

COMMITTEE ON FINANCE, JOINTLY WITH THE COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES
AND INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES
OF THE

COMMITTEE ON FINANCE, JOINTLY WITH THE
COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES, AND
INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS

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Wednesday, May 21, 2025
Start: 10:06 a.m.
Recess: 3:42 p.m.

HELD AT: Council Chambers - City Hall

B E F O R E: Hon. Justin L. Brannan, Chair
Hon. Carlina Rivera, Chair

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

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Julie Won

A P P E A R A N C E S

Linda Johnson,
President & CEO of Brooklyn Public Library

Anthony Marx,
President & CEO of The New York Public Library

Dennis Walcott,
President & CEO of Queens Public Library

Laurie Cumbo,
Commissioner, New York City Department of
Cultural Affairs (DCLA)

Lance Polivy,
General Counsel, New York City Department of
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John Hyslop,
President Queens Library Guild Local 1321, DC 37
(Queens Library Workers)

George Sarah Olken,
President, Brooklyn Library Guild Local 1482, DC
37 (Brooklyn Public Library Workers Union)

Katherine Kusiak Carey,
Education Division at the Brooklyn Museum and
Member of Local 1502, DC 37

Dr. Abby Emerson,
NYC PLAN (The Public Library Action Network)

Melody Emerson-Simpson,
Second Grade Student, Library Patron, and
Advocate

Felix Emerson-Simpson,
Library Patron and Advocate (age 6)

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Stephanie Hill-Wilchfort,
Ronay Menschel, President and Director of the
Museum of The City of New York and Executive Vice
Chair of the Cultural Institutions Group

Angel Hernandez,
Director of Government Relations for the New York
Botanical Garden (NYBG)

Norah Yahya,
Senior Government Affairs Officer at the
Metropolitan Museum of Art and Manhattan Vice
Chair of the Cultural Institutions Group

David Freudenthal,
Director of Government Relations at Carnegie Hall

Gonzalo Casals,
Co-Director of the Culture and Arts Policy
Institute and Interim Chief Operating Officer of
El Museo del Barrio

Juanita James,
Brooklyn Public Library – Branch Manager,
Washington Irving Library

Melissa Peralta,
Brooklyn Public Library

Elizabeth Bevington,
Board Member of The New York Public Library Guild
Local 1930; Chatham Square Branch of the New York
Public Library

Carol Benovic-Bradley,
Vice President of the Friends of Ridgewood
Library

Constance Lesold,
Supporter and Patron of Public Libraries and the
Cultural Sector

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Marren Berthelsen,
Deputy Director of Development at Symphony Space

Ariel Savransky,
Director of Government and Community Relations at
92nd Street Y

Kristen Barrett,
Vice President of Development at New 42
New 42nd Street

Francine Garber-Cohen,
President and Producer of Regina Opera Company,
Inc.

Miranda Massie,
Founder and Director of the Climate Museum

Maisie Carroll,
BookMatch Teen at Brooklyn Public Library

Johny Garcia Alexander,
Teen Techie Intern, Brooklyn Public Library

Sauda Tasnim,
Librarians of Tomorrow Intern at the Saratoga
Branch of Brooklyn Public Library

Christina Li,
Library Patron and Advocate

Clementine McLeod,
BookMatch Teen Intern at Brooklyn Public Library

Lucy Sexton,
Executive Director of New Yorkers for Culture;
Cultural Coalition New Yorkers for Culture & Arts

Candice Michelle Franklin,
Advocate for The National Endowment for the Arts
(NEA)

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Sara Roer,
Interim Executive Director at Dance/NYC

Akia Squitieri,
Executive Director of Bronx River Art Center

Kate Madigan,
Government Affairs Coordinator at The Public
Theater

DJ McDonald,
Dance Parade

Sami Abu Shumays,
Deputy Director of Flushing Town Hall

Beth Allen,
Executive Director of Downtown Brooklyn Arts
Alliance

Adeeba Afshan Rana,
Branch Manager of the Bedford Public Library

Risa Shoup,
Co-Executive Director, The Alliance of Resident
Theatres/New York (A.R.T./New York)

Melody Capote,
Executive Director of the Caribbean Cultural
Center African Diaspora Institute (CCCADI)

Noel Allain,
Co-Founder and Artistic Director of the Bushwick
Starr Theatre

Jimena Martinez,
Executive Director at the Cumbe Center for
African and Diaspora Dance

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Seth Rosen,
Chief of Development at American LGBTQ+ Museum

Hew Rose Evans,
Senior Development Associate of the American
LGBTQ Museum

Nicole Touzien,
Executive Director of Dancewave

Potri Ranka Manis,
Artistic Director and Founder of Kinding Sindaw
Heritage Foundation

Christopher Leon Johnson,
Self

Sheila Lewandowski,
Co-Founder and Executive Director of The
Chocolate Factory Theater

SERGEANT KING: This is a microphone check for the Committee on Finance, jointly with the Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations. Today's date is May 21, 2025, recorded by Tavell King in the Chambers.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Good morning, and welcome to the New York City Council Executive Budget Hearing for the Committee on Finance, jointly with the Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations. Please silence all cell phones and electronic devices. And please do not approach the dais unless your name has been called.

Chair, we are ready to begin.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: [GAVEL] Thank you, Sergeant. Okay, good morning, and welcome to the eighth day of FY26 Executive Budget Hearings. I'm Council Member Justin Brannan, and I chair the Committee on Finance.

Today's hearings will begin with the City's Library Systems, followed by the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. I'm pleased to be joined by my colleague, Council Member Carlina

Rivera, who chairs the Committee on Cultural Affairs,
Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations.

We've been joined so far this morning by
Council Member Louis.

Welcome to Linda Johnson, President and CEO of
the Brooklyn Public Library; Tony Marx, President and
CEO of the New York Public Library; and Dennis
Walcott, President and CEO of the Queens Public
Library. Thank you all for joining us today to answer
our questions.

To set the stage, on May 1, 2025, the
Administration released the Executive Financial Plan
for FY26-29, with a proposed FY26 budget of \$115.1
billion. The Library's proposed FY26 budget of \$496.
8 million, across all three systems, represents less
than 1% of the Administration's FY26 Executive Plan.
This is an increase of \$16.4 million or 3.3% from the
\$480 million originally budgeted in the Preliminary
Plan back in January.

The increase is mostly the result of added
funds for collective bargaining. As of March 2025,
the Libraries collectively had 429 vacancies relative
to their FY25 budgeted headcount.

In our Preliminary Budget response, the Council called on the Mayor to add \$62.5 million to reverse a series of funding cuts made to the Libraries, to expand their current hours, increase programming, and reinstate Sunday library service.

Despite the Mayor's recent restorations in the Executive Budget, they represent only a fraction of the cuts he has made to key programs, such as this one, which the Council has found were never necessary in the first place. In a city with a budget as big as ours, keeping the libraries open seven days a week should not be some big victory.

As budget negotiations continue, it's critical that we work from the same framework in prioritizing the restoration of our City's most vital services and programs that our communities can truly afford.

My questions today will largely go further into the Council's preliminary response, along with examining the Library's capital gap.

I now want to turn to my co-chair for this hearing, Council Member Rivera, for her opening statement.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you so much. Thank you, Chair Brannan, I appreciate you very much.

Good morning, welcome to the hearing for the
Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and
International Intergroup Relations. I'm Council
Member Carlina Rivera, and I'm Chair of the
Committee.

Today, we will begin with a hearing on the
City's three library systems, followed by a hearing
on Cultural Affairs. And finally, the Committee will
hear public testimony related to these two hearings.

With that, I would like to welcome you to our
Libraries' hearing. I know many of you have been here
before.

This morning, we'll be discussing the Fiscal
2026 Executive Expense and Capital Budget for the
Systems. For Fiscal Year 2026, the Administration is
proposing \$496.8 million subsidy for the Systems. The
Fiscal Year 2026 Executive Capital Commitment Plan,
which covers fiscal years 2025 to 2029, includes \$1.1
billion for the Library Systems.

In its Budget Response, the Council called on
the Administration to allocate and baseline an
additional \$62.5 million for the City's three library
systems, starting in Fiscal 2026.

The funding would provide \$44.8 million for the Library Systems' unmet expense needs for Fiscal 2026, baseline the \$15.7 million, which the Council has provided annually for the systems, and provide \$2 million to expand seven-day library service to 10 additional branches citywide.

I am disappointed to see that the Administration only included a small portion of this in the Executive Plan. The Systems still have a combined unmet expense need of \$44.80 million in Fiscal 2026 for increased costs related to uncovered wage growth and health insurance, liability insurance, rents, additional staffing needs, capital ineligible IT, and deferred maintenance expenses, new and expanded locations and programs, building maintenance contracts, and supplies, among other expenses I'm sure.

Additional funds are needed to help maintain our city's libraries, and it is also our obligation. The Systems also have an unmet capital need estimated to be \$345 million in Fiscal 2026 alone for comprehensive renovation of branches, critical maintenance, technology upgrades, resiliency, accessibility, and project shortfalls. This

investment in physical infrastructure is crucial to bridge the funding gap for the System's ongoing infrastructure needs. And while this funding would meet the Library Systems' current capital needs, it does not account for the many millions of dollars of future capital needs.

In order to provide for these needs, the Council called for a meaningful inclusion of Library capital needs in the 10-year plan, with the addition of \$1.2 billion over the next 10 years. While this plan does not include this additional funding, we hope to work with the Administration to find a way to meet the capital needs of the Systems.

The Council will continue to champion Libraries as a funding priority. Libraries have an essential presence in every neighborhood of New York, providing indispensable services in a safe and reliable space for youth, older adults, immigrants, and all other New Yorkers, whether it's a baby at story time or a student logging on to finish homework, a new New Yorker learning English, or a senior finding connection in a book club, the impact of the public library system reaches far beyond their walls, providing vital programs that strengthen our city's

future. It is essential that the budget we adopt this year be transparent, accountable, and reflective of the priorities and interests of the Council and all the people we represent.

I look forward to an active engagement with the Administration over the next few weeks to ensure the Fiscal 2026 Adopted Budget meets the goals the Council has set out. Thank you all again for being here.

I would also like to recognize the staff, including Financial Analyst Sandra Gray, Committee Counsel Christina Yellamaty, Legislative Policy Analyst Regina Paul, and, of course, my own staff. Thank you very much.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Thank you, Chair.

Before we get started, I'd like to take a minute to thank the entire Council Finance Division. I think today we are at the halfway mark. We've got another week and a half of hearings to go. There's a whole crew of people across the street at mission control who help make these hearings possible, especially the people today who are here with us, Aliya Ali, Sandra Gray, and my Committee Counsel, Brian Sarfo.

As a reminder, for this year's Executive Budget joint hearings, we are going to take public testimony later today on both the Libraries and the Cultural Affairs Department. So if you are here to testify, just make sure you fill out one of those witness forms in the back. And after all of the agencies testify, we will take public testimony.

I am not going to turn it over to Brian Sarfo, the Committee Counsel, to swear you guys in, then we can get started.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Good morning, do you affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth before this committee, and to respond honestly to council member questions, President Johnson?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Yes.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: President Marx?

PRESIDENT MARX: (UN-MIC'D) Yes.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: President Walcott?

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: Yes.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: You may begin.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Good morning, I'm Linda Johnson; I'm President and CEO of Brooklyn Public Library. Thank you, Speaker Adams, Finance Chair

Brannan, Chair Rivera, members of the Finance and Libraries and Cultural Affairs Committee, our Brooklyn Delegation, in particular Councilperson Farah Louis, and the entire City Council, for your continued leadership and steadfast support of libraries.

It's a privilege to speak before a body that has not only championed Libraries but consistently acted to ensure that we can continue serving every neighborhood in our city. Your support has always been strong and, most importantly, effective. Thank you.

The Council's response to the Fiscal Year 2026 Preliminary Budget once again demonstrated your commitment to New Yorkers and to our public services. Your call for a \$62.5 million investment in Libraries is not only reasonable, it's essential.

After years of fending off cuts, library operating funding has remained flat, even as costs and demand continue to rise. Our patrons and staff, including our DC 37 partners, who will testify today, deserve better than another year of doing more with less. We are encouraged that the Fiscal Year 2026 Executive Budget added \$15.7 million in operating

support for Libraries. That investment is welcome, though, unfortunately, not baselined.

I am optimistic that with your help, the full funding of our Library Systems required to sustain and strengthen our services will be secured. That means allocating another \$44.8 million for our unmet needs, and an additional \$2 million for the Speaker's proposal to expand seven-day service. We were also pleased to see \$50 million in capital funds for the Brooklyn Public Library included in the Executive Budget. This is a meaningful start for which we are grateful.

Libraries and the values we represent are under attack nationally, from the recent firing of the Librarian of Congress, to threats against the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and the freedom to read. Here in New York, the Brooklyn Public Library, with our over 1,100 dedicated employees, is rising to meet the moment — serving more patrons, offering vital programming, protecting intellectual freedom, and helping more New Yorkers thrive.

Librarians are serving homebound patrons with books by mail, and our outreach program connects

family members in our branches with their
incarcerated loved ones via free video conference.

Brooklyn Public Library's digital literacy
programs have recently extended into housing
developments and community centers in partnership
with the city through the newly launched Neighborhood
Tech Help program. And our new Digital Discovery Days
are giving Brooklynites of all ages hands-on
experience with cutting-edge technology.

We're supporting job seekers and entrepreneurs
through LevelUP, which has now helped over 500
patrons gain the tools and mentorship needed to
advance in competitive industries. One hundred women
have graduated from the program, and two of them are
submitting testimony today. And our workforce and
volunteer programs are growing with a 30% increase in
community volunteers, helping to lead English as a
second language groups, citizenship coaching, and
homework help.

We're also helping our newest neighbors,
offering over 75 ESOL classes every week, from drop-
in conversation groups to business English courses
and job certification classes. These programs are at
capacity, always with waitlists.

And the need is only growing. In 2024, Brooklyn Public Library recorded nearly 6 million visits, a 19% increase in program sessions, and our books and digital materials circulated 9.4 million times.

But we cannot keep doing more with less. Brooklyn Public Library faces a \$12.4 million in unmet needs. These are not wish list items – they are unavoidable costs of providing reliable service in every community.

The cost of purchasing books and digital materials is rising. We've seen a 5% increase in material costs over the past five years, and our digital collection alone now requires an additional \$400,000 annually just to keep pace with usage.

Our buying power has diminished, and without the ability to increase our book budget, Brooklyn Public Library lags behind the national and state averages in our per capita spending on collections.

Healthcare premiums have also climbed, and we face uncovered costs from negotiated wage increases and minimum wage changes. These are essential investments in our staff and the very people who keep our doors open and our communities supported.

And now we operate two new locations, as well as several recently expanded branches, all of which offer in-demand programs that require more staffing and resources. These new sites expand our reach, but without additional funding, they stretch our capacity even thinner. Patrons continue to feel these effects even with a reversal of last year's cuts. Longer wait times for books, lost hours, and, unfortunately, more service disruptions.

In Fiscal Year 2024, Brooklyn Public Library experienced 102 instances of unplanned delays and closures due to staffing shortages. And this problem persists today. This is not sustainable, and it is not acceptable, *and I feel like a broken record*. I've been making this case for many years, and really, we need to do something to change the situation. The public relies on us to be open when we say we will be open. It is a core library tenant. We deeply appreciate the \$4.4 million included in the Executive Budget for the Brooklyn Public Library. This yearly library subsidy is crucial, but if the City does not cover and baseline our existing \$12.4 million in unmet needs, we cannot stabilize staffing, invest in

our collections, or ensure consistent service across
our branches.

But what truly keeps me up at night is the
staggering capital funding we need to bring our
buildings into a state of good repair. Brooklyn
Public Library's unfunded capital needs now exceed
\$400 million, one-third of which are urgent projects
like roofs, HVAC systems, fire safety, and
accessibility upgrades.

Of our aging libraries, 19 are over a century
old, and last year, due to failed HVAC, elevators,
and other basic infrastructure malfunctions, we lost
more than 670 hours of service borough-wide.

The \$50 million allocated in the Executive
Budget for the Brooklyn Public Library is a strong
start, and we're grateful to the Administration for
providing this funding. However, this amount covers
only a fraction of our \$307.7 million request in the
10-year Capital Plan. We also require adequate
funding to initiate comprehensive and cost-effective
branch overhauls, instead of moving from crisis to
crisis. New Yorkers deserve public spaces that match
the creativity, drive, and resilience of our
communities.

Thank you, Speaker Adams, Chairs Brannan and Rivera, and our Brooklyn Delegation, for supporting library capital projects in your districts and helping create spaces that inspire our patrons.

Over the years, the Council's lump sum capital funding has been a lifeline, allowing us to address urgent repairs and fill shortfalls in stalled projects. Your capital funding has been instrumental, and we would appreciate receiving these vital, unrestricted capital funds from you once again this year.

Libraries are our nation's most democratic spaces. Every day, we welcome neighbors from all walks of life into our trusted buildings. That opportunity for community connection is needed now more than ever.

Last year, thousands of New Yorkers wrote and asked you to support our libraries, and you listened. Their support has not waned. In my hand, I hold a stack of more than 225 people's personal stories. These are people who have written their testimony that they will be submitting for the record today. They, too, are optimistic that our committed city

leaders will contribute a much-needed boost to
Libraries.

I will end my testimony by sharing how
personally grateful I am for the strong relationship
libraries have with you and all of our City leaders.
Unlike many of my counterparts nationwide, who face
service cuts and book bans, we are fortunate to have
your unwavering support. It's an honor to serve New
Yorkers with you, and I look forward to continuing
the conversation with the Council and Administration
to increase the City's investment in Libraries.
Together, we can ensure every person has free and
open access to the resources they deserve. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Thank you very much.

PRESIDENT MARX: Good morning, I'm Tony Marx
from the New York Public Library. It's an honor to be
here with Linda and Dennis. And, of course, a huge
thanks to the City Council, and Speaker Adams, who
has spoken eloquently, as has the whole Council,
about their support and her support for Libraries;
Chair Brannan and Chair Rivera, essential partners,
and to all the members of the City Council, who've
done so much, and continue to do so much for all New
Yorkers, and for all New York's libraries.

I will be brief and summarize my submitted
testimony.

At our last hearing, we were already saying
thank you, and we do again, to the Mayor for the \$15.
7 million for the three Systems. We appreciate that.
We also noticed, of course, as we've all said, that
that was not baseline funding. So it's not an
addition, it gets us back where we were, which is
sort of what the budget dance consistently does, but
that doesn't meet our additional needs — as we'll
discuss — nor in this case, unusually, is it
baselined. So we need to address those. We need your
partnership to work with the Mayor to get us that
result — to work with the Administration to baseline
the \$15.7 million of one-time funding, and to secure
as much as possible, together with the Mayor, \$44.8
million for the three Library Systems as requested.

You all know, as you all have spoken eloquently
many times, of the essential role of libraries in New
York City's civic life, and that is crucial at this
point. I will come back to that.

After years of fighting cuts, we are now doing
more, so much more, for all New Yorkers with less,
especially if you consider the affects of inflation.

So we are struggling here to do the work that we want to and aspire to do, that my amazing colleagues, our amazing colleagues, our DC 37 members, make possible every day, but we need the funding to ensure those results.

We see that costs, as I've said, have gone up — security personnel, as just one example, in the last five years, the costs have nearly doubled. We need to make sure that our staff and patrons are safe. The cost of software licensing has doubled. Our collections budget has not been able to keep pace with inflation, let alone get us to the increases that, as Linda said, we need in order to get to something comparable to what our peers elsewhere in the country are.

This is New York. We should not be lagging. We should continue to lead. So, if we do not get that kind of funding, then the results are very direct, and we've seen this too many times. Our patrons will have longer waits for books. We'll have unexpected branch closures, as Linda has already referred to, due to staffing shortages, as well as emergency repairs. We'll have fewer programs, because the branches in all three systems have now become the

essential free education centers, in addition to all
the classical work that Libraries have always done.

You all know that.

The Speaker has already spoken in her State of
the City Address eloquently on this, and proposed an
additional \$2 million to bring Sunday library
services to more branches across the city, a topic
that I know Councilwoman Brewer has been passionately
pushing for.

We welcome that partnership. We are delighted
to work with you all to get those kinds of results.
And that's only one example of the partnerships that
we're in with the City.

Recently, HPD announced a neighborhood tech
help program with us to give direct outreach, one-on-
one, to Section 8 tenants. We're working with HPD as
well, who've given us a landmark \$3.5 million for a
pilot program to bring free internet access to up to
2,000 Section 8 tenants. Given what Brooklyn and
Queens are already doing on that front, the fact that
the digital divide remains such a problem in this
city, the center of the world, is outrageous. So
we're delighted to continue, all of us, to continue
to partner to address that.

We work with the Office of Immigrant Affairs to provide a huge number, the greatest number in the City, outside the Schools and University, of 20 English language and support centers — everything we do for free, everything respects everyone who comes in the door.

I'll also, as Linda did, turn to our capital program. We submitted a \$1.2 billion request for unmet capital needs, \$485 million for NYPL alone. The Mayor, and we are grateful for this, has provided \$75.3 million, but let's just note that is less than one-sixth of what our total capital needs are.

We're delighted to move ahead with the Seward Park renovation, an amazing library in an amazing neighborhood, which deserves the full attention that we want to give it. But there's so much more that we need to do.

We want to do more comprehensive library renovations, as we have done, and just completed this year, with five Carnegies. We would love to do the same at a minimum at Francis Martin and Soundview in the Bronx, as well as at Great Kills in Staten Island.

We need to ensure that our maintenance needs are met and that our critical technology upgrades are available.

We continue to work with DDC (Department of Design and Construction). We appreciate the hard work of all of our colleagues there. We know they share our frustration with the constraints and rules that result in too much time being spent and too much money being spent. So we continue to look for alternatives.

We partnered with the EDC (New York City Economic Development Corporation) on our five historic Carnegie branches, which we completed this year, with magnificent, comprehensive renovations. A huge shoutout to Iris and my team for achieving that result.

We need all these efforts on capital to be included in the 10-Year Capital Plan. Only then can we plan and produce the results, which we are able to do when we manage, with EDC, or for ourselves, at half the money and half the time. Those are great results for all New Yorkers.

We welcome continued conversations with the Administration, now and in the future, to ensure that

we can find a better path and alternative ways of addressing this issue. We appreciate that, now with DDC Design Build, we can undertake the Westchester Square Library project for what is now budgeted at \$32 million, as opposed to the previously budgeted \$44 million.

We are eager to continue to build colocation, lots of new libraries with affordable housing on top, as we did in Inwood. Now they're beautiful, open, and affordable, with 174 housing units on top, as well as a universal PreK and a community center.

We currently have a similar project in the pipeline, at Grand Concourse in the Bronx and the Bloomingdale Library in Upper Manhattan, which will feature 800 new housing units on top.

We want to do what we can to address the real housing needs of New Yorkers. Let's continue to do this. Let's make it part of the 10-Year Capital Plan.

