TESTIMONY TO COMMITTEE ON PARKS AND RECREATION

Tuesday, June 29, 2021

Testimony to Committee on Parks and Recreation

By Dance/NYC

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 you for your leadership during this time and in requesting:

1. A simpler, clearer permitting process for non-profit cultural groups and independent artists to use parks and public spaces for performances and events;
2. An affordable system to allow non-profit cultural groups and independent artists to sell tickets, charge fees, and/or solicit donations at performances and events in parks and public spaces; and
3. Providing hardship waivers for liability insurance to make performing in parks and public spaces accessible for non-profit cultural groups and independent artists.

We express our gratitude to the City Councilmembers, City Officials, Mayor's Office and other dedicated workers who have contributed to the recovery of the city's arts and culture sector. Programs such as Open Culture have provided support to the arts and cultural sector as it continues to adapt to the new realities of the ongoing pandemic. With gratitude, we believe that there are further considerations to be made to permitting processes for performances in City parks and public spaces in order to provide for the needs of non-profit cultural groups and independent artists, particularly the hardest hit individuals and small budget organizations. The City's parks are an invaluable resource to the community, and democratic access to these vital spaces can allow the arts and culture sector to recover and thrive sustainably as the City reopens.

Non-profit cultural groups and independent artists lack access to capital reserves, infrastructural support, and experience with Parks Department permitting processes, which causes high barriers to entry and viability in the current model and creates inequities. While Open Culture was instrumental in getting art back into City streets and parks, the fact that the permitting process runs through four or five different agencies makes the system complex and difficult to navigate. The Parks Department should find ways to clearly communicate permitting processes to every community, which could include posting signage within the parks to direct those seeking permits to the appropriate agency. A simpler, clearer permitting process would go a long way toward making opportunities accessible to groups and individuals on the hyperlocal level, allowing artists that reside in a community to activate local spaces and perform for neighborhood audiences.

Even when a cultural group or independent artist successfully secures a permit, they often face financial barriers to making their performances economically viable. While permits for free events are affordable, fees jump considerably if an artist or group wants to sell tickets, charge fees, or solicit donations at the event. The Parks Department can look to the system set up for Open Culture, in which events must be free and open to the public, but artists and groups are also able to charge fees in advance, post information for donations, or "pass the hat" at the performance. In order for public performances to provide sustainable opportunities for small budget non-profit cultural groups and independent artists, there must be avenues to bring in income to cover costs and pay artists for their work. Easing restrictions on ticket sales, fees, and solicitation of donations lowers the barrier to entry for artists seeking to perform for their communities and allows them to earn the income they so desperately need after over a year of extended financial hardship.

Parks policies regarding liability insurance can also be a barrier for non-profit cultural groups and independent artists. The cost of insurance can be prohibitive, particularly for groups and individuals that are not incorporated. Again, the Parks Department can look to the Open Culture program and follow suit by providing hardship waivers for insurance. By removing yet another financial and bureaucratic barrier to entry, hardship waivers for insurance stand to make performing in parks more equitable and accessible for artists and groups at all scales.

If the City's goal is to support the recovery of the arts and culture sector by encouraging engagement in parks and public spaces, creating a system that eases the financial and bureaucratic burdens on non-profit cultural groups and independent artists can go a long way toward accomplishing this goal. Removing some of these challenges stands to foster greater community engagement for the Parks Department and allows for more democratic participation by artists within these communities. In this way, the City can fill parks and public spaces with the art that communities are craving and allow non-profit cultural groups and independent artists to generate the income they so desperately need. The City has an opportunity to set the standard for the recovery of the arts and culture sector in this country and usher in new standards for community-engaged public art.

Dance/NYC strongly advocates for a vision rooted in justice, inclusivity, equity, and sustainability for the arts and culture sector. These principles are the driving force behind Dance/NYC's organizational priorities and the lens through which we view the New York City arts and culture ecosystem at large. Dance/NYC joins the City's arts and culture sector in asking for changes to the Parks Department permitting processes to ensure greater equity and economic viability for non-profit cultural groups and independent artists seeking to perform in parks and public community spaces.

For Dance/NYC and its constituents, the most urgent priorities are:

1. A simpler, clearer permitting process for non-profit cultural groups and independent artists to use parks and public spaces for performances and events;
2. An affordable system to allow non-profit cultural groups and independent artists to sell tickets, charge fees, and/or solicit donations at performances and events in parks and public spaces; and
3. Providing hardship waivers for liability insurance to make performing in parks and public spaces accessible for non-profit cultural groups and independent artists.

We thank you in advance for your consideration and commend the City's ongoing efforts to support economic recovery and cultural resilience. Now is the time to act so that cultural groups and artists at all levels continue to thrive for years to come. We look forward to the opportunity to ensure that New York remains a vibrant capital for arts and culture.