efforts
6 of the libraries, given everyone's attention on this,
7 as Linda and Dennis just described that, you know,
8 this is no longer avoidable as a serious public
9 policy problem. Look, let me be clear. The
10 library-- maybe this'll help for an analogy. The
11 library was not in the electricity business a century
12 ago, but we sure had an interest in people getting
13 electricity into their homes, including poor people,
14 so that they could read, right? We have a similar
15 interest now in finding a way to get every New Yorker
16 connectivity. There needs to be a utility level. A
17 basic service for free or close to it in this city
18 period and I'm tired of the subject. And after this
19 last year, I fit to be tied beyond tired.

20 LINDA JOHNSON: I mean, I don't think it
21 is overstating that this is the civil rights issue of
22 this era.

23 TONY MARX: It certainly makes addressing
24 any of the other issues--

2 LINDA JOHNSON: Right. You can even
3 begin to talk about anything else. That's exactly
4 right.

5 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Right. Thank
6 you, Tony, Linda, and Dennis. I wanted to go back to
7 Commissioner Casals one more time. Then, obviously,
8 your relationship within the budget situation is
9 slightly different than, obviously, the presidents
10 and CEOs of our library systems who are not a part of
11 the administration. So, they engage in a level of
12 advocacy that they are engaged in. Your role, of
13 course, is even trickier in some ways, but it is very
14 important, as you know, Commissioner, for the
15 cultural community to know that you are in there, you
16 know, fighting for every dollar for this community as
17 the Commissioner who, yes, is appointed by the Mayor
18 and is a part of this administration, but it was also
19 a leading advocate, right, for the people that you
20 and I both represent. Obviously, I am able to
21 babysit things a little bit differently and more
22 pointedly, but talk to me a little bit about-- you
23 know, without speaking out of turn, but your advocacy
24 would then the administration and how that is going
25

2 and speak to the degree on the level of your fight on
3 behalf of culturalists.

4 COMMISSIONER CASALS: Before I answer
5 that question, and I really need to say this, as you
6 were spending 23 years, you know, in hearings, I
7 spent almost as many years, you know, in public
8 programming and I never saw somebody that can
9 moderate such different audience that is in the
10 conversation as you are doing now. Congratulations
11 to that. That is a skill that nobody learns in
12 school. You know, I can say that, you know, I come--
13 you know me. I come to this position with an
14 advocate, you know, sort of spirit. I must tell you
15 and it's very clear, hopefully, to everyone, that
16 this is not an administration in which you need to
17 fight for arts and culture. This is an
18 administration that believes in arts and culture, as
19 you mentioned before, and working with the Council we
20 had reached in the last eight years historic funding
21 for arts and culture and for the agency even in a
22 year like last year in which nobody knew what was
23 going to happen. There was a commitment arts and
24 culture with a very slight cut to the budget and, all
25 things considered, I see that budget as a very

2 successful budget. And, again, we, in conversations
3 that I have, you know, across the administration, you
4 know, everybody continues to understand that New York
5 cannot recover if the arts and culture sector is not
6 recovered. So, they are one and two together in so
7 many ways and it is not only about the economic
8 development that the sector provides to the city as
9 our colleagues at the libraries understand so while.
10 It's also about the positive social impact that arts
11 and culture can have in the neighborhood and in a
12 community.

13 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you,
14 Commissioner Casals. Of course, from your history
15 and passion for the arts and for your genuine belief
16 that we are both responsible to, accountable to the
17 constituency that we represent and fight for a which
18 is all things culture and the arts in the city of New
19 York and I know you will begin their, fighting as
20 hard as you can, as I will be in my position fighting
21 also. Thank you for the compliments on my moderating
22 this panel which is a little bit more interesting
23 that we had intended it to be. A little bit more,
24 but we move with the times and we have dexterity
25 year. So, it's also great because 23 years into

2 this, have a great deal of affinity for the four of
3 you, but also how even more importantly for the
4 people that you all represent and so-- and I deeply
5 believe that libraries, culture, and the arts,
6 together form the heart of who we are and that is
7 where hope lies in this moment in particular is
8 people coming together and able to share ideas and
9 express themselves and no one does it better than
10 libraries and the arts. So, it is great fun and I
11 was just thinking I obviously do not yet know where I
12 will be next March and in what position, but
13 regardless, I may just show up to this hearing anyway
14 just because. Because this is where I every March
15 for the last 23 years.

16 LINDA JOHNSON: So, I just would like to
17 say in this blended hearing that we are having, one
18 of the projects that we have been able to continue
19 during the pandemic, which is terrific, is building a
20 branch inside the Brooklyn Children's Museum,
21 partnering with Commissioner Gonzales and so, we are
22 very excited that just this week, actually, we opened
23 for grab and go service in that library. In that
24 space in the children's Museum. Even on the
25 libraries not finished at, as a way of broadcasting

2 to the community that this is what is coming and to
3 get people into the habit of moving a couple blocks
4 from where our branch in the neighborhood was to the
5 new location in the museum. We couldn't be more
6 excited about the partnership.

7 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: That's great.

8 Thank you, Linda, for that ask if there are any other
9 Council members who have questions for the three
10 presidents and CEOs and the Commissioner of Cultural
11 Affairs, since we are doing this all as one group
12 virtually for the first time and if there are no
13 other questions from Council members for either of
14 the three president and CEOs or the Commissioner of
15 the Department of Cultural Affairs, we will excuse
16 all four of you as a sort of blended panel as it
17 turned out to be this morning and move on to our
18 public portion of the testimony and the committee
19 staff can let me know if there are any other Council
20 member questions.

21 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: No.

22 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Okay.

23 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: So far no
24 questions, Chair. Council members, I would like to
25 take this time to remind you that if you would like

2 to pose a question, please use the raise hand
3 function in Zoom.

4 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Okay.

5 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: No questions.

6 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Okay. Thank
7 you very much, Anna. And so, with that, thank you,
8 Dennis Wolcott, Tony Marx, Linda Johnson,
9 Commissioner Casals, for your testimony, for your
10 advocacy. Obviously, we will be following this
11 incredibly closely as we move towards an executive
12 budget and making sure that our public libraries and
13 our culturals are protected, defended, and funded in
14 a way where all of you can continue to do the
15 lifesaving work that you do. And I don't say that
16 lightly. I mean that. So, thank you all. You are
17 willing to stay in here as much as you like, but we
18 will meet again very soon.

19 LINDA JOHNSON: Councilman, just one
20 thing as we leave. I know for all of us, we've never
21 had this experience of testifying with any chairman
22 other than yourself and we are deeply grateful for
23 your leadership. And as I sit here thinking about
24 it, it is hard to imagine what these hearings would
25 be like without you. So, thank you very much.

2 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you,
3 Linda. Thank you very much. We will see you guys
4 soon. We will start the next round. Ana, can I take
5 a two minute break before we go to the next panel?

6 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Most certainly.
7 While you--

8 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you.
9 Thank you.

10 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: I will go over the
11 housekeeping rules for the public testimony portion,
12 please. So, now that we have concluded the
13 administration's testimony, we will now turn to
14 public testimony. For members of the public, please
15 note that I will call up individuals and panels.
16 Council members who have questions for a particular
17 panelist should use the raise hand function on zoom.
18 You will be called on after everyone on that panel
19 has completed their testimony in the order that you
20 raise your hand on zoom. For panelists, once your
21 name is called, a member of our staff will unmute you
22 and the sergeant-at-arms will give you the go-ahead
23 to begin after setting the timer. All testimony will
24 be limited to two minutes. Please wait for the
25 sergeant to announce that you may begin before

2 starting your testimony. So, for the first public
3 panel-- the first public panel in that award would
4 be Sarah Espino, librarian, Queens Library followed
5 by Shantel Johnson, social worker, Queens Library,
6 Christine Zarett, curator, Queens Library, and then
7 Josselyn Atahualpa, Local 1321 DC 37, Queens Library
8 worker. Ms. Sarah Espino, whenever you're ready.

9 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: And the timing
10 is perfect.

11 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Ms. Espino? Okay.
12 Since Ms. Espino is not here, we will circle back.
13 We now will hear from Ms. Shantel Johnson. Ms.
14 Johnson, if you are ready, please.

15 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time starts now.

16 SHANTEL JOHNSON: Good morning, Chair Van
17 Bramer and fellow committee members. My name is
18 Shantel Johnson and I am the case manager/social
19 worker for the Queens Public Library adult learner
20 program. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to
21 represent my program and testify on the Mayor's FY
22 2022 preliminary budget for the three library
23 systems. So, I am here today to represent my
24 colleagues and clients who rely on our continued
25 services that provide support and connections to

2 community organizations that enhances the quality of
3 their lives. I want to offer a glimpse on how your
4 funding has addressed the needs of the boroughs
5 underserved communities and how the people we serve
6 have made us cognizant of the difficulties in
7 accessing gainful employment and food, housing, and
8 other needs, just to name a few as the pandemic is
9 ravaged these communities. [Inaudible 01:38:24] are
10 rolling out adult learning classes, however, they
11 need more support. In order for them to successfully
12 complete their classes, they also need continuous
13 case management assistance and guidance. As we are
14 becoming aware of increasing wide-ranging needs among
15 our students, we also recognize that to properly
16 address them, additional monetary support is
17 required. Many of my colleagues and I have met these
18 challenges through educating the disenfranchised
19 communities we serve this to advocate for themselves
20 during the period of uncertainty. Our staff has
21 worked tirelessly and stepped into many roles
22 necessary to support our diverse student population.
23 Our staff and students have built a strong rapport
24 with each other and have a high level of trust and
25 comfort. They rely on us to help and have her

2 regularly shared personal, vulnerable details of
3 their lives, unfortunately, to the point of tears.
4 With your increased support, you can aid us in
5 improving the lives of our clients. We need your
6 help so we can take you to be a beacon of hope during
7 these uncertain times for our customers. As I
8 conclude today, I represent the dedicated members of
9 our adult learning program and I can definitively
10 testify that we have worked hard to keep our virtual
11 library doors open, along with our hearts and trials
12 and tribulations of our old lives. Please help us so
13 we can help the communities we serve. We do not want
14 to turn anyone away because our caseloads are way to-

15 -

16 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time expired.

17 SHANTEL JOHNSON: Thank you very much and
18 thank you for letting me speak.

19 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you,
20 Shantel, so much for your work and, as someone who
21 did work at the Queens Public Library for 11 years
22 before I got elected, I can certainly tell you that
23 there are few things as impactful as interacting with
24 the adult learner program and the incredible things
25 that I saw happening at the adult learning center has

2 when I worked at the Queens Public Library and,
3 obviously, since I have been the Chair of the
4 committee, as well, but if people want to feel good
5 about the world, they should visit one of these
6 programs and see the work that you and your
7 colleagues do. There is never a dry eye in the house
8 when you hear from folks of these programs, and have
9 had their lives changed forever. And sometimes that
10 happens, as you know, when people are in their 60s.
11 You know, when they are in their 70s and they find a
12 program like this and their lives are never the same
13 because of people like you who do the work. And so,
14 I want to say thank you for that.

15 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so much,
16 Ms. Johnson. We will now hear from Ms. Christine
17 Zarett, curator of Queens Library followed by Jocelyn
18 Atahualpa, Local 21. Ms. Zarett, whenever you're
19 ready.