We've also requested, as Linda mentioned, \$30 million in lump sum allocation of capital funding from you, the Council, our essential partner — \$10 billion for each borough that we serve. We're grateful to the Council for that kind of support and hope it will continue at that level, if not higher.

This is not the moment when we should be content to just stay the course. The values that make up the foundation of what public libraries are being purposefully challenged at the highest level of this country at this point. We have seen the gutting of the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the National Endowment for the Arts. We have lost our grants from those agencies, and we have reviewed and decided not to pursue or accept additional federal funds, because of the strings that are attached that we simply cannot live with. We've seen the Librarian of Congress, our amazing colleague, Carla Hayden, fired. We've seen books banned around the country. The message from the federal and other local governments is clear — these are attacks on the values of democracy and the principles of access to knowledge and free expression that are absolutely singular to what it means to be in and of America.

The Libraries continue, here and elsewhere in this country, to be the singular, essential, truly democratic institutions. And this is the moment when we need to bring the full power and resources of all public libraries to bear for all people.

Let me be as clear as I can. We live in very complicated times, very challenging times. We've seen books banned. We resist.

We've been seeing misinformation everywhere and distrust everywhere. We resist.

We are seeing a decline in thoughtfulness in terms of, you know, compared to what social media and the distractions are providing. We know that the market cannot and is not providing the kinds of results that all of us, especially our children, deserve. So we resist.

We are seeing economic inequality at staggering levels that mean that people are not getting the opportunities to advance their lives, which is what we are in the business of providing in the libraries, so we resist.

This is the moment to invest in the most used, most trusted civic institution in this town, so that we can continue to do the job that you aspire for us to do. It could not be more important than it is now. It could not be more pressing.

We are so grateful to be at this place, not facing cuts, but we need your support for baseline additional funding, just to make it possible to

continue to do what we're doing, and to do *more* that all New Yorkers and this Council look to us to do. Thank you so much for your support and for this opportunity to testify.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: And my name is Dennis Wolcott; it's a pleasure to be here. I have the honor of being the President and CEO of the Queens Public Library. I want to thank Tony, Linda, and all of our teams for their respective partnership.

I want to give a special thanks to you, Chair Brannan, and to Chair Rivera, and to the Council Members, for all of your support over the years.

I see Dr. Nantasha Williams here from our Queens Delegation. I want to thank our fantastic Queens Delegation. When I talk about a relationship and a partnership, we at the Queens Public Library have a tremendous relationship and partnership with our Queens Delegation. And it's really a pleasure to work on their behalf and the people that they serve as well.

You have our formal testimony, so I will not repeat it at all. And I will not even repeat what I have in front of me, which is our abbreviated testimony, because I heard the opening from the Chair

of the Finance Committee on how many meetings you've actually had. So, I will be brief.

Everything that Tony and Linda said, I will say ditto to do.

In addition to that, you have specific testimony from the Queens Public Library, as far as our respective costs, both on the expense side and the capital side. I want to thank the Speaker for her leadership, and I want to thank the Mayor for putting the money in the budget. But as indicated, that does not meet our need.

And how I will be brief is that, when I see our customers come through our door, it just reinforces the value of who we are and how we are trusted. When you see the Cheese Buses pulling up in the morning, with children who are in kindergarten to whatever grade they may be, it makes my day. When I see people who are challenged come to our libraries to sit down and to read and get information and services, it makes our day. When I see our ESOL folks come in and customers getting services, it makes our day. When I see people who are coming to our programs more and more and more, it makes our day.

We are there to serve the public, plain and simple. Tony and Linda talked about it. We're trusted with a truly open, democratic institution. We are there to serve the public.

Right now in Queens, we're gearing up for the Pride Parade that'll be taking place in June. We will have some fantastic people marching on behalf of a community that we believe in. We participated in the Lunar New Year parade and had an extremely strong contingent showing support. We have materials and respect for the various communities in the various months of service that we give them.

We are there for the public. And, I just can't say enough about what we do as libraries, but more importantly, what the people who are sitting behind us do as our team members serving the public day in and day out. Those are what we're about. That's who we are.

I was watching one of the council members when we had our press conference outside, and the smile on his face when he was talking about his children, and talking about growing up with libraries, and the value that they brought into his life. Each of us has a similar story. We all have our story. We all have,

I know mine is the Saint Albans Library, where I grew up, and I remember getting my first library card. And we talk about it — my children and grandchildren — and participating in various ways.

Like Tony and Linda, their teams, and our team at the Queens Public Library, our folks are always thinking out of the box about how to serve the public better. How do we increase our services? What does it actually mean to be open as much as we are open, but ideally to be open even more to serve the public?

That's why we're coming to you today to talk about adding the additional money. And it's not just to say *add additional* money, because the money that we have does not meet our need on the expense side, does not meet our need on the capital side.

As Linda indicated very clearly, and she's done it year after year after year, our doors are not always open because of the aging infrastructure. Our staff are not always able to be there, because we're spread so thin. That's unacceptable in a city like New York. It is unacceptable anywhere, but especially who we are as residents of New York City and public servants of New York City. It should not be that way. And as a result of that, we are here to say, we need

your support to one, have our money baselined, and two, also to meet both our expense needs and our capital needs.

So I just want to give you one bit of information, and I'm going to jump down into the weeds, and then I'll close. Since my folks are able to do a great job pulling this together, I need to read it.

Assuming the cost of a physical book is roughly \$20.00, in 2021 with \$1 million, we would have been able to purchase approximately 50,000 books – 2021, 50,000 books. In 2025, with that same \$1 million, it would only get us approximately 40,000 books. And think about that. Fewer books for the same money, because the budget is not meeting our needs.

Talk about an E-book, for example. Again, assume it's costing us \$100.00. In 2021, with \$1 million, we would have purchased 10,000 E-books. In 2025, that \$1 million would get us approximately 8,000 E-books.

The erosion of the opportunity of having books for the public is right in front of our faces.

You want to go even further into the weeds, and this is even beyond my scope of understanding, RFID

tags. (BACKGROUND NOISE) Yes, you can laugh at RFID tags. (LAUGHTER) We all know what we're talking about.

RFID tags come in a roll of 2,000. In 2025, a cost per roll is \$314.76. A cost per tag is 0.157. In 2021, the cost per roll was \$249.52. That tells you again the erosion of the RFID tag, really, what it means. And that deals with the books that we have to put the insertion of the tags into to track the tags. Did I say it correctly, my colleagues here?

UNKNOWN: (INAUDIBLE)

PRESIDENT MARX: Book ops.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: Book ops. I know, that, too. And as a result of that, we need your support.

And we can go on and on and on, talking about the erosion of the dollars, and the flat budget that has allowed us to provide fewer services to the public. Yet at the same time, our dedicated staff say we want to provide more. We want to do more creative things. We want our hours to be longer and make sure we're there to serve the public. That's why we're here today – to talk about the importance of both the expense side of our budget and the capital side of

our budget, but more importantly, the baselining of
our budget.

Once again, thank you very much for all of your
support. Thank you for your perseverance. Thank you
for your patience. And thank you for the ability to
talk to you year after year, because you have been a
receptive audience and ear. And we thank you for
everything that you do on behalf of Libraries.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Thank you very much.

Okay, before we get into questions, I just want
to note that we have been joined by Council Member
Ayala, Council Member Williams, Council Member Moya,
Council Member Brewer, Council Member Carr, Council
Member Hanif, and Council Member Salaam.

I want to jump right in here.

So in the budget, in the Council Budget
Response, we called for a meaningful inclusion of
library capital needs in the 10-Year Plan, including
\$1.4 billion over the next 10 years.

Would that be sufficient funding to cover all
the system's infrastructure needs?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: You know, 10 years is a long
time. And it seems today like that's the magic
number. Who knows?

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: So, could you give us an idea of how much above and beyond the \$1.4 million, how much additional capital would be needed?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: No, I can't. I mean, we submitted the number that I -- and I didn't mean to be cheeky. It's just hard to predict what the value of a dollar will be in 10 years. What we thought, you know, what we anticipated an overhaul of a library would be four years ago, doesn't come close to covering what it actually costs today. That's my only point.

The numbers that we've given you are, in fact, the numbers that we've projected that would cover the cost of our needs.

PRESIDENT MARX: Just to reiterate, when the Administration provided us with a \$100 million infusion through the 10-Year Capital Plan, that was a historic move, because it had never happened before. We thought we could do five Carnegies for that, but we ended up having to add another \$76 million to that just because the cost went up.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Mm-hmm.

PRESIDENT MARX: Now, as we have funding for Seward Park, which we're grateful for, the costs,

again, continue to go up, so we're gonna need to find, and work with you all, and with the Administration to find additional resources. And there are many more Carnegies and other branches that we want to do. Those that are landmarked, we need to respect that — ones where we can replace the libraries with affordable housing on top — the costs keep going up, but I do want to reiterate, Chairman Brannan, being in the, you know, being at the \$1.4 billion mark would be extraordinary or anything close to that.

What we need is a commitment in the 10-Year Capital Plan that is a significant one. Because without that, we cannot plan, we cannot execute, we cannot find partners where it's possible to not necessarily work with DDC, where we can provide, uh, we can get things done in half the time for half the money. That means we have more money left to do more projects, even as costs continue to escalate.

It's all about what any individual would understand. We need to know what we have to work with — and to have enough to work with — to be able to get the results that you want, that the Mayor wants, that

we all want to see in our libraries in every one of
our neighborhoods.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: So, just to add one more
piece, the longer we wait for the investment, the
more it will cost. So, having that investment as
quickly as possible allows us to get the projects off
the ground based on today's cost.

But who would have known last year the type of
challenges from the capital side and expense side we
would be facing with trade wars and everything else
going on, and the impact? So the erosion of the
dollar, over a period of time, becomes even steeper.
So I think the investment that we talk about meets
our needs at this current point in time, but the
longer we wait, the investment will go up.

PRESIDENT MARX: Can I just add one point to
Dennis' comment?

When we don't have the commitment to do
projects in a planned and effective way, we end up
having to do emergency repairs that we have to pull
money from our expense budget, and we end up with
closed libraries unexpectedly. And then we do band-
aid solutions, because that's the best we can do —
which are a waste of the public's money — because

that's not the way to keep our buildings operating — so that we can ensure that they're operating, so that people will come to our doors and know that they are open when we say that they'll be open.

We'd like them to be open more on Sundays, et cetera. But, you know, it all comes back to having the kinds of resources that make it possible for us to do in a rational, planned way what you want us to do, what the Mayor wants us to do.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: We agree. The cost of doing nothing is very expensive, and waiting is equally expensive.

Could each of the systems give us your current capital needs for FY26?

(PAUSE)

PRESIDENT MARX: Our 10-year ask to OMB (Office of Management and Budget) is for \$485 million for the 10-year ask. That's \$160 million for branch renovations, \$200 million for project shortfalls, as well as \$22.3 million for shortfalls with the DDC/EDC portfolio, and \$125 million for technology and security systems upgrades.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: Queens general need is \$369.58 million.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Okay.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: In Brooklyn, we have \$7.25 million in DDC shortfalls. We have a McKinley Park branch overhaul that will cost, we think, \$25 million, tech upgrades and network upgrades of \$3 million, and system-wide, critical infrastructure for \$5 million, for a total of \$40.25 million.

We have 39 active DDC capital projects and are facing \$8.4 million in current shortfalls. So we can actually submit all of this, if we haven't already, so that you have it in spreadsheet form.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: Also, Chair, just to remind you, last year the three systems were hit with a capital PEG that was never restored either. So we started with a hole, based on the capital PEG, that was not part of the restoration. And for Queens, that was roughly \$32.2 million of the capital PEG in Fiscal Year 2024.

PRESIDENT MARX: Mr. Chair, can I just -- I gave you a 10-year number. The Fiscal Year 2026 ask for New York Public Library, based on the numbers I gave you, is \$262.5 million.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Okay. What's the total number of active employees at each of the systems including full time and part time?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: In Brooklyn we have currently, full time 1,008, part time 229 employees of which 81% are union employees. But the budgeted projected headcount that we should be at is 1,167 employees and 300 part-time employees for a total of 1,466.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: Total we have in Queens 1,438: union - 85; non-union - 125, and 456 hourly rates.

And again, I think for the three of us, we're reversing the trend, even though we have not met our desired max need of prior budget cuts as well, but we're at 1,438.

PRESIDENT MARX: At the New York Public Library, as of March 31, 2025: Full time salary was 2,161; part time was 43, part time hourly - 744 of our salaried staff, 68%, proudly union members.

I do want to note, these are all amazing colleagues, but just to put it in context, in FY24, we lost 326 hours of public service due to existing

staff shortages, let alone what we need going forward.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: What are some of the most critical vacant positions for these three systems?

(PAUSE)

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: Children's Librarians. Without question. And...

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Are there obstacles to filling vacancies like that? And what are they?

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: No. It's just that we're starting in the hole. And so basically -- then, in fairness to my colleagues, we're all competing for the same pool of people as well. And then also competing with folks, for me especially, at Nassau and Suffolk. So it's a constant making sure we're able to get people in. But that's part of the challenge.

In addition to that, we have, at Queens, in particular, a number of our people who have been there 30+ years, so we're seeing a number of retirements as well.

So you're balancing out with new hires coming in, some of the specific specialty areas, and those who are retiring. And for this past year so far, we

have had a net number of people coming in versus
number of people leaving.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: You know, in Brooklyn, we
are always looking for librarians. Right now, we also
have a need for public safety officers. But the issue
really is one of planning, and it gets to this
problem of not being able to count on the budget year
after year. So you can't be expected to stop hiring
because of a budget cut, for example, and then when
the budget cut is restored, just flip a switch and be
able to fill the vacancies. It takes time to fill
that pipeline.

One of the things we're doing in Brooklyn is
supporting employees who have undergraduate degrees
and are interested in pursuing a master's in Library
Science. This allows them to have upward mobility
within the system and also fill vacancies in the
library. And, now, even going beyond that, and
looking at people who are close to getting an
undergraduate degree, so enabling them to complete
their undergraduate work, so that they then can apply
for the master's programs.

PRESIDENT MARX: My colleagues have answered
eloquently. I'll just add, you know, last year, for

instance, when we saw the proposed budget cuts, it means we couldn't hire because we couldn't plan. And just as one example, tragically, in, you know, the amazing neighborhoods of the Bronx, we were seeing that we didn't have the librarians, and then we had a lag time in order to hire these great colleagues to, you know, to join our other great colleagues in in the Bronx and elsewhere in our system. You know, that that's it's just another example. It's not just funding. It's the assurance going forward so that we can plan and continue to recruit. We're competing with Westchester, with Long Island, with New Jersey.

We're happy to compete for the best folks, and we do have the best folks, but we need to know that - we need the resources, and we need to know that we have those resources, so that we can keep hiring and not keep people waiting.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: And just to add one word, *stability*. Stability allows us to plan. Linda's talked about it. Tony's talked about it. Stability is such a critical thing in planning your budget and not have to look over your shoulder to worry about a PEG, and then react to that, which then demoralizes our folks as well. And we have to be very conscious of

1
2 that. And in addition to the Children's Librarian, at
3 least I'll speak for Queens, we have a custodial need
4 as well. And hiring custodians is something that
5 we're very conscious of to make sure folks are
6 available to keep our libraries both clean and always
7 being responsive in who they are. They're fantastic
8 folks, but there's always a need for more.

9 CHAIRPERSON POWERS: Okay. Last question for me,
10 then I want to turn it over to Chair Rivera.

11 I just want to talk about state funding. So
12 each of the City's three library system receives
13 funding from the state, under formula aid, provided
14 to every public library system that meets minimum
15 standards set by the NYSED. What state aid level, uh,
16 what does the state aid level depend on? What are
17 those requirements or those minimum standards?

18 (PAUSE)

19 PRESIDENT MARX: As I understand it, Mr. Chair,
20 we -- there is a formula. For instance in FY25, we
21 got \$21.9 million. Formula aid is \$9.7 million, but
22 there's also designated aid of \$10.6 million in other
23 state aid, as well as \$5.5 million from statewide
24 Library Construction Aid Program.

We also work with the Governor, and we're grateful for our partnership with her, on particular projects, and we're always looking for more of those on top of what the formula and other sources provide from the state.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: In addition to that, we rely on some capital monies from them as well. And that for us, especially gives us the flexibility to do more creative type of funding with the expense money, capital money that comes down from the state. And they are very targeted initiatives that come from the state — specific to each library — and a particular legislative district as well.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Brooklyn Public Library's state funding is at \$8.7 million. And I just echo what my colleagues have talked about in terms of process.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Okay, thank you all very much. I will turn it over to Chair Rivera. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you so much for your testimony. It's always thoughtful and thorough, and always with anecdotes that we truly appreciate.

In the Council's Budget Response, we did call on the Administration to add \$44.8 million for the

library system's unmet expense need for Fiscal Year 2026. Clearly, we'd love for them to execute unprecedented baselining for you all. I think it's deserving. That funding is not reflected in the Executive Plan.

Did OMB have any conversation with you all regarding the Council's Budget Response and what we were hoping would be included?

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: I know our teams have been in conversation with OMB, but I'm not sure of the specifics, so I'll get information as we go along.

But I know there have been back and forth communication between our finance team, our operational team, and OMB as well. But I'll give you more details.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: That's okay. I mean, if they haven't, I'm disappointed, clearly, but I feel like that partnership there and the conversations should be had with you all.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Yes, exactly.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Okay. Well, I think we've mentioned an additional \$15.7 million for the Systems. I know, you can elaborate on this if you'd like, but for that to sufficiently meet the expense

needs of the Systems is a nice idea, but it doesn't realistically cover everything that you're predicting, especially with the federal grants, and really, the entire sort of environment around Library needs. You mentioned that for capital, a commitment that should be significant, and a number that could help. I mean, your capital PEGS were not restored from last year.

How many projects will be delayed or postponed due to this funding not being included in the plan?

We called on the Administration to provide an additional \$345 million in FY 2026 for the System's capital needs. The Executive Plan does not include capital funding for the System. Do you know how many projects will be delayed or postponed due to this funding not being included in the plan, or postponed included in the plan?

PRESIDENT MARX: Let me put in context — the \$15.7 million, which has been restored, if you will, gives us funding for facilities maintenance and cleaning, library materials, which, you know, as you've heard, the prices have gone up, as everything has gone up, as well as a \$1 million towards library pages who we love and are crucial.

The missing additional expense ask would cover the unreimbursed wage growth, a greater increase in library materials to fill the gap that Dennis was discussing, IT, cybersecurity, OTPS, all of which have been the result of inflation.

The ready example, in terms of capital, Madam Chair, is that we put in a request for another five Carnegies, or five full renovations, and in effect, we were funded for one. We're grateful to be able to move on Seward Park, but those other neighborhoods are also deserving of capital. And that's just one subset of what we are eager to do.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: I'll limit my response just to the question about capital. And, you know, we've put in our request for the 10-Year Plan, a number of projects that we'd like to start, and we won't be able to do that if we're not included in the 10-Year Plan.

However, I also want to highlight the fact that each time we undertake a major overhaul of the library, we make a significant reduction in the deferred maintenance number. So we try to target libraries that are in bad need of renovations. We do a major overhaul. We eliminate all of the systems

that are close to being incapacitated because, you know, they've been in existence beyond their useful life. These overhauls not only put great libraries into neighborhoods that truly deserve them, but they also reduce the ongoing maintenance costs of that particular branch. So it has a ripple effect throughout our entire capital and expense budget.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: And what I will do is try to answer it a little differently as well. If there's a shortfall on a particular project, then that project stops if you're working with DDC. And that's unacceptable. Therefore, when we prioritize our needs, as Linda and Tony indicated, our experts, who work with our respective systems, are familiar with those aging infrastructures. And they put that in the capital plan process so that we can allocate the appropriate amount of money. And when that shortfall occurs, or there's a capital PEG that's never restored, then we have to pull that project back. Then it goes back to something that Tony talked about earlier, as far as them -- we have to shift into doing patchwork. And to do the patchwork, we're using expense dollars. And when you use the expense dollars, that comes out of a particular staff

member's budget; therefore, it contributes to a staffing shortfall.

So, it's a domino effect, as Linda has talked about earlier, where the dominoes continue to fall as a result of both capital shortfalls and expense shortfalls.

And I know, thanks to you, and thanks to the Chair Brannan, and to the Council Members, people really don't have a clear insight into the intricacies and the complexities of the capital plan. It's not just that simple. In working with DDC, and we have a good partnership with DDC, I will not dog DDC, but they're a bureaucracy as well. And things get lost in the sauce. And, as a result of things getting lost in the sauce, then it provides really the slowness of a project, which then eats into our expense money, because we have to do a repair of a boiler — And, I've always said this, and I'll say it again at this hearing, so it's officially in the Minutes, I always cite the example of when we had a broken boiler one time. If we had to go through DDC, and the amount that it cost us to do that boiler project, and as a result of that length of time, people have frozen their butts off over the winter,

or we would have to close the library down to that particular community.

Instead of doing that, we shifted our expense dollars to do it quicker and cheaper, so that way we can get that project done and keep the library open to the public. And that's the complexity and the domino effect that we continue to talk about.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: And I...

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Dennis has used a couple of terms of our, you know, lost in the sauce, freezing our butts off. (INAUDIBLE)

(LAUGHTER)

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: Obviously, I haven't used our library services for articulating my...

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: All of which are great points. There is, I think, some form of legislation that's being proposed that would allow the Libraries to continue to sort of expand the work that we're doing on the construction and maintenance side. We're not interested in becoming developers for sure, but since we can do the projects at about a quarter of the cost and a third of the time, it does make sense for that kind of capability to be transferred to our staff.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: So well put.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: And I appreciate that.

That's -- my questions with expense and capital.

Sometimes we make it seem like they're entirely

separate, and they don't actually overlap, but you

need the budget to make sense, especially in in terms

of emergencies. I mean, how many of the System's

capital projects are delayed due to issues with DDC'S

project management? Do you have any solutions to

offer to reduce the delays with DDC-managed capital

projects?

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: So I'll respond this way,

and I'll try to keep my language in a way that

represents the head of a library system and not

someone else. (LAUGHTER)

We have a great project going on with DDC right

now that we'll be able to achieve the timeline that's

been projected. And the other piece I want to add to

that is that it's not just DDC, when we talk about

the bureaucracy and trying to make it lean, it also

involves OMB, it involves bonding, it involves a

whole host of different issues that impact the either

repair of a library or the building of a new library

or the expansion of a library. And so DDC gets a lot of the heat, but it's deeper than a DDC issue.

