

TESTIMONY TO CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES, AND INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS AND THE COMMITTEE ON SMALL BUSINESS

Friday, November 1, 2024

Testimony to City Council Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations and the Committee on Small Business

By Dance/NYC

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

Submitted to the City Council Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations and the Committee on Small Business on November 1, 2024

Prepared by Melinda Wang, Research and Advocacy Manager of Dance/NYC

Thank you for your consideration of this testimony, submitted on behalf of Dance/NYC ([Dance.NYC](#)), a service organization that reaches over 6,000 individual dance artists, 1,700 dance entities, and the many for-profit dance businesses based in the metropolitan New York City area. Its areas of service are of special benefit to BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and Peoples of Color), immigrant, disabled, low-income, and small-budget dance workers. Through its action-oriented research and advocacy, Dance/NYC seeks to represent and advance the interests of the dance field. It embeds the values of justice, equity, and inclusion into all aspects of its operations and frames the following requests through the lens of those values.

In New York City, we know that arts and culture are crucial to building flourishing and just local economies. Small Business Services already recognizes this, supporting public art and community festivals as ways to bring vitality and economic activity to neighborhoods. Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts NY do excellent work to demonstrate how the organic, local creative assets in a community flourish when they are empowered with self-determination and cross-sector partnerships.¹ As many of our colleagues shared during the hearing, arts and culture create the conditions for healthy economies by driving foot traffic and encouraging local spending.²

Dance, in particular, is a key part of thriving community life. Dance/NYC's landmark report, *State of NYC Dance 2023: Findings from the Dance Industry Census*, envisions dance as a vibrant and diverse ecosystem that strengthens the local fabric of civic life. Dance workers are deeply embedded in their communities, with 28% of dance workers also working in education, 23% in healthcare and wellness, and 19% in leisure and hospitality. Supporting their livelihoods in dance allows them to continue to support our broader communities through their work in vital industries. Similarly, we found that dance programming takes place across a wide variety of settings, including theaters, community centers, educational sites, faith institutions, studios, and more.³

Yet, the dance industry continues to struggle. Dancers and choreographers, on average, earn just \$23,000 a year from dance, and \$39,500 total. Immigrant and transgender/gender-expansive (TGE) dance workers earn even less. 40% of dance organizations classify their financial health as weak or very weak, and 56% do not hold a reserve or savings.³ For these reasons, Dance/NYC urges the City to continue to support dance and culture as a way to support neighborhood culture and economies. In particular, we call for:

- Accessible, equitable, and affordable space for dance in local neighborhoods
- Support for public dance engagements
- Expansion of small business support for neighborhood-based cultural organizations

Affordable, equitable, and accessible space for dance in local neighborhoods

In our survey, both organizations and individuals named space for dance as one of their top five needs. For organizations, this was their number two need. Additionally, only 15% of entities own their place of business, while 45% rent, leaving dance entities vulnerable to rising rents and affordability concerns.³ Dance organizations are struggling to find and continue to afford space. Dance/NYC supports measures to promote affordability, including commercial rent stabilization and the conversion of vacant or abandoned spaces into affordable cultural venues. These affordability measures are key to preserving neighborhood culture and making sure the vital cultural assets in a community can stay there. Given that two-thirds of dance entities note that their headquarters are also a home, it is important to note that affordable space to dance and conduct business also means affordable space to live.³

Support for cultural space should prioritize equity and accessibility. Working class, immigrant, and BIPOC neighborhoods across New York City deserve cultural spaces that reflect their own needs and values. Cultural impact planning like that done by London's Culture at Risk Office can serve as a model of this. Our report found that 39% of dance workers commute 45 or more minutes to and from dance work. Dance workers should be supported in presenting vital programming in their own local communities. In addition, we found that 30% of dance entities do not provide accessibility accommodations.³ Dance/NYC supports capital funding for accessibility enhancements for dance spaces including minor changes like adding handrails or power doors, as well as major changes like adding elevators or making adjustments to landmarked buildings.

Support for public dance engagements

Existing city programs for public art, like the City Canvas program, increase social vibrancy, community engagement, and economic returns. Dance and other movement- and performance-based arts also serve as important parts of public engagement. 53% of individuals and 65% of entities in dance conduct programming in public space.³ These public space activations keep people in their local communities and highlight diverse movement forms. They can serve to build and maintain the existing cultural fabric of local communities. Dance/NYC supports the work of programs like SBS's Open Streets Grant to support the activation of streets, parks, and plazas with cultural and community programming. It is also vital to build structures for public space activation in neighborhoods without Business Improvement Districts.

Expansion of small business support for neighborhood-based cultural organizations

Small Business Services' Public Realm Grants have been instrumental in supporting cultural placemaking and economic revitalization. By funding community-based development organizations to conduct programming in their own neighborhoods, they emphasize the importance of neighborhood self-determination and community and business collaboration. It is important to note that dance and other cultural organizations serve as important community builders that can do this work. Small Business Services should recruit and expand support for neighborhood-based cultural organizations to submit proposals. It should expand the Building Creative Capacity programs to encourage partnership between arts and non-arts organizations, using cultural organizing as a way to support broader community well-being.

Lastly, it is important to recognize that dance and other cultural organizations are important small businesses and need greater access to small business resources. Conducting outreach to arts and cultural organizations and providing greater navigation support would facilitate their use of vital Small Business Services resources. Additionally, 57% of dance organizations are 501(c)3 nonprofit organizations.³ Expanding the eligibility of Minority and Women-owned Business Enterprise (M/WBE) programs to nonprofits would provide vital support to the dance ecosystem.

Our city's diverse neighborhoods deserve the support and resources necessary to build local economies that work for the residents, businesses, and cultural workers rooted there. Protecting arts and culture so that local cultural assets can stay in the neighborhood, bring vitality to public commercial and community spaces, and thrive through cross-sector partnerships and small business support is key. We thank you for your consideration of dance's cultural and economic impact as we move forward.

¹ Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts NY, Key Learnings Reimagining New York City: Cultivating Neighborhood Networks <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56a13fbbbe7b9646c1dec1f/t/66f701341ba9ce103d722195/1727463732325/Longer+version+Lessons+Learned.pdf>

² Center for an Urban Future, Big Ideas to Help NYC Thrive in a Post-Pandemic Economy <https://nycfuture.org/research/big-ideas-to-help-nyc-thrive>

³ State of NYC Dance 2023: Findings from the Dance Industry Census. https://hub.dance.nyc/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/State-of-NYC-Dance-2023-Report-FINAL-23_12_11_ACC.pdf