20 CHRISTINE ZARETT: Thank you for the
21 opportunity to speak to the city Council members
22 today. I am, Christine Zarett, curator for the black
23 heritage reference collection at the Langston Hughes
24 Community Library and Cultural Center. After closing
25 our doors in March 2020, staff at the branch jumped

2 into action and moved to virtual programming in
3 April. We essentially adapted any in person program
4 we could to virtual. We created programs virtual
5 attendance, including a good for your soul cooking
6 program and educators meet up and motivational
7 Mondays workshop. Since April, the Langston Hughes
8 Library has hosted a minimum of three programs a week
9 in attendance remains steady. Curators Choice
10 programs that I run brought people together to
11 discuss black history and culture. We also partnered
12 with the Brooklyn Public Library for a special
13 program on African-American spirituals. Programs
14 also included presentations on black artists, Dave,
15 the Potter, and quilts including underground railroad
16 quilts. All this material for Curator Choice was
17 accessed from the black heritage collection. Also,
18 material from the collection was shared digitally
19 with Farouk college black studies classes including
20 essays, slave narratives, and poetry. The Langston
21 Hughes Library also held all of our annual events
22 virtually. Staff took great care thinking and
23 planning of our programs for our diverse community.
24 Hispanic heritage month contained a series of
25 programs including cooking series, health workshop

2 series, dance series, and a craft series. The annual
3 Langston Hughes literary arts Festival consists of
4 poetry readings, author talks, and a theater
5 performance. We also held 1/36 annual Kwanzaa
6 celebration and held seven events during the last
7 week of December acknowledging each of the seven
8 principles of Kwanzaa. We also came together as a
9 branch to create and publish a monthly newsletter
10 that spotlighted a community member library staff, a
11 letter from the executive director, programming
12 schedule, uphold, and an artist quarter feature with
13 a photo from the Langston Hughes library art
14 collection--

15 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time expired.

16 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so much--

17 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: You stopped on
18 a dime there.

19 CHRISTINE ZARETT: I did. Can I just say--
20 Go ahead. Yes.

21 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: But, you know,
22 feel free to share a few more thoughts, if you would
23 like. If not, obviously, Langston Hughes is an
24 incredibly important institution and one of the most
25 special places in Queens.

2 CHRISTINE ZARETT: It is. And I just want
3 to say just on a personal note and putting together
4 my Curators Choice programs, I put my heart into it
5 and I spend a lot of time thinking about what
6 material to present. And the best part is people do
7 respond and say thank you and say I didn't know that.
8 So, I am sharing information from the collection.
9 So, thank you. And thank you for your time today
10 and continuing to support the Queens Public Library.

11 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you,
12 Christine.

13 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so much,
14 Ms. Zarett. Ms. Jocelyn, Local 1321, whenever you're
15 ready, please.

16 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time starts now.

17 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Should we move
18 on to the next speaker?

19 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Give me one moment.
20 I am checking the--

21 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: I know that
22 Ron Barbara speaking on behalf of the library locals.
23 Is that correct?

24 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: So, for now, we
25 will move on to Ms. Svetlana Negrimovsky. she's a

2 managing librarian at the Brooklyn Public Library and
3 we will circle back to those. So, Ms. Negrimovsky,
4 please, whenever you're ready.

5 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time starts now.

6 SVETLANA NEGRIMOVSKY: Hello? Hello?

7 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Yes. We can hear you.

8 SVETLANA NEGRIMOVSKY: Yes. Can you
9 please give me like 10 minutes? I just need 10
10 minutes to prepare.

11 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Okay.

12 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Who is next?

13 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Next, we will hear
14 from Damla Beck, young adult librarian, Brooklyn
15 Public Library. Whenever you're ready--

16 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time starts now.

17 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Ms. Beck?

18 DAMLA BECK: Yes. I'm sorry. I'm here.
19 I had trouble unmuting. So, good afternoon now. My
20 name is Damla Beck. I am the young adult library and
21 at the Mill basin branch of Brooklyn Public Library.
22 And I'm here today to speak upon the value of the
23 public library systems in New York City. And thank
24 you to the cultural affairs and library committee for
25 allowing me to testify. So, I am going to begin by

2 telling you a little bit about what the library means
3 to me personally. I am the quintessential library
4 kid all grown up. I racked up countless finds on
5 countless books all throughout my childhood. I
6 volunteered at my local branch, the Midwood Branch,
7 and even worked there part-time, and I have been
8 working full time at BPL for like almost 3 years now
9 and I think I finally, finally figured out how to
10 articulate what it is that public libraries actually
11 do for New Yorkers. Everything. If asked, we do
12 everything we can to help the people we serve. You
13 need books? We got those in every flavor. You need
14 Wi-Fi? Short. Free to access 24 seven. Need ESOL
15 classes? No problem. We've got the best teachers in
16 the game. Need to call your mom after school and let
17 her know where you are? Here's the phone and here's
18 a snack. I wear many hats as a librarian. Educator,
19 social worker, community advocate. I'm not going to
20 lie to you and say that it's easy, either, but what
21 makes it a little bit more manageable is the promise
22 of funding. It is the support of the city Council
23 and the recognition of the sheer scope of work that
24 we do. The library has been a stabilizing force for
25 me my whole life and I would love to show what it can

2 do for other people. For the past year, we have all
3 heard about how New York is tough. New York is
4 resilient and I believe these things to be true only
5 because I still have faith in the institutions
6 designed to allow us good quality of life. Our city
7 is what it is because we have public schools, parks,
8 libraries. And more than that, I have faith in the
9 people working in these systems to keep them from
10 faltering, despite budget cuts, lest we lead our
11 communities down. City workers are the lifeblood of
12 New York and we are your constituents, too. Thank
13 you so much for your time and attention today and I
14 hope I made an impact.

15 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: You did.

16 Thank you very much, Damla. That was terrific and I
17 agree with you and I think there are many of us who
18 are products of our libraries and who are in the
19 positions that we are because we had access and spent
20 so much time in our libraries as children and
21 teenagers and, therefore, had access to things that,
22 at least in my case, were available in the home.
23 Right? For various reasons. So, the thank you very,
24 very passionate and strong testimony. So, thank you,

2 Damla. I love hearing from all these library
3 workers. This is great.

4 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so much,
5 Ms. Beck. We will now hear from Mr. Russell Granet,
6 the Executive Director of the new 42nd Street. Mr.
7 Granet, whenever you are ready.

8 RUSSELL GRANET: Great. Thank you.
9 Thank you, Chair. Thank you--

10 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time starts now.

11 RUSSELL GRANET: everyone for having us
12 today. Great. I'm going to start with good news.
13 Well, the good news is I Russell Granet. I am the
14 president and CEO of New 42, which is also the New
15 Victory Theater and we shut our theater down on March
16 13. Then, on Monday the 16th, we started with online
17 content and in the first week, we had 25,000 people
18 participating in I am happy to report a year later
19 that we are at about 900,000 people. So, in a given
20 year where we see 100,000 people live in our theater
21 and we hope to be back very soon, we are most likely
22 going to hit the million mark. In our goal there is
23 around access and equity. We have always believed
24 the New Victory Theater, with its subsidized ticket
25 price is about access and equity, so the idea that,

2 through this very turbulent year, we have been able
3 to reach more people than we ever have in one given
4 year is thrilling for us. We have also underwritten
5 all of our education work, so anything at the New
6 Victory that a teacher wants to participate in the
7 five boroughs of New York City receive all of that
8 programming free of charge and we have made it is
9 easy for educators as possible to participate in the
10 New Victory and in the New 42 projects. We have a
11 program called Lab Works where we are devising work
12 for young people solely devised by people of color.
13 Largely what is on the stage is for young people and
14 families, although the actors might be artist of
15 color, the creative team is often times white. So,
16 we are investing heavily in wanting to ensure that
17 everyone's story is told on the new Victory stage,
18 not only here, but around the world. We were greatly
19 impacted by Covid. We had to shut down all of our
20 theaters which meant no earned revenue from many of
21 our real estate. We had salaries that were reduced.
22 We had layoffs. We did job share. We did everything
23 we can to hold onto the people to ensure that they
24 had health insurance. So, funding for the Council is
25 an enormous and very helpful to us. We would ask

2 that you try and streamline the process so it is a
3 little bit easier to apply and to follow up with the
4 Council, but, obviously, your support has been done
5 doing and we thank you--

6 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time expired.

7 RUSSELL GRANET: Great. Thank you so
8 much.

9 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: And just to
10 put a finer point on it, Russ, you are talking about
11 sort of actually getting the funding that you are
12 allocated, right, in terms of either City Council
13 discretionary funding or--

14 RUSSELL GARNET: Correct.

15 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: CDF in terms
16 of our culturals. The process is still taking far
17 too long for groups to be able to draw down their
18 funding. All right. Yes. That is something that we
19 continue to work ok. I know that the DCLA
20 acknowledges that there's still a lot of work to be
21 done there and so we are absolutely focused on that
22 issue because it is very important. And thank you
23 for the work that you and your organization do and we
24 will-- I hope soon-- you will be able to welcome
25 people back safely, obviously, to the theater.

2 RUSSELL GRANET: Thank you.

3 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you.

4 Next.

5 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so very
6 much. Next, we will have-- we will hear from Mr.
7 Barber. Mr. Barber, whenever you're ready, please.

8 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time starts now.

9 RONALDO BARBER: Good afternoon, Chair
10 Jimmy Van Bramer and fellow committee members. My
11 name is Ronaldo Barber and I'm here of the Tri-
12 library. While I think you first and foremost for
13 this opportunity to testify before you in conjunction
14 with my fellow presidents, I want to dedicate this
15 testimony that we are presenting to you today in
16 memory of our beloved Eileen Miller who was the past
17 president of Local 1482 and who passed away last
18 month. We miss her greatly. She is a great leader
19 and friend. So, I want to begin by saying that, on
20 March 5, 2020, we stopped at city Council chambers to
21 testify about the great work library staff do for
22 everyone with a sense of foreboding. Knowing
23 something on the horizon was fast approaching. 11
24 days later, the three library systems closed their
25 doors and none of us fully understood how this would

2 impact libraries and how we were going to provide
3 services. But we worked it out. As we embark on the
4 one year anniversary of this pandemic that induced
5 the shutdown, we need to take a moment and reflect on
6 library worker dedication and work. Staff worked
7 frantically to make sure our libraries were a safe
8 workplace. IT department staff maintained online
9 infrastructure, boosted our Wi-Fi, maintenance and
10 custodian staff cleaned and maintained our library
11 buildings, HR and finance staff provided much-needed
12 services, collection development staff greatly
13 expanded our e-book collection, our programs, and
14 services department and public service staff created
15 and offered a myriad of programs and reading
16 advisories, online reference, and chat, homework help
17 at the learning program, job search--

18 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time expired.

19 RONALDO BARBER: workshops, stories, and
20 other entertainment.

21 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Feel free to
22 finish up, Ron.

23 RONALD BARBER: Thank you, Mr. Chair.
24 Library workers are well aware that these services
25 are inadequate, but know that customers need full

2 library services, books, and places to conduct
3 searches, job preparedness, technology, safe, clean
4 libraries, entertainment, preschool, and other
5 fundamental programs. Seeing our customers of all
6 ages and backgrounds come through our doors, it is
7 something that all of us miss dearly. We deeply hope
8 to return to normalcy in order to meet our customers'
9 needs, however this may not happen. The budget cuts
10 being discussed will cause library service and
11 staffing level to revert to those of the 1970s,
12 however we want-- we are very thankful that the city
13 and the administration have been consensus of the
14 employees and customer safety. Now, we need your
15 help, Mr. Chair, and the City Council. We need your
16 help in convincing the Governor and the Mayor that
17 our staff need the vaccine. We need your help
18 funding libraries so we are vaccinated and can open
19 safely. Everyone will have access to all of the
20 library's vital materials, computers, Wi-Fi,
21 printers, programs, and more. We are eager and
22 willing, but we need your help. Thank you, Mr.
23 Chair.