I think it's a variety of components that would make us more efficient in our ability to have both a cheaper project and a more timely project.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: I'll just pile on here, because why not? You know, my team that works on capital projects and maintenance knows that the thing that really sticks in my craw is that even when we are doing projects ourselves, it takes so much time for the City to reimburse us that we actually have a line of credit. We pay interest so that we can pay our vendors to keep projects moving forward. So, the money we're getting is actually not covering the entire cost of the capital work being done. We're also having to pay a finance charge because doing business with the City is that arduous.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: And as you know, DDC just got an alternative delivery approval from the state. So we look forward to working with DDC around this alternative delivery method of building, because we want DDC to be the most efficient, cost-effective organization there is. I mean, we look forward to that, and we've had projects that have been done on

time. We've had projects that have been delayed, but the reality is that as projects get more delayed, they become more expensive. Therefore, the shortfalls increase, and then we have to stop the projects, and that's unacceptable.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: I wanna reiterate that point. It would be great if DDC could efficiently handle all of our systems and roofs and all of the things, all of the small projects. I think I mentioned in my testimony that we have 39 open DDC projects right now. We don't want to be responsible for building new roofs or installing new systems in our buildings. It's not our business to do that, and so we'd very much like to have a construction authority that could do that efficiently.

PRESIDENT MARX: Madam Chair, I would like to reiterate. Look, we know that the folks, the good folks at DDC, are working hard, but they're also working hard within a structure that doesn't make a whole lot of sense as far as we can tell. We've talked about this over the years. That's something for the City Council and the Mayor to fix.

And we know there have been attempts at reform, but they haven't gotten us where we need to get.

Things are better with Design-Build, for instance, but I'll just reiterate the simple fact that without sufficient funding, without plannable funding, we end up seeing delays of, you know, twice the time, you know, costing twice as much.

Westchester Square, that's an ongoing effort here that's been going on for way too long. That neighborhood deserves a great library. Woodlawn, since 2013, we've been trying to get that project off the ground and done. We are so eager to get these done. If we get 10-year capital funding, then we can work better with DDC. We can find alternative partners as we have with EDC for our five Carnegies. We can find, in some instances, partners with private development for the apartments above using the air to provide New Yorkers with housing, or self funded projects, self managed projects. But we need to know that we have the resources so we can make plans, deliver projects at least half the cost, half the time as otherwise.

When the City doesn't provide us with those kinds of commitments, in my view, it's being penny-wise and pound-foolish. And everyone suffers, because

then we cannot deliver what the City expects and
needs us to deliver in terms of our capital projects.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: One more thing for me, in
that we're building out two new libraries, but we're
using expense money, because we need to get those
libraries open as quickly as possible. Someone once
said to us during this planning process, "Well, how
come you're not using the capital money you have?"
And we said, "We want this library open sooner than
eight years from now."

And the reality is we'll have this library open
in two years. We're in design for these two new
libraries. And, as a result of that, we have our
folks working with the landlords of these particular
buildings to make sure that we're able to serve the
public a lot sooner than eight years from now.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: I appreciate that, whether
it's Jackson Heights or Eastern Parkway, Westchester
Square, these are all important projects.

My last question, because I know my colleagues
have some, you know, all of this affects the
programming you provide, and that's what's right, the
jewel in addition to the books. How do libraries
gather feedback from communities to decide which

1
2 programs and activities to prioritize? And are any of
3 those programs in jeopardy seriously? That'll be my
4 last question, Mr. Chair.

5 PRESIDENT JOHNSON: You know, it's a balancing
6 act. At least in Brooklyn, we look at attendance and
7 where the demand is the greatest. We also have a
8 sense of a pedagogy that we can be proud of. So, it's
9 not just about demand; it's also about aspirations
10 and what we want our community to learn. You know,
11 we're very heavily invested in services to newest New
12 Yorkers, civic engagement, voter registration, all
13 the things that come with being a responsible citizen
14 in the city of New York, in the state of New York, in
15 the country.

16 And there are always great and innovative ideas
17 that are coming from staff, so we have a Strategy
18 Department that specifically looks at what kind of
19 programs in the branches are likely to be successful,
20 and we incubate them and work on a small scale, and
21 if they're successful, then spread them more broadly
22 across the borough.

23 PRESIDENT WALCOTT: In Queens, we just approved,
24 I guess last year, our five-year strategic plan. So
25 that serves as a foundation as far as working with

1 the community and implementing new initiatives and
2 strengthening existing programs and service. And part
3 of that plan was engaging the community as far as
4 their feedback. We rely on our managers, who are on
5 the ground, who know more than I know, as far as the
6 need to the respective communities, and really
7 feeding that into both the strategic plan and the
8 overall discussion process itself, and then taking a
9 look at funding. I mean, we have a very great
10 relationship with the City, as all of us do, as far
11 as the needs of the City and how we play that role.
12 Whether we can allocate our existing dollars from
13 you, the City Council, and the City overall, or raise
14 money to meet those needs, it's all part of that
15 process of really blending the initiatives to meet
16 the increased demands of services.

17
18 And then again, I think strategic planning
19 really provides that foundation. Linda talked about
20 the aspirational. It's keeping that aspirational
21 vision of what we want to do, but also unlocking the
22 creativity of our team members to provide those
23 services.

24 PRESIDENT MARX: Madam Chair, thank you for that
25 question.

To reiterate, we've also just completed a five-year strategic plan, which has allowed us to review this question in detail.

We've seen, over the last five or ten years, a massive increase in our investment, thanks to your and the Mayor's partnership, in everything from after-school programs, teen programming, teen centers, teen ambassadors, and banned book clubs. We see English language instruction for the immigrant community that's being pressed on so many fronts at this point in terms of what the feds et cetera are doing. Computer skills are essential for making it in this world. AI is now a new area we're going into in terms of helping New Yorkers understand it.

We respond to what we hear in surveys, what our staff tells us is working or not working. Obviously, it varies from neighborhood to neighborhood, so we do some programs more, some less, depending on what the real needs are there.

One of our strategic initiatives is to increase our data capacity, our capacity for gathering data, to be responsive. And at the same time, we have to figure out, and we work at this, how to balance having the information to make the right decisions,

based on the resources that you and the Mayor provide to us, but also protecting people's privacy as we do it. And that's a little tricky. We may be the last institutions left that care about and respect privacy, but we have to keep that balance, and that's what we're doing.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Okay, now we have questions from Council Member Louis, followed by Council Member Brewer.

COUNCIL MEMBER LOUIS: Thank you, Chairs, and good morning. I have three quick questions.

Despite City Council's push to restore \$6.2 million in funding for libraries across the city, and with the Administration only committing \$15.7 million, this particular restoration has possible threats in equitable distribution in hours and programming and staffing – especially in historically underserved communities like Southeast Queens, East New York, East Flatbush, Brownsville.

So I wanted to know with only \$15.7 million of the \$62.5 million Library funding restored, how is, particularly, all your systems planning to equitably prioritize branch hours and services, particularly in these neighborhoods that I just mentioned? And will

your systems be using a particular formula to determine which branches will receive restored hours and staffing? How will council members and local communities be included in those decisions?

And the last question is kind of like the second one, but what are the actual metrics that are being used in determining the cost at each branch for expanding to seven day service for FY26?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Uh...

COUNCIL MEMBER LOUIS: Sorry, I know it's technical.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: No, no, it's not that...

PRESIDENT MARX: No, no, no...

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: It's just that there are a lot of questions in there. And I would say that the underlying theme of those questions is, how do we make sure that patrons living in some of our most challenged neighborhoods are being appropriately served, especially in the face of inadequate funding?

And I would say that we keep a close eye on programming in the neighborhoods that you're referring to. Many of those neighborhoods that you read are Brooklyn neighborhoods. And, you know, we are very sensitive to not only the programming and

content that are being offered in those neighborhoods, but also making sure that as we're looking at libraries, the physical libraries that need renovations and overhauls, that we're making sure that the branches in those neighborhoods are also particularly well cared for and prioritized in terms of what we need.

Of course, and I'm sorry because I, again, sound like a broken record, but there's a balance between dealing with emergencies that are unanticipated, and making sure that we can actually do the kind of planning that we want to do to make sure that the patrons in those neighborhoods have branches that are in good and working order.

One emergency can come along and wipe out the capital budget for a particular year, and that's partly (TIMER) because we're not able to provide the kind of preventative work in those branches that would avoid those kinds of crises.

COUNCIL MEMBER LOUIS: And the last part is system-wide with all systems, is there a formula or a metric you all are using for a seven-day service for all branches?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: I know what the number is in Brooklyn to have seven-day service across all of our branches. And I know that because my good friend, Councilperson Brewer, asks me every year.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: (UN-MIC'D) (INAUDIBLE)

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: (LAUGHS) And for Brooklyn, it's \$7.4 million.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: So with Queens, we have uniform hours and days of the week that we're open. So we make sure that the services being provided in the respective areas of Southeast Queens and other parts of Queens that deserve the service are fairly equitable. But we also rely on the managers to be creative.

And then what we've done is try to allocate separate funding to the various branches as well. So it's not a lot of funding, but individual funding, so they can tailor it to their particular community's needs as well. And we found that to be extremely helpful.

As far as the ability to manage the programs based on the budget, we go through a very rigorous internal budget process where we take a look at the equity as far as the allocation of the dollars to

make sure that all the libraries are receiving equitable dollars and we're not shortchanging any one community at all.

But, also, when you asked about metrics, I imagine like all of us, we keep very detailed metrics of the services and the types of programs and the increases or decreases in a particular metric area and then make adjustments based on those metrics.

Those adjustments could be either increasing funds to try to make sure we increase the level of services in those metric areas, or we reduce it, because, for whatever particular reason, that program is not meeting the needs of the community any longer.

So we try to be collaborative in that process, but we keep very detailed internal metrics. And, also, as indicated earlier, then that feeds into our five-year strategic plan, and looking at those eight priority areas for us in our five-year strategic plan and how that unfolds over the next period of five years.

COUNCIL MEMBER LOUIS: Thank you for that.

PRESIDENT MARX: I'll just reiterate. We must provide equitable services across all our neighborhoods. But we also recognize that the

neighborhoods vary. So we look at an array of factors. We make decisions about investing in libraries or programs, or thinking about Sunday services, that include what the access to public transit and parking are, for instance, but more particularly, number of visits, number of potential visits, demand, proximity to schools, even neighborhood income levels.

So one example of that is when we did get the 10-year capital investment to do five Carnegie renovations, we focused those on neighborhoods of need, where income levels are lower and folks don't have alternative resources, programs, or even just physical space to go to. And so that's what we decided to invest in, because that's where we felt the need was most pressing.

COUNCIL MEMBER LOUIS: Thank you all. Thank you, Chair.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: We have been joined by Council Members Ung, Hudson, and Powers.

And now we have questions from Council Member Brewer, followed by Council Member Salaam.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Thank you very much. And thank you for your great testimony with data and

answers. It's shocking compared to what we usually get. And, also, thank you to my twin; there's a twin up there just in case you all don't know that.

PRESIDENT MARX: Duly noted.

(LAUGHTER)

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: Our birthdays align, so...

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Same day, second, hour, and year. Just so you know. He looks better than I do. I'm trying.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: No, I don't.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Yes, you do.

So, E-Rate, do you -- is that still something that you get? And how much? And how does it operate, and et cetera?

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: We get it. We'll get you the exact number in a sec...

PRESIDENT MARX: So, E-Rate is federal funding for internet connectivity, which is so essential given the continued digital divide. In FY25, NYPL can receive a maximum of \$2.2 million in E-Rate funding for eligible costs.

At this point, we see no threats to that, but you never know what's gonna come out of Washington next.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: Queens is \$700,000.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: And Brooklyn is \$2 million.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay. So that's good
that it hasn't been cut yet.

So maybe you said this earlier and I didn't,
but in terms of the issue of federal funding, are
there other that could be at jeopardy, or does the
federal funding so far seem okay?

PRESIDENT MARX: No.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: So there's a -- there's a
number of issues.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: Mm-hmm.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: There's the Institute of
Museum and Library Science...

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Major cuts, yeah.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Those cuts have sort of come
to a halt. They're episodic. It's not like it's a
continued stream from IMLS that funds Libraries. It's
by application.

But I think the bigger concern is, what happens
to the state's budget if...

PRESIDENT MARX: Mm-hmm.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: And, you know, as you know all too well, what happens in the state flows down to the city, and what happens in the city flows down to the library.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Yeah, okay. All right, that makes sense.

In terms of the digital divide, obviously part of your capital is getting more funding. So my question is, I know almost every five years, you need to have an overhaul of your technology, because you have so many users. Is that still true? And is that the kind of funding that you're looking for? Because to me, when I go to the library branches, every computer is at use.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: I'll just start, and I'll let everybody pile on, because this is an important issue.

Yes, I mean, the technology infrastructure needs to be continually replenished. Yes, we're the largest provider of free Wi-Fi in the boroughs, and we are in enormous demand. It became (TIMER) apparent during COVID to the rest of the world, something that we already knew, which is just how much our patrons depend upon the libraries to stay

connected — to the point where we were leaving all the Wi-Fi signals on, so that people could sit outside of our libraries when they were closed and take advantage of the signal that...

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: That's The E-Rate. Yep.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Yes. But in addition to that, there's always emerging technology that becomes important. And Tony mentioned (TIMER) his testimony, uh, the importance of making sure our patrons are versed in artificial intelligence. That world is changing so quickly that it's mind-boggling for the most proficient. So I know when I'm getting requests from the branches all over the borough about help in artificial intelligence, that that's gonna be an area of expense moving forward.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: So in response to your question, and picking up on Council Member Louis' question around metrics — just to give you a metric sense — in Fiscal Year 2023, we had Wi-Fi sessions 583,803. In Fiscal Year 2024, that jumped to 1,755,367. So that's a 200.68% increase. And that's as a result of what Linda talked about. And all of us are dealing with both having the Wi-Fi capacity on,

on a regular basis, as well as what we did in Queens.
And I imagine our colleagues in Brooklyn and New York
as well, the expansion of the range of the system as
well. So we've done special projects where, in
neighborhoods that our branches serve, people are
able to sit 150 yards away outside and get the
services as well.

We have put aside money from prior budgets in
upgrading the computers in our computer center.
That's available for people on a regular basis. But
our infrastructure needs around computers continues
to increase. And we have a basically unmet need of
\$30 million in capital dollars to deal with the
upgrading of our computers for the public, but also
our internal needs. Because our systems, at least
I'll speak for Queens, are extremely old. So that's
part of our strategic plan as well -- the internal
infrastructure improvement that we need to focus on
and that requires additional money.

PRESIDENT MARX: Councilwoman Brewer, thank you
again for your question.

We also have seen significant increases just,
for instance, in wireless sessions, 80% increase in
the last fiscal year, in just that fiscal year alone.

You know, we have a huge number, over 5,000 desktop computers, over 4,000 laptop computers. But as you say, the issue is the digital divide. And it is, you're right, on a five year cycle in terms of replacement. And we've spent, I think, about \$30 million just on that in the last five years.

But the digital divide, as I've already signaled, I think maybe before you came in, is an issue...

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I heard you. I was listening.

PRESIDENT MARX: Okay, across the city, thanks, Gale. That's why we're so proud to be partnering with HPD, both in two different projects, with Section 8 housing, one, one on one, and then the other is, 2,000 people, in the kind of project that Dennis was describing, and that my colleagues have also been doing.

Look, let me just be clear. It is outrageous that in New York City, at this point in history, that, you know, a million, possibly twice that number, of our neighbors and fellow citizens don't have access to trustable broadband at home. You know, we focused on this during the pandemic, when it was

1 additionally incredible that you couldn't do
2 schoolwork, you couldn't do your job, you couldn't
3 look for a job, you couldn't do research, you
4 couldn't keep up with your friends and neighbors or
5 with, you know, city officials in terms of the
6 information that you needed. I will never forget
7 talking to the CEO of one of the largest, if not the
8 largest provider in the city, who explained to me
9 that, no, they didn't see a problem, even though one
10 or two million New Yorkers are in the digital dark.
11 Their prices simply make digital access unavoidable.

12 That's why all three of us, across the five
13 boroughs, have been experimenting towards what I hope
14 will be a much better result, which is where every
15 New Yorker has a basic broadband, you know, offering
16 for free as sort of a basic requirement of life at
17 this point. The market is not providing that. It
18 won't provide that. It's just another example of
19 where the libraries have to step in to solve the
20 social problems and needs that the markets by
21 themselves can't and won't meet.

22 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Yeah. I mean, the NYCHA
23 folks get a little bit through Spectrum and the
24

City's program, but you have to be a NYCHA resident, and you have to have Spectrum. Did you want...

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: Yeah, I just want to build on what Tony is talking about.

First, just locally, in our 10-year Capital Plan ask, there's \$12.2 million for technology. And without getting into the complexities of what qualifies for capital and what doesn't...

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I'm well aware.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: But, I want to I want to reiterate the issue of inadequate broadband across the city. The libraries are in fact, you know, there to sort of help those that are on the wrong side of the digital divide in a way that is really hard to fathom in 2025. And the issue is growing every year, because the more sophisticated we get, in terms of investing in digital material, the further behind people living on the wrong side of the digital divide become. And that is really perhaps one of the biggest conundrums that we're dealing with right now. Because to meet the demand of many New Yorkers, in terms of digital material, requires us to make investments that are in some cases, it's like we're running two enterprises. We're running the bricks and mortar, and

we're running this digital enterprise that we've all
built out over the last five-seven years.

And we're still operating with the same amount
of funding. And that is part of what is making the
situation untenable.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: All right, thank you.

Just quickly, two quick things. I won't bring
up DDC, because I always do. Because when I do, then
they call me and complain that I complain about them.
But I am complaining about them.

For the New York, what's your seven day number?
I know I didn't get it, I got Brooklyn's. What's your
seven day, if you were to do seven day, what's your
number that you would need?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON: (UN-MIC'D) (INAUDIBLE),
Tony.

PRESIDENT MARX: We, again, with the with the
metrics, and trying to figure out where to do this
and spread it across, we think it's roughly a \$10
million number.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay, and then when
will...

PRESIDENT MARX: And, Gale, can I just add, we
used to be at a five-year replacement cycle for

technology infrastructure. With your help, we were
able to switch to a three year, which is...

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Yeah.

PRESIDENT MARX: much more in keeping with the
reality of what we need.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: And for Queens, it's \$7
million, which is specific for overtime.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay, thank you.

And, then finally, Bloomingdale. What's the
timing of Bloomingdale being renovated and housing
and so on?

PRESIDENT MARX: So we're working on that, Gale.
We'll get you the numbers. It's in partnership with
EDC. We're grateful that, you know, now that we've
gotten agreement with the Health Department, because
they are also located there. As in Inwood, we will
provide a great new, hopefully larger, better
library, brand new.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Yep.

PRESIDENT MARX: And in the case of
Bloomingdale, a block that I have walked by many,
many times, you know, because of the size of the

site, we think we can get up to 800 apartments above
what is the current location.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Terrific, all right,
thank you. Thank you very much. I won't bring up all
my other topics right now, because you all know
them. Thank you so much.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Okay, questions from
Council Member Salaam, followed by Council Member
Williams.

COUNCIL MEMBER SALAAM: Thank you, and good
morning.

PRESIDENT MARX: Good morning.

COUNCIL MEMBER SALAAM: Great testimony so far.
This has been really informative.

I have a few questions as it relates to Harlem.
The Executive Capital Commitment Plan includes major
upgrades for branches like Brownsville and Jackson
Heights. What specific capital commitments, if any,
are being made to address urgent infrastructure
issues in Harlem branches, such as HVAC failures, ADA
accessibility, or roof repairs?

And has any of the \$345 million in unmet
capital needs identified by the Council been
allocated for Harlem-based library facilities? And

will the Administration commit to including Harlem Library projects in the \$1.2 billion 10-Year Capital Plan?

PRESIDENT MARX: Council Member, thank you for your question.

Let me just say that, you know, we consider our branches and our research library in Harlem to be essential, crown jewels, if you will, in a neighborhood that is so powerful and needs, you know, more than it has gotten.

We recently completed an exterior rehab of Countee Cullen. Took way too long, over \$7.5 million. I remember that scaffolding was there and causing problems on that block. I'm delighted that's done.

Harry Belafonte, so proud to have that name on our 115th Street branch. We completed a cellar and floor renovation, a boiler replacement. I know that doesn't sound like charismatic items, but they're expensive — that was \$266 million. 1:34:16

We have proudly finished a facade and window replacement -- sorry, we are in construction of the Schomburg's facade and window replacement — \$8 million of special funding from Governor Hochul, so we're grateful to the Governor for that.

And I just want to point out that we are currently celebrating the 100th Anniversary of the Schomburg, which is the premier research center in the world for African American and diaspora studies. We've got so many programs and so much that we're aspiring to do there and fundraising, privately, as well as publicly, for the Schomburg.

If we can get a serious 10-year capital commitment, then we can do more in Harlem, whether it's at the Harlem Library — we did, as you know, finally replace Macomb's Bridge, which was painfully small for decades. I think we doubled or tripled the size of that branch, and it's bursting with life and programs. That's the model we want to do throughout the System, and certainly, and particularly in Harlem.

COUNCIL MEMBER SALAAM: And just some follow-ups with regards to youth and workforce programming in Harlem Libraries.

With the vacancy rate for Library staff at 9.4% as of March 2025, how is the City ensuring that Harlem Libraries maintain robust (TIMER) youth programming, adult education, and workforce

development services, especially when staffing
shortages persist?

PRESIDENT MARX: So again, our strategic plan
has recommitted us with public funds, and where
necessary, with private funds, to ensure that our
education programs, especially in neighborhoods of
greater need, which is what we're talking about here,
deserve that kind of level of funding. We have
massively increased our education programs at New
York Public and the other systems as well. Now we
need to ensure that going forward, build on that
going forward. And if that means we need to do more
private fundraising, we will do that as well. Because
the people of New York, even the folks with
resources, understand just how crucial this is. And
we know that you and the City Council and the City as
a whole understand that.

COUNCIL MEMBER SALAAM: Absolutely.

Chairs, if I can just -- a short follow-up to
that.

How are the libraries partnering with local
schools and community-based organizations in Harlem
to expand the digital literacy and after-school
initiatives? And will additional operating support in

the Executive Budget be directed in part towards restoring youth and educational programs that were scaled back in recent years?

PRESIDENT MARX: Well, we have been building back, whether it's page or teen ambassador programs. We've been expanding our after-school activities -- in Harlem and elsewhere. We want to ensure that we have the resources to continue that and to expand that where possible. But we've done so much in terms of expansion, that now we need to make sure that we can continue those commitments, as well as look to other places to do more.

COUNCIL MEMBER SALAAM: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Questions from Council Member Williams?

COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: Thank you.

I just had a question about the Capital Budget. I know you mentioned a lot of the issues that you have with these projects. I think almost every year I put money in, and, as you know, it comes back around that there's a budget shortfall, and then we have to try to find additional funds.

If you could just explain again that process, and how we could try to avoid that? Because it is a

1
2 little frustrating to make a priority to put in funds
3 one year, and then find out that the project is
4 suddenly not fully funded. It's just a frustrating
5 dynamic for us with such limited capital funds to
6 spread around.

