

TESTIMONY TO COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS

Wednesday, April 21, 2021

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

By Dance/NYC

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On behalf of Dance/NYC (www.dance.nyc), a service organization that serves over 5,000 individual dance artists, 1,200 dance-making entities, and 500 non-profit dance companies and the many for profit dance businesses based in the metropolitan New York City area, including BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and Peoples of Color) dance workers, immigrants, and disabled dance workers, Dance/NYC joins colleague advocates working across creative disciplines in thanking the Committee for your leadership during this time and in requesting the City:

Acknowledge the ongoing lasting impacts of slavery and settler colonialism, establish and execute a plan to address those impacts, and repair the harm done by immediately establishing a Commission for Reparations for past and continuing harms inflicted upon Black and Indigenous people -- from colonialism to slavery, through food and housing redlining, mass incarceration, and surveillance;

1. Prioritize funding to BIPOC, immigrant, disabled, and LGBTQ+ Arts and Culture organizations to decenter Eurocentrism and white supremacy in mainstream New York City cultural representation in order to begin to undo pejorative and hurtful narratives, depictions and associations of/with Black and Immigrant and POC cultures. Substantial investment is needed in the organizations that authentically represent, primarily serves, are founded by and/or led by these communities;
2. To establish funding to ensure BIPOC, immigrant, disability, and LGBTQ+ organizations and artists can own and/or properly maintain their venues, buildings and/or land recognizing land stewardship and ownership as one of the most significant ways to address systemic inequitable distribution of resources;
3. To ensure funding streams created to support BIPOC, immigrant, disability, and LGBTQ+ arts and cultural organizations are streamlined for multi-year support, providing expansive technical assistance to facilitate the application process, and award sizes that allow for the payment of dignified wages to arts and cultural workers;
4. Ensure that Federal relief funds received by the city prioritize both in allotment and in distribution mechanisms BIPOC, LGBTQ+, immigrant, undocumented and disabled independent arts workers, and small-budget organization to ensure those most impacted by COVID-19 and systemic injustice are able to access needed support and services quickly.

These requests are anchored in Dance/NYC's long-standing values of justice, equity, and inclusion (www.dance.nyc/equity/values). As a City, we must take concrete actions that result in a material and tangible benefit to our most marginalized communities in order to effectively combat white supremacy and systemic racism.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a devastating impact on the arts and culture sector. It has also opened the possibility for fundamental change and a re-envisioning of the sector. We believe it is our responsibility to examine our roles and remain accountable within them by engaging in a sincere process of self-reflection and deep consideration. As we strengthen our capacity to enact significant change, we recognize that institutions and systems founded under white supremacist values are not leading the change. Centuries of BIPOC and queer wisdom and leadership are the guiding force for how we interrogate racist systems and take action to ensure justice, equity and inclusion in the arts. Ensuring BIPOC, immigrant, disabled, and queer-led organizations continue to thrive are important for the survival of artists, arts workers, the cultural life of NYC and the local communities they nurture. Healthy thriving communities are not just spaces of joy, liberation and pleasure, they are also fertile ground for strong economic development and families.

Dance/NYC has been conducting comprehensive research on the impact of the coronavirus on the dance sector. In our recently published Coronavirus Dance Impact Informational Brief (https://bit.ly/DNYC_COVID_DanceImpactBrief) Dance/NYC found that 21% of African, Latina/o/x, Asian, Arab, and Native American (ALAANA) dance workers were unable to pay rent/mortgage as compared to 15% of White (non-Hispanic) dance workers. 65% of disabled dance workers have not been able to access all of the medical and mental health resources they need as compared to 41% of non-disabled dance workers. 32% of immigrant dance workers need medical health care coverage as compared to 15% of those born in the US. These data points highlight the ever-present inequities in the sector and that more work is needed to protect these dancer workers to make sure they continue to thrive here.

On June 22, 2020, and on September 15, 2020, we testified before this committee and called for the following actions to be taken, in addition to requests already made by this testimony:

1. The Committee to reduce the proposed cuts to the Arts and Culture sector, particularly those on BIPOC-led and serving organizations, redirecting funds otherwise used to fund the NYPD to ensure that organizations and their arts workers remain necessary workers and community members in New York City;
2. The City to provide financially and rent relief (commercial and personal) for organizations and arts workers being affected by the affordability crisis and ongoing COVID-19 pandemic which are disproportionately impacting the City's marginalized communities;
3. The City pays living wages and funds programs that allow for the payment of living wages for dance and cultural workers treating them as necessary workers and dignified labor.

To act address the challenges faced by BIPOC, LGBTQ+, immigrant, and disabled communities and act on our commitments to ensure that dance workers, organizations, and businesses can thrive, Dance/NYC has:

1. Examined the racial impacts of our organizational practices and decisions, by removing and preventing racial inequities, and advancing racial justice both internally and publicly. This includes the establishment of salary floors that better reflect the increasing costs of living in NYC for our dance workers, offering adequate paid leave, providing employees with healthcare, and prioritizing much-needed times of rest to account for the rigorous emotional labor required to remain authentic and present in its services, particularly during moments of national unrest;

2. Disseminated over \$1 million in relief support (dance.nyc/COVID-19) to dance workers and dance making organizations. The fund explicitly prioritized communities most impacted by COVID-19, including African, Latina/o/x, Asian, Arab, and Native American (ALAANA), disabled, immigrant, and women-identifying artists, as well as those at high risk, including elderly and immunosuppressed artists. Funds were distributed between March and September of 2020, supporting 734 unique individual dance workers and 125 dance-making organizations and groups with over \$1 million in funds.
3. Launched the #ArtistsAreNecessaryWorkers campaign (www.Dance.NYC/ArtistsAreNecessaryWorkers/Overview) and a 12 week series of conversations (www.Dance.NYC/ArtistsAreNecessaryWorkers/Tune-In) to highlight the importance of the arts ecology, point to current challenges and offer considerations on our way forward as a field in the midst of a health and racial pandemic;
4. Collaborated with colleague arts service organizations that are mission-focused on increasing racial equity, inclusion and access for disabled people, and/or integration of immigrants into arts and culture;
5. Created resource lists on our website under the issue areas of racial justice, land acknowledgment practices, disability, and immigration, among others, in order to provide tools and information for how to dance workers and organizations, can best address the manifestations of white supremacy in their work;
6. Issued calls to action to the sector through two letters in response to the recent and ongoing murders of Black people by the actions of white people, institutions, and systems, including law enforcement, and the many accomplices, witnesses, and beneficiaries of white supremacy who have actively participated in or stood by and observed in silence.

Dance/NYC strongly advocates for a vision rooted in inclusivity, equity, and sustainability for the arts and culture industry. Artists are necessary workers and need to be treated as dignified labor in order to continue to be a driving part of the NYC workforce and help arts and culture to lead recovery efforts. Funding is desperately needed in order to not lose our most vulnerable organizations and workers and to ensure they continue to thrive here. The time to act is now.

We commend New York City's ongoing efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19, while safely reopening the City. The arts have been among the last to reopen and are critical to rebuilding the City. We thank the City Council members for their time and efforts in reopening the arts and cultural sector to bring dance to all New Yorkers. We thank the City and the Council for hearing our concerns about the prevalent inequities in the arts sector and hope that you will take action to address these issues and ensure that all marginalized arts workers including LGBTQ+, BIPOC, disabled, and immigrant arts workers continue to thrive here.

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