24 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you,

25 Ron. I want to say a few things. One, I was now

2 aware of Eileen Muller's passing and just want to say
3 that I knew her, obviously, for many years in many
4 different capacities and she was a terrific leader
5 and fighter on behalf of Brooklyn Public Library
6 workers, so I want to just say that about Eileen.
7 She was very, very kind to me over the years. I also
8 want to just say yes, clearly, public library
9 employees should have immediate access to the
10 vaccines or vaccines and happy to push that, you
11 know, in a letter and in a statement to the Governor
12 right now and right here. Public library workers
13 need to be protected. There is, obviously, a level
14 of public interaction and library workers need to be
15 protected. You are on the front lines and have
16 always been on the front lines of public service and,
17 in the pandemic, it is incredibly important. And so,
18 let me also just say thank you, Ron-- and I see John
19 and I thought I saw Mr. Paul, as well. Our
20 presidents of our library locals who are here and
21 always-- oh. Val Colon. How could I miss Val
22 Colon? And you know how much I care about library
23 employees, library workers and how grateful we are
24 that you are able to work and serve as you always do
25 and always have, but that it is done safely and that

2 library workers are the ones at the table well
3 represented by these locals and making sure that
4 there is a way that is safe and equitable and fair to
5 library workers. So, thank you, Ron, John, Val, and
6 Mr. Paul. I see you there, as well, and I hope I got
7 all the local leaders that. I see Lauren Comito who
8 I assume will be speaking, as well, but the library
9 workers mean everything to me and I-- more
10 importantly, they mean everything to the city of New
11 York. And so, we are one in this fight, Mr. Barber.

12 RONALDO BARBER: Amen. Thank you, Mr.
13 Chairman.

14 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you.

15 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so much,
16 Mr. Barber. We will now hear from Mr. John Hyslop,
17 president of local 1321 followed by Mr. [inaudible
18 02:00:59], president of local 1930 and then Leonard
19 Pole, president of local 374. Mr. Hyslop, whenever
20 you're ready, please.

21 JOHN HYSLOP: Oh. Ron Barber spoke on our
22 behalf, so we're good. All the local presidents, Ron
23 spoke on our behalf.

24 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you,
25 John. That is my understanding, as well, Ana, that

2 all the library locals combined. Their incredible
3 forces in spirit had Ron delivered the testimony on
4 behalf of all of them.

5 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Okay. At this
6 time, if I may take a moment to remind Council
7 members that if they have any questions for the
8 panelists or a particular panelist, to please use the
9 raise hand function in Zoom. Okay. I see no
10 questions from Council members, so we can move on to
11 the next panel. In the next panel will be Ms. Kelly
12 Kramps, institutional development at Guggenheim
13 followed by Lisa Gold, Executive Director of Asian
14 American Arts Alliance, followed by Kimberly Olson,
15 Executive Director of New York City Arts and
16 Education Roundtable, and then Sheila Lewandowski,
17 Executive Director Chocolate Factory Theater. Kelly
18 Kramps, when you are ready, please.

19 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Starting time.

20 SARAH LEVINSON: Apologies. I'm
21 borrowing Kelly Kramps' account. My name is Sarah
22 Levinson and I'm Deputy Director of education and
23 public engagement at the Guggenheim Museum. One year
24 ago, New York City was beginning to close down
25 because of the pandemic and in these last 12 months,

2 the country and our city have witnessed profound
3 disruption, change, and loss. The impacts of the
4 events of 2020 cannot be overstated. The calls for
5 social justice and racial equity drove much needed
6 conversations around the country and within our own
7 institution. Our work to forge have this towards a
8 more equitable and diverse institution is well
9 underway. We remain committed to fulfilling our
10 promise that all New Yorkers feel welcome at the
11 Guggenheim. In addition to that over million
12 visitors a year we had pre-pandemic, the Guggenheim
13 has also been offering arts learning opportunities
14 for over 50 years to the students in New York City
15 across all five boroughs. We remain committed to our
16 students and recognize that they represent the future
17 of our audience, but also the future of our field.
18 Similar to many New York City museums, the Guggenheim
19 currently has a significant financial obstacle from
20 approximately \$12 million of revenue losses as a
21 result of the pandemic this past year. As you know
22 well, in an effort to recoup its own revenue losses
23 associated with Covid 19, the 2021 New York City
24 budget reflects a 70 percent cut to arts funding for
25 New York City public schools. These devastating

2 budgetary cuts would directly impact the systems 1.1
3 million students, leaving many without access to arts
4 instruction and opportunities for self-expression.
5 Through its free programs, the Guggenheim seeks to
6 fill this educational, offering arts programs to
7 students across the city as we have always done. In
8 addition to the multitude of proven benefits from
9 arts learning, increased self-confidence and self
10 understanding--

11 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time expired.

12 SARAH LEVINSON: We know that arts
13 funding is essential to the healing of New York City.
14 Thank you so much.

15 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so very
16 much. We will now hear from Ms. Lisa Gold, executive
17 direct of Asian American Arts Alliance followed by
18 Ms. Kimberly Olsen. Ms. Gold, whenever you're ready.

19 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time starts now.

20 LISA GOLD: Thank you so much to the City
21 Council and the Commissioner for your leadership and
22 for the opportunity to testify today. I am the
23 Executive Director of the Asian American Arts
24 Alliance. We are a 37-year-old organization
25 dedicated to ensuring greater representation, equity,

2 and opportunities for Asian American artists
3 organizations, as well as providing a critical voice
4 for the APA, or Asian Pacific American community. We
5 have been extremely fortunate over the years to have
6 received funding through the city Council and the
7 Department of Cultural Affairs and it has been like
8 truly, truly amazing. But despite these 37 years of
9 serving our community and empowering our
10 constituents, our own organization is in a constant
11 state of per care ready and I am concerned not only
12 for ourselves, but for the general lack of support
13 for the Asian American community, which makes up 16
14 percent of the city's population. And as we face
15 mounting numbers of violent anti-Asian attacks, our
16 communities and organizations are regularly
17 underfunded while our services are in increasing
18 demand. And, you know, even before the pandemic, the
19 city was disproportionately underfunding Asian
20 American led and serving cultural organizations and I
21 know last year DCI awarded like a record number of
22 grants, and that's amazing, through the cultural
23 development fund, but, you know, of those more than
24 1000 organizations that were funded. Only 59 were
25 Asian serving-- or a mere 5.7 percent. And out of

2 all of those, only seven of those grants-- a mere
3 three percent-- were for amounts of 50,000 dollars
4 or more and yet the total percentage of grants
5 awarded in excess of 50,000 was 211-- or 20 percent.

6 So, again, why are getting three percent when the
7 average is 20 percent? So, these numbers, they don't
8 take into consideration the CIG's, of which not a
9 single one is led by an Asian American. So, again--

10 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time.

11 LISA GOLD: I just want to close out and
12 say that all arts organizations and all artists are
13 really hurting but I really fear that Asian Americans
14 and other people of color have suffered
15 disproportionately during the pandemic and we need
16 your support to recover and I really born-- any
17 budget cuts are going to be born to have a lady by
18 our community. So, I just ask, I beg of you,
19 actually-- I beg when you are allocating the budget,
20 you do not compound to the injustice upon Asian
21 Americans and ensure that there is full transparency
22 and there's careful consideration in this budget to
23 ensure that the city lives up to its promises of
24 equitable funding and support for historically
25 underserved communities. Thank you.

2 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so very
3 much. We will now hear from Kimberly Olson,
4 Executive Director of New York City Arts and
5 Education Roundtable. Ms. Olson, whenever you're
6 ready, please.

7 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time starts now.

8 KIMBERLY OLSON: Thank you, Chair Van
9 Bramer, the Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries,
10 and International Intergroup Relations, as well as
11 Commissioner Casals and the staff at DCLA for your
12 leadership and commitment to arts education. I also
13 want to say it is such a pleasure to hear from our
14 colleagues in the public library system where I
15 actually began my career as a teaching artist working
16 at the Steinway branch of the Queens Public Library.
17 My name is Kimberly Olson and I now the executive
18 director of the New York City Arts and Education
19 Roundtable. The roundtable is a grassroots service
20 organization that builds its efforts around the
21 values that arts are essential and that arts
22 education is a right for all New York City students.
23 As our city begins to rebuild and envision a post
24 pandemic era, I am here to highlight the importance
25 of investing in arts education as part of the cities

2 recovery process. The long-term effects of Covid 19
3 on students and schools will take years to
4 understand, however, the trauma, systemic racism, and
5 learning loss related to Covid 19 are stark realities
6 happening now that students face every day in the
7 classroom. The need for investment and equity in
8 arts education comes at a time when not arts in our
9 schools have never been so important. New York City
10 is missing the opportunity to invest in authentic
11 ways to build social emotional competencies of you
12 living through these dramatic times. We are also
13 missing the chance to instill in our youth the power
14 of imagination, that creativity that's not only
15 needed for arts space professions, but careers like
16 engineering, healthcare, and computer software
17 design. And, lastly, we are also failing to engage a
18 workforce of thousands of artists who are primed to
19 expand student opportunities and advance equitable
20 access to arts learning. This year and every year,
21 the arts will be key to reigniting student learning
22 in a post-Covid Ararat and preparing them for success
23 and joy in a complicated 21st-century world. So, to
24 rebuild the cultural workforce and also help sustain
25 arts in our schools, we believe the city must restore

2 that 70 percent cut to arts services that happened at
3 the DOE and also work to restore cuts to the Casa and
4 Su Casa programing, as well. Thank you so much.

5 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time expired.

6 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so much.

7 We will now hear from Ms. Sheila Lewandowsky,
8 executive director, Chocolate Factor Theater. Ms.
9 Lewandowski, whenever you are ready.

10 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Is Sheila
11 here? I haven't seen her.

12 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Okay. So, next we
13 will move on to the next panel which is--

14 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Ana, can I
15 just-- I wanted to say just a few things about some
16 of the comments on this panel. I just want to say,
17 Lisa, thank you for saying what needed to be said and
18 I just want to say, as you may or may not remember, I
19 voted against the budget last year in part because I
20 did not believe that we did the right thing on many
21 different levels and I still believe that we
22 overfunded the Police Department and underfunded
23 desperately needed programs and services particularly
24 in black, brown, and Asian communities and cutting
25 the arts at all in this moment, particularly have

2 some folks spoke, to arts in education funding, which
3 was decimated in our schools. It's the wrong way to
4 go. So, I will just commit, Lisa, to do my part and
5 to use my voice and my position to do what I can
6 knowing that this is a mess... So and I cannot move all
7 of it in the way that I wish that I could, but I will
8 use my voice, as I did last year to call for us to
9 appropriately reimagine public safety in the city and
10 use the funding that we have in ways that will
11 address some of the systemic racism and inequities
12 that you talk about that will ultimately also make
13 the city more just and safe at the same time. So, I
14 realize this is a much longer conversation and you
15 all are giving quick two minute testimonies and then
16 I chime in, but I did not want to let this panel go
17 without saying something to let you know that I hear
18 you. I see you and I believe that it is my
19 obligation to follow through on what you said.

20 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Chair.

21 At this moment, I would also like to remind Council
22 members if you have questions for a particular
23 panelist or a panel, please use the raise hand
24 function on zoom. I see no questions. Therefore, we
25 will now move on to the next panel will be James Jay

2 Claffey Junior, president of IASE Local One, followed
3 by Lisa Alpert, vice president of programming at
4 Greenwood, Francine Garber Cohen, president,
5 [inaudible 02:14:37], Alejandra Duce Cifuentes,
6 executive director of Dance New York City. Mr.
7 Claffey, whenever you're ready, please.

8 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time starts now. James,
9 you have to unmute yourself. You're still muted,
10 sir.

11 JAMES CLAFFEY: My apologies. Chairman
12 Van Bramer, distinguished members of the city
13 Council, I've had the privilege of meeting some of
14 you before. I am James Claffey Jr., president of
15 Local One, and international president of the
16 International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees.
17 I am here today to provide testimony on behalf of the
18 Coalition of IATSE unions, collectively representing
19 over 15,000 members of which 500 theatrical workers
20 representing more than a dozen crafts at the
21 Metropolitan Opera House. There can be no
22 productions of opera at the Metropolitan Opera House
23 with all these union professionals, however, that Met
24 Opera, under the leadership of general manager Peter
25 Gelb, is now subjecting our members to a unionbusting

2 scheme. For this reason, the Metropolitan Opera
3 Coalition is asking the New York City's Counsel to
4 refrain from providing funding to the Met Opera in
5 the city budget. You all like we know that Local
6 One's membership, at least our stage crew more than
7 350 stage and shop workers at the Met Opera have been
8 locked out for more than 14 weeks by the Mets
9 management. While Local One is the only union that
10 has been locked out so far, as a practical matter,
11 our situation creates a de facto lockout for other
12 workers represented by the IATSE through the
13 interconnectivity of our work. In addition, most of
14 the other unions representing workers of the Met are
15 working under expired contracts or have been asked to
16 reopen collective bargaining agreements early for the
17 purpose of providing massive concessions to the opera
18 company. Purported rationale for the concessions, an
19 overwhelming amount of which are work pools, is
20 premised on the impact of the Covid 19 on the Met
21 opera. In reality, the Met's demand utilized the
22 pandemic as leverage to obtain Covid 19 related
23 concessions. Examples of such concessions include a
24 30 percent reduction pay that extends for years with
25 no relationship to the end of the pandemic and

2 workflow changes that imperil health, safety, and
3 quality of life for our members who are typically to
4 work 75 hours a week with around the clock schedules
5 and weekend work. When looking at management's
6 demands of concessions, it is clear that there is
7 no--

8 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time expired.

