

ARTS TESTIMONY FOR EVERY CITY COUNCIL DISTRICT (HUFFINGTON POST)

Friday, June 6, 2014

Arts Testimony for Every City Council District (Huffington Post)

By Lane Harwell

► [Share](#) | [Print](#) | [Download](#)

I offer testimony for every NYC Council district to support robust allocations in the City's FY 2015 budget to cultural affairs and arts education. As City leadership evaluates multiple priorities for this budget, the first for a new Administration and City Council, I invite it to consider the priorities of New Yorkers weighing in on the creative sector. And I invite New Yorkers to speak up, now and always, for a better New York.



This video offers highlights from a [NEW YORKERS FOR DANCE](#) campaign effort, which spotlights local vibrancy by featuring 51 statements from New Yorkers in each of the 51 City Council districts. Timed to coincide with budget hearings, it leverages the power of digital storytelling to draw the attention of City leadership--in every council district, in every borough--to the importance of the arts and culture to their constituents. It is also a call to action to all New Yorkers to engage.

What I am asking for, with peer advocates including the Cultural Institutions Group (CIG), New York City Arts Coalition, and One Percent for Culture, is the continuance of baseline funding through the Department of Cultural Affairs for CIG and the Cultural Development Fund (CDF), which supports program grants, and an increase of funding to the CDF of \$6 million. With the Center for Arts Education and others who have made arts education their priority, I am also [continuing my support](#) for the enactment of a new \$23 million allocation to expand arts instruction in the schools.

Background matters. The video above results from an open call to New Yorkers to have the service organization Dance/NYC film statements, first come, first in, by council district--an effort to re-frame advocacy as inquiry and bring multiple authentic voices to the fore. Dance artists were among the first to say yes, but there are other countless voices in and beyond the sector that should be heard. It is only a snapshot, just one step forward to what [Lakai Worrell](#) of District 37 calls "a new narrative between all communities."

So, why do dance and culture matter locally? Those who responded to the Dance/NYC invitation tell us via a survey these are the top 10 key words, in this order of priority: community, life, children/kids, culture, express, learn, body, creativity, audience, and health. And as the survey says: community, way above all.

What does "community" mean? I offer from my read of the meanings described in Raymond Williams's *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, a go-to from my research in performance studies, that "community" as used by New Yorkers in this campaign involves both "working directly with people" and "service to the community" and that these are not distinct, as Williams suggests they may be in normal use (page 76). Of the values derived by dance, it is the community it gathers through its continual creation, the community it touches through its performance, and the powerful blurring of these lines to achieve direct action this testimony calls out. I look forward to other meanings further examination and discussion may offer up.

What is accomplished by this campaign is a new, more inclusive account that privileges the words and faces of New Yorkers over the quantitative [research data I have used as my foundation](#) in previous testimony. Consider, for example, findings from [State of NYC Dance 2013](#), based on the Cultural Data Project, which show us the importance of City funding to eligible 501(c)(3) dance organizations. The City is the most substantial source of government funding for organizations in nearly every budget range, helping to generate thousands of performances locally, millions of paying attendees, and \$251 million in aggregate expenditures.

These hard data demonstrating returns matter, too, but cannot be viewed in isolation. The NEW YORKERS FOR DANCE campaign reaches beyond the 501(c)(3) organizations for which we have the best data, and is creating a wider lens on the reciprocal link between the creative sector and society. It could help make the case for additional budgetary allocations, resource provision, and policy that include the arts and culture in solutions to pressing issues. (Consider, for example, [opportunities for the arts that can be identified in our new Mayor's vision for New York](#), from jobs and economic development to equality for all, safety, sustainability, and resilience.)

Today, I offer up 51 video statements, and invite the 8.5 million New Yorkers in all five boroughs to weigh in (figure from [Census Bureau](#)). I suspect that with each story offered new values may be illuminated and the narrative will open up. This is a narrative--if you will, a dance--that requires care in partnering and the willingness to improvise. I look forward to continue dancing with New Yorkers. City leadership, please join me.

This blog was published on the [Huffington Post](#). A version of this blog was submitted electronically to the New York City Council as public testimony on the City's FY 2015 Budget on June 6, 2014.