7 And if we say we're going commit to this one
8 year, and, then, next year we make other commitments,
9 and then have to move lines around, because we get a
10 notification from the System that a particular
11 project is underfunded. And I think this has happened
12 to me probably almost every budget cycle, where a
13 project that I thought was fully funded is suddenly
14 not funded.

15 PRESIDENT WALCOTT: So I'll take that first if I
16 may.

17 One, it may happen to you again this year, so
18 just to give you a heads up. I know, but I'm giving
19 you a heads up.

20 But that's where the City Council's
21 unrestricted money has been extremely helpful to all
22 of us as far as plugging those holes as well. So you
23 have not really heard the same amount of coming back
24 to you for additional funds — at least on the Queen's
25 side — because of the use of prioritizing and really

taking a look at where shortfalls may take place and the excellent unrestricted money that the City Council has provided that allows us to plug that.

And your district in particular, Council Member, as I look at the list of libraries that you cover, every library in your district has a capital initiative taking place: Cambria Heights with roof resiliency; South Jamaica with total overhaul; South Hollis as well; and Central, thanks to you, and the Speaker, and other council members, the renovation of the auditorium at Central; and St. Albans has a project.

So we're very conscious of that, and we've tried to minimize coming back to you for additional money because of shortfalls.

But it goes back to what we talked about earlier, as far as the complexity of, if we don't have the money, as Tony and Linda have indicated, as far as the total Capital Plan — especially a 10-Year Capital Plan — then we meet those shortfalls by either coming back to you or using the unrestricted money that you have set aside from the Council itself in the overall budget.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Okay, we have also been
joined by Council Member Brooks-Powers on Zoom.

Okay, thank you all, very, very much for your
testimony.

PRESIDENT WALCOTT: Thank you for the
opportunity, and thank you for your leadership as
well.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you so much. We
really appreciate you and your testimonies.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Okay, we will take a
little break, and then we are going to hear from DCLA
at 12:00 p.m., noon.

(PAUSE)

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: [GAVEL] Okay, good
afternoon, and welcome to day eight, part two, of day
eight of the Executive Budget hearings.

This will be the final Executive Hearing of the
day. We'll be focusing on the Department of Cultural
Affairs. I'm joined by my colleague, Council Member
Rivera, Chair of the Committee on Cultural Affairs,
Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations.

Welcome to a familiar face and friend,
Commissioner Laurie Cumbo. Good to see you guys, and

Lance, of course. Thank you for joining us today to
answer our questions.

On May 1, 2025, the Administration released the
Executive Financial Plan for FY26-29, with a proposed
FY26 budget of \$115.1 billion.

DCLA's proposed FY26 budget of \$215.1 million
represents less than 1% of Administration's proposed
FY twenty five budget. This is an increase of \$50.7
million from the \$164.4 million originally budgeted
in the Preliminary Plan back in January. This
increase is the result of several actions, mostly a
partial restoration of PEGS to the CDF, the Cultural
Development Fund, and the CIG, the Cultural
Institution Group operating subsidy – this partially
offset by an adjustment in utility spending costs. As
of March 2025, DCLA had nine vacancies relative to
their budgeted headcount.

In the Council's Preliminary Budget Response,
we called on City Hall to add \$75 million to DCLA's
budget to fully restore and baseline cuts imposed to
the Cultural Institutions Funding.

As I mentioned this morning, we do not arrive
at these numbers lightly. The Council has identified
sufficient resources to restore this and other

unnecessary cuts in full for our cultural institutions. Investing in our arts and cultural institutions isn't a nice luxury, but one of those rare moments where it works for both a moral and a financial position.

If a budget is a moral document, then the arts are what inspire generations today and tomorrow to create, think, and explore the world beyond. I've got the passport stamps to prove it.

Financially, our cultural institutions are also those key investments we need to support — a heartbeat pulling millions of people into the city from around the world, generating money for our economy and our workforce, and supporting jobs all the while.

The Council is obligated to deliver a final budget that supports New Yorkers' success, fiscal and otherwise, and will continue that work in the negotiations ahead.

My questions today will largely focus on the Council's Budget Response, along with one-time funding and DCLA's Capital Program. But I now want to turn back to my co-chair, Council Member Rivera, for her opening statement.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you so much, Chair
Brannan. Passport stamps are such a flex.

And I want to just thank everyone here,
especially my colleagues, for fighting so diligently
for their communities to ensure that their
neighborhoods, their neighbors, their constituents
have opportunity.

Good afternoon, and welcome to the hearing for
the Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and
International Intergroup Relations. I'm Council
Member Carlina Rivera, Chair of this committee.

This afternoon we will be discussing the Fiscal
2026 Executive Expense Budget for DCLA, which stands
at \$215.1 million, and the Fiscal 2026 Executive
Capital Commitment Plan which includes \$1.2 billion
in Fiscal 2025-2029 for the Department.

I'm happy to see that at the urging of the
Council, the Administration added baseline funding of
\$45 million in the Executive Plan, which includes
\$23.5 million for Cultural Development Fund
recipients and \$21.5 million for the 34 Cultural
Institution Group member organizations.

However, I am disappointed that the
Administration did not allocate and baseline the full

\$75 million for the City's cultural institutions as
the Council called for in its Budget Response.

The City's cultural institutions are renowned
worldwide for providing enrichment to all audiences,
while contributing to the growth of our neighborhoods
and the City's economy. The additional \$30 million of
baseline funding would assist the CIG institutions in
paying staff salaries, providing accessible public
programs, and for security and maintenance of City-
owned buildings.

The funding would also help thousands of
creative nonprofits that rely on CDF funding to keep
their doors open and provide services across the
city. Our cultural organizations provide welcoming
spaces for our community creating positive social
impact.

In a moment when the federal government is
closing its doors on immigrants, on international
allies, and on public funding for the arts, we in New
York City remain committed to what makes us great.
Our doors are open, and we will always be the same
welcoming New York City that people have been drawn
to for centuries. We're a global city for culture, a
sanctuary for creativity, and a place that believes

in community power and support. Cultural organizations and arts workers are not just major economic drivers, they are the heart and soul of our communities enriching our lives and showcasing our values.

In the face of ongoing challenges from the slow recovery of tourism to shifting federal policies – really the cuts and threats to federal funding – we must ensure that the arts and culture sector is fully supported. And as the Chair of the Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations, I will continue to push for accountability and accuracy and ensure that the budget reflects the needs and interests of the City. It is essential that the budget that we adopt this year is transparent, accountable, and reflective of the priorities and interests of the Council and the people that we represent.

This hearing is a vital part of this process, and I expect that DCLA will be responsive to the questions and concerns of council members. And I look forward active engagement with the Administration over the next few weeks to ensure the Fiscal 2026 Adopted Budget meets the goals the Council has set

out. As we know, historic times call for historic investments. Thank you very much.

I wanna just recognize the members.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: I got it.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: All right.

Let me just thank my staff for organizing today's hearing, including Financial Analyst, Sandra Gray; Committee Counsel, Christina Yellamaty; Legislative Policy Analyst, Regina Paul; and, of course, my Chief of Staff, Katie Loeb; and Legislative Director, Eddie Amador. Thank you so much.

Mr. Chair, back to you.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Thank you, Chair.

We have been joined by Council Members Hudson, Louis, Williams, Salaam, and Brooks-Powers.

Just a reminder for folks that are here...

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: (INAUDIBLE)

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: We said you already, you've been here the whole time. Gale, we always count on you to be here. (LAUGHS) Council Member Brewer is still here.

For those of you who want to testify, after we take testimony and we question DCLA, we will do

testimony from the public on Libraries and the
Cultural Affairs Committee. So just make sure you
fill out one of those little slips in the back, so we
can call on you.

I will now turn it over to Brian Sarfo, our
Committee Counsel, to swear you in.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Good afternoon. Do you
affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth, and
nothing but the truth, before this committee, and to
respond honestly to council member questions?

Commissioner Cumbo?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I do.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: General Council Polivy?

GENERAL COUNCIL POLIVY: I do.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: You may begin.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Thank you. Good afternoon,
Chair Rivera, Chair Brannan, and members of the
committees. I am Laurie Cumbo, Commissioner of the
New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. I am
here today to testify in regards to the best budget
ever, also known as the Mayor's FY26 Executive Budget
proposal. Come on, this is the best budget ever.

I am joined today by a number of my colleagues
from the agency. I will begin today with a quick look

at the amazing numbers in the Mayor's Fiscal Year
2026 Executive Budget for DCLA. It includes:

- \$52 million for the Cultural Development Fund;
- \$101 million for operating support for cultural institutions on City-owned property;
- \$52.3 million for energy subsidies to groups on City-owned property;
- \$8.2 million for agency staff and operations;
- \$1.7 million for CreateNYC and other agency initiatives.

If you don't have your calculator handy, that amounts to a grand total of \$214.7 million for DCLA in the Fiscal Year 2026 Executive Budget. And this biggest news of all, it includes \$45 million in baseline funding for DCLA: \$21.5 million for the Cultural Institution Groups and \$23.5 million for the Cultural Development Fund.

This is the first time that the Agency's baseline has been significantly increased in more than a decade. This reflects a major long term commitment to support our city's cultural community,

and a recognition of culture's essential role in making our city thrive, particularly at a time when our cultural community is facing so many urgent challenges. I'm proud to be serving as Commissioner during the administration that has prioritized this historic commitment to our arts and culture community.

At nearly \$215 million, this is the largest amount included for DCLA in an Executive Budget proposal in HERstory. By comparison, the Executive Budget at the same point in last year's budget process was a \$151 million — meaning this year's Executive Budget is a 42% increase over last year's. And as always, this figure does not include any funding that is typically added at adoption, such as City Council initiatives or member items. Starting from such a strong position, we look forward to working toward an Adopted Budget that continues to invest in and support our vibrant cultural sector at record levels. We are certainly looking forward to the City Council outdoing us this year.

While initially added in the Fiscal Year 2026 Preliminary Budget, another item included is the in the best budget ever is \$3 million for the creation

of up to five new members of the City's Cultural Institutions Group. We are continuing to work closely with the organizations under consideration to see if the designation is the right fit to ensure their long term stability and service to New Yorkers. While the CIG as a whole is the cornerstone of our city's cultural community, these new CIG members give us an once-in-a-generation opportunity to foster greater equity in this important source of city support. We look forward to making announcements as we finalize the new groups in the near future.

Now, I'd like to provide a few updates on the great work we're able to do with these historic investments in our cultural community.

The process of distributing the FY26 Cultural Development Fund is already well underway. We released the applications for the next cycle the last week in March, well ahead of last year's schedule and they were due May 8th.

We appreciate the many council members who helped us spread the word about this year's opportunity, which, each year, supports nearly 1,100 organizations citywide.

For the upcoming award cycle, we estimate that we'll convene more than CDF panels to review approximately 800 applications for support. We are actively recruiting panelists to support this process. It's a great paid opportunity to learn about the public funding process in-depth, network with your peers, and give back to our city's cultural community.

Please visit nyc.gov/CDFapply to learn more.
Again, that's nyc.gov/CDFapply to learn more.

And as you know, last year we brought back city council representatives to participate in the CDF panel review process. No one knows your districts better than you, and we value you and your staff's insight and contributions to the process.

Earlier this month, DCLA's Programs Unit collaborated with the Council to host a webinar on the ins and outs of Council participation on CDF panels. We appreciate your ongoing partnership and collaboration on this important program. And that came about as a result of our strong testimony here at City Hall, and we heard from you, our Council colleagues.

Just last week, New York Foundation for the Arts announced the recipients of the latest round of the Queens Art Fund, and the Brooklyn Arts Council announced grantees for the latest round of DCLA-funded regrants to artists and small arts groups. Together, these grant programs distributed more than \$1 million to hundreds of artists and small arts groups across Brooklyn and Queens. These funding amounts include the 15% increase we added for the borough arts councils in our FY25 budget, an investment in the artists who live and work in our city.

Our Public Art Unit is also hard at work bringing remarkable works of art to civic spaces across the five boroughs. Together with EDC, we recently launched an open call for artists to serve as the design partner for the Chinatown Welcome Gateway, part of the Chinatown Connections Project. Manhattan's Chinatown is one of the city's most distinctive enclaves, where generations of immigrants have come to make their homes and, in the process, contribute to our city's vibrant mix of communities and cultures. With the creation of the new Chinatown Welcome Gateway, this iconic New York City

neighborhood will have the powerful symbol it deserves. Applications to the open call are due June 15th. Visit nyculture.submittable.com for details if you are watching from home.

We've also got an active open call for artists to serve as our city's next public Artist in Residence. PAIR is DCLA's pioneering Artist Residency program, which places artists-in-residence with the New York City municipal agencies to address pressing civic and social challenges through creative practice. Artists and artist collectives are encouraged to apply to work with one of the three agencies participating in the 2025-2026 PAIR program: The Mayor's Office of Housing Recovery Operations, The Mayor's Public Engagement Unit, and The New York City Department of Small Business Services.

PAIR taps into artists' unique superpower, bringing creatives and public servants together to find new ways of approaching long-standing issues. Applications are due June 30th, and the selected PAIRs will be announced later this year. The open calls are also available on and submittable at nyc.submittable.com.

While FY26 six capital adds will not be included in the budget until adoption, that's not stopping us from moving forward on major capital and equipment projects across the city. Earlier in May, we celebrated the grand reopening of the New York Botanical Garden's Everett Children's Adventure Garden. The \$8.5 million renovation project, which included \$4 million in city support, is the first update to the beloved 12-acre space since it was created in 1998. Council Members Rivera and Hudson, you're all going to love this. The project ensures that the Children's Garden can continue to accommodate large audiences – over 175,000 children and adults – who visit each year, including 18,000 students from PreK through fifth grade.

I was also delighted to join Council Member Rivera, Powers, and Brewer in April to cut the ribbon on the multi-year \$220 million renovation of The Frick Collection, marking the most comprehensive upgrade to The Frick since its opening in 1935. The project has restored the museum's historic first-floor galleries and created a new suite of galleries on the second floor of the original mansion,

welcoming the public to experience these spaces for
the very first time.

Also in April, I joined the New York Historical
Society – again with Council Member Brewer. We've
been hanging out a lot together. For the topping out
ceremony of the Tang Wing for American Democracy, the
future home of the American LGBTQ+ Museum. The City
is honored to be a key partner in bringing this
vision to life, having committed nearly \$60 million
to support this important project, which I've been a
part of since I was on *that* side of the table.

And we're proud to be stewarding the next
generation of capital projects through our Capital
Feasibility Planning, CFP pilot program. CFP is an
opportunity for small and mid-sized organizations
that are considering construction, renovation
equipment, or other capital projects to take a deep
dive into this major decision before they make it. In
the two previous cycles of CFP, we've worked closely
with organizations to strategize, plan, and think
deeply about their needs and how a capital project
could fit into their long-term goals. Some groups are
able to hit the ground running on their expansion,
renovation, or other big projects after coming out of

CFP. Others decide that such a major undertaking doesn't actually align with their strategic goals, or the timing isn't right. Regardless, CFP can help set up small and mid-sized cultural organizations for long-term sustainable success. The application for the next round of CFP is currently open. All eligible groups should have received an email from our capital unit. We'll be sending a reminder this week so groups who are interested can keep an eye out for that.

As always, our team at Materials for the Arts is doing the most to foster a cleaner, greener, more creative NYC. At the beginning of the month, MFTA welcomed five new emerging designers for MFTA's Young Designers Program. Each designer started the program by creating an original look using materials sourced from MFTA that are now on display in the warehouse. Throughout the residency, the young designers will return regularly to gather materials, participate in educational excursions, focus on sustainability and fashion, and receive mentorship from MFTA's Designer-in-Residence and the BK Style Foundation team. Their final collections will debut at a runway show this September, presented in partnership with BK Style

Foundation. We hope you all will be participating in it this year.

This year, MFTA has continued its MFTA After Hours: Late Night Teacher Shopping program. Launched in 2023, the Late Night Shopping program extends MFTA's hours until 7:00 p.m. on a monthly basis to accommodate the schedules of educators during the school year. Thursday, June 5th will be the last day of Late Night Teacher Shopping for the school year. So, Educators, make sure to book your appointments at nyc.gov/mfta. We've had over 200 appointments from schools during MFTA After Hours this year, so the response to this initiative has been spectacular.

MFTA is such a special place, providing free materials that make affordable, accessible arts programming happen in schools, not-for-profits, and other spaces across the city. I want to give a big shout-out to the team that makes it all happen.

Before closing, I want to recognize that our city's cultural sector is facing challenges on so many fronts – from uncertainty with federal and private funding, to changing audience habits, to rising costs, and so much more. We're proud of our historic investments, which will help our sector

1
2 persist, thrive, and continue to bring amazing arts
3 programming to New Yorkers. We couldn't do this
4 without the partnership of so many, especially the
5 City Council. I thank you for the opportunity to
6 testify today, and I'm happy to answer any questions
7 that you have at this time on the best budget ever.

8 CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: I didn't hear my name
9 mentioned in the testimony. That's okay.

10 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: You've got to invite me
11 out.

12 (LAUGHTER)

13 CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Okay, let's jump right in.
14 Sorry, we have also been joined by Council Member
15 Sanchez.

16 Okay, so let's talk -- All these hearings have
17 been somewhat overshadowed by cuts from the Trump
18 administration. So does DCLA know how any of the
19 City's cultural organizations have been impacted by
20 funding policies of the Trump administration? Are you
21 hearing concerns from folks? Are they reaching out to
22 you, asking for contingency plans? What are you what
23 are you hearing on the ground?

24 COMMISSIONER CUMBO: According to an analysis by
25 the City's Independent Budget Office, 268 nonprofits

1 in New York City received grants from the NEA,
2 totaling more than \$7.5 million in the current fiscal
3 year. Another 27 groups \$6.7 million from IMLS.
4 Thirty-five groups got \$8.9 million from the NEH.
5 That's more than \$23 million for hundreds of groups
6 across the city. Coming at such a precarious time,
7 while we do not have an analysis of how many of these
8 might be affected by the NEA's latest actions, we
9 recognize that our cultural community is facing
10 unprecedented challenges on a number of fronts. While
11 the City can't address the sector's needs alone, we
12 are proud of the \$45 million in baseline funding
13 we've provided in the Executive Budget, a major long-
14 term investment in the sector. We've also put out a
15 collection of resources for groups that receive
16 notices of NEA Grant terminations, so they have the
17 info they need to submit appeals, find legal support
18 if needed, and advocate for the value of culture here
19 in New York City and across the country.
20

21 CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Are you aware of any
22 cultural organizations that are in danger of closing
23 because of the elimination or reduction of federal
24 funding?
25

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Many organizations come to us through a program called Create in Place. This initiative was established to help sustain and support organizations during this time. So what I would say to that question is, we are consistently working, if you can also say triaging, with dozens of organizations, to make sure that we help them and connect them to resources on the state level with other foundations, other support partners that can help them navigate these very challenging times. But anyone can see when they're reading the papers that many organizations are facing layoffs, furloughs, terminations of positions, and it is inevitably a difficult and challenging time. Tourism levels that were rebounding are also starting to take a hit, as many of our partners and other cities and countries are not coming to the US at the same frequency. So there is a lot to manage at this time, but I believe that the City's strong commitment through this Executive Budget signals to the community that we are here for them. We recognize that art and culture are the lifeline of the city of New York, and we're going to continue to support them.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Thank you.

How is DCLA addressing labor issues within the cultural sector, specifically, issues of fair pay and job security for artists and cultural workers?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: We've had conversations with DC 37. We've had conversations to navigate some really challenging circumstances and situations that have arisen, particularly within our Cultural Institutions Group. We've met with Deputy Mayor Adolfo Carrión. We've also brought up these challenges that the cultural community is facing as a result of labor negotiations and contracts. So it's something that we are actively working on in terms of making sure that we are providing long-term solutions to really make sure that we don't find ourselves in the same positions that we found ourselves in this year, particularly when labor negotiation contracts are negotiated. We want to make sure that we are working more in tandem to make sure that there is a support mechanism when those increases happen.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: I'll talk about headcount. So DCLA's FY26 budget provides for 58 full-time positions across all divisions. But that's actually two fewer positions from the headcount in FY25. Could you tell us what positions were eliminated and why?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: So, last year, DCLA
committed to hiring more staff, but the agency is
still below its budgeted headcount.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: What is your budgeted
headcount right now?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Our budgeted headcount at
this time is...

GENERAL COUNCIL POLIVY: Council Member Brannan,
for FY25, our budgeted headcount is still 60 full
time positions and 10 full-time vacancies. For FY26
and the out years, the headcount is 58, and that's
because of two federal FEMA positions. (INAUDIBLE)...
(CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Okay. So the two that were
eliminated were federally funded?

GENERAL COUNCIL POLIVY: Exactly.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Now, did you eliminate
those sort of preemptively, or are they no longer
funded, or what's the story there?

GENERAL COUNCIL POLIVY: No, one of them is an
active opening that's posted on the...

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Oh, okay.

GENERAL COUNCIL POLIVY: City Jobs website...

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Okay.

GENERAL COUNCIL POLIVY: that we're actively
trying to... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: And what positions are
those that are funded by FEMA?

GENERAL COUNCIL POLIVY: We have -- we had one
FEMA expert who sat within the agency to help arts
and culture organizations that were making FEMA
claims as a result of Sandy and (INAUDIBLE)...

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Oh, okay, got it.

GENERAL COUNCIL POLIVY: and storms to help them
get FEMA claims.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: That's great. Okay.

GENERAL COUNCIL POLIVY: Yeah.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: So, what are your current
vacancies there right now?

GENERAL COUNCIL POLIVY: Our current vacancies
that we're hiring for are our chief of staff position
and the FEMA position.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: So it's just two?

GENERAL COUNCIL POLIVY: Correct.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Just those two spots,
okay. Are you having any challenges filling those?
How long have you been looking?

GENERAL COUNCIL POLIVY: No, we're not having challenges. We have strong applicants for both positions. We've been actively interviewing for both positions and hope to make an announcement about hiring for both as quickly as possible.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Okay.

All right, I just want to ask about the capital commitment plan. DCLA's five-year Capital Commitment Plan for FY25-29 is \$1.2 billion. It's almost a 6.5% decrease when compared to the preliminary plan. Could you tell us what projects have been delayed and pushed out to the out years? And I assume there's not one general reason for the project delays. Could you talk maybe about some of the common reasons why these projects get pushed out?

(PAUSE)

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: If you can start that, I'm not aware of delays that you're referring to in the way that you're referring to delays. Our projects are on track. Some projects take longer than others to either put a shovel in the ground or to complete. Lance can probably give you a bit more detail on those projects that you may potentially been referring to.

GENERAL COUNCIL POLIVY: I would say there are no particular delays that we want to highlight today in general. The City capital process is one that takes a lot of time...

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Sure.

GENERAL COUNCIL POLIVY: and that has a lot of safeguards. And in large part, that's because it's funded by municipal bonds, and we take that responsibility very seriously, as do our two construction agency partners, the Department of Design and Construction and the Economic Development Corporation.