9 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Feel free to
10 continue, Jim.

11 JAMES CLAFFEY: Thanks, Mr. Chairman.
12 It's clear there is no nexus with Covid 19 and the
13 global pandemic is a mere pretext to bust the unions
14 and gut the contracts fairly negotiated over many
15 decades. We recognize the Met's finances impacted by
16 the pandemic. Our members are greatly impacted.
17 Workers have lost employer healthcare contributions
18 and struggled through the unemployment process. It
19 is for this reason that our union and many other
20 unions whose members work at the Met are prepared to
21 consider concessions while the opera house is
22 shuttered. To this point, we have seen examples
23 where other institutions have worked closely with
24 their unions to craft mutually agreed upon collective
25 bargaining agreements that recognize the harm the

2 pandemic is inflicting on our institution. As you
3 can see in our submitted testimony, which is lengthy,
4 beyond the two minutes I've been afforded, so if you
5 take a look. Mr. Gelb and management are not
6 demanding massive union concessions to account for
7 the impact of Covid 19, but rather as compensation
8 for their historical pattern of poor financial
9 decisions and it's important to emphasize Mr. Gelb's
10 systematically engaged in financially risky flawed
11 and failed management which he then seeks to paper
12 over with demands that the Met Opera workforce should
13 shoulder the cost of his blunders. The Met claims a
14 need to reduce costs and yet spends huge sums of
15 money on management and on scraping and replacing
16 productions. Commissioning too many new productions
17 that cost millions with no realistic expectation of
18 even a break even financial return. This was not the
19 case prior to Mr. Gelb's tenure. The consistency of
20 Mr. Gelb's financial mismanagement has led to his
21 increasing belief that the remedy to the opera
22 company's problems is to bust the Met's unions.
23 Instead of negotiating fairly, Mr. Gelb has chosen to
24 lock out Local One and outsource up to a year's set
25 and scenery work. Two productions, slated to be

2 produced in Met's in-house shop have been
3 subcontracted to pay productions in Cardiff Wales and
4 another will be built in a nonunion shop in the West
5 Coast. While Mr. Gelb sincerely and publicly
6 declares the need for sacrifice on all sides, use
7 chosen a path in which the quality of life of the
8 workers is to sacrifice. The Mets demands would take
9 away overtime rules, reduce sick days, accrual of
10 vacation pay, remove comp time and reduce benefits.
11 These take it or leave it demands impact the
12 livelihood and safety of the workers. These items
13 have been gained in mutual exchange over decades of
14 bargaining. In effect, Mr. Gelb is demanding to
15 return our agreement to 1999's terms. Therefore, the
16 coalition of IA unions request that the New York City
17 Council not provide funding to the Metropolitan
18 Opera, including capital grants in the city budget
19 while it means engagements agenda of union busting.
20 We believe that if the city withholds public funds to
21 the Met, you'll be sending a clear message that
22 policymakers expect nothing short of a good faith
23 negotiation between the Met and its unions. Let's be
24 clear. The negotiation in which Peter Gelb presents
25 all nine pages of his proposals as a take it or leave

2 it proposition does not constitute good faith
3 bargaining and should not be rewarded with public
4 dollars. I thank you for the opportunity to appear
5 on behalf of the members of the IA union coalition
6 and I am certainly available to answer any questions
7 should you chose to ask. Thank you.

8 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you for
9 your testimony and, as you may have heard in my
10 discussion with the unions representing all of our
11 library workers earlier and of course my own personal
12 history being-- coming from a union family, it is
13 absolutely unacceptable that the Met or any other
14 organization would try to break unions and strip away
15 hard earned benefits that workers deserve. So, you
16 have our support and our solidarity to do anything in
17 my role as the Cultural Affairs Chair to wait and on
18 behalf of the workers who are fighting this fight.
19 So, thank you when we should definitely talk after
20 the hearing and see in which ways we can help amplify
21 the fight.

22 JAMES CLAFFEY: We greatly appreciate
23 it, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

24 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so much.
25 Next, we will hear from Ms. Lisa Alpert with

2 [inaudible 02:21:49] development and programming,
3 Greenwood. Ms. Alpert, please, whenever you're
4 ready.

5 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time starts now.

6 LISA ALPERT: Hi. Hello, Chair Van Bramer.
7 My name is Lisa Alpert. I am the vice president of
8 development and programming at Greenwood Cemetery in
9 Brooklyn and, for geographical context, Greenwood is
10 in South Brooklyn, borders six different
11 neighborhoods, including Sunset Park and Park Slope.
12 So, if not quality time we are going to share
13 together in the next two minutes, I want to just make
14 for critical points. Number one, Greenwood Cemetery
15 is really big and we are in your replaceable asset
16 for Brooklyn and all of New York City. We are 478
17 acres. That is just slightly smaller than Prospect
18 Park and we feel a responsibility and obligation to
19 share this incredible resource with the community.
20 And we embrace this responsibility every day. How do
21 we do that? Number two, more than 250 public
22 programs every year, including concerts,
23 performances, and art installations, fully staffed
24 education departments serve thousands of kids,
25 workforce development training, groundbreaking work

2 with Cornell and fighting climate change, high school
3 internships, access, and equity is our goal, as
4 always. Number three, something incredible happened
5 at Greenwood last year. Last spring, when Covid hit,
6 Greenwood opened and staffed all four of its entrance
7 gates seven days a week until 7 p.m. every night and
8 that changed the number of people who come to
9 Greenwood annually from 300,000 to just under 600,000
10 people in 2020. Not all at the same time. Don't
11 worry. Which means Greenwood is now better known and
12 loved by Brooklynites than ever before. But, number
13 four, we have a big challenge and a big opportunity.
14 We currently have no indoor space for programming.
15 That means when it is cold or raining or snowing, we
16 cannot serve our community. We lose almost four
17 months of the year. Our capital project and
18 education and welcome center will allow year round
19 programming, which is especially important here in
20 South Brooklyn, which is culturally significantly
21 underserved. We have raised 65 percent of the funds.
22 We are seeking the support of the City Council on
23 this very important capital project. Thanks.

24 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Ana, is that
25 this panel?

2 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Yes. I was
3 wondering whether you wanted to make any remarks.

4 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Fair enough.
5 Yes. Thank you to all of the folks on this panel,
6 some of the folks who are gone and, Lisa, I will
7 certainly take a look at that. I am a big fan of
8 Greenwood and know exactly where it is. So, thank
9 you. Next panel?

10 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: So, thank you.
11 Next, we will hear from Ms. Francine Garber Cohen,
12 president of Virginia Opera Company, followed by
13 Alejandra Duque Cifuentes, executive director of
14 Dance New York City. Ms. Garber Cohen, whenever
15 you're ready.

16 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time starts now.

17 FRANCINE GARBER COHEN: Thank you, Council
18 members and arts I am Fran Garber Cohen, president of
19 Regina Opera. For 50 years, Regina Opera has offered
20 fully staged operas with full orchestra and English
21 super titles, as well as many concerts. We provide
22 affordable entertainment and accessible venues for
23 audience members who might not otherwise attend live
24 performances. The performances bring happiness and
25 empathy to our audiences. We performed three fully

2 staged operas each season, consisting of four
3 ticketed performance and one totally free
4 performance. We also feature many free concerts in
5 parks, libraries, and festivals and ticketed concerts
6 in our theater located in Sunset Park, all of which
7 brings foot traffic and business to local restaurants
8 and shops. The need for this cultural enrichment is
9 reflected in the fact that over 4000 people usually
10 attend our live performances, again, most of which
11 are in Sunset Park, and underserved, low income
12 community. Due to Covid 19, Regina Opera lost one
13 year of live performances, but we have been actively
14 posting our archived free and on demand on our
15 YouTube page, for a total of over 40 offering and we
16 have had over 20,000 views. Not a lot compared to
17 other people, but we are a small organization. The
18 arts are particularly vital to New York City. They
19 are uplifting to the spirit, especially for senior
20 citizens who may live alone. As with all of the arts
21 organizations, we don't know when we will again earn
22 sufficient income through ticket sales and donations.
23 As a result, we are relying upon DCLA and city
24 Council members funding such as that of Council
25 members--

2 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time expired.

3 FRANCINE GARBER COHEN: Menchaca and
4 Brannan. The funding will help alleviate some of the
5 pain and insecurity that we, like most cultural
6 institutions, have been facing. Thank you.

7 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Chair, would you
8 like to make a remark?

9 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you,
10 Francine.

11 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so very
12 much. Next, we will hear from Alejandra Duque
13 Cifuentes, executive director of Dance NYC. Whenever
14 you are ready, please.

15 ALEJANDRA DUQUE CIFUENTES: Hello,
16 everyone. Thank you, Council member, and to the
17 committee for having me here today. My name is
18 Alejandra Duque Cifuentes. I'm the executive
19 director of Dance NYC, coming to you from my home and
20 office in Forest Hills, Queens, New York. I am
21 speaking on behalf of Dance NYC and the dance sector
22 and industry that we represent. Well over 5000
23 individual artists, dance making groups, for and
24 nonprofit organizations, and independent artists.
25 Today, I am joining my colleagues and advocating for

2 the city to maintain the budget for arts and culture
3 without making any budget cuts. As Council member
4 Van Bramer said earlier, culture never closed and
5 while the funding that is set aside for culture is
6 small in proportion to everything else that the city
7 allocates funds to, the return is incredibly high.
8 Our artists and cultural workers have continued to
9 serve our community in this time. They have risen
10 across a variety of advocacy movements like Dance
11 Rising with performers all around the city. They
12 have supported our educational institutions and our
13 students. They are workers embedded across many
14 other parts of our city and the different sectors and
15 so we want to just recognize how necessary this
16 support is in continuing to support these
17 organizations, these businesses, and these workers.
18 We also want to affirm that the funding that is
19 designated allows for arts workers to be paid living
20 wages for institutions to be required to pay these
21 living wages in a way that is true for a New York
22 City economy. We also want to encourage Council to
23 designate funds initiatives that support black,
24 indigenous, and folks of color led organizations,

2 disabled led, immigrant led, and the organizations
3 specifically serving those--

4 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time expired.

5 ALEJANDRA DUQUE CIFUENTES: without which
6 we can't continue to do this work. This year has
7 been a great impact, but we know that culture is what
8 will bring New York City back and it's what has
9 distinguished New York City for decades and
10 generations across the world. So please continue to
11 support us.

12 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you,
13 Alejandra, for bringing, you know, such a clear and
14 powerful voice to these issues and, obviously, your
15 leadership over the last year, not just for the dance
16 community, but for the greater cultural community
17 and, obviously, being a real fierce, you know,
18 speaker of truth around equal access and justice for
19 bipoc communities and, in particular, artists. And
20 doing all of that from the greatest borough in the
21 world, in Queens. So, when I realized that everyone
22 else who speaks now doesn't live in Queens, I sort of
23 just declared a preference. I think folks
24 understand. But, Alejandra, thank you for everything
25 you do for all of us, really.

2 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so very
3 much. Since there are no questions from Council
4 members, we will move on to the next panel which will
5 consist of Lauren Comito, board chair, Urban
6 Librarians Unite, followed by Muriel [inaudible
7 02:31:31], Queens Memory, Tara Brady, Queens Library
8 Guild, and Margaret [inaudible 02:31:37], Hispanic
9 Society of America. Ms. Comito, whenever you're
10 ready, please.

