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Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

**Gale A. Brewer, Manhattan Borough President
Testimony before the NYC Council Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and
International Intergroup Relations
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DCLA, COVID-19 and Cultural Organizations in New York City

I am Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer and I thank Cultural Affairs Committee Chair Jimmy Van Bramer and the committee for the opportunity to submit testimony today.

As we all know, the impact of COVID-19 on the arts and culture community has been devastating even as New Yorkers are seeking solace and inspiration more than ever in books, film, music, theater, dance and other works of art. The arts organizations are struggling to survive the next few months - and their on-line visibility has been phenomenal - but sadly some may not be able to maintain their presence. I do not want to lose any of them.

Last year I commissioned an Independent Budget Office (IBO) analysis (<https://ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/role-of-arts-and-cultural-sector-on-nyc-economy-july-2019.pdf>) of the role of New York City's arts and cultural sector in the local economy. Employment in the sector—as measured by number of jobs and share of total wages paid—is concentrated in Manhattan: In 2017, 80.7 percent of the arts and cultural sector's jobs and 87.7 percent of the sector's wages were located in Manhattan. From 2014 through 2017, employment at the city's arts and cultural establishments grew at an annual average rate of 2.7 percent, exceeding citywide employment over the same period which grew at an annual rate of 2.3 percent; aggregate wages for the sector grew faster than employment, also exceeding citywide aggregate wage growth.

These institutions, here in Manhattan and citywide, have been a key part of the city's economic development as well as playing an essential role in healing the personal and collective trauma of the pandemic, addressing systemic racism, enriching K-12 education, and enhancing the lives of older adults – whom I highlighted at my August 2018 Age-Friendly symposium on “Aging Artfully”.

The pandemic has also highlighted the economic challenges facing artists individually and as a group. Most working artists function as a small business or independent contractor and yet they have limited access to small business relief or unemployment benefits at this time. They don't have third party reimbursement.

Arts organizations have been supported in the past by the city council, state and federal government, and philanthropy. It is imperative that they work to strengthen relationships with foundations, private funders, and each other in anticipation of city, state, and federal budget cuts due to the pandemic.

The major question for the arts community is how to get the support it needs and how best to contribute?

Starting in April, my office has hosted four Virtual Town Halls (April 3, April 23, May 22 and June 4) to address the issues and needs of the Uptown Arts Community, in collaboration with the Arts & Culture Committee of the Greater Harlem Chamber of Commerce, the Harlem Arts Alliance and the Northern Manhattan Arts Alliance, as well as discussions with Community Boards 9 and 11.

In these efforts, we were joined by a diverse group of speakers from the National Black Theatre, Dance Theatre of Harlem, Mama Foundation, Harlem School of the Arts to those in Washington Heights and Inwood such as Inwood Arts Works, Word-Up Community Bookshop/Libreria Comunitaria, the Hispanic Society; as well as by DCLA Commissioner Casals, Commissioner del Castillo of the NYC Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment (MOME), Chair Van Bramer, Council leadership, and representatives from Columbia Law School, the Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone, and NY Community Trust.

With the postponement of many programs due to the pandemic, groups and individual artists who received city funding for programming originally planned for FY20 are concerned about the status/preservation of their funding as the fiscal year closes: Will the Office of Management and Budget, DCLA, the City Council and others allow flexibility in invoicing those programs for the early part of FY21? How flexible will funding be to re-scope FY20 work to use online platform? At present, some groups are being asked to re-scope for digital platform projects planned for FY21, when we may be out of isolation. How can we best protect and support these artists and their planned FY21 programs? And how do we support the CIGs/Cultural Institutions Groups?

We broadened our focus from the initial discussion (needs, strategies, and resources) to include a discussion on funding, philanthropy, and technical assistance opportunities available to the city's arts groups in the face of COVID-19.

In the course of this dialogue, we also learned how groups are realigning themselves, strategizing and building advocacy, engaging in more collaboration and partnerships, and brainstorming about ways to showcase and garner support virtually for local artists.

Word Up Community Book Store and Sister's Uptown Bookstore and Cultural Center provide an example of one of many valuable ways in which small and struggling multidisciplinary cultural organizations are pooling efforts and resources to find solutions. These last two independent brick-and-mortar book shops in Northern Manhattan are collaborating on Virtual Book Clubs in Washington Heights, the online content of which has been incorporated into the 18th annual, but first ever virtual, Uptown Arts Stroll of the Northern Manhattan Arts Alliance.

Northern Manhattan is also fortunate to have the Empowerment Zone; the work they do to support artists is essential. They worked hard to help cultural arts groups and artists apply for

federal relief funds - mainly the Paycheck Protection Program. Yet, arts groups were hurt by the feds in the 3rd round and failed to find support from big banks.

In the case of philanthropy, my understanding is that the large COVID consortium from Bloomberg, Robin Hood, Mellon Foundation and others, closed with a total 846 arts groups. Many groups were based in Northern Manhattan, and it remains to be seen what the outcome will be. Another organization - USA Artists – has traditionally given to mid-career artists, but now they are giving \$5,000 to almost any individual artist, and we hope that there are other, similar efforts.

And, in our most recent program on June 4, we joined the 42 members of the Coalition of Theatres of Color (CTC) to address the proposed FY21 city funding for arts institutions. Given the codependent nature of arts, community, and culture in New York, survival of these local institutions is critical to the cultural and economic health of New York neighborhoods.

The CTC members collectively have serviced their respective communities with enriching arts and culture programming for decades, emphasizing education, historical and inter-generational programming, as well as training opportunities and exposure to all aspects of the performing arts.

Over the 50+ years, the senior members of the Coalition, through their programming, established a solid connection with their artists and audiences. Now during the city's struggle with Covid-19, protesters fighting for change, and reduced budgets, we must remember that art and culture capture something transitory that is also eternally vibrant and new. We must continue to prioritize funding in communities of color. I urge the Council to continue the crucial funding for the Coalition of Theaters of Color Initiative.

On a final note, over the past months the city has been graced with original murals – public works of art dedicated to essential workers, discourse on the “new normals” of isolation, in memory of family and friends we lost to the pandemic, and to Black Lives Matter. NYC and Company is launching a campaign to bring people to New York to view and appreciate these works and reflect on the stories they tell. The murals on Dyckman Street on the plywood will be permanently displayed on the Parks Department fence nearby; the public art in Soho will be archived when the store opens for a future exhibit; and the BLM and names on the huge windows of the Africa Center can be seen by all. Black Lives Matter street murals are planned for Harlem's Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard and along Centre Street in Lower Manhattan along with the painted mural in Bedford-Stuyvesant and those being designed in other boroughs. Art can be both creative and healing, while fostering economic development in a time of financial stress.

One additional note is that as we focus on these many pandemics in the classroom, arts education must be part of the discussion. Do not cut funds for arts education.

Thank you for your time and the opportunity to testify.