So we don't manage any active capital construction. We're a funding agency that then partners with one of those two agencies to execute the projects. We're proud of the work we do with those agencies. We know that these projects can take time, but we also know that these City investments can make an enormous difference for a cultural organization that would otherwise be unable to fundraise.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: I guess we're just trying to understand why there's a \$1.2 billion decrease from January's Preliminary Plan.

GENERAL COUNCIL POLIVY: We'll take a look and
get back to you, Council Member.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Okay.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Mm-hmm.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Okay, Chair Rivera?
Thanks.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you. Thank you both
for being here.

As you know, the Council called on the
Administration in its budget response to include \$45
million baseline starting in Fiscal Year 2026. But
the budget does not include the additional \$30
million that we also asked for. Has DCLA had
discussions with OMB regarding the additional \$30
million for the CIGs and CDFs?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: We have not had additional
conversations following the announcement of the
additional \$45 million that came in for art and
culture. Usually, as part of the negotiation process,
we partner with the City Council, and there's an
anticipation that the Administration will provide a
level of support, and that the Council would match
that level of support in some way, either through
council funding, initiatives, or member items. So we

are actively looking for that partnership to continue and remain because it's really, really critical for organizations to feel that baseline increase through the partnership with the City Council.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: It's -- so you're saying that \$30 million will not be included in the final budget? Are you still considering it? Why wasn't it included in the Executive Plan?

GENERAL COUNCIL POLIVY: We are so proud of the fact that the FY26 Executive Budget included a \$45 million baseline increase for New York City Arts and Culture. And that was something that only happened because of the groundswell of support from the more than 1,000 organizations that receive CDF funding every year, our 34 CIGs that spoke with one voice so clearly that the number one priority this year was a meaningful and significant baseline increase. And we are so proud that that was included in the Executive Budget.

The budget dance is not done. It continues through the end of June, and we look forward to ongoing engagement with our arts and culture partners and conversations with Council and the Administration

to arrive at the final budget, which we know will be
the best budget ever.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: And we certainly didn't
want the City Council to feel left out of such a
historic investment in art and culture. So we have
left a place for you in order to contribute to the
best budget ever, and wanted you to...

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Wow, thank you.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: certainly feel included.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Wow, thank you so much.

You know, when you dance, you should stretch
just in case your partner gives you the runaround.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: But you've got to have a
partner.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Right. So, how is DCLA --
actually, how will the additional \$45 million be
split between the CDF groups and the CIGs?

How will the CIG portion be split between the
34 CIGs?

GENERAL COUNCIL POLIVY: The CIG portion is
\$21.5 million, and that baseline increase is gonna go
to all 34 of the CIGs. It's going to be split the way
that their funding is typically split. What it really
does is it gives those 34 institutions the ability to

plan long term for that increase instead of having to rely on one-time amounts at adoption each and every year, and that's why it was so important.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Okay. I know you had somewhat of a breakdown in your testimony, which I appreciated the detail that you gave, Commissioner.

In in terms of capital equity, how is DCLA prioritizing capital project spending to address the projects that have been identified as urgent matters and may require more capital funding?

GENERAL COUNCIL POLIVY: Can you repeat the question, Council Member?

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Yes, of course, of course. How is DCLA prioritizing capital project spending to address the projects that have been identified as urgent matters and may require more capital funding?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: So in our capital process, particularly during this really challenging economic time, we look at projects that are already in the pipeline. Projects that have gone through our process and they are near completion, but have been undergoing a process where each year they call what's known as banking, where they have the ability to roll

over funding year after fiscal year in order to
achieve their capital funding goals.

So we start there, and then we go into the list
in terms of recognizing that there are organizations
that are already in process, and we want to make sure
that we continue to support them. We also want to
make sure that we help organizations complete the
process. So we want to make sure that we put funding
there.

And then there are also capital requests that
are very instrumental to the daily operations of the
organizations, such as boilers, roof repair,
elevators, lighting systems, situations, or
circumstances that are critical to the viability of
the organization. Projects that will make the
institution more accessible are certainly critical.

And then after that process, we do look at new
building, new construction, new ideas that are being
put forth to see how we can prioritize those
organizations. And so we do our comprehensive review
of organizations that are banking, organizations that
are near completion, organizations that have critical
needs, and then we culminate with organizations that
have new ideas and new projects that they want to

bring to the fold. And we have to do an assessment as we do with every project to make sure that new organizations or organizations that are looking to do a very large capital project have the ability to complete said project, particularly during this time.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Understood. And I know that you all have a great relationship with many of these organizations, and they let you know what's coming or what's been delayed.

You know, in terms of the CDF fund, that's something that I know you all take a lot of pride in. The deadline was May 8th. I think you mentioned there were 800 applicants.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Approximately.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Great. What is the goal for the number of organizations to receive grants, and how is DCLA ensuring transparency and fairness in the panel review process?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Well, I thank you so much for that question, because the CDF process is certainly the cornerstone of our agency. So, I want to begin really by saying that one of the things that we have done to make this program more accessible is the partnership with the City Council, for both

getting the word out about the fact that -- To getting the word out, the fact that the application is coming up, doing webinars within the agency to help organizations prepare for it, but you all sending it out in your newsletters, at your community board meetings, informing people of two things: One, that this application due date is approaching, which is now passed, but also the ability to promote for panelists. And getting into your districts is so important for ensuring that we have diversity in our panels, but also diversity in the organizations that are applying to this process. So having 51 members as champions and ambassadors, and also bringing those said council members and their staff into the reviewing panel process, has created a level of equity that has been really extraordinary for the Agency in terms of having that level of diversity. So we certainly thank all of you for your support in that. Lance, did you want to add to that as well?

GENERAL COUNCIL POLIVY: Council Member Rivera, do you have more that you were hoping to hear about the CDF process?

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: I know you're always looking to include more people on ,like, in terms of

the diversity on the panels. It's really the process of ensuring transparency and fairness. I know we're working on improving the process, the timeline, so I really appreciate the Commissioner's response.

I guess my follow-up question to that, in terms of our communities and historically underserved populations and areas, does DCLA allocate additional funding to organizations that are led by or serve BIPOC communities, low-income communities, LGBTQIA communities, and other historically marginalized communities? And if so, can you produce a breakdown of which groups received additional funding and the difference in award amount for these groups, or is this something that you're planning?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: We did not quantify the organizations in that way by the criteria that you just discussed. We created something called the CDF Equity Fund, and through this fund 264 organizations operating in areas of New York City with the lowest median incomes and highest poverty rates received a total of \$2 million in additional funding on top of their CDF awards. So we actually looked at this and said, how can we get funding into the lowest median incomes and highest poverty rates? And that was the

criteria that we looked at in terms of bringing support that has been not as deeply invested in those communities systemically for generations. So we wanted to change that.

Eligibility for the CDF includes whether additional funds would provide critical support for arts or cultural organizations serving vulnerable populations of the city with fewer community resources.

GENERAL COUNCIL POLIVY: I'd also note that we brought back the Language Access Fund this year and the Disability Forward Fund this year, both of which in FY25 helped support organizations that we're targeting, uh, the types of programs that I think you're really driving at.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: And I know you're always looking to grow. I mean, ideally, that's what we would want, expansion. I know we're expanding the number of cultural institution groups there are. The preliminary plan included \$3 million in baseline funding for new CIGs. You mentioned in your testimony that you really have to see if the designation is the right fit. Have the new CIGs been determined, and if

so, which institutions are they in, and in which
boroughs?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I'm excited about that
question.

I wish I could give you the announcement that
we're all waiting on with pins and needles to
announce who those organizations are, but at this
time...

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Are you close? You're
close.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: We're close.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Okay.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: We're really close. We're
so close, but it's going to be potentially five
organizations, one from each borough. We wanted to
make sure that we prioritized organizations that are
on City-owned property, which is a criteria to making
sure that we can support these organizations, but
also we wanted to bring it to all five boroughs and
communities that have typically been underserved and
under resourced, similar to the Equity Fund, but in a
different way.

So we wanted to make sure that the
organizations were on City-owned property, that it

1 was a good fit for the organization, understanding
2 the financial viability of the organization. So it's
3 a really intensive process in terms of determining
4 whether CIG status is a right fit for the City and
5 the organization. There are many factors that could
6 come into play in terms of ownership of the property.
7 Do organizations want to work with the City in that
8 way? Many organizations have really expansive
9 portfolios where they own properties all across the
10 city. Some are leased, some are owned, some are
11 rented. So there are a lot of complexities that go
12 into determining if an organization is a right fit
13 for the Cultural Institution Group.

14 And so we are continuing to undergo that
15 vetting process. We're really excited about it. There
16 hasn't been an increase of the Cultural Institution
17 Group of this magnitude in over 30 years. So we're
18 really excited to, again, to continue to make
19 HERstory along with the expansion of the baseline
20 budget, the expansion of the Cultural Institution
21 Groups, as well as an increase to our local arts
22 councils by 15%.

23 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you for that, and I
24 appreciate you always recognizing when people are
25

kind of first to do something. And you've mentioned my own position, so I always appreciate you.

And there's just one last question, because I know my colleagues have them. There's no doubt New York's the cultural capital of the world. You are an incredible cheerleader and champion of that. Yet, according to the cultural community, many artists and cultural workers are leaving New York due to a lack of work or affordable housing. I know Chair Brannan mentioned labor shortages and the challenges in the creative economy. With artists leaving, we are risking not only a loss of culture but also a loss of economic opportunity. And I know you and I have talked about housing specifically and how desperately we need that here.

How can DCLA support artists and cultural workers to ensure that they do not have to leave New York City? And is housing for those artists in practice, because I know there are some legal questions there, something your agency can support?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I'll start with this. I know you have a lot to add on this as well, Lance.

What I'm really excited about is that, for the first time, we've delivered a 15% increase to all

1
2 five local arts councils in New York City. And that
3 is substantial. It's going to allow for many of the
4 artists of New York City to receive grants, but also
5 the support that comes with a grant that's being
6 received by an artist who's a part of our local arts
7 councils.

8 But something that I'm also really excited
9 about is the Mayor's announcement about After-School
10 for All. This is a \$330 million investment in After-
11 School for All, and arts and culture are going to be
12 a huge part of that initiative. We're meeting with
13 Commissioner Howard in the days to come, and we are
14 gonna discuss how we are going to prioritize our
15 teaching artists and our arts organizations to be a
16 part of this because this type of initiative would
17 give what many artists need, which is sustainable
18 income, where they're able to demonstrate that they
19 have a work history that is very important for when
20 you're applying to affordable housing lotteries and
21 otherwise.

22 So we want to make sure that we are providing
23 real employment that has a continuous ability to have
24 pay stubs, and all of those types of dynamics that
25

are on a regular basis, that are gonna help the arts community on so many levels.

There are also projects that we've been piloting, like the National Black Theatre, which is an arts and housing project that is going to show how artist housing can coexist with cultural spaces. We're looking to do that, as well as the Bedford Union Armory project, now the Major Owens Health and Wellness Center, is another project where you have cultural space, as well as deeply affordable housing for the individuals of New York City.

But I tell you it's something that I want to continue to crack the code on in terms of how we really create deeply affordable artist housing and workspace in New York City. But these are some of the measures through the increase of the Arts Councils, we want to see more of that, and we can do that in partnership with the City Council, as well as with private partnerships. But I also want to make sure that we ensure that the arts community is at the forefront of the After-School for All Initiative.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Okay, now we have questions from Council Member Brewer, followed by Council Member Salaam.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Thank you very much.

Just in terms of that \$30 million that we still want,
I mean, if you have \$23 million cut to the groups,
and they've all been calling me and calling you.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Mm-hmm.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: You know, 65, 10 there,
65 -- it's a lot for these small groups. Plus,
tourism is way down from being responsible for both.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: That's right.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: So, I mean, how can you
not say that we don't need -- I know there's a budget
dance. I've seen it before. But I do think you should
be advocating even though \$45 million based is
terrific. They're really hurting. They're really
hurting.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Mm-hmm.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Plus, I know we're all
working with MOCS to improve the City flow of
dollars, but that's slow, because of all the MOCS
blah, blah, blah issues.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Right.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I think your groups are
in trouble. Real trouble. And so I'm just wondering
what else, besides the \$45 million, and I understand

the after-school programs, but that \$30 million is really needed now. Can you respond to that?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I would say, again, the continuous partnership with the City Council has always been the way that we have achieved sustainability for the arts and cultural community. Without that partnership, we're not able to provide the level of support that is so critical and is so needed. So as we've always done, we're certainly going to need the Council's support to match this historic victory for the arts and cultural community. So we're going to be, again, looking at art and culture support from the City Council.

But also, we're really excited about the arts and education funding that the Mayor placed in the budget as well. And that is going to be critical in terms of also providing artist support, teaching artist support within the budget.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I understand, I understand. Just so you know, we are really concerned about the groups. And \$30 million, I'll just say it again, is desperately needed.

Number two, we wrote you a letter about CASA. We love SU-CASA. We appreciate your support. But we

need to have earlier SU-CASA decision-making. Because what happens is it's so late — I mean, the City Council, too, needs to improve its decision-making about SU-CASA. But I wanted to know that you would be part of an earlier process. It's hard on Lower Manhattan CC, and it's hard on the groups, because they don't get their funding until it's too late, and then they don't have much time to do their process.

So, can you comment on how we can improve the SU-CASA process?

GENERAL COUNCIL POLIVY: Thanks so much, Council Member Brewer. I wanted to let you know that the Department of Cultural Affairs and Council Finance have already been in touch about how to improve all of the Council initiatives and to make sure that our partnership is as successful as possible. And it does really, in fact, take a partnership, both with our agency stepping up to the plate and the Council making the designations as early in the cycle as possible. I think with this open line of communication between Cultural Affairs and Council Finance, that we're gonna be able to get things in a really good place going forward.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: All right. So SU-CASA can be announced, like, (TIMER) in the summer and not until the fall? Is that what you're trying to tell me — in English?

GENERAL COUNCIL POLIVY: I'm not committing to a particular schedule, but I'm saying that ongoing communication, dialogue, and partnership...

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: All right, but we need to make it sooner. I'm not good at hyperbole, so...

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Let me just say this, Council Member Brewer, on that. My dream of all dreams, and it was the dream when I was in the City Council, is the close of the budget, latest June 30th...

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Correct.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: If all the City Council members would make their...

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I'm ready!

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Would make their SU-CASA, CASA, Art As A Catalyst for Change, Theaters of Color, Art Immigration — if you did it all at one time, you can't imagine how powerfully we would be able to get that money processed and out the door. But when on the Council side, the allocations or the

designations come in October, or they come in
December and make...

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I will -- I will work to
make sure... (CROSS-TALK)

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: (INAUDIBLE)

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Mine is ready. But, I'll
try to (INAUDIBLE)...

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I know yours is ready.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Mine is ready, but I'll
try to make sure that my colleagues...

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: If anybody could do it,
it's you.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I will try.

Next is CIGs. Are there new CIGs? Are they
announced? What's going on?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: The new CIGs have not been
announced, because we want to continue with the
vetting process to make sure that this is the right
fit and the right designation for each of the
organizations. We would be irresponsible to announce
who they are while they're going through the vetting,
and let's say, for whatever reason, the vetting
process determines that they are not eligible.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: It would be a big disappointment to their community, their supporters, and their organizations.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: How many CIGs -- I understand, this is a good thing that you're doing, but there are still CIGs, or I should say potential CIGs...

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Mm-hmm.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: on City property who are not on the list, because there's not enough money. Do you know how many? I mean, I love my South Street Seaport, as an example, Museum. Not on the list, probably -- it is on City land, however. So, do you know how many are on City land that, for whatever funding reasons, can't be considered?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: It's less than a dozen.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Less than a dozen? Okay. So we still need money for them?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: That's right.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay. I appreciate there's more money for the... I call LMCC in Manhattan, but for the others -- But I don't think it's enough. They really need more money to manage all of these agencies that they're trying to manage.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: That's right.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: What have they asked for? I know you just said 3%, but what have they asked for? What do you think they really need to do the managing? Because they do feel that they can't manage with what they are being allocated.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: That increase -- that increase was actually 15% not 3%.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: So I want to just...

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: All right, that's (INAUDIBLE)...

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: pat myself on the back about that. And I just want to say clearly that we are very focused on our local arts councils. We are meeting with them. We just had a convening at Governor's Island, with all five of the local arts councils, to discuss how we can strengthen and pool our resources to better serve the field. There were foundations that were there. There were public and private partnerships and individuals who recognize the power of the Arts Council's unifying, and we are going to continue to support them. And I'm confident that this partnership of the local arts councils is

going to render very strong and powerful results for
the City of New York culturally.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: All right, I appreciate
that.

We all love, New Heritage Theater. You know how
much I love them.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I know you do.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Yes, I do.

So they need \$5 million to purchase a building.
Can they get \$5 million from DCLA to purchase a
building? That's a pretty good price in Harlem.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: It is an excellent price.
However, we are working with both organizations. The
New York City Department of Cultural Affairs does not
administer capital dollars for the purposes of
acquisition. We've also looked at the partnerships
with the New York State Council on the Arts, as well
as DASNY (Dormitory Authority of the State of New
York), and it looks as if acquisition can't be
utilized for -- acquisition capital dollars cannot be
used for acquisition on the state level either. So
we're trying to figure out other resources to help
them, potentially private resources, where once they
receive those private dollars, we're then able to

match that with the build out and the fit out, the
FF&E for their particular spaces. So our job is
typically not in the business of acquisition of
spaces.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay. We need them. We
need \$5 million... (CROSS-TALK)

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: We certainly need
(INAUDIBLE)

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I don't care how we get
it.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: That's right.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Finally, on the schools,
the Blueprint. You know, I always talk about the fact
that even though we hope that there is Cultural in
the schools, and I appreciate the after school
efforts. Is there any sort of tallying by Cultural
Affairs as to what does go on in the schools? Because
I do feel that there's not enough Cultural in the
schools. I think you agree. But how we keep tabs on
what they are or not doing?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I would say that the best
way to get that answer would be for the Blueprint
that the art study that comes out every year with
Paul Thompson in the Department of Education Arts and

Ed Office. They do an annual event each year where they publish a report discussing the very question that you're asking, in terms of how do we keep a tally of where artists are in the schools, where organizations are in the schools, who has after school, who doesn't have after school, where there are cultural deserts. And that is a really powerful tool for us to understand where we need to focus our dollars.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: All right, but do you look at it to say that they should be doing more? Because they should be doing more.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: We can always do more with more.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Thank you, Council Member Brewer. I feel like I have arrived — I've been grilled by Council Member Brewer, all right!

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Okay, we have questions from Council Member Salaam, followed by Council Member Louis.

COUNCIL MEMBER SALAAM: Good afternoon, and thank you for your testimony.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Thank you so much. It was very good seeing you at the Westchester (INAUDIBLE) Luncheon Awards Ceremony.

COUNCIL MEMBER SALAAM: You as well, always great to see you.

COUNCIL MEMBER SALAAM: I am actually just writing down the last thing that you just said, "We can always do more with more."

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: That's right.

COUNCIL MEMBER SALAAM: That should be put on a shirt.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Mm-hmm.

COUNCIL MEMBER SALAAM: I want to talk about, real quick, the support for the Studio Museum of Harlem. The Studio Museum of Harlem sees projected -- sees a projected budget decrease of nearly \$70,000 from FY25 to FY26. And I wanted to know, what explains this reduction? And what steps are being taken to ensure the stability of one of Harlem's flagship cultural institutions?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I will have to look further into your question, because the Studio Museum in Harlem is part of the Cultural Institutions Group, and they receive a baseline award that is continuous

year after year without reduction. So perhaps General Counsel Polivy can expand on that.

GENERAL COUNCIL POLIVY: I think the issue is that we're comparing the FY25 actuals to the FY26 Executive Budget, which doesn't yet include member items, one time adds at adoption, they should not be receiving a \$60,000 reduction in expense funding.

COUNCIL MEMBER SALAAM: Gotcha. We'll definitely follow-up.

And, lastly, vacancy rates and staffing capacity – The department has a vacancy rate of 17.6% as of March 2025. Does this staffing shortage impact the Agency's ability to work closely with Harlem-based institutions and applicants, particularly when navigating application and compliance processes for CDF funding?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: We have two vacancies, so we are actively interviewing for those two vacancies within our office. They say you should take a long time to hire. So I'm in the very long time to hire, because we want to check references, we want to make sure that this is a good fit. So I want to make sure that we do our due diligence and make the right hires. We are thrilled with our recent hire for the

CDF process. Audrey St. Clair (phonetic) has recently come on to make sure that we have a robust CDF process, and we're really happy with that experience of working with her.

But I would say in terms of our ability to work with Harlem organizations, we are actively in communication and helping to deliver really great projects in Harlem, such as the National Black Theatre, which has been a grant recipient both on the CDF as well as the capital side. We have just continued to provide support for the Studio Museum in Harlem and also to help them to assist with the opening of their building.

We are also working with the Apollo and making sure that we complete the renovation project that's really exciting that's happening. (TIMER)

My goal is to complete, for the first time, the Africa Center project. That has been delayed on 5th Avenue for quite some time. So we've invested an extraordinary amount of capital dollars to complete that project.

I just met with, as you know, Mama Foundation [for the Arts]. I did a walking tour with Vy Higginsen just last week touring the five-story

building and seeing all of the great work that
they're doing.

So we are active on the ground in Harlem making
sure that the organizations that call Harlem Home are
well supported, well funded, and I'm excited when all
of these organizations within the next year are going
to begin to open their doors.

COUNCIL MEMBER SALAAM: Thank you for that.

Just one last question on anti-gun violence
initiatives and cultural, immigrant initiatives. How
many Harlem organizations are receiving funding
through these initiatives? And how is DCLA tracking
its impact in neighborhoods disproportionately
affected by gun violence and immigration challenges?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: That's an excellent
question. To get those exact numbers, I would have to
get back to you to understand how those initiatives
are impacting your district. But I will say, as I
have to pat myself on the back one more time, when I
was in the City Council, I created the Art as a
Catalyst for Change Initiative. And that initiative
was designed to place an artist residency program in
areas most impacted by gun violence. And the goal of
that initiative was to partner with the Mayor's

Office to End Gun Violence, which is also legislation that I passed when I was in the Council, to make sure that those two dynamics work in tandem, so that we have an artistic and cultural component to solving the issues of gun violence in our communities.

But I will say, while those initiatives are really powerful and important in navigating issues of gun violence in our communities, we can't underestimate the power of Summer Youth Employment opportunities, which this Council, in partnership with the Mayor, has expanded. When I was sitting on that side of the table, there were only 25,000 young people receiving a Summer Youth Employment opportunity. That number, with your partnership, is now up to 100,000. So that's really powerful, and we can't underestimate that.

And just want to add that this after-school program, After-School for All, is going to really impact the safety of our communities on so many levels, when we're able to really provide full academic, cultural, and athletic opportunities for every young child in our school system. Our young people shouldn't have to choose which school they're going to go to based on who has aftercare and who

doesn't have aftercare. Those are really hard
decisions for a parent to make.