11 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time starts now.

12 LAUREN COMITO: Thank you, Chair Van
13 Bramer and Council members who have come to this
14 committee for giving me this chance to testify today.
15 I've spent a lot of time trying to think of how to
16 condense the experience of the last year and sort of
17 our hopes and dreams about what libraries should be
18 and are into two minutes and I don't think I can.

19 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: You don't have
20 to, Lauren. I will give you more time.

21 LAUREN COMITO: All of my colleagues
22 have talked so much about we pivoted and went to
23 virtual services and changed how our entire field
24 works and I just want to acknowledge that New York
25 City library workers led the country and the work in

2 how we have done that. There are people from
3 Australia who have come and asked us what we're doing
4 who have sat in on our programs and then taken it
5 back to their own country and done it there. There
6 are people from Canada asking us how we do things.
7 We have led the country and the world in how we
8 jumped right back into servicing our community after
9 the incredible impactful event of having to suddenly
10 shut down and go home. And all my colleagues have
11 talked about the services we have provided, but I
12 think with the budget, we talk about a budget as a
13 statement of priorities all the time. Every year.
14 And for me, one of my priorities as building
15 community and fighting the isolation that we have
16 felt over the last year. Libraries and jumping into
17 virtual services have created these online spaces for
18 interaction and social-- just social interactions
19 that don't exist anymore because we can't get
20 together in person in a way that we needed
21 desperately. Isolation is a horrible thing to have
22 happened and for a full year--

23 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time expired.

24 LAUREN COMITO: I just want to tell the
25 story of my knitting group because, without those

2 women, I don't know how I would have made it through
3 the last here myself. We have a knitting group at my
4 branch that meets every Friday at 11 and there are
5 people joining this group from Harlem, Staten Island,
6 Brooklyn Heights, like Williamsburg, South Brooklyn,
7 Philadelphia, Arizona, Tennessee, the Carolinas.
8 Like people who would never have met each other in
9 person can now get together and we all know
10 everybody's business. We just hang out and talk and
11 laugh every Friday at 11. It's not visible to the
12 Council. It's not visible because it is in Zoom and
13 it's like this. It's hidden. This sort of joy
14 filled our every Friday in the middle of all of this
15 awful stuff is hidden from view and I just want to
16 make sure that the Council knows that those things
17 are happening. That there are bits of joy that is
18 being created by library workers all over the city.
19 Relationships in my knitting group where they go from
20 my program to a coloring program to a program in
21 Queens to something in Staten Island. They are all
22 in the same boat club. They are a group of friends
23 that came together because of the library in the
24 midst of a giant tragedy. The power of that needs to
25 continue and it needs funding. That's it. Just, you

2 know, we can keep doing it, but we need the funding
3 to continue.

4 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you,
5 Lauren. Obviously, like so many other folks who are
6 here and I really just want to say thank you to all
7 the folks who are waiting and looking at the final
8 list of all the folks who are testifying and I see
9 you, Lucy and Sade, and so many others, but, Lauren,
10 we've known each other for many years. We have
11 fought alongside one another for many years. We used
12 to have rallies on the steps of City Hall before
13 these hearings, right? And we--

14 LAUREN COMITO: We will again.

15 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Yeah. We will
16 again. But you would often represent Urban
17 Librarians Unite and library workers have incredibly
18 powerful things to say, sometimes with your daughter
19 and to, right? Am I correct? Yes.

20 LAUREN COMITO: She is in online school
21 at the moment.

22 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Fair. Fair.
23 So, I just thank you for your eloquence and passion
24 and, you know, we are just really, really grateful to
25 you and all library workers. And I know that I don't

2 see your knitting group, obviously, but just know
3 that, as the Chair of this committee, I do see
4 library workers, right? And I do know their
5 incredible value to the city. So, I know they bring
6 joy in an impossible time. So, thank you.

7 LAUREN COMITO: Thank you.

8 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so very
9 much. Next, we will hear from the Muriel , Queens
10 Memory, followed by Tara Brady, Queens Library Guild.
11 Muriel Gish, whenever you're ready, please.

12 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time starts now.

13 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: I don't think
14 I see that person. I see Jocelyn waiving her hand.

15 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Okay. In that
16 case--

17 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: But, Jocelyn,
18 are you from the Queens Library, Jocelyn? She is.

19 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: We have Tara Brady
20 of Queens Library Guild whenever you're ready.

21 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: I thought we
22 already have the Li--

23 TARA BRADY: No. I'm a librarian. I'm a
24 member of the Library Guild. My name is Tara Brady
25 and I am a teen librarian at the Queens Central

2 Library in Jamaica. One year ago this week, the
3 [inaudible 02:38:07] teenagers that I had hosted
4 every week for over two years had what was to be its
5 last meeting. It's hard to imagine now, but, at the
6 time, I thought that if we saw service changes due to
7 Covid, we might reduce room capacity is, maybe even
8 close for a few weeks, but not much more than that.
9 So, when two of my long-time participants had a
10 breakthrough in the code they were writing for their
11 robot, I told them without hesitation that next time
12 we would let it run around the room and see what it
13 can do. Their eyes lit up. There still hasn't been
14 next time. In the weeks to follow, I was amazed and
15 inspired by all the ways my colleagues found to keep
16 on serving their communities. You have heard a lot
17 about virtual programming, grab and go service, and
18 take-home program kits, of course, but within days we
19 were also up and running with chat, email, and text
20 message reference services from home. That's the
21 service I haven't heard mentioned as much and it is
22 so important. Working remotely, I have walked people
23 of all ages through accessing the many services
24 available on our website, worked with teachers to put
25 together electronic resources for their suddenly

2 remote classes, and helped so many people find
3 alternate ways to get the services they would
4 normally get from us in person. A bit later on, we
5 were able to restart phone reference services, as
6 well, which, for many of our patrons, is a lifeline.
7 I am so glad I have been able to keep reaching
8 patrons in this way. Nobody wants to live through a
9 year like this, but if I had to, I can't think of a
10 better place to do it than I Queens Public Library
11 where I have so many opportunities to serve my
12 community every day, even from my cute little Que
13 Gardens studio apartment. I know this hasn't been
14 the most visible work. You can't stop by a branch
15 for a tour right now and see everything we are doing,
16 but we are finding new ways to help our communities
17 all the time and we are so close. Once we are
18 finally able to safely reopen, our patrons are going
19 to need up more than ever. We're going to be helping
20 kids who have been desperately underserved by remote
21 schooling get caught back up. We're going to be
22 rebuilding the sense of community that those who
23 gather in our spaces feel and I know a little robot
24 is still waiting for the chance to test his stuff in
25 my program room. As we find our way through the

2 coming months and years, we're going to need all the
3 help and support we can get. Thank you.

4 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time expired.

5 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you.

6 Perfect timing, Tara.

7 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so very
8 much, Ms. Brady. We will now hear from Ms. Margaret
9 Connor McQuade, Hispanic Society of America.
10 Whenever you're ready.

11 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time starts now.

12 MARGARET CONNORS MCQUADE: Great. Good
13 afternoon and thank you for providing this
14 opportunity today. My name is Margaret Connors
15 McQuade. I'm the deputy director of the Hispanic
16 Society Museum and Library. The Hispanic Society,
17 located on 155th Street and Broadway, was founded in
18 1904 as a museum and library dedicated to the art and
19 culture of the Hispanic world. For several years
20 now, we've been working to restore and renovate our
21 buildings to bring them up to current standards,
22 provide full universal accessibility. During the
23 renovation, we brought our educational programs to
24 the local schools in Upper Manhattan and the Bronx.
25 These programs, which are offered at no cost to help

2 fill gaps in the arts curriculum for many of the
3 schools we serve. We also have concerts, lectures,
4 and tours of our Vision of Spain gallery, all free of
5 charge. We are currently closed due to the pandemic,
6 but we have significantly increased engagement to
7 online programs, including lectures, concerts,
8 cooking demonstrations, and a virtual summer camp
9 organized together with our uptown colleagues at
10 cultural organizations. And, finally, we used our
11 terrace to present an outdoor installation last fall
12 and we are now planning another outdoor exhibit with
13 the Northern Manhattan Art Alliance, NOMAA, to
14 exhibit a mural created by local artists. The use of
15 our outdoor space is particularly important for our
16 community hit hardest by this pandemic. We have been
17 fortunate to be able to keep our staff intact during
18 the pandemic. Those of you who have been to the
19 Hispanic Society know that we have some of the most
20 impressive galleries for experiencing art in the
21 city, but you also know that our buildings are in
22 great need of significant and costly upgrades. We
23 had hoped and still hope that we can count on the
24 city for ongoing capital projects. We are uniquely
25 positioned to serve as a major cultural hobbit in

2 upper Manhattan and in New York City, but we can't do
3 that without a private public partnership. We have
4 been successful in raising private funds, but need
5 the city's support to bring this institution into the
6 light it deserves. We are committed to deepening our
7 mission to better serve the wider public in
8 meaningful ways. Thank you so much.

9 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time expired.

10 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you.

11 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so very
12 much. I would just like to take a moment to say that
13 we will go back at the end to anyone who we have
14 missed, so please don't worry. We will get back to
15 you. Then we will move on to our next panelist. The
16 next--

17 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: And there are
18 only two more panels, just to be clear. There are
19 only two more panels.

20 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Right. So, the
21 next panel will consist of Jessica Chen of [inaudible
22 02:43:12] Chen Project, Carol Ochs, the 52nd Street
23 Project, Christina Perry, [inaudible 02:43:19]
24 Theater, and Sade Lythcott, National Black Theater.
25 Ms. Chen, whenever you're ready, please.

2 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time starts now.

3 JESSICA CHEN: Hi. Hi. Thank you,
4 everyone. Thank you, Chair Van Bramer, Council
5 members, in my colleagues, for the chance to speak
6 today. Today is my first time testifying live.
7 Thanks to my mentors Lisa Gold, Lucy Sexton, and so
8 many more. I am Jessica Chen, artistic director of J
9 Chen Project, a modern dance company founded in 2008,
10 established as a 501©(3) nonprofit in 2017. J Chen
11 Project has demonstrated a history of diverse city
12 and inclusion with immigrants, BIPOC, including Asian
13 Pacific Americans and LGBTQ community. My company is
14 filled with vibrant, passionate individuals that, if
15 given the chance, will continue to bring art and
16 beauty to this great city. Right now, my community
17 is also hurting, so I am here in solidarity with my
18 Art's colleagues to urge significant investment in
19 the arts and culture now. I do want to share the
20 story of Ruby with you today. Ruby came to New York
21 City for the first time to attend our J Chen Project
22 mentee program in 2014. She was a rising junior at
23 the time that the Board of County School of The Arts
24 in California where I often teach and, at age 16, she
25 was already planning and dreaming about the ways that

2 she wanted to make a difference in her community.

3 She is now a New Yorker, a graduate of the NYU Tandem

4 School Engineering, class of 2020, and is currently

5 envisioning and building for a better New York. Arts

6 and culture burying guide and talented people to New

7 York every year, whether they work in the arts or

8 not, like Ruby, and dance in the city filled with

9 artistic expression, but [inaudible 02:45:11] to New

10 York and we need people like Ruby to revive and

11 rebuild our city. Arts and culture will play a

12 leading role in New York's economic vitality and

13 robust recovery and to do so, we need relief and

14 support. So, let's get our creative workers

15 vaccinated and back to work. Thank you so much for

16 your time and opportunity to testify.

17 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you.

18 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so much.

19 Next, we will hear from Carol Ochs, the 52nd Street

20 Project, followed by Christina Peary. Ms. Ochs,

21 whenever you're ready, please.

22 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time starts now.

