

TESTIMONY TO THE COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES, AND INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS: OVERSIGHT - CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS AND ACCESS FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

Wednesday, June 22, 2022

Testimony to the Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations: Oversight - Cultural Institutions and Access for Individuals with Disabilities

By Dance/NYC

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Thank you for your consideration of this testimony, submitted on behalf of Dance/NYC (dance.nyc.org), a service organization that reaches over 5,000 individual dance artists, 1,200 dance-making entities, 500 non-profit dance companies, 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. Dance/NYC is the only service organization for the dance sector in the metropolitan NYC area, and its action-oriented research and advocacy seek 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.

Dance/NYC joins colleague advocates working across creative disciplines in thanking you for your leadership and requesting the City to advance presenting landscape for integrated and disability dance artistry by:

Funding

- Expanding dance making and creative opportunities for disabled dance artists and companies performing integrated and disability dance artistry, through targeted grants, residencies, and rehearsal space subsidies
- Increasing access and inclusion in DCLA-funded cultural capital projects for artists, cultural workers, and audiences with disabilities
- Allocating discrete funds for disabled artists' access purposes, such as additional travel (especially for touring companies), personal care assistants, sign language interpreters, and other accessibility costs that are often not accounted for by funders and presenters
- Improving DCLA's communications practices and technology, including website accessibility, and ensuring applications are accessible to disabled applicants, through planning, providing technical assistance, and allowing for adequate time frames (six weeks minimum) and flexibility in deadlines for grant applications
- Expanding purview of funding to ensure small-budget groups, fiscally sponsored artists, and independent artists are served

Employment Opportunities

- Supporting organizations that promote disability arts and employ, support, and serve New Yorkers with disabilities
- Partnering with DCLA grantee organizations on professional development and capacity building to increase employment of artists and cultural workers with disabilities

Education and Training

- Expanding dance education opportunities for disabled children, particularly in the public schools, and ensuring accessibility in public school buildings and their dance facilities
- Expanding opportunities for training, certifying, employing, and investing in disabled dance educators
- Growing partnerships between integrated and disability dance artists and companies and schools

Audience Development and Engagement

- Growing and engaging audiences in integrated and disabled dance artistry by creating opportunities for shared learning among presenters, artists, and audiences about audience engagement
- Promoting and addressing full accessibility in marketing, communications, and outreach to disabled audiences

Accessibility

- Addressing infrastructure (buildings and technology) issues through dedicated capital funding to ensure all performance spaces are accessible and ADA compliant for audiences, artists, and cultural workers
- Providing bussing services for afterschool arts programs for disabled students

Dance/NYC is committed to addressing issues of disability equity and justice, and since 2014:

- Has produced 3 reports on Disability. Dance. Artistry. ([2015](#), [2016](#), [2018](#))
- Hosted and organized numerous dialogues, convenings, and town halls on disability and dance
- Created the Disability. Dance. Artistry. Fund to generate dance making and performance by and with disabled artists to advance artistic innovation and excellence and further disability rights
- Provided Social Justice Fellowship to recognize the critical role that disabled dance workers and arts practitioners play in social justice movements

- Established a residency program to expand opportunities for dancers with disabilities and to advance accessibility and equity

But much more needs to be done.

Proper funding is essential for the longevity and cultivation of disabled dance artistry. Dance/NYC studies show that disabled dance artists face significant challenges to accessing funding and that opportunities for funding for disability dance artistry are limited. Assessment of study participants show that disability and disabled artists are viewed skeptically by most funders, and that what is already a challenging funding landscape for any dance maker is worse for disabled artists. When segmented by budget size and structure, those integrated and disability dance artistry companies and independent artists with the smallest budgets are most challenged in securing funding to perform their work, a finding that is echoed in the wider dance field.¹

The crisis of affordability that exists for New York City and the high costs of accessibility render these funding challenges more acute for disabled artists, who face the added burden of accessibility costs, from travel to personal care assistants and sign language interpreters often not accounted for by funders and presenters. The needs for affordable spaces to perform, rehearse, and develop work, which are critical for the wider dance sector,² are magnified for disabled artists, who also have to contend with accessibility issues. Dance artists also face a range of challenges unique to touring: a lack of time on the ground, weaker presenter relationships, knowledge of space, unfamiliar audiences, and the high costs of travel and accommodation, especially in New York City.

Targeted funding can work as a tool to generate dance made and performed by and with disabled artists, as demonstrated by the success of [Dance/NYC's Disability. Dance. Artistry. Fund](#). But the long term success of integrated and disability dance artistry will be determined by broadened and sustained field and public engagement. This includes expanding employment opportunities for artists and cultural workers with disabilities; investing in dance education for children with disabilities; training, certification, and employment of disabled dance educators; and audience development and engagement in integrated and disability dance artistry.

Understanding, communicating, and executing the minimum compliance requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) remain a struggle for many presenters. Participating artists in Dance/NYC studies reported a myriad of issues, ranging from inaccessible restrooms and entrances to signage, as well as information gaps about the availability and status of accessible services, such as audio description, captioning, and sign language interpretation in performance venues.

A concurrent focus on accessibility needs of both audiences and artists, from front of the house to backstage, must take place to more fully realize inclusion. The same programs and venues that may be accessible to disabled audiences may present serious barriers to disabled artists — from proscenium stages without wheelchair ramps to inaccessible backstage restrooms or lack of ASL interpreters for Deaf artists to be able to communicate and participate in production cues and decision-making.

Accessibility costs money. Investment in capital funding to support infrastructural improvements for ADA compliance, as well as operational support for ongoing accessibility services, such as web accessibility, audio description, captioning, sign language interpretation, and capacity building for staff is critical and much needed. This is especially true for small budget arts and cultural organizations operating without capital reserves. Both capital funding and operational support are necessary not only to achieve ADA compliance but also to shift the paradigm to full inclusion and equity for disabled audiences, dance artists, and cultural workers.

Cultural access benefits all. Research indicates that targeted attention to disability access features and the diversity of experiences possible for disabled audiences can create exponential value. It provides new entry points of learning and generative creative engagement for both the artists and disabled and nondisabled audiences, advancing artistic innovation not only for performing integrated and disability dance artistry, but also for the wider field of creative production.

There is an urgent need for the New York City government to play a leadership role in elevating a philosophy and setting standards and practices of access and equitable participation for disabled people in cultural institutions across the city. Internationally recognized as one of the world's leading cultural centers, New York City needs to do a better job of serving its disabled citizens, audiences, and artists. It is time for the City to enact new policies, expand programs, and establish dedicated funding to advance inclusion and cultural access for all New Yorkers.

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Footnotes

¹ Blake, C. and Jacques, N. (2020). Defining "Small Budget" Dance Makers in a Changing Dance Ecology. Accessed at <https://www.dance.nyc/programs/research/2020/10/Defining-Small-Budget-Dance-Makers-in-a-Changing-Dance-Ecology/>, 24 June 2022.

² Webb Management Services (2017). Advancing Fiscally Sponsored Dance Artists and Projects. Accessed at <https://www.dance.nyc/programs/research/2017/08/Advancing-Fiscally-Sponsored-Dance-Artists-Projects/>, 24 June 2022.