So I want to make sure that, you know, we don't
underestimate those initiatives, but they are
critical in solving these really, really important
issues in our community.

COUNCIL MEMBER SALAAM: Thank you, I appreciate
it.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Thank you.

COUNCIL MEMBER SALAAM: Thank you, Chairs.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Council Member Louis?

COUNCIL MEMBER LOUIS: Thank you, Chair, and
good to see you, Commissioner, and Lance.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Good to see you. And I want
to thank you again for the opportunity to serve in
your Women's HERstory Month event.

COUNCIL MEMBER LOUIS: Oh, yes.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Always a big success at the
Brooklyn Children's Museum.

COUNCIL MEMBER LOUIS: We enjoyed you and your
outfit.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Thank you. (LAUGHS)

COUNCIL MEMBER LOUIS: So, thank you for coming
by.

Two quick questions – One of them, Chair Rivera shared, so I'll rearrange it. But, will DCLA allocate a portion of FY26 funds specifically towards technical assistance, multilingual outreach, and application support for emerging and grassroots cultural groups, and in the FY26 budget?

And the second one is – and Chair Rivera mentioned that the City Council is supporting DCLA with sharing information with our constituents and cultural groups – but given ongoing feedback about inadequate awareness of deadlines and eligibility requirements, have you all thought about with the FY26 funds that you'll receive, will DCLA establish a year round community based engagement plan to democratize access to funding?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Spoken like the Council Member who created the Office of Not for Profit Services (*Mayor's Office of Nonprofit Services).

That is an excellent question. We do extensive webinars to make sure that our applicants are ready, on board, and prepared to apply. We also have an entire process – once the application is launched, during the application process, and afterwards, making sure that organizations understand exactly how

to apply to CDF, what to do while they're applying, and whether they did or did not get the grant. We actually do really intensive interviews with applicants so that they can understand where they might not have met the benchmark in order to apply for the following year. So that's one.

Our technical service is not built out the way that you're saying it or asking. It's more just a part of the entire process. We make sure that that happens. We do extensive outreach. Our new programs Assistant Commissioner, Audrey St. Clair, has been out in the field, which is a really big and new dynamic, where she's going in person to meet with arts organizations and to meet with groups that work collaboratively together and form alliances. So we're really very proud of that.

Lance, did you want to add something to that?

GENERAL COUNCIL POLIVY: The last thing I'd say is that this year we worked very closely with the Council to put together a toolkit of resources for groups that may want to apply to CDF. So our office put that together, we shared it with the Council, and the Council then shared it with all members, so that members could get those materials into the hands of

the groups in your districts, and that you could include it in your newsletters, and all of the other ways that you communicate directly with your constituents. (TIMER)

So we think that this is really important, and I want to just highlight what the Commissioner said, that our assistant commissioner is getting her team out into communities this year to speak directly with organizations to do exactly what you're proposing.

So we are very much on the same page and want to collaborate on doing that effectively. And this toolkit that we've put together and shared with the Council is another good way to do that, because we can't get into all 51 council districts, but we know that you guys have all the right contacts, and the right people to be communicating with, so that you can take that toolkit of information and share it with all of them.

COUNCIL MEMBER LOUIS: The toolkit was definitely helpful, so I look forward to doing that again.

So, Ms. St. Clair would be the point person...

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Yes.

COUNCIL MEMBER LOUIS: to work with? Okay, thank
you.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: And just want to add, we
have met with the Office of Non-Profit Services and
are looking forward to doing some collaborations
there as well. So, thank you so much for authoring
that.

COUNCIL MEMBER LOUIS: Yes.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: That office is really
critical to City services and making sure that we are
getting funding out the door in a timely fashion.

COUNCIL MEMBER LOUIS: Thank you. Thank you,
Chairs.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: One more question about the
recent Arts and Education Oversight. The Agency
stated that more than 420 CDF grantees proposed arts
education projects throughout the five boroughs. Do
you foresee any shortfalls in the CDF's continuous
participation in arts education?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Our agency operates on a
panel review process, and so we're not able to, in
many ways, make designations based on key priorities.
It would have to be that organizations come to us,
and they propose a project or a specific interest

that they have in fulfilling said project, and we fund based on that. But we don't have a criteria to say that we're going to fund x amount of arts and education grants or x amount of community based grants or x amount in that way.

It's more so something that comes about as organizations come forward and say this is something that they're interested in that they want to support, and the panel would read that application and make a designation in that way.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Okay, thank you, thank you for that answer. Thank you to both of you.

I am just going to ask one more question, okay?

Despite the end of COVID, the City's cultural institutions are still feeling the impacts of the pandemic, you know, with attendance. It just hasn't rebounded to the pre-pandemic levels.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: That's right.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: And many organizations are seeing a slowing in their fundraising efforts, you know, phrases that are being used as "philanthropic retreat".

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Mm-hmm.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: It's quite scary. Even some larger cultural organizations are feeling this pressure. Many cultural institutions are facing a dire financial situation, with some organizations being forced to lay off staff and cut down on programming or operating hours.

With the Council's expected assistance, as you laid out, will an additional \$45 million be enough to sustain the cultural community and to help them recover from the impacts of COVID or is more needed?

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: \$45 million is only enough with the support and partnership of the City Council. So if we have the level of support that the Council has previously provided – and then some – then we can work collaboratively and collectively to make sure that we provide the level of support to sustain our organizations during this really challenging time.

Your partnership, again, will be critical to ensuring that we can provide the cultural and financial health for our sector.

GENERAL COUNCIL POLIVY: And that partnership goes beyond just funding. We spoke about this topic at one of our prior hearings. And I think that the hearing really brought out just how dire this

financial time is for organizations in the arts and culture.

So since that hearing, what the Commissioner has done is, you participated in a convening that the Commissioner put together of all of the leaders in government arts and culture across the state and the city, to make sure that everyone is on the same page, knows just how difficult this time is, and is trying to start rowing in the same direction to work collaboratively to help solve this problem.

Another thing that the Commissioner has done, as we promised at that hearing, is that she has started speaking to foundation leaders to try to better understand what is going on with funders and what you called the philanthropic retreat from arts and culture. And we're starting to get some answers about why that might be happening and where those dollars may be going instead. But we are committed to helping the arts and culture sector to understand this problem, to get our arms around it, to get that information out to the groups, and to be working as closely as possible with all of our government partners, because only working together as a team can we solve this problem.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: I'm glad you brought up the call. You know, I realized that we need the state as well. So at that point, they had not passed the budget. We're really looking to figure out how to address the gaps and shortfalls. I appreciate your partnership and the questions you've raised. I know there's going to be testimony from our partners and allies. And looking forward to the next few weeks

Chair Brannan? Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Thank you, Commissioner. We care very much about arts and culture in this council, and we will do everything we can to deliver the "best budget ever" on our side.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: I feel very confident with that closing statement. I think I can rest well tonight knowing that I've heard it from you and our Chair. I am so happy that you were able to participate in the meeting with our city and state cultural leaders, at the state level, as well as with the Assembly and Senate, alongside NYSCA and our team. And those sorts of collaborations are what's going to keep us whole during this really trying time.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Thank you very much.

COMMISSIONER CUMBO: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Okay, we are going to take a half-hour break. Public testimony is not supposed to start until two o'clock. We really can't start it early. We will reconvene in about half an hour.

(PAUSE)

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Okay. [GAVEL] We are now going to open up this hearing for public testimony.

I just need to remind members of the public that this is a formal government proceeding and that decorum shall be observed at all times. As such, members of the public shall remain silent, unless, of course, you are testifying.

The witness table is reserved for people who wish to testify. No video recording or photography is allowed from the witness table.

Members of the public may not present audio or video recordings as testimony, but you can submit transcripts of such recordings to the Sergeant at Arms for inclusion in the final, official hearing record.

If you wish to speak at today's hearing, make sure you fill out one of these little appearance slips; they're at the back table with the Sergeant at

Arms, and then just wait for us to call you. Once you're recognized, you will have two minutes to speak on today's hearing topic, either the Libraries' budget or the DCLA's budget.

If you have a written statement or additional testimony you wish to submit for the record, just provide a copy of that testimony to the Sergeant at Arms, and they will bring it up to us.

I will now call the first panel. We have Katherine Carey, John Hyslop, and George Olken.

(PAUSE)

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Okay, no worries, do you want to start, John?

JOHN HYSLOP: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Thank you.

JOHN HYSLOP: All right, thank you.

Good Afternoon, Chairs Brennan and Rivera, and Committee Members.

Thank you for giving us this opportunity to testify on behalf of the nearly 4,000 public library workers we represent. We cannot thank the City Council enough for their unwavering support for libraries. Under the leadership of Speaker Adrienne

Adams, our union members know that New York City's public libraries will receive Council funding.

We must also thank Mayor Adams for adding money to the Libraries' budgets. Without that financial commitment, our financial situation would have been even more dire. And yet, this is our problem: Our financial situation remains dire. The Mayor's proposed Executive Budget for FY 2026 remains the same as FY 2025 and is only for one year.

In our testimony in March, we explained the invaluable services we provide and how libraries' inconsistent funding has impacted those services. Right now, we do not have enough funding to adequately staff for six-day service. Right now, children's programs do not happen because we do not have enough staff. Right now, branches do not have enough custodians to adequately clean them. This understaffing is a result of every Mayor's inconsistent and inadequate funding of libraries.

Compounding this understaffing is New York City's high cost of living that crushes our members, forcing library workers to work multiple jobs and overtime and never feel financial security. Many

leave the library and the profession because they cannot afford to work on such low salaries.

This is devastating to many of us because our library work is so rewarding. Our members are rewarded with engagements we have with our patrons and colleagues. A Children's Librarian sees the joy on the faces of children at Toddler Time. An Adult Reference Librarian engages with an avid reader on their favorite authors. Our branch's neighbors help the custodian clean up the sidewalk. A Clerical Supervisor is thrilled to see their former page and mentee after they graduate from college. Those rewards only happen at our library branches. When a mayor inconsistently underfunds our libraries, our members suffer and our patrons — your constituents — lose.

The Mayor's proposed Executive Budget keeps our budget flat while costs are going up, and is not baselined. Our members will continue to suffer under New York City's unaffordability crisis and libraries' understaffing, and this does not need to happen. Our elected officials have the ability to consistently and adequately fund our libraries for us to plan our future and pay our members a living wage. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Thank you very much.

GEORGE OLKEN: Good afternoon, Chairs Rivera and Brannan. Thank you to the Committee Members.

I'm George Olken, the President of Local 1482, the Brooklyn Public Library Workers Union. And I'm going to speak to a particular situation in Brooklyn.

As John mentioned, public libraries are understaffed, and library workers are underpaid.

Based on economic contracts negotiated by DC 37 and the City, OLR issues pay orders that lay out minimum salaries for each City title. I'm a bookmobile driver. My City title is Office Associate Level 2. And so the current minimum incumbent rate for my title is \$49,014.00, and that's exactly what BPL pays me. After years of members raising concerns about irregularities, our Local found that nearly 200 union workers at BPL have been systematically underpaid, paid below the contractual minimums, *for decades*. We filed a grievance in 2023 and a second grievance in 2024 on behalf of workers in affected clerical and custodial titles.

The Library argued that the current method is how salaries have always been calculated. It's still

incorrect. And they've been working with us to fix it.

Unintentional as it may be, underpayment has dire consequences; it changes the course of lives. I spoke to one member who was denied a home loan because their income was just below the eligibility threshold. That member is underpaid by \$3,000.

As you can imagine, members are frustrated at the slow pace of negotiations. Altogether, we're talking about more than \$250,000 in total underpayment across these workers. We're confident that salaries will be corrected before the end of the fiscal year. However, incorrectly paid workers also deserve back pay. We urge the Library to prove they value workers as much as they say they do and to make good on their commitment to workers.

We're supporting the Library's ask for increased funding to hire more workers, to buy books and computers, to repair old buildings, and in part to help us clear this final hurdle — to pay library workers what they've earned and (TIMER) to end this unhappy chapter in Brooklyn Public Library's history.

Our message is simple: pay us what we're owed.

Thank you for your leadership and your support.

KATHERINE KUSIAK CAREY: Good afternoon. My name is Katherine Kusiak Carey, and I work in the Education Division at the Brooklyn Museum. I have worked at the Brooklyn Museum for eight years and am a proud member of District Council 37, Local 1502.

I first want to thank the Chairs of this committee for your ongoing support for our union and your support for cultural institutions and working-class New Yorkers. When Brooklyn Museum leadership attempted to lay off our union members this fiscal year, members of the City Council supported us in avoiding these layoffs. They showed their commitment to protecting Union jobs as well as supporting the arts and culture. We hope to continue collaborating, as workers and local government, to protect the artists and cultural workers who make our arts and educational institutions places where all New Yorkers can express creativity, learn, and benefit from resources and programming that enrich their lives.

Today, I'm asking the Council to increase funding for the Department of Cultural Affairs for the FY26 budget. I'm also here today to discuss, as an educator, how this budget affects my work and how

the museum's financial situation impacts the
communities we serve.

In my role at the Education Division, I support
the work of educators who serve over 50,000 people,
including public school students, DOE educators,
teens from all five boroughs, families, access
audiences, as well as older adults and emerging
professionals. Over the past few months, our
Education team has been directed to drastically
reduce programming due to decreased funding. And it's
been deeply concerning to watch thriving programs
that have served diverse audiences come to a halt.
For example, our division has a very highly respected
paid internship and fellowship program. (TIMER) We
conduct targeted outreach to first-generation college
students, as well as students from CUNY and SUNY,
which creates a pathway for jobs in the cultural
sector. For the first time in 30 years, we will not
be running a fellowship program. In addition, just
last June, we received an email that a federal IMLS
grant was abruptly cancelled. The impact of cutting
this program comes at a high cost to the museum and
would reduce our internship program.

Other education programs that have been cut include outreach for adult literacy, art-making programs, programs for adult Spanish speakers, and a reduction in the number of educators teaching K-12 guided gallery visits to school groups.

At a time when federal cuts are forcing museums to halt programs, and educators are strained for resources, I urge the Committee to prioritize funding for cultural institutions as an investment in our city's future and ensure that our city continues to provide opportunities for arts and education programming for all New Yorkers. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Thank you. Thank you very much, I appreciate you guys.

Next, we have Abby Emerson, Melody Emerson-Simpson, and Felix Emerson-Simpson.

(PAUSE)

DR. ABBY EMERSON: Hello, good afternoon, Chair Rivera and Chair Brannan. Good to see you both.

My name is Dr. Abby Emerson. I'm a New York City Educator, and I'm here today as a member of NYC Plan, the Public Library Action Network —a group of patrons and library workers organizing together to amplify, strengthen, and advance the futures of NYC's

three public library systems. San Francisco's Library budget is 1.36% of its overall city budget. Chicago's Library budget is approximately 0.7% of its overall city budget. But if we take a look closer to home, at the moment our NYC Library budget is just 0.43% of the overall City budget, and that is unacceptable.

What I would like to ask is that as a city, we fund libraries at 0.5%, and not just this year, but every year. At NYC Plan, we feel this is a realistic number and would address the major strains the libraries are currently under. From our research and conversations with library workers, patrons, and union reps, we found some key areas of concern that a measly 0.43% can't currently address. We also just heard from them in the last panel.

So, committing to 0.5%, which for this coming year would translate to \$575.3 million, would be used to address these three critical areas:

One, the very real building upgrades that are needed, HVAC, accessibility, restrooms, et cetera.

Two, back pay and fair pay for library workers. The existence of out-of-date contracts and thousands of dollars in workers' wages is frankly quite embarrassing.

Three, additional programming for multiple populations that rely on the library to meet their very real needs – immigrants, youth, elders, unhoused folks, working adults, et cetera. My local branch is bustling and rowdy with youth after school, such as these, which is great, yet there's currently zero programming for them at this time.

Funding libraries at 0.5% is frankly a small ask. New Yorkers want more from their libraries, (TIMER) which are some of the only public-shared, completely free, democratic spaces we have left in the city. It would be very “punk rock”, frankly, to fund them appropriately. Thank you for your time and consideration.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Any punk rock mentions will get you a long way here.

MELODY EMERSON-SIMPSON: Good afternoon, my name is Melody Emerson-Simpson, and I live in Brooklyn. I go to Brooklyn Brownstone School, and I'm in the Second Grade Rainbows. I am here today to talk about how library workers need to be paid more fairly, and how the elevator in my library is always closing down for repairs.

I think the workers should be paid more so that they get enough money for how much work they do. Some workers aren't paid enough. That is unfair.

At the end of first grade, the library near my house was closed down for three weeks. Also, the elevator is always breaking. We need money for repairs.

In addition, I think we should have more Movie Days. The library needs more money for that to happen. I think libraries should have better elevators, and workers should have more money. Thank you.

(APPLAUSE)

FELIX EMERSON-SIMPSON: Hi, my name is Felix. We need more money to fix the library's elevator. We need more money for the workers. Thank you for listening.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Thank you very much for your testimony.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you!

(APPLAUSE)

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Good job, guys, thank you.

Okay, now we have Stephanie Hill- Wilchfort,
Gonzalo Casals, Angel Hernandez, David Freudenthal,
Norah Yahya.

STEPHANIE HILL-WILCHFORT: Good afternoon, Chair
Rivera, Chair Brannan, and Members of the Committees
on Culture and Finance. Thank you so much for this
opportunity to testify.

My name is Stephanie Hill-Wilchfort; I am the
Ronay Menschel President and Director of the Museum
of the City of New York. I'm also Executive Vice
Chair of the Cultural Institutions Group. I'm here
today to provide testimony on behalf of the CIGs, a
coalition of 34 cultural institutions, located in all
five boroughs, including zoos, gardens, museums, and
performing arts organizations. We are testifying
today to support culture for all and request a \$30
million baseline increase to the DCLA adopted budget
in FY26.

I want to start by thanking the Council for
prioritizing culture, and for your strong advocacy in
securing a full restoration for our institutions in
FY25, and for the historic \$45 million that was
baselined in the FY26 Executive Budget. While the \$45
million baseline allocation stabilizes current

funding, it does not increase the overall budget for culture. A \$30 million baseline increase would be transformative for CIGs, for DCLA, and for programs across New York City. This \$30 million would not only ensure our institutions have the resources needed to fully serve New Yorkers and attract tourists, but it would also build the City's resilience as federal policies and funding cuts threaten the viability of New York City's institutions, programs, and the livelihoods of our artists.

Arts and culture generate \$110 billion in economic activity annually and are vital to the city's economy. Our cultural sector is also central to the success of our city's tourism industry and workforce. The Cultural Institutions Group alone employs 15,700 full and part-time staff, of whom 5,800 are union members. Furthermore, CIGs offer career pathways and training opportunities (TIMER) to more than 6,000 New Yorkers each year.

This is a particularly important moment for the City to support our cultural institutions. Investing in culture is investing in the heart and soul of New York. We ask the Council to baseline \$30 million for

Culture to ensure our sector can survive and thrive.

Thank you so much.

ANGEL HERNANDEZ: Good afternoon, my name is
Angel Hernandez, and I'm Director of Government
Relations for the New York Botanical Garden, a
"Fungi". The recent announcement of -- oh, you got it
now, thank you...

The recent announcement of a \$45 million
baseline in the Cultural Budget marks a historic
moment for DCLA. On behalf of New York Botanical
Garden, I want to thank Speaker Adams, Chair Rivera,
and Chair Brennan for your unwavering support and
efforts in this achievement. The increase allows the
Agency to make pivotal investments in our city's
cultural institutions, an accomplishment that will
empower these local economic engines to preserve jobs
and create more opportunities for the communities
they serve. After many years of advocating for a
baseline, cultural institutions now focus on
withstanding federal cuts as they currently grow,
while inflation has rapidly swelled since the last
cultural budget baseline 15 years ago. This is why I
stand with my colleagues in the cultural community
today and ask for your support in baselining \$30

million in the Cultural Budget in the upcoming fiscal year adoption.

A baseline would make an economic impact that can bring our city's cultural institutions to a steadfast position. At NYBG, for instance, our school partnership programs at the Edible Academy and Children's Adventure Garden would see an increase in staff and resource capacity to serve more Bronx Public School Students.

We also advocate with our side network coalition colleagues to increase the initiative's funding with a \$30 million baseline, so that paid internships for city high school students can increase threefold from previous fiscal years. Yet a full baseline not only helps extend and expand current initiatives at NYBG, but it can also help create new ones as well. The yet to be instituted Rooted In Accessibility Initiative, which funds the enhancement and expansion of accessibility (TIMER) programming at NYBG, along with three other CIG botanical gardens, can become a reality.

I want to conclude this testimony by extending an invitation to you all to visit our latest summer installment, Van Gogh's Flowers, which opens this

week. With only a baseline of \$30 million in FY26,
New York Botanical Garden is allowed to continue its
mission of public engagement on this level, despite
the obstacles that lie ahead. Thank you very much.

NORAH YAHYA: Good afternoon, I'm Norah Yahya,
the Senior Government Affairs Officer at The Met
Museum and the Manhattan Vice Chair of the Cultural
Institutions Group. Thank you, Chair Brannan, Chair
Rivera, and Council Member Gale Brewer, for the
opportunity to testify today.

I'm going to skip some of the history here, and
first just say, thank you, for this historic
recognition, and the value that you recognize that
culture was bringing to our city by baselining the
\$45 million in the Executive Budget. As a former
Finance Analyst, I remember seeing the budget
decimated, so this is truly historic and a profound
moment for us, and I'm glad I'm here to see this
symbolic investment. In addition to that, I just want
to continue to advocate for the additional \$30
million that we are looking for in the budget
adoption. We are grateful for the \$45 million, but it
does not account for inflation and the things that we
need in order to be sustainable and provide all the

services that our cultural institutions provide
across the city.

Like many of our peer institutions, the Met
continues to face lasting challenges brought on by
the pandemic and subsequent global and economic
disruptions. While we are heartened by the resurgence
of tourism, the landscape has shifted. For example,
the Met had 5.6 million visitors last year, with 2.5
million of them being New Yorkers.

We are a pay-as-you-wish institution. You can
come in, you can pay a penny, or you can pay \$5, up
to your choice. Our New Yorkers are not our visitors
that generate revenue for us – it's our international
visitors, and not only has that number not rebounded
from the pandemic, but it has also shifted and
changed. With the war in Ukraine, it's made traveling
from Asia even more difficult. We have completely
lost our Asian market, and they were some of our
biggest spenders, quite frankly, in the museum. In
addition to that, with tensions now with Canada,
Mexico, and the EU, it's already having a chilling
effect on travel raising real concerns for our future
audiences, so we're already starting to see a
decrease in visitation from our Canadian visitors,

which is really frightening for us in what the future looks like for our revenue.

I will just close by, again, (TIMER) thanking you all in this moment of both profound challenge and great potential, we ask for your continued support and understanding that the arts are not a luxury, but they are essential to this city.