23 CAROL OCHS: Thank you, Chair Van Bramer,

24 Council members. I'm Carol Ochs, the executive

25 director of the 52nd Street Project. The project,

2 coming up on its 40th anniversary, is a community-
3 based arts organization located in and serving the
4 young people of Health Kitchen. We work with
5 underserved kids starting at the age of nine or 10
6 and they stay with the us for eight years until they
7 graduate high school and even beyond with scholarship
8 programs for higher education. Our programs are free
9 to the children who participate and our performances
10 are free to our audiences. Reaching approximately
11 150 kids each year, we have been running virtual
12 programs since March, continuing to engage our
13 members. I will tell the story of one young woman as
14 an illustration of the impact that the arts and long-
15 term service to our community can have. This child
16 started with the project when she was 10 years old.
17 She did not really speak to adults. When you spoke
18 to her, she would look down, shrugged her shoulders.
19 And whenever she was asked a question, you could
20 barely hear what she said and never offered an
21 opinion of her own. We stuck with her friends still
22 talked to her. I asked her questions, engaged with
23 her when we knew the conversation would be minimal.
24 We invited her to every program possible and she
25 always said yes. She participated in programming,

2 and performing and writing programs, as well as
3 backstage crew, just to name a few. Today, at 17,
4 she is extremely vocal, starts topics of
5 conversation, chooses to share her thoughts with us.
6 She is the most consistent member of the teen
7 ensemble. We were in rehearsal for a virtual show
8 when her mother, sadly, suddenly passed away this
9 winter. She chose to complete the program. Even
10 though she has struggled with school through the
11 pandemic and her mother's illness, she attends every
12 meeting of college prep. She wants to continue
13 acting in college. This is the type of impact the
14 arts and community can provide. It is critical that
15 the DCA funding be kept whole in order to support the
16 crucial work--

17 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time expired.

18 CAROL OCHS: of arts organizations during
19 this pandemic and in order that the city survive and
20 recover as the economic energy and communities
21 strengthening work of culture. Thank you.

22 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you,
23 Carol. It is a devastating story, but very powerful
24 and those stories need to be told and, as someone who
25 has been doing this work for a long time, it just was

2 called some other stories that I have experienced
3 were people, particularly young peoples, lives were
4 changed by the arts. So, thank you.

5 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so much.

6 We will now hear from Ms. Christina Perry. Have
7 League of Independent Theater followed by Sade
8 Lythcott. His Perry, whenever you're ready, please.

9 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time starts now.

10 CHRISTINA PERRY: Good afternoon,
11 Councilman Van Bramer. Always good to see you.

12 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Good to see
13 you.

14 CHRISTINA PERRY: Yes. And Commissioner
15 Gonzalo, I look forward to finally being able to meet
16 you in person one of these days. So I'm Christina
17 Perry. I'm with the League of Independent Theaters.
18 We represent over 300 venues with 99 seats or less
19 and I also operate two theater venues in Midtown
20 Manhattan known as the Chain Theater. So, I am here
21 as a member of the league and to also give a personal
22 account as a venue operator. So, first of all, I
23 cannot speak of any local city or state hearing
24 without first mentioning rent relief. It is our
25 greatest need right now and we know that you, our

2 city representatives, have the ears of those in state
3 and we ask that you continue to voice this
4 overwhelming need as we also wait on further action
5 with proposed bill 1796. So, that said, we, for
6 years, not-for-profit so as far as looking for ways
7 to save and we have an idea that we feel would be
8 really substantial to our industry. An important ask
9 I would like to address today is the need for not-
10 for-profit rate from Con Edison that eliminates us
11 from being classified as a large commercial venue. I
12 can personally share that our organization pursued
13 this five years ago when we first had a space in LIC
14 and, after numerous attempts, we were told that
15 because we didn't own the building, we did not
16 qualify for this. And the reality is small arts
17 organizations like us can't afford their own
18 building. So, if we can't afford our own building,
19 it is safe to say we probably really can't afford to
20 be classified as a large commercial venue with Con
21 Edison. So, this is money that would save us
22 thousands of dollars each year and it would go to
23 further programming, community events, paying artists
24 and geek workers, and this is money we already have
25 that is in our budgets that can be reallocated. So,

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2 I am asking today to help us create this change. It
3 is the change that would not pull from the city
4 budget, but would save our organization so much. So,
5 we see this as a great way for the city to help our
6 arts organizations financially during this time
7 without actually pulling from the budget. And so, I
8 just want to say thank you so much for this
9 opportunity to speak and I look forward to further
10 discussing how we can actually make this happen. So,
11 thank you.

12 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so very
13 much. Next, we will hear from Ms. Sade Lythcott of
14 National Black Theater. Whenever you're ready,
15 please.

16 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time starts now.

17 SADE LYTHCOTT: Good afternoon, Chair
18 Van Bramer, for your leadership. But not just your
19 leadership. Your passion in your tremendous heart.
20 Thank you all also to all the esteemed members of the
21 Committee present today and Commissioner Casals. My
22 name is Sade Lythcott. I testified today as the CEO
23 of the National Black Theater, the longest
24 continually run black theater in New York City. I
25 also proudly serve as the Chair of Coalitions the

2 Theaters of Color, coalition that represents the
3 largest body of culturally specific theaters in all
4 five boroughs. What BIPOC communities have endured
5 this past year is nothing short of a war and I'm not
6 sure why we are not calling it that. The numbers
7 make it poignantly clear, between the pandemic, the
8 uprisings, and the tyranny of systemic racism on our
9 communities specifically. From the exponential rise
10 of anti-Asian violence to the disproportionate Covid
11 19 deaths in black and brown communities, life has
12 been fragile and fleeting, but most starkly,
13 uncertain. The BIPOC organizations that are funded
14 through the CTC initiative have been on the front
15 lines of this war, a safe haven for the communities--
16 sorry. For the communities in which we operate. We
17 have been doing the work for generations, not just in
18 this moment, as we are just brilliantly hard from
19 sister Lisa Gold of A4. Even in this year of extreme
20 challenge and trauma, our CTC organizations have
21 continued to serve hundreds of thousands of New
22 Yorkers in the hardest hit communities with vitally
23 needed cultural, educational, social, and economic
24 resources for youth, seniors, and families and local
25 neighborhoods into the broader residents living in

2 the outer boroughs. From the antiracism training
3 courses conducted by the Caribbean Cultural Are in
4 East Harlem--

5 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time expired.

6 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Keep going,
7 Sade. Keep going, please.

8 SADE LYTHCOTT: Thank you. To the
9 digital education and activism of the Chinese Theater
10 Works in Queens, to art therapy that the Mind
11 Builders in the Bronx offer kids, some who have lost
12 both parents to Covid 19. For us, this testimony is
13 not about money. This is about our lives in the
14 well-being of our communities. Cuts to the CTC would
15 be destabilizing over half of our theaters will be
16 gone for good. Some that represent the only theaters
17 of their kind in the country, like Amarinda, serving
18 and empowering American Indians. Last year, I came
19 to you to remind you that budgets are moral
20 narratives. They hold up a mirror to our values.
21 They reflect back our priorities. Every vote,
22 decision, and cut tells the story and you heard us
23 and we are so grateful for that. We are asking that
24 you continue to stand with us and not only no harm
25 come to the CTC initiative, but that you will our

2 fund-- but that our funding becomes baseline so that
3 the support from our beloved city is no longer
4 uncertain or insecure. We are asking that you make a
5 secure annual investment in our organizations so that
6 at least, on this front, we have peace of mind that
7 we can plan a future. Our DCLA funding is mostly
8 through CDF, which is competitive and uncertain.
9 Baselineing this funding would mean everything for the
10 future of our communities. Together, we have the
11 sacred responsibility of imagining and manifesting a
12 new and more equitable city. This is your chance,
13 like the artists we all revere so, to be creative.
14 As Chair Van Bramer says, think outside the box. Be
15 bold and take courageous steps towards budget justice
16 to shine a light in these dark times into the spaces
17 that need it most. So grateful to be able to speak
18 to you today. Thank you.

19 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you,
20 Sade. And I just want to say a member of my staff,
21 as you were giving your testimony, said Sade for
22 president. And I concurred. You know, look. There
23 is so much more that needs to be done, but, you know,
24 I will just say that the fight that I brought last
25 year and the vote that I took which did not come

2 without some consequences, but it was the right thing
3 to do and so I will bring that same energy, dare I
4 say fierceness, as a gay man, to this budget because
5 I believe it. Just a few days ago, I was walking
6 along Greenpoint Avenue in Sunnyside and I ran into
7 Angel who runs the Jalia Spanish Theater which is, of
8 course, member of the CTC. And, you know, it is a
9 relatively small institution where I have enjoyed
10 many, many performances. As you may know, it's one
11 of the only bilingual theater companies in Queens and
12 it is a beautiful little space on Greenpoint Avenue
13 it stays alive because of CTC and because of some of
14 the, obviously, grants that I provide, as well. So,
15 I believe in it and I really appreciate you saying
16 that this isn't about money. Right? It is about
17 serving justice and survival in many ways. And so,
18 you know, all I can say to you is that, you know, I
19 have demonstrated that I see you and I have voted my
20 conscience and I will continue to do that as long as
21 I have that ability and that obligation, right? I
22 have an obligation because of this position that I am
23 in, to do the right thing, and I will keep doing
24 that. And I absolutely believe in baselining. We
25 have fought for years to baseline both library and

2 cultural funding because, you know, I remember when I
3 was a staff person at the Queens Public Library.
4 This is many years ago. And it was after 9/11 and
5 there were huge budget cuts and I was a relatively
6 junior staff member in the external affairs,
7 governmental affairs department and there were
8 layoffs and folks got layoff notices and a much older
9 man, he was Haitian, stopped by my cubicle and begged
10 me to help save his job because he knew that I had
11 some access to elected officials, right? And that
12 was part of my job to fight for budget-- fight
13 against budget cuts. And I never forget those
14 conversations and how much real people's lives are
15 impacted and how frightened this person who was much
16 more my senior was about losing his livelihood and
17 his ability to care for his family. And that I had
18 some little role to play in that. Now I have a much
19 larger role to play in that, but I never lose sight
20 of those stories and of those people. And when we
21 baseline funding, we take away that fear, right, that
22 people live in all the time that what little they
23 have could be ripped away at any moment in time based
24 on some decision that gets made in a room, whether it
25 is a Zoom room or a real room. And folks will never

2 know. They will never know who made the cut, who
3 agreed to it. When it becomes public is when we
4 vote, right? And when we speak to how and why we
5 vote. And, you know, I will be a Council member for
6 12 years and the speech that I gave-- I spoke twice
7 last June when we voted on the budget, right? And we
8 had so many black lives matter uprisings, but also
9 activists who were occupying City Hall or the park
10 outside City Hall and, you know, I am really proud of
11 this speech that I gave that night in defense of
12 activists. And also recalling my own personal
13 history as a queer activist and [inaudible 03:00:31]
14 and how that movement, you know, changed the world
15 and saved lives by being-- by not being polite and
16 by not asking for permission to unequivocally state
17 that our lives matter and that queer people were
18 dropping like flies and government didn't give a shit
19 and like we had an obligation to do things. So,
20 yeah. You just got me thinking, Sade, as you often
21 do, about all of these things. So, I just wanted to
22 share my thoughts and also just offer my allyship and
23 solidarity.

24 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so much,
25 Chair. So, we are moving on to our next panel and

2 after this panel we will go back to everyone we have
3 missed, so please stand by. The last panel will
4 consist of Ms. Kathy Brewster Lee, Local 1321,
5 Yashiris Moreta, former director of New York
6 Historical Society, Atiba Edwards, Lucy Sexton,
7 executive director of New Yorkers for Culture and
8 Arts. Ms. Kathy Brewster Lee, whenever you're ready.

9 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time starts now.

10 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Okay. It appears
11 that she is not present. Yashiris Moreta, whenever
12 you're ready, please.

13 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time starts now.

