

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

Thursday, January 30, 2025

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

By Dance/NYC

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Submitted to the City Council Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations on January 30, 2025

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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 2022, we launched our Dance.Workforce.Resilience Initiative (DWR). The DWR initiative aims to address economic inequity and strengthen the dance ecology by reducing the gap between dance workers and the resources they need to thrive. Through the work of the initiative, we learned that workforce development must go beyond training for the point of entry. The obstacles that dance workers face throughout their career are immense, ranging from financial precarity to lack of union protections to lack of professional development opportunities. As such, arts workforce development doesn't just mean developing individuals for the workforce— it means developing the larger workforce infrastructure that is necessary to support the individuals within it.

The DWR Initiative seeks to advance economic justice in the dance workforce through a few key elements:

- Action-oriented research through our State of NYC Dance 2023 Report that allows us to understand the issues in the workforce
- Advocacy through our Our New York City Dance Campaign, which provided dance workers and entities with the tools to create a more equitable dance workforce.
- Free and accessible resources through our Dance. Workforce. Resilience Hub to support dance workers in sustaining and advancing their careers. The hub includes a resource library, our newly launched Dance Workforce Directory to help connect the dance ecosystem, and a compensation tool to advance fair wages.

The *State of NYC Dance 2023: Findings from the Dance Industry Census* is Dance/NYC's most recent sector-wide study. It includes a first-of-its-kind effort to gather a critical mass of information on the economic realities of individuals and entities working in the sector, to better understand their relationships to one another, and to more accurately capture their stories. We surveyed 27% of the estimated 6,000 dance workers and 23% of the estimated 1,700 entities. In addition, nearly 250 dance workers provided input at nine roundtable discussions. It was supported by two advisory groups.

We found that the dance workforce is contending with systemic inequity, changing audience participation, and ever-evolving revenue models. On average, dance workers earn about 15% below NYC's living wage, while dancers and choreographers earn about \$23K. Immigrant and transgender/gender-expansive (TGE) dance workers earn even less. This is making work in dance increasingly unsustainable, causing 54% of dance workers to have to work outside of dance to make ends meet.¹ Our workers are holding jobs in education, healthcare, wellness, and hospitality, all while attending classes, scrambling between rehearsals, and making meaningful art that contributes to the fabric of our civic life.

Yet, dance workers continue to persist. 70% of workers consider dance work to be a permanent career, and the most common feeling people report having towards their dance career is fulfilled. All of this research shows we must do more to support our workers throughout their career. If dance workers cannot find dignified work with living wages and benefits, it becomes very difficult for low-income and marginalized students to enter the dance workforce. Economic justice is workforce development, because without it, even the most skilled dancer or administrator cannot sustain a career.

Dance workers cannot be left behind in the decisions that affect their lives and impact NYC's cultural community. A sustainable, resilient, and thriving dance workforce in New York City isn't just about access to training— it requires us to take action to make dance an attainable profession that workers can thrive in. We ask City Council to join us to advance the dance and broader arts workforce by:

- 1) Creating thriving and living wage standards for dance and other arts workers across roles. This might include allocating funding for organizations to raise wages for artists and workers, setting prevailing wage requirements for city-funded arts projects, and piloting guaranteed income programs for artists.
- 2) Ensuring benefits and workplace protections for dance and other gig workers. According to our research, 37% of dance workers have no health insurance and 82% have no access to mental healthcare. Much of this is due to dance's role in the gig economy— 29% of dance workers have worked 5+ jobs in dance over the past year.¹ A city-run portable benefits program for cultural workers could help make work in dance more attainable and safe.
- 3) Supporting fair hiring practices in dance and the arts that address systemic inequities and accessibility. This might include continued data collection on the arts workforce, like the Department of Cultural Affairs's 2016 Cultural Workforce Demographics study. It might also include supporting programs that convene arts employers to share best practices, or that make job opportunities more accessible to all, like our Dance Workforce Directory.

We look forward to continuing to work with the Council and organizations across the city to create a stronger dance workforce across the whole life cycle of a dance worker.

¹ 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

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