DAVID FREUDENTHAL: Chair Brannan, Chair Rivera, Council Member Brewer, thank you all for the opportunity to testify.

I'm David Freudenthal from Carnegie Hall. I'm here to reinforce and uplift the support of the field by asking for \$75 million to be baselined in the Cultural Affairs Budget this year. We are thrilled, we join our colleagues in our great happiness in the inclusion of the baselining of \$45 million.

This year's budget is a historic move, but the work is not done. And we urge the Council to partner with the Administration to get us to that last leg to get us there. So important. You all know the value of what culture does, how essential it is to our city. I don't need to repeat those words that have been said.

I'm glad to give some examples of some of the things that Carnegie Hall does in this space and to

1 speak about some of the pressures that we have
2 experienced here that demonstrate the challenges that
3 the field as a whole has seen.
4

5 I also will take this opportunity to uplift
6 Carnegie Hall's own request before the Council around
7 our work with the City's human services agencies,
8 which I think is extremely typical of the way that
9 CIGs and the cultural community really leans in to
10 support New Yorkers and the way that arts, in our
11 case music, can be an essential piece of building
12 stronger communities, better lives for New Yorkers,
13 especially those in the most challenging
14 circumstances.

15 I'm sure that my colleagues have spoken to the
16 challenges that the city is facing, that we as
17 cultural institutions are facing around these federal
18 cuts for Carnegie Hall. There's about \$1.7 million
19 that we've already lost (TIMER) or are significantly
20 at risk. The challenges are real, and you have always
21 -- you, the Council, have always been in culture's
22 corner. It's fantastic that the Administration has
23 done what it's done. You know, you've always been
24 fighting for us, and we're so grateful for all you've
25

done. We ask for your help to get us to this last
mile.

GONZALO CASALS: Thank you, David.

Dear Chair Rivera, Chair Brennan, and Members
of the Committee, thank you so much for allowing me
to testify today. Gonzalo Casals, I'm the Co-Director
of the Culture and Arts Policy Institute, and I'm
also currently the Interim Chief Operating Officer of
El Museo del Barrio.

I want to acknowledge the Administration's
listening to our calls for historic baselining. But
as my colleagues have said, and you're gonna hear
over and over again, that is long overdue stability,
but it does not bring growth. And I'm gonna go a
little off the script of the written testimony that I
present. Because I think I should be speaking not
only about the work of El Museo, but also about the
work of the whole sector. In particular, El Museo is
part of the Latinx Network, 50+ Latinx organizations
in the city. Probably we're the largest one, and
because we're the largest one, I feel the
responsibility to advocate for all Latinx
organizations and BIPOC organizations. And of the
many different aspects of this perfect storm in which

we're suffering in the cultural sector, the loss of \$32 million in federal support has deepened longstanding inequities in the sector. Latinx and BIPOC organizations that are rooted and accountable to their communities have historically received 50% to 60% less money from individual donor contributions compared to what we call predominantly white institutions. And this apparently reflects the systemic inequities in philanthropy giving, with wealth and networks being racialized. As a result of this, many organizations depend almost entirely, if not exclusively, on government funding. So, when you remove 25% to 30% of all government funding available through the City, State, and Federal Government, that gap deepens.

And I want to be clear that it just depends because you only relied on one source of revenue. And I want to be clear, all cultural (TIMER) organizations in the sector are hurting -- and I'm finishing with this -- every single one. That said, as the City steps in with support, it's critical that the resource is distributed equitably. Right? Taking into account the disparate impact that the withdrawal of federal funding has across the sector.

I support the additional \$30 million baseline requested, as the sector has. And I thank you for all your support for the cultural sector.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: I just wanted to thank you all for the work that you're doing in terms of diversity, I guess, inclusivity, whether it's -- I know you're doing [Martin] Wong Graffiti, and the Children's Adventure Gardens, Superfine. Carnegie Hall had Ivy Queen, the queen of reggaeton.

(LAUGHTER) Okay? And I have to say, El Museo and the Candida Alvarez Exhibit are wonderful. So I want to thank you all for what you're doing for New York City. And I will be sure to fight for you.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Thank you.

Okay, our next panel is Constance Lesold, Carol Benovic-Bradley, Elizabeth Bevington, Melissa Peralta, and Juanita James.

JUANITA JAMES: Good afternoon, Chairs and Council. Thank you for this opportunity to speak today.

My name is Juanita James, and I've proudly served the Brooklyn Public Library for the past 25 years. Currently, I'm a branch manager at Washington Irving, and I speak on behalf of not my branch, but

also dedicated staff, families, students, and seniors who rely on our services every day no matter what.

As a branch manager, I often step in multiple shifts, sometimes closing and opening branches with staff for days at a time. When staff take their well-earned vacations or call out sick, I scramble to keep our doors open. In some cases, I have to return to work on my own time -- I return right after my own time off to ensure weekend coverage. This is not sustainable. It's frustrating. It's stressful. And quite frankly, it's unfair to our staff and the public who expect and deserve consistent, high-quality services.

Stretching our workforce to the brink impacts everything from programming to safety and atmosphere in our spaces. That's why I'm urging you today to restore Brooklyn Public Library's budget -- \$44.8 million in the unmet needs -- so we can continue our services to the public at the standard that they deserve. By restoring this funding, we can maintain adequate staffing levels, reduce burnout, and ensure that every branch can open and close safely and reliably. It will also allow us to keep offering

educational and cultural programs that so many
Brooklynites depend on.

Thank you (TIMER) for your time, attention, and
commitment to the public library. With your support,
I know that we can continue with our communities that
need it the most and do it with excellence. Thank
you.

MELISSA PERALTA: Good afternoon, and thank you
for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the
Brooklyn Public Library.

My name is Melissa Peralta; I'm a child
librarian. I've only been at the Washington Irving
branch for four months, but in a short time, I've met
so many families, students, and newcomers who rely on
us in a deeply personal way. Access to free
resources, educational support, and welcoming spaces
can make a profound difference in people's lives, and
I see it every single day. Our branch offers a range
of well-attended programs, including tech workshops
for teens, English classes for adults, and regular
story times for families. Our patrons include
students from nearby schools, immigrant families, and
long-time residents, each with their own unique
needs.

As a child librarian, I had the privilege of connecting with many of them. One mom recently told me she brings her children every weekend, not just for books but in her words, "It's just the one place where they all feel like they belong." Unfortunately, we're not able to meet the growing demand for these programs. We've had to turn down opportunities to host additional story times and school visits, not because there's no interest in them, but because we don't have enough staffing to support them. To continue serving the community effectively, we need to increase funding for additional staff and more programs – programs that respond directly to what our patrons are requesting. With additional support, we can create opportunities to empower children, support immigrant families, and strengthen the neighborhood as a whole.

Thank you for your time, consideration, and commitment to supporting your local libraries. When you invest in libraries, you're investing in the children, families, and neighbors who count on us every day.

ELIZABETH BEVINGTON: Good afternoon, and thank you again for the privilege of speaking to you today.

My name is Elizabeth Bevington; I am a Local 1930
Library Workers Guild Board Member and a resident of
Council District 2.

I want to speak today about the City's
affordability crisis and its impact on library
workers and our patrons. That's specifically to
underscore why baselining our budget and increasing
funding for libraries and cultural institutions is so
important.

Earlier, one of you asked about the obstacles
to recruiting and retaining staff at the libraries.
Most library workers and people considering library
work will tell you it is a salary. I mentioned that I
am a District 2 resident, and that's possible only
because I live in a three-income household. My
partner has two jobs: one as adjunct faculty at New
York City University and another at a different
cultural institution. It is imperative that library
workers have competitive salaries, so that we can
live in New York City, and so that library systems
can be responsive to the unique needs of our
communities.

I work in District Council 1, at the Chatham
Square branch of the New York Public Library. Located

in Chinatown, between the Manhattan Bridge and the Bowery, the COVID-19 pandemic especially hard hit it in myriad ways, and recovery has been slow. But we are once again one of the busiest branches, with double or more the program attendance, circulation, through-the-door visits, and computer usage of, the systemwide average for the New York Public Library.

Our service area median income is \$39,123. Our patrons are among the most impacted by housing shortages and cuts to social services. Library services often (TIMER) fill the gap with inadequate resources. We need to be able to recruit and retain staff who are representative of our neighborhood, and, perhaps most importantly, who can speak their languages. More than half of our staff speak at least one dialect of Chinese, but we cannot be sure we could replace them without being able to pay multilingual library workers what they are due. Thank you for your time.

CAROL BENOVIC-BRADLEY: Good afternoon, Chairs Brannan and Rivera, and esteemed Council Members.

My name is Carol Benovic-Bradley, and I've been visiting libraries in New York City since I was a child. Today, I live in Ridgewood, Queens, where I

frequent the Ridgewood branch of Queens Public
Library. I also serve as Vice President of the
Friends of Ridgewood Library.

Libraries played a foundational role in shaping
my love of reading, my sense of community, and my
deep appreciation for our amazing city. As a child,
it began with books. I was the kind of kid who could
finish a book in an afternoon, so libraries really
helped keep our book spending in check. And riding
the bus to Brooklyn Central Branch with my older
sister always felt like an adventure, a journey
across the borough to a magical world filled with
books and calm.

As an adult, libraries have come to mean even
more. I love the periodical and newspaper collection,
and I frequently use the Libby app, as well as the
printing services. And, yes, the library still helps
me keep my book spending in check.

But what I've grown to appreciate most is the
library as a community space. It's a place to learn
about local writers, to enjoy live music and the
arts, and to connect with my neighbors.

At the Ridgewood branch last November, we
hosted a holiday Friendsgiving dinner, sharing a hot

meal and conversation with over 40 neighbors attending. We've given away hundreds of books, supporting literacy across all ages with comics, popular novels, and titles that've been challenged or banned. As a Friend of Ridgewood Library, I've made real friendships. I've helped care for our library's garden, creating a peaceful oasis for visitors. I've played bingo, done crafts, and attended events hosted by other local groups, all right at my branch. I was able to attend the opening of the new Far Rockaway branch and celebrate the resources, events, and sense of community it offers. I have a network of neighbors whom I can read with, trade books with, and who I call friends. I'm endlessly grateful for these experiences and relationships and for everything that (TIMER) libraries offer. It's my greatest wish that all New Yorkers and visitors to our city get to experience all that libraries have to offer. This is exactly why our libraries need more funding. It is my dream to see all branches open seven days a week, where extended hours are considered standard, where our libraries can plan for the future with confidence and invest in staff and collections, where facilities don't just keep up, but thrive, offering modern

amenities that reflect the needs of the communities
they serve.

Investing in our libraries is investing in
people, in our collective future, and in the strength
of our communities. Please support QPL, BPL, and New
York Public Library with increased funding so they
can continue their efforts to promote not just
reading, but learning, service, and community. Thank
you.

CONSTANCE LESOLD: My name is Constance Lesold,
and I thank you for all the wonderful work you're
doing on behalf of the City. I thank you for finally
getting the Bedford branch of the library open. I
attended the opening, and it was absolutely
wonderful. I look forward to using it as a space to
encourage other community activities that are greatly
needed.

I am very concerned that we don't have enough
free activities for the underserved populations of
the city, both those who've been here a long time and
the immigrants who are here.

My husband's family were immigrants from
Hitler's Germany, and they used, for example, the
Brooklyn Botanic Gardens. In fact, my father-in-law

said that was his "synagogue". They used it for relaxation and to keep their minds and souls together through that hard time.

I have sponsored the Committee of 100 to make the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens free again for several years. I'm also glad to remind you that during the pandemic, the gardens, without a director at the time, decided to offer a community pass, allowing anyone to visit for free. However, people are not aware of this yet. It is not publicized enough. I would ask all the libraries to publicize that fact, that you can go for free if you ask for a community pass. I can't say how important that is.

The Brooklyn Children's Museum is in need of support so (TIMER) that it can have many more free activities. We cannot ignore the fact that people just don't have any extra money now. And the City has to fill in with assistance for them to give their communities, their families, what they need to carry on and become productive citizens. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Thank you very much, thank you all.

Our next panel features Francine Garber-Cohen, Ariel Savransky, Kristin Barrett, Marren Berthelsen, and Miranda Massie.

MARREN BERTHELSEN: I'm Maren Berthelsen, Deputy Director of Development at Symphony Space. And on behalf of our Executive Director, Kathy Landau, I'd like to express my deepest appreciation to Chair Rivera and Chair Brannan, as well as to your support of the arts in New York City.

We were thrilled that the proposed Executive Budget provides \$23.5 million for cultural development funding and that the baseline funding for arts education was restored. It shows, once again, that New York leads the nation in demonstrating the importance of the arts in both strengthening communities and civil society.

This Council, and this Committee in particular, understand that the arts and artists matter. Every story matters, every student matters, and every dollar matters and makes a difference. Generation after generation, we see this on our stages and in our classrooms. From audience members who attend our literary, music, and film programs at 95th and Broadway, to the thousands of New York City students,

children, and adults who participate in our arts education and literacy programs, we witness the power of the arts to transform lives.

After a three-night residency at Symphony Space, author and musician James McBride shared that, "The humble space at the corner of 95th and Broadway has stood as a shining lighthouse of what art means and should mean to the wider world. It shows the diversity of hope, aspiration, and opinion that we should all aspire to. It is our treasure, a New York special," and that is true of so many of our cultural partners.

Now more than ever, it is up to all of us to ensure that the arts continue to enlighten, illuminate, and inspire as they have throughout history, that they remain a source of celebration, of refuge, of resistance, acceptance, and evidence of our shared humanity. An increase in baseline funding would go so much farther toward furthering those goals.

With your committee and the City Council leading the way, we know that New York will remain the beacon for artists, audiences, and community that it's always been. Thank you for your time.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Thank you.

ARIEL SAVRANSKY: Thank you, Chair Rivera, Chair Brannan, and Members of the Committee, for this opportunity to share testimony. My name is Ariel Savransky, and I am the Director of Government and Community Relations at the 92nd Street Y. Since 92nd Street Y's founding, more than 150 years ago, we have offered services for people of diverse racial, religious, ethnic, and economic backgrounds.

I want to start by thanking the Council and the Administration for allocating an additional \$45 million to the baseline funding for DCLA. We are also honored that the City Council Members, again, awarded CASA and SU-CASA partnerships to us during FY25.

In FY25, we are providing eight free CASA programs in schools throughout the city, including those focused on creative movement, Cuban music, American rhythm and blues, and Afro Brazilian percussion. We hope to expand in FY26 and deepen our relationships with additional schools throughout the city.

We are also grateful for our SU-CASA funding, allowing us to provide choral arts instruction at Roosevelt Island Senior Center. We hope to continue

this program in FY26 with the support of the New York City Council.

Our arts programs reach over 7,000 public school students and teachers in 58 schools across all five boroughs of New York City. Programming offers opportunities for in-depth classroom visits from top teaching artists and innovative curriculum design, as well as interaction with 92nd Street Y main stage talent from around the world. Additionally, it provides unparalleled access to professional internships and other early career opportunities. We have built strong collaborations with many schools, and we understand the unique needs of each school population.

Public funding is crucial for our organization, and we are committed to using this funding to help ensure students can experience high-quality arts education in their classroom and the thrill of live performances at our global community center.

Thank you so much for your support and for the opportunity (TIMER) to testify.

KRISTEN BARRETT: Good afternoon. I'm Kristen Barrett, Vice President of Development for New 42, New 42nd Street. Thank you very much for welcoming

all of us today and for your tireless efforts to grow city funding for cultural organizations.

As we all know, the arts and culture sector exists at the very heart of our city, and meaningful funding is critical. The power of the arts can be transformative, expanding a child's socioemotional development and unlocking their creative potential.

Many young New Yorkers have had their first experience with live performance at our new Victory Theater. One of our partnering teachers recently shared, "None of my students have ever been to a theater before. Some of them had never even taken the train until today. This was so exciting for us."

Each year, we partner with over 130 schools throughout the five boroughs for in-classroom arts education, and we welcome 19,000 students to the theater with a highly subsidized \$2 ticket. We have also provided 3,000 free tickets to children and families in NYCHA housing.

These programs, among others, rely on City funding. At New 42, reductions in our Department of Cultural Affairs allocation and the loss of Speaker Initiative funding in recent years have strained our already limited resources, making it difficult to

think expansively and sustainably about how we invite all New Yorkers to engage with the arts. Our federal support was also cut this month when the NEA withdrew its approved funding recommendation for one of our productions.

I urge the City Council to fight for essential cultural funding on behalf of New 42 and the many organizations that make up the cultural community here in New York City.

And I thank you very, very much for ensuring that New Yorkers of all ages have access to world-class performing arts. Thank you.

FRANCINE GARBBER-COHEN: Good afternoon, Council Members.

My name is Francine Garber-Cohen, President and Producer of Regina Opera Company, which has offered year-round, fully staged operas, and ticketed and free concerts in Southwest Brooklyn for 55 years, including 13 years in Sunset Park, and also performing in Bay Ridge. At these performances, thousands of Brooklyn residents, over two-thirds of whom are senior citizens, many of them retirees on fixed incomes, can meet other music lovers, getting them out of their homes where many live alone. We not

only provide entertainment to help these people, these grandmas and grandpas feel happy listening to our music, but we also help to combat the scourge of loneliness and feelings of isolation. Music is medicine. But to provide these services, Regina Opera, like other arts organizations, needs increased support from New York City.

We at Regina Opera thank you for the baseline of \$45 million in the Executive Budget in Fiscal Year 2026. And now, due to the extreme losses caused by the cuts to federal funding, we must request an additional \$30 million. The extra support is especially needed to increase the Department of Cultural Affairs' available funds.

I want to point out that these are high-velocity dollars. The money goes directly into the hands of staff members and arts workers who spend it immediately on food, rent, taxes, and other necessities, which help local businesses. (TIMER)

Investment in the arts is an investment in New York City. Thank you.

MIRANDA MASSIE: Chair Brannan, Chair Rivera, I want to join my colleagues in thanking you all for your leadership on culture and your civic leadership

for all New Yorkers. It's very much noted and appreciated, especially now. This is a time when we need local leadership, and it is also a time when we need cultural leadership. We need leadership that is sound in culture, which has historically been and continues to be a real strength here in New York City.

My name is Miranda Massie, and I'm the Director of the Climate Museum, which is a pretty new, and a member of New York City's cultural community — we got started in 2018. Chair Brannen, you were one of the members who supported us early on. Thank you again for that.

Thanks largely to the Department of Cultural Affairs and the engagement and support of different members of the City Council, we were able to make it through the pandemic as a fledgling organization. And in the brief time that we've been doing public programming, we've presented hundreds of public events, and 17 different exhibitions, many with esteemed partners, who are represented in the testimony today, from across the city in every borough. And we've gotten to a point where we're gonna have a permanent home in 2029 as the cultural

1 anchor of a new development on the Far West Side. And
2 most of the capital requirements associated with that
3 permanent home will be covered by our real estate
4 partners, Moinian, Boston Properties, and BRP. But
5 some of them we'll need to step up on ourselves.
6

7 So I want to elevate for your attention
8 \$100,000 Speaker request that we've made
9 strategically to start to establish eligibility for
10 requesting capital funds from the City in the future
11 down the road. Because, of course, while the property
12 that we're gonna be located on is owned by New York
13 State, our heart lies very much with New York City,
14 and we want to partner with the City in creating the
15 work that we're (TIMER) going be presenting to the
16 community of New York City. And the fundamental
17 impulse of that work, just to close, is to use the
18 arts and culture to let everybody know about all the
19 meaningful civic actions they can take in relation to
20 climate and all the ways it's touching our lives. So
21 we are kind of at the intersection of New York City's
22 climate leadership and our cultural leadership.

23 And again, we want to thank you for putting us
24 at that nexus point. Thank you all.
25

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Kristin, can I just ask,
the NEA Grant that you mentioned, how much was it
worth?

KRISTINE BARRETT: Ours was a \$15,000 grant for
a production that has already happened. So we spent,
and then we were cut out, thank you.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Thank you, guys. Thank you
all very much.

Okay, now we have Jessica Soto, Christina Li,
Maisie Carroll, Sauda Tasnim, and Johny Garcia
Alexander.

(PAUSE)

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Okay, who wants to start?
Start from my left, your right. Just turn your mic
on.

MAISIE CAROLL: Hi, good afternoon. My name is
Maisie Carroll, and I'm a BookMatch Teen at the
Brooklyn Public Library. We're a group of teenagers
who run a program that provides book recommendations
to other teenagers. I've been part of BookMatch Teen
for two years, and I love it so much. Seeing this
rare connection that the library creates is magical.
Through this program, I have connected with so many
people. I've even interviewed a five-year-old boy

about his book interests, which turned out to be the horror series "Five Nights at Freddy's". Then my friends and I recommended a collection of creepy children's books and graphic novels to him, which he excitedly shared with his parents and little brother.

I want to share with you a few moments of how the library has helped me connect with other readers. So many people who write to us don't have much to say about the books they like. They give us video games, music, and movies, and then we give them books, hoping to inspire reading amongst kids who don't enjoy it as much as we book-matched teens. I mean, what's a better way to start reading again than being given a book that is perfect for you?

One example is a form sent by Rachel. Rachel gave us a list of video games that she liked. I recommended "Nimona" by N.D. Stevenson wrote, "This is a fun graphic novel that has the action, adventure, and fantasy of many video games like the ones you mentioned. It also has a movie adaptation as a plus. I found that's a great way to get kids interested."

I also messaged a girl named Cheyenne who was losing interest in fantasy books and was looking for

something else to read. I recommended her "Where I
End and You Begin" by Preston Norton. And I wrote
her, "This is the interesting and fun plot of many of
the books and authors you mentioned, along with the
same humor and romance. You did mention that you are
not as into fantasy as you used to be, but I hope
that you are able to enjoy this light fantasy in this
book and appreciate how it is a tool to tell a much
smaller story."

I hope these examples can show (TIMER) how we
have used the tools that the Brooklyn Public Library
has given us to inspire and connect with readers.
Inspiring readers and connecting with other people in
our community is what the library stands for. That's
why I was so eager to come here today and share with
you all why the library is so important to us
teenagers. It gives teens like me the opportunities,
the passion we have for books and reading, and the
chance to connect with other people interested in
reading across the city. It has allowed us to promote
reading and literacy and spread the love for books in
a way that genuinely allows people to find the books
that work for them. Thank you.

JOHNNY GARCIA ALEXANDER: Good afternoon,
everyone. It's so good to be here with you all. My
name is Johnny Alexander Garcia; I'm a Teen Techie
Intern at Brooklyn Public Library.

I'd like first to take a moment and say thank
you to the NYC City Council and the Brooklyn Public
Library for the opportunity to be here today. It is
an honor to be able to advocate for such an important
part of so many lives.

The library has always been a core part of not
only my life but also my family's history. It has
been passed down through generations as a valuable
place for recreation and education. My mother
introduced me to the library when I was little, just
like how my grandparents introduced her when she was
little. It has provided valuable opportunities and
has been an essential safe space for all of us.