14 YASHIRIS MORETA: Good morning. My name
15 is Yashiris Moreta, vice president of operations for
16 capital projects for the New York Historical Society.
17 Members of the Committee on Cultural Affairs, thank
18 you for your continued service to the arts and
19 culture community in New York City, particularly
20 during this challenging time. Thank you for the
21 opportunity to offer my testimony on behalf of the
22 New York Historical Society. The past year has been
23 transformative for New York Historical and we have
24 worked to respond quickly to unprecedented challenges
25 while remaining committed to serving our audiences to

2 the fullest. New York Historical continues to
3 recover from significant setbacks this last March
4 including major losses in our income and slow
5 visitation. Despite those challenges, New York
6 Historical has remained committed to its mission of
7 creating museum programing that highlights
8 underrecognized stories. Our history at home has
9 served more than 31,000 students in the fiscal year
10 202 and has reached over 94,000 students in this
11 fiscal year. With limited staff now working onsite
12 at the museum, New York Historical has continued it's
13 exhibition schedule beginning with an outdoor exhibit
14 [inaudible 03:03:16] New York City under quarantine
15 and followed by many more. In fiscal year 2020, New
16 York Historical partnered with the American LGBTQ+
17 museum to bring forth plans to construct the city's
18 first major museum dedicated to LGBTQ+ history and
19 culture. This project will provide critical
20 workforce development and job creating opportunities
21 allowing New Yorkers to advance during this economic
22 recovery in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.
23 Due to financial and logistical setbacks resulted
24 from the Covid 19 pandemic, New York Historical will
25 proceed with a phased approach starting with the

2 construction of a single story expansion with a
3 superstructure to follow. In conclusion, New York
4 Historical Society remains deeply grateful for the
5 important programmatic and capital funds from New
6 York City that has allowed us to expand our resources
7 and adapt to the urgent needs of our local community.

8 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time expired.

9 YASHIRIS MORETA: City Council member for
10 your [inaudible 03:04:28] service and for hearing me
11 today.

12 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you.

13 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so very
14 much. We will now hear from Atiba Edwards followed
15 by Lucy Sexton. Atiba Edwards, whenever you're
16 ready, please.

17 ATIBA EDWARDS: Good afternoon, Chair
18 Van Bramer and members of the committee. My name is
19 Atiba Edwards and I'm the COO at Brooklyn Children's
20 Museum and the committee chair of the Cultural
21 Institutions Group Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and
22 Access Committee. I'm here to testify on behalf of
23 the CIG's, a coalition of 34 cultural organizations
24 who share private-public partnership with the city of
25 New York and are located in our five boroughs.

2 First, let me begin by saying how grateful we are for
3 the Council vital support for the culture and the
4 arts in New York City throughout the years.

5 Additionally, today's hearing marks a one year shift
6 since we saw Covid 19 take over daily life and also
7 the cultural industries struggle with the paradigm
8 shift. According to a recent study in 2020, CIG's
9 saw just under half \$1 billion in deficit due to
10 revenue losses, while investing millions and
11 reopening. Organizations identified ways across New
12 York City for meal and PPE distribution, voluntary
13 space for blood drives, testing and for vaccines, and
14 overall collectively, the CIG you spent 2 million in
15 order to ensure New Yorkers were able to access
16 quality virtual programming and, in total, these
17 offerings reach about 10 million individuals,
18 especially those hard-hit by the pandemic. At
19 Brooklyn Children's Museum, we have been able to
20 provide space for half a dozen artists in our
21 community to help to the unifying power of the arts.
22 Additionally, as mentioned earlier, we are partnering
23 with Brooklyn Public Library to offer grab and go
24 service to a community that just lost their library.
25 Looking forward, CIG's are critical to the economic

2 recovery of the city. Staff, wages, and dollars for
3 visitation across the cultural industry help
4 reinvigorate the local economy and also I want to
5 stress our strong support for colleagues who are not
6 members of the CIG who have worked alongside in the
7 past year through our Culture at Three Call which has
8 led to a number of initiatives such as funding for
9 the Coalition of Theaters of Color, Council
10 initiatives, and, additionally, Council initiatives
11 like Casa and Su Casa are critically important. We
12 deeply appreciate the Council's unwavering support
13 and ask you once again to ensure that culture and
14 [inaudible 03:06:42] for New York City. We ask that
15 the cultural budget be held harmless and maintain at
16 fiscal 21 levels as we wait on further information
17 around federal relief around the Covid pandemic that
18 might be made available to the city--

19 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time expired.

20 ATIBA EDWARDS: Thank you.

21 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you,
22 Atiba. Were you done? Okay. We would have let you
23 go on and certainly longer. And, yes, it is
24 certainly interesting to see what the federal
25 stimulus looks like for our city and what we decide

2 to do with that money because we are talking about
3 simply holding culture and the arts and libraries and
4 programs and services harmless and keeping them the
5 same. I want to know where that money is going.

6 Right? And we have an opportunity with the stimulus
7 on top of the budget situation not being as dire, as
8 many have feared and predicted, to be in a position
9 to actually add funding and to direct funding to
10 black and brown communities and organizations. This
11 is an opportunity and let's see what we, as a city,
12 do with it. And I think, Lucy, you are up.

13 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Yes. Thank you,
14 Chair. Ms. Lucy Sexton, whenever you're ready.

15 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time starts now.

16 LUCY SEXTON: Thank you so much. And just
17 before I even start my testimony, I want to say that,
18 yes, other states and cities have created dedicated
19 streams of their relief money towards the arts and
20 culture sector. New York State and New York City
21 needs to do the same. Ready to imagine that with
22 you. Thank you, Chair Van Bramer and members of the
23 City Council, for this important and urgent hearing.
24 My name is Lucy Sexton. I am with the Cultural
25 Advocacy Coalition, New Yorkers for Cultural and

2 Arts. While I realize we're talking about the budget
3 and that this is a time of economic crisis, I think
4 we need to talk about a radical reimagining of New
5 York City, one with arts and culture supported in
6 every community, helping every neighborhood recover
7 economically and emotionally and laying the
8 groundwork for an equitable and thriving city going
9 forward. Arts and culture have fled the city's
10 economic recovery before during past crises, and
11 inhabiting and revitalizing the hollowed out
12 industrial spaces in the 70s, creating festivals that
13 drew people downtown after 9/11, and getting people
14 back on the streets and into businesses coming out of
15 the 2008 financial crisis. Now is the time to invest
16 in, not to cut this critical economic driver. The
17 benefit that Arts and Culture bringing extend far
18 beyond economics. Data has shown that neighborhoods
19 with cultural assets have improved outcomes in
20 education, aging, mental health, youth engagement
21 with criminal justice, community strength, and
22 safety. Every one of these areas will have hearings
23 during this budget season. I ask you to remember the
24 role culture plays in each area. So, when you think
25 of schools, remember strong arts programs lead to

2 student success. When you think of safety, remember
3 that community centers with cultural programs can
4 disrupt patterns and lead to reduced crime rates.
5 And we are insanely affordable. The city spends a
6 mere quarter of a percent of its annual budget on the
7 cultural programs that drive the economy, increased
8 tax revenue, and show measurable improvements in the
9 lives of its residents. In recent years--

10 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time expired.

11 LUCY SEXTON: the Council has worked hard
12 to increase support of culture and we are so
13 grateful, but right now, arts and culture are hanging
14 on by a thread. Most cultural organizations remain
15 partially or wholly shattered. More than half of our
16 workforce remains unemployed and the organizations
17 most at risk are the ones most dependent on public
18 funding. Organizations disproportionately led by and
19 serving BIPOC communities that have been hardest hit
20 by all aspects of this crisis. I am asking the
21 Council to break with conventional patterns of
22 cutting arts and culture as some form of amenity. I
23 am asking that we push against a survival of the
24 fittest approach and, instead, invest more robustly
25 in the parts of our ecosystem most likely to

2 disappear. We cannot come out of this terrible time
3 with a decimated arts and culture landscape that is
4 more white and more centralized than it was before.
5 I want to be clear that we are fighting to hold
6 harmless the support for every part of our cultural
7 ecosystem from CIG's serving hundreds of thousands of
8 New Yorkers, to arts and culture groups of every size
9 who serve every community in the city with CDF
10 funding, to critical initiatives including the
11 Coalition of Theaters of Color and struggling Casa
12 and Su Casa programs for kids and seniors. In short,
13 we ask that you protect every cent of the current
14 cultural budget as it for cities life depends on it
15 because it does. Thank you for letting me testify.

16 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you,
17 Lucy. I have a few more words as we wrap up. I
18 think we have one or two more folks love to testify,
19 but I feel everything that you just said.

20 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so much,
21 Chair. Now, we will go back to those who we missed
22 and we begin with Ms. Sara Espanol, librarian, Queens
23 Library. Whenever you're ready, please.

24 SARA ESPANOL: Okay. Good afternoon,
25 Chair Van Bramer and all the members of the

2 committee. My name is Sara Espanol. I am the
3 children's librarian at the Glendale branch for
4 Queens Public Library. Thank you for giving me the
5 opportunity to testify on such an important topic.
6 In March of 2020, QPL closed our buildings to slow a
7 spread of Covid 19 and right after that, I was able
8 to joint to library's Virtual Children's Programming
9 Committee. Along with some amazing colleagues of
10 mine, we design children's programing for the virtual
11 realm. We started, I think, within two weeks we had
12 a schedule of story times on Facebook Live, three
13 times a week, one being a bilingual story time, and
14 also for our school aged children, we had two
15 programs a week that featured a chapter book read
16 aloud, stem classes, arts and crafts, and more. In
17 partnership with our marketing department, we started
18 developing content for our YouTube page that included
19 videos on early literacy, science experiments, and
20 also instructional videos on how to access our
21 digital collection. As a children's librarian, our
22 relationship with our local schools is very important
23 and I reached out to my local schools and, since the
24 pandemic began, I have been doing monthly story times
25 with my local special-needs pre-k. This is to invoke

2 normalcy and consistency with the students added that
3 also let the parents know about the resources that
4 the library has to offer. I am also on the summer
5 reading committee because one of our big concerns is
6 summer slide that our kids lose the knowledge over
7 the summer. We want to keep them reading and there's
8 the added difficulty of remote learning this year--
9 last year and this year. So, we used our platform,
10 Read Squared, to do a reading challenge. That way
11 our families can log and track their reading over the
12 summer. Once to go service began, I worked with my
13 assigned branch making grab and go craft kits and I
14 am working with the fellow children's librarian on a
15 virtual--

16 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time expired.

17 SARA ESPANOL: literacy program focused
18 on letter recognition and. For me, the library is an
19 essential part of the community. We work closely
20 with our local schools and we want to provide
21 families and communities with the information and the
22 tools that they need to help their children succeed.
23 My personal goal as a children's librarian is to make
24 every child a reader, to encourage reading and
25 literacy in young people. I live in Queens. I have

2 a school age child that remote learning did not work
3 for and the library has been an incredible resource
4 for us. The ability just to check out e-books before
5 we were open and now to get books and other materials
6 that we have grab and go service is invaluable. I am
7 here today and I witnessed the positive impact that
8 libraries have on our community every day. I
9 experience it myself in my personal life. Libraries
10 have been there in the past and will continue to be
11 there for all of our customers, helping them to meet
12 their individual needs. Thank you for allowing me
13 this time.

14 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you,
15 Sarah, for your testimony and I think there are few
16 jobs more important than a children's librarian and
17 really, really grateful for the work that you do with
18 the children in Glendale and, you know, just when I
19 heard you say-- was it special-needs pre-k that you
20 are working with, I just was like, my goodness. That
21 is truly the work of unsung heroes, right, where
22 people like you are doing that work with children.
23 So, thank you. Just thank you for what you are doing
24 and for being here and testifying.

2 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so much.

3 Next, we will hear from Ms. Josselyn Atahualpa, Local
4 1321, Queens Library Worker. Whenever you're ready,
5 please.

6 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time starts now.