For many communities, including homeschoolers
such as myself, libraries are invaluable resources to
promote and support inclusive social and mental
wellness while equally helping us develop our
personal, social, academic, and professional skills.

Libraries fill gaps in our lives in so many
ways, and I speak from experience. My sister would

walk with me to the library for art and gaming events. There, I'd be able to socialize and spend time with fellow community members my age, as together we enjoyed all the wonderful activities available in our library.

Additionally, my parents take me to the library frequently. As aforementioned, it's part of our family tradition. They take time out of their busy schedules for us to spend quality time together, exploring and participating in library activities, while borrowing and enriching books — books that have helped me grow as a person, and books by authors who have helped broaden my perspective, setting examples, and providing guidance for making it through life's hardships.

I now, like my siblings have before me, volunteer and intern at the library. It has been an amazing, fruitful experience meeting so many diverse people along the way. Part of my life is continuously navigating substantial community resources and opportunities at local libraries, opportunities that I simply may not have had the chance to experience otherwise.

My first experience working as a volunteer was at Brooklyn Central's Business and Career Center. There, I was able to help people with their resumes and job searching. It was such a fulfilling experience being able to give back. It helped me get acquainted with fellow members of our community, while developing my social skills, a skill I needed support with prior to signing up. (TIMER)

After being assigned to a branch, I was able to participate in FIRST LEGO League. I was part of a team full of bright, inspiring individuals. We learned important soft skills in coding and robotics.

I'm grateful for the library being such an important pillar in our lives and communities. This is only my story. There are countless other New Yorkers who've had wonderful, life-changing experiences with their local libraries. I humbly ask for your continuous support of these invaluable resources. In the times we live in, the library has become even more essential in creating a safe space for people who direly need it.

In conclusion, a budget increase would be a net positive for everyone in New York City. When making this important decision, we hope you take not only

our stories into consideration, but also the experiences of all of our fellow New Yorkers who hold the library near and dear to their heart and lives.

Once again, I would like to thank the City Council and Brooklyn Public Library for letting me be here with you all and speak on a matter which I hold incredibly close to my heart.

Thank you all for listening. I wish you all a blessed day.

SAUDA TASNIM: Good afternoon, everyone, thank you so much for this opportunity, it's a pleasure to be with you all.

I am Sauda Tasnim. I have been an intern at the Saratoga Branch of the Brooklyn Public Library since January of this year. I'm a Librarians of Tomorrow intern, and since the beginning of the year, I've learned tremendously about various aspects of the library as an intern that the school couldn't have taught me in any other way. I have the fortune to work with an incredible mentor, amazing staff members, and peers whom I met through the library.

It wasn't the actual small task of an intern that made this experience so memorable for me. It was the connection, the daily conversations I would have

with people, the guidance they provided me, and all the amazing experiences —my favorite being learning how to garden in my branch's backyard.

Throughout the months, I've had the opportunity to visit a lot of field trips, including the Morgan Library Museum and Book Ops, to see the logistics and behind the scenes of how books end up in libraries. Those were experiences and knowledge I couldn't have found anywhere else. I'm so grateful to the Brooklyn Public Library for having all these opportunities for us young adults.

And even for teenagers who are not interns, I believe libraries are still a great place and resource. It's a place surrounded by knowledge and an understanding community. And it's especially important that in this era, where everything is slowly becoming online, we keep the importance and cultures of libraries alive.

Libraries are not just bookkeepers, but they are filled with unique experiences and people that young people wouldn't find anywhere else. My experience there has impacted my personal goals, my career, and my college goals, and opened me up to so

much more opportunity. It is only through the library that I was able to have all of that.

My ask would be that you consider libraries as a more important pillar of society and invest more in them, so they can continue their programs and work that support and guide young adults just like me. Thank you so much again.

CHRISTINA LI: Good afternoon. My name is Christina Li; I thank you for granting me the privilege today to speak on an issue that is deeply personal, yet imperative across various boroughs – the significance of sustained funding for public libraries.

We often uphold public education as the foundation of literacy, creativity, and knowledgeable ideas. But as with any structure, the foundation alone is not enough. A child's intellectual and emotional development demands upskilling and enrichment. This is where public libraries step in. Where education offers a framework, the library offers freedom to explore, to question, and to grow.

Consider this: A child may be able to learn to read in a classroom, but it's often in the library where that reading turns into passion. Exposure to a

wide selection of texts cultivates transformation.

This leads to greater academic success, higher empathy, and strong communication skills.

The library is where the idea becomes accessible to all, not just to those with economic means. Let's not forget the free programs that are offered, designed to meet the developmental needs of the youth. I have had the privilege of working within such programs, and I can tell you firsthand that the programs offered extensive joy to them. They ignite an imagination, sharpen motor skills, and encourage creativity. Yet the truth is stark. Many parents are unable to supplement their children's education, not due to a lack of trying, but rather to a lack of resources. I speak with conviction because I do not approach this from a distance. I sought refuge in the books, programs, and librarians who never diminished my opinions. The library is not just a place; it is a sanctuary. We live in an economy where full-time employment no longer guarantees financial stability. For these families, the public library is not simply helpful; it is essential.

To underfund our public libraries is to incur a long-term social cost. It's a turn away from the very

values we can't claim to hold dear, equal
opportunity.

In closing, I ask not simply for your support,
but for your vision to see libraries not as
components of the past, but as blueprints for the
future.

Now I ask *you*, as the investors, to invest in
the potential of our future generation, knowing that
it would be nothing less than a flourishing of an
informed, empathetic (TIMER), and resilient society.
Thank you.

CLEMENTINE MCLEOD: Good afternoon, my name is
Clementine McLeod, and I am a BookMatch Teen Intern
at the Brooklyn Public Library.

Libraries were and will always be a vital part
of every community, especially for teens. They're not
just a place to check out books; they're a third
space separate from school and home that is free and
accessible. That kind of space is increasingly rare.

After school, I often found myself spending
time in the library studying or doing homework while
waiting for my other activities to begin. I couldn't
wait at school; it closed after classes ended, and
home was too far away.

The library became a haven. In Downtown Brooklyn, Atlantic Terminal Mall introduced a policy around 2024 banning teens under 18 unless accompanied by an adult. A friend of mine who went to a nearby high school could no longer go there after school. That left the library as one of the few welcoming spaces left for teens to simply exist.

Libraries matter because they're places where young people can connect, feel safe, and just be. That's why I'm asking you to continue funding spaces like this because we need them. Thank you for your time.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you so much to this panel and for your experiences, advice, and advocacy. I do think the libraries are transformative, and I truly appreciate your testimonies. Thank you.

The next panel is Lucy Sexton, Sara Roer, Candice Michelle Franklin-Cox, Akia Squitieri, and Justin Perez. Are we missing Justin? I am going to add someone else, uh, Kate Madigan.

Okay, whenever you are ready, thank you for being here.

LUCY SEXTON: Great, my name is Lucy Sexton. I'm with New Yorkers for Culture and Arts.

As you have heard, we are asking for \$30 million to be added to the baseline. Why? Many reasons. I'll list a few. But I want to note first that \$30 million will bring us up to 0.25% of the City budget for the first time in 10 years. We've been below that, and we've long requested 1% of the City budget.

1. We need the \$30 million added to the baseline to fully fund the Cultural Development Fund. Many organizations that depend on CDF are still getting zero. Losing funding for the first time or worse, like the Chocolate Factory, a beloved staple of Western Queens, which had long received support, getting zero for the second year in a row. Those that did have funding restored, such as the Bronx Arts Ensemble, received less than half of what they'd been getting two years ago. CDF simply does not have enough to fund cultural organizations across the five boroughs.

2. DCLA needs more staff. They currently have nine program officers for 1,100 grantees. It's an equity issue, as smaller organizations with limited capacity are more dependent on assistance from program officers.

3. Arts and culture are under attack from the federal government. The Institute for Museum and Library Services, National Endowment for the Humanities, and the National Endowment for the Arts together fund New York City cultural institutions with \$32 million in 2024. That is all going away. The zoos, gardens, and science museums are losing tens of millions of more dollars in science funding. We need this \$30 million added to the baseline to protect us as we face these devastating headwinds over the next three years. You know who else needs arts and culture to be protected and stable? The economy. It will need all the help it can get in the coming years, and we are why people visit, why they live here, and why people go out to bars and restaurants. We generate 13% of the City's economy. Even more important, our communities (TIMER) will need the connection and well-being that culture provides.

So, as you work to do all you can for these communities most impacted by cruel federal cuts, remember that this modest investment in culture is essential to keeping those communities whole, connected, educated, and healthy. Thank you very much.

CANDICE MICHELLE FRANKLIN: This is my first
time ever doing anything like this. I'm just an
independent dancer. But good afternoon, Council
Members.

My name is Candice Michelle Franklin, and I'm
honored to stand before you today to advocate for
restoring funding from that loss from the National
Endowment of the Arts.

I'm a dancer, choreographer, music producer,
creative director, and the artistic director of Jazz
Ain't Dead. Most importantly, I'm a teaching artist
working with institutions such as the Department of
Education (DOE), Jazzmobile, Joffrey Ballet School,
Lincoln Center, the National Jazz Museum of Harlem,
YAFFA Arts, Harlem One Stop, and the Cumbe Center for
African & Diaspora Dance.

Like the lady from the Met said earlier, the
arts are not a luxury; they are essential. They
uplift communities, amplify marginalized voices,
further dialogue toward equality, and remind people
from all walks of life that they are seen and valued.

Most of my work is free to the public, not
because the arts are free but because arts funding
makes public programming possible. With the arts we

are not just showing dance, we are bringing joy,
excellence, teaching history, creating opportunities,
and sometimes on a day celebrating culture through
the love of social dance, we have the beautiful
extraordinary power simply through the offer of our
dancers hand to show people that they are seen and
that they matter.

For example, we work with seniors with
Jazzmobile and autistic children with the DOE,
teaching Lindy Hop and giving opportunities to
perform, be social, be seen, and feel valued.

I'm going to jump over, because I want to make
sure I make that 17 seconds. Probably not. (LAUGHTER)

But anyway, that being said, let's say this,
funding doesn't just support artists, it supports the
people artists uplift, restoring arts funding
strengthens communities, preserves history (TIMER),
and builds bridges across generations.

It's not just a lifeline for artists in this
city but a means for them to create belonging,
provide opportunities, and ensure that communities
are seen and valued, ultimately enriching lives and
improving the quality of life for all. So I ask you,
please help restore NEA funding for theater, music,

and dance, the visual and fine arts, because when we invest in the arts, we invest in people. Thank you.

(PAUSE)

SARA ROER: Thank you to Chair Rivera and the Committee for the opportunity to testify today. I'm Sara Roer, and I am the Interim Executive Director at Dance/NYC, an art service organization that advocates for the estimated 6,000 dance workers and 1,700 dance entities in this city.

Dance workers, like you, are powerful agents of change. They use the arts to build stronger communities in an increasingly hostile environment. While immigrant communities are under attack, dance workers are teaching newly arrived youth in our schools using movement to facilitate belonging beyond language. While freedom of expression and diversity are under attack, dance workers are amplifying all the stories that make up this city, creating programming in parks, small businesses, theaters, and community centers. However, this vital work is not sustainable under the current conditions.

When the average dance worker is doing these amazing things but still earning 15% below the living wage, we need the City to be our partner.

Recently, Dance/NYC and Arts New York conducted a survey of 177 CDF grantees, and our data shows what's possible when the City supports culture. It meant that only 25% of organizations experienced cuts in FY25 versus 69% in FY24.

Despite that good news, broader instability, that's happening right now, means that 29% of organizations still reported feeling unconfident or very unconfident in their contributed revenue goals, despite that poll coming near the end of the fiscal year, when those projections are typically more solid.

And that's why we are joining the chorus of voices to reiterate our full ask of a \$75 million baseline increase for DCLA. The \$45 million is a major success and would be a wonderful win; the additional \$30 million is critical.

We also need increases for City Council initiatives, especially shouting out the Coalition of Theaters of Color, which hasn't had an increase in over five years despite a 40% increase in the organizations served.

Just (TIMER) right now, our communities are hurting, and attacking the Arts is part of a larger

effort that's rolling back our rights, and this is an opportunity to be bold, to say that our cultures are important, that all cultures are important, and to invest in those cultures as a way of deeply investing in our city, and we hope that you'll continue to do that. Thank you.

AKIA SQUITIERI: Hello, Council Members. Thank you for your time and for this opportunity. My name is Akia Squitieri; I am the brand-new Executive Director of the Bronx River Art Center. I am also a proud member of the Bronx and a resident of District 11.

For 37 years, BRAC's central location has been in four neighborhoods, identified by New York City's Task Force on Racial Inclusion and Equity as disproportionately affected by racial, social, economic, and health factors. These have been deeply impactful to these neighborhoods, which we serve, and BRAC has been a channel for DCLA, CASA, SU-CASA, and the CIA Initiative Funding. We have brought world-class performances, contemporary art, and arts education directly to these historically underserved communities where the arts, and more, have been defunded in schools and community centers for years.-

We strongly urge the Council to keep fighting for more funding in this budget. As I'm sure you all know, and many of us have already said, studies have proven time and time again that the arts help youth develop not only their technical skills but also their communication skills, identity, sense of empathy, and self-worth.

We've seen firsthand how the youth of our city develop critical life skills, thanks only to access to the arts and culture, which is supported by this Council and DCLA. Often, these students ' only arts programming is provided within their community by our organization.

We've also seen firsthand how New Yorkers are desperate for more of the arts. In the past year alone, while city and federal cuts have increased, our attendance and participation numbers have tripled. We are welcoming more and more people than ever, looking for a place to celebrate the vast representation of cultural identity and artistic expression, multiple perspectives, mediums, and for them to try new creative pursuits.

As we face a federal political climate that devalues the power of the arts and culture in our

communities (TIMER) with cuts to NEA and beyond, I urge this Council to fight to ensure that New York City remains a sanctuary city for the arts, which is so integral to the vibrant fabric of our city's multi ethnic culture of identity. Thank you.

KATE MADIGAN: Good afternoon, Chair Rivera, Chair Brannan, Committee Members, and staff. My name is Kate Madigan, Government Affairs Coordinator for The Public Theater. I am here to advocate for The Public Theater's survival and for the Council to stabilize the entire arts and culture sector. Thank you for this opportunity to speak.

Art institutions are the core of what makes The Big Apple so "appealing". Thank you for that.

(LAUGHTER)

The Public Theater is grateful for the City Council's Commitment to the first substantial baseline increase for our cultural groups in over a decade. A permanent \$45 million increase for the Department of Cultural Affairs is nothing short of historic. However, more is needed to stabilize NYC's cultural organizations.

The CIGs and CDFs alike are facing rising costs related to inflation, funding cuts from the federal

government, and divestment from private donors and foundations. In 2023, The Public Theater implemented painful austerity measures to protect the future of the organization, but as the goal lines continue to shift, and we experience the effects of the headwinds I just outlined, sustainability remains painfully out of reach. Sadly, many of our peer organizations are facing a similar reality.

In addition to our shared cultural funding request, The Public Theater has submitted various discretionary and capital asks to the Council this budget cycle to support our free programming and City-owned infrastructures.

Each free Shakespeare in the Park production at the Delacorte Theatre costs the public over \$3.5 million to stage. With a typical summer season featuring two main stage shows, a community pageant, and a mobile unit tour to all five boroughs, we invest nearly \$10 million annually to provide free performances to the people of New York City. Our iconic free Shakespeare in the Park program serves more than 100,000 New Yorkers and visitors each summer entirely free of charge.

And I will finish — (TIMER) Without fiscal action in permanent NYC government investment, the NYC nonprofit component will be a less equitable, diverse, and accessible field. Should we let this version of the future come to pass, ultimately, those who can only afford to pay hundreds of dollars for tickets and productions will be able to attend these cultural offerings. I'll give you one "Guesla" on who would fill that gap.

Thank you for your time and dedication to the people of New York City.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Thank you all very much.

Okay, this is the last panel in person, so if we don't call you and you're here and want to testify, please make sure to fill out a slip, and we'll bring you up.

First is Adeeba Rana, Beth Allen, Sami Abu Shumays, and DJ McDonald.

And if you want to testify, and I didn't just call your name, just fill out a slip, and we will call you up.

(PAUSE)

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Okay, who would like to start? (LAUGHTER)

DJ MCDONALD: I caught that pass.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Good.

DJ MCDONALD: Hi, DJ McDonald, coming to you from the Dance Parade, and I've been part of every one of the 19 parades that have taken place. Last time on Saturday, we once again sent 10,000 dancers through the streets of New York from 16th Street and 6th Avenue over to Tompkins Square Park.

I came from a lunchtime meeting with a young choreographer. Well, not so young. I mean, she's mid-career. She has a company that she supports and partially pays through your support. And I would like to thank you, Chair Brannan, Chair Rivera, and your colleagues on this Committee, for your continued support. You understand what is at stake here.

This morning, I thank you, Chair Rivera, for joining us out on the veranda. I appreciate your words, and you understand that the amplification of the money that you invest in culture in New York returns itself 99 times. And with that kind of investment portfolio, I'm surprised Warren Buffett hasn't taken us over.

But what was at issue this morning is the challenge that this choreographer is facing in

employing her artists, and the immediate cause of my having this conversation was that I watched the faces of a bunch of children sitting in front of the stage when her company performed. I know she's discouraged, and she needed a pep talk.

The pep talk that you give us every year is predicated on the money that you provide for us. And I want to amplify our ask for \$30 million on top of the baseline this year, just to get us to 0.25% of the City budget. The Libraries are asking for 5%, which sounds luxurious. And I know I'm preaching to the choir here, but I want to emphasize that the baseline, the base of our pyramid, are people like this artist and her dancers that have come to New York, as they do every year around parade time, seeking their new life, and giving to the children that saw them, and whose faces lit up, so much. They didn't know what they were looking at, but they were enthralled with it. And the way that the arts and culture in this city represent to us our own experience, so that we can see and create with it, is what makes New York dynamic and unique. Thank you.

SAMI ABU SHUMAYS: My name is Sami Abu Shumays,
Deputy Director of Flushing Town Hall, one of the
small CIGs.

Let me start by saying that we're enormously
grateful to the Administration for the baseline
increase, and to the Council for its steadfast
advocacy for that. However, the new baseline for
Flushing Town Hall only brings our budget figure up
to \$516,000, which still represents a cut of \$306,000
from our FY25 allocation of \$822,000. This still
represents a 37% reduction to our Operating Budget
from DCLA, and an 8% cut to our total Annual Budget.
If this cut is sustained in the Adopted 2026 Budget,
it could necessitate laying off five to six of our
full-time employees, which represents just under a
third of our staff. So, while you may hear folks
saying that the budget dance has ended, it has not
ended for us. I don't have much to add that hasn't
already been said by many amazing colleagues in the
cultural sector.

I'll say this – please look closely at the
numbers and ensure that everyone is held harmless,
from the CDF Organizations, which desperately need a
new funding model, to the CIG Organizations. Please

baseline the additional \$30 for FY26 and ensure that organizations like ours, which serve diverse and lower-income communities, are truly supported and made sustainable.

On the back of my testimony, I copied page 1780 from the supporting schedules. You can see that cut. And you asked a question earlier about how the money was distributed. Of the \$21 million to 34 CIGs, Flushing Town Hall \$141,000, bringing our baseline from \$375,000 to \$516,000.

We are still largely suffering from baseline funding. Thank you.

BETH ALLEN: Hi. Thank you, Chair Rivera and Chair Brennan, for the opportunity to provide testimony today. I'm the Executive Director of the Downtown Brooklyn Arts Alliance, or as we fondly call it DBAA, and I am here to join with my colleagues in expressing my gratitude for the \$45 million baseline in the Executive Budget and to advocate for an increase of \$30 million to bring the full budget to \$75 million.

Downtown Brooklyn Arts Alliance is a network of 60 nonprofit arts and cultural organizations in the greater Downtown Brooklyn area. Our members include

every presenting arts venue situated in the Brooklyn Cultural District, as well as a range of smaller venues, dance and theater companies, small galleries, and others.

Our members collectively serve more than five million individuals annually, including over 100,000 school-age children, employ around 4,000 individuals, and generate more than \$200 million in annual economic impact.

Our work is fostering a supportive network among arts and cultural professionals and addressing issues that affect our work at the neighborhood and borough levels. The context for our work is the growth and gentrification of Brooklyn, where we are fighting for attention and resources amid much larger-scale investments in the commercial sector and larger non-profits, including the fund they call "Eds and Meds", so universities and hospitals.

There's been no equivalent investment in scaling the arts. We talk about the arts surviving gentrification, but don't we ask the question of what the arts need to grow and to meet the increased demand.

That is the question that I am largely trying to put out to anyone who will listen, where we all know the basic answer is more money, and specifically (TIMER) more money available to small and mid-sized organizations to scale up, and more money available for the full range of talented artists and passionate administrators who work in the field and not just those who have proximity to wealthy donors.

DCLA provides crucial funding for this infrastructure, especially for its support of small and mid-sized organizations, which are the bulk of DBAA members. It's the only city agency fully devoted to supporting this infrastructure, and it's a crucial part of our community infrastructure. Arts organizations are the ones that partner with schools and community centers. Our venues drive foot traffic to local retail and restaurants. And the Cultural Development Fund is a very, very crucial source of support for these organizations, and as has been mentioned many times, they are in a severe amount of distress right now, not least because of the National Endowment for the Arts cuts and various reallocations and foundation funding. This would be a huge benefit,

allowing us all to breathe a little easier with the additional \$30 million.

So, thank you very much for the opportunity to testify and for your championing of our cause.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Thank you very much.

ADEEBA AFSHAN RANA: Good afternoon, I love being a closer. My name is Adeeba Afshan Rana, and I'm the Branch Manager of the Bedford branch, which reopened just 28 days ago after being closed for more than four years.

In those years, aside from learning patience, I learned just how deeply our patrons value the library. They love coming to story time, having a place to study, getting book recommendations, and, as you heard from our teens, they love having a space of their own.

One patron shared that, "Although she may move from apartment to apartment, the library where she learned to love to read, where she brought her daughter every week, and now brings her grandchild, might look a little newer, but the feeling of home has always, always stayed the same."

We are proud to be back, and our community is so happy to have us back. That's why I'm asking you

to meet Brooklyn Public Library's \$44.8 million in
unmet expense needs. Without this investment, it
would feel to many like the branch never truly
reopened. Meeting these needs —staffing, programming,
and utilities—allows us to sustain the vibrant,
intergenerational connection we have with our
community. It ensures that future generations grow up
knowing that no matter how the city changes, their
local library will always have a place and a program
for them. Thank you for your time and consideration.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Thank you all very, very
much.

Okay, last call for on-person testimony. Is
there anyone here who wants to testify and hasn't
already done so? Once we go on Zoom, there's no
turning back.

UNKNOWN: (INAUDIBLE)

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Okay. As soon as