7 JOSSELYN ATAHUALPA: Thank you for
8 pronouncing my last name correctly. Good afternoon
9 to all. Thank you, Chairman Jimmy Van Bramer and
10 fellow committee members for the opportunity to
11 testify today. My name is Josselyn Atahualpa. I am
12 the program coordinator for Queens Memory at the
13 Queens Public Library. Queens Memory is a joint
14 community archiving project with Queens College. In
15 my personal capacity, I also coordinate the Centro
16 [inaudible 03:17:18] Mutual Aid Network in Corona
17 Queens and have been a community organizer for the
18 past decade in New York City. In this past year, I
19 have helped hundreds of people survive the pandemic.
20 And I don't say that lightly, but even though I know
21 this to be true, I find it hard to remember all that
22 we've been through. The human ability to forget so
23 quickly is a double-edged sword and that is why
24 community archiving projects like Queens Memory at
25 QPL are so important. Not a lot of people understand

2 all the labor that New York City libraries take on.

3 As the city shut down, Queens Memory pivoted to a 100

4 percent remote team, documenting in real time the

5 devastation caused by Covid 19. We captured the

6 initial shut down, the work of those on the front

7 lines, and the different faces of quarantine. We

8 conducted panels and all history interviews to learn

9 about the impact of the pandemic on immigrants and

10 small businesses in Queens. We have interviewed

11 hundreds of New Yorkers, nurses, community

12 organizers, those in power and everyday people who

13 spoke under experiences in their own terms. We

14 didn't do this alone. We were able to activate over

15 100 volunteers, expanding the work in bringing in

16 more support from QPL staff and exploring new

17 technology. Our adaptability was quick and I commend

18 us for that. It is surprisingly easy to forget all

19 that has happened since the city shut down in March

20 of last year. I don't say that because the things

21 that happened weren't important or because it wasn't

22 a lot. I say it because our brains tend to suppress

23 trauma in crises for our own self-preservation. This

24 past year showed us, collectively, more than any

25 other singular event, how precarious life in New York

2 City can be. It is so important that everyday New
3 York City be preserved. We need to have a material
4 understanding of the ways in which our systems failed
5 us so that we can change and fix them. There are
6 many instances on the federal level, but also on the
7 state and city level where New Yorkers were
8 abandoned. And I don't ever want us to live through
9 that again. New York City libraries, among many
10 things, work to preserve our history and, without it,
11 we would be lost, destined to repeat our mistakes. I
12 hope I have given you some insight into our work and
13 that you can support a strong future for our
14 libraries in New York City. Thank you. And I know I
15 still have time, so I just do want to add that I'm
16 very thankful for everyone here. I've learned so
17 much and I feel like we all get here and bare our
18 souls and beg for this funding knowing that there are
19 real consequences. The history proves that, right?
20 And we don't say any of this in a vacuum, right?
21 There are campaigns to tax the rich. Campaigns to
22 defund the NYPD. There are already ways that we can
23 get and secure this money for our institutions and we
24 just need to escalate our strategies for that. Thank
25 you.

2 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you.

3 You know, we're three and a half hours in and, you
4 know, I'm writing down the things that you said,
5 Josselyn. So thank you because it's-- it may be
6 three and a half hours in, but there are still
7 incredibly powerful things being said and things that
8 all of us are receiving, right? So I wrote down the
9 ability to forget so quickly is the double edged
10 sword and you talking about how moving on and
11 forgetting as a survival mechanism, you know, is just
12 incredibly moving. So thank you because this is a
13 week where all of us are sort of revisiting the
14 trauma and very focused on sort of what we were doing
15 a year ago today and I saw a photo pop up on my sort
16 of Facebook memory or whatever that thing is where,
17 you know, a year ago you were doing this. And I was
18 sitting in an office, my office, meeting with
19 Woodside on the Move taking a photo after we met and
20 I see the bottle of hand sanitizer in the corner of
21 the photo and that is what I was doing to protect
22 myself, right? Even though I was sitting really
23 closely in a small, confined office with two other
24 people, but it is just a reminder of sort of where we
25 were and how we didn't really know how to protect

2 ourselves or really what we were doing, but, you
3 know, for me, anyway, I feel like we got very lucky
4 because we Going, but a lot of people obviously did
5 not. But, thank you. I love the project. I just
6 want to say, and the work that you are doing in
7 Corona is incredibly important. So, it's just really
8 brilliant that Queens Public Library, you know, cares
9 about and invests in this project.

10 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so much,
11 Chair. Next, we will hear from Ms. Adriano Mitchell,
12 supervisor of the Brooklyn Public Library. Whenever
13 you are ready, please.

14 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time starts now.

15 ADRIANA MITCHELL: Okay. Good afternoon,
16 Chair Van Bramer. Good afternoon, everyone, all
17 members of the committee. Thank you for allowing me
18 to speak today. My name is Adriana Mitchell and I am
19 here today to provide testimony on behalf of the
20 Brooklyn Public Library and plead for the continued
21 support of BPL's efforts borough of Brooklyn. I am
22 proud and honored to have worked for the Brooklyn
23 Public Library for almost 15 years in different
24 capacities over the course of the years. I am
25 currently the neighborhood library supervisor for the

2 Brighton Beach Library and I have had the opportunity
3 to work in different branches at BPL and experienced
4 the diversity in different needs for each community.
5 Add a personal level, my love for the libraries
6 started as a Brooklyn night parent with the need to
7 have a free, safe, and inspirational environment for
8 my child. She was a toddler at the time. And found
9 the attending story times-- that attending story
10 times provided that comfort and exposure that I
11 needed for me and my child. Growing up in Mexico
12 City, I did not experience the benefits of attending
13 libraries and the valuable services they provide, so
14 I found that individual lives, regardless of who you
15 are or where you come from. Now that my daughter is
16 a young middle going to college, I am proud to say
17 that the Brooklyn Public Library has contributed to
18 her accomplishments and growth by providing her, as
19 well as many other young people in Brooklyn with
20 internship opportunities, safe and inspirational
21 spaces to be in, access to courses, books,
22 information, etc., and thank you BPL and thank you to
23 those that support libraries and believe in the power
24 of improving and making lives better for all the
25 people in Brooklyn. Many of our patrons are grieving

2 the loss of jobs, loved ones, homes, health, etc.

3 Help and support Brooklyn Public Library efforts to

4 contribute to the support and healing that

5 Brooklynites need through the access of literature,

6 computer classes for older adults, technology

7 assistance, cultural programming, opportunities for

8 our most vulnerable to not feel isolated or at a

9 loss. Please support us to continue providing and

10 contributing to the joy of reading and storytelling

11 and other educational and cultural programming where

12 the people can continue to feel connected to their

13 libraries, even if it is in a virtual world mostly

14 for now. Please help to continue to move forward to

15 safely open our physical spaces by supporting our

16 outdoor programming and enhancing our outdoor spaces

17 to bring back our libraries to the one place that

18 everyone is well, and that unifies communities.

19 Chair Van Bramer, it is good to see you again. Thank

20 you, all members of the committee. I want to thank

21 you for everything. For your advocacy, for all that

22 you do, are doing and will continue to do to support

23 our libraries. So, thank you.

24 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you for

25 your powerful testimony and for your work. I love

2 hearing the stories of library workers and mentioning
3 the branches that you all work at and, having been to
4 so many of them myself, obviously, over the years, as
5 a library employee in the Chair of the committee.
6 And, you know, just listening to Adriana, you
7 reminded me that several people throughout this
8 hearing have, you know, said the words plead or even,
9 in some cases, bag, right? And it is outrageous that
10 anyone would, you know, feel like we need to do that
11 to our government to fund libraries in the arts,
12 right? It should be understood that and accepted
13 that government must play this role, right? And
14 people, obviously, need to hold government
15 accountable and demand what is needed for
16 communities, but I just want to say to you and to
17 everyone that we owe you, right? Like this city
18 those each and every one of you the funding and the
19 respect that you deserve and that you rightly possess
20 because of what you do. So, I just wanted to say
21 that. And I have been on the other side, of course,
22 right? When I was a library employee for 11 years
23 and as an advocate, obviously, in my own life and my
24 activism, but, you know, just being on this side of
25 the equation, if you work, or the table, I just want

2 to express my empathy for all that everyone is
3 bringing to the hearing, right? Thank you. And I
4 think there is one more person to testify, right?
5 Last, but not least?

6 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Yes, Chair. Next
7 and last speaker is Svetlana Negrimovsky. Whenever
8 you're ready, please.

9 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Time starts now.

10 SVETLANA NEGRIMOVSKY: Good afternoon.

11 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Good
12 afternoon.

13 SVETLANA NEGRIMOVSKY: My name is Svetlana
14 Negrimovsky. I am the neighborhood library
15 supervisor at the Sheep's Head Bay Branch, Brooklyn
16 Public Library and I am here to speak about the
17 importance of public library systems to New York
18 City. Thank you to the cultural affairs and library
19 committees for allowing me to testify. Brooklyn
20 Public Library, who has always been a cultural,
21 educational, recreational center and a favorite place
22 for all Brooklyn residents. I have been working for
23 Brooklyn Public Library for 20 years. For all of
24 those years, I have never seen patrons benefit more
25 from other programs than this past year. Now, more

2 than ever, I am learning that the services we offer
3 to the community are essential. Library workers are
4 not considered frontline workers, however, Brooklyn
5 Public Libraries [inaudible 3:29:34] saved people,
6 especially the elderly, from loneliness, depression,
7 despair through virtual programs and services. For
8 example, one of our virtual programs hold talent
9 without borders and gives an opportunity for people
10 to come together and share their original music and
11 poetry with the community. This program went far
12 beyond Brooklyn and attracted participants from other
13 countries. Our program participants always tell me
14 that, in the pandemic, will they are locked in their
15 homes, these programs has changed their lives and
16 saved them from loneliness, depression, has provided
17 them emotional support and help for the future..
18 Now, more than ever, we are asking you June not cut
19 our library budget so that we can continue this
20 wonderful mission. Thank you.

21 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you,
22 Svetlana. Thank you very much. And I think Ana will
23 let us know, but I think that is the last person to
24 testify for today's hearing, almost 4 hours in. I
25 want to thank all the folks who are left in the room.

2 Sade, thank you. Jack shared some of your thoughts
3 with me. I really appreciate that. I, myself, got a
4 little choked up as you were sharing your testimony
5 and then I was sharing some of my experiences and
6 thoughts which went deeper than I had intended to go
7 at the time, but I appreciate that. So, I also just
8 want to say that, as I look out on the screen and,
9 you know, chairing this committee for the last 11+
10 years, there are so many women who come before this
11 committee. So many strong, fierce women, so many
12 women of color who are leading and leaders and it is
13 just a privilege and an honor to really work for you
14 and to be, you know, in this fight with you. So,
15 thank you so much. And having come from libraries
16 and culturals in the arts, right, women are
17 everywhere in that and more and more as we are seeing
18 and needing to see as presidents and CEOs and
19 artistic directors and curators and bleeding. So,
20 thank you all. Obviously, we have a way to go before
21 we get to June and adopt this budget, but, needless
22 to say, if we have learned anything, and I mean
23 anything, from these last 12 months, we will not
24 adopt an austerity budget, right? We cannot have
25 people mouthing the words about black and brown

2 communities disproportionately affected by the
3 pandemic and then adopting an austerity budget which
4 will directly harm all of those very same people,
5 right? That is why I voted no on the budget last
6 June, but it is even more intense, right, this year
7 because we have all seen all of this play out in
8 really horrific ways. So, to do an austerity budget
9 is just the definition of insanity. So-- and it is
10 morally wrong, right? It is just morally wrong. So,
11 thank you all for being here and we will, obviously,
12 stay very close throughout this fight. And, with
13 that, Ana, it is appropriate to say this hearing is
14 adjourned?

15 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you so much,
16 Chair. I just wanted to point out that we currently
17 have no questions and we have concluded public
18 testimony, however, if we inadvertently missed anyone
19 that would like to testify, please use the zoom raise
20 hand function and we will call you in the order in
21 which your hand is raised. Please do so now. There
22 seems to be no hands raised, also, Chair, it appears
23 that we have concluded this portion.

24 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you very
25 much. Thank you to our library folks and our

2 cultural folks. All of you live in my heart all the
3 time. Thank you so much. With this, the hearing is
4 adjourned. Have a good day, everyone. Thank you.

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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 _____ May 19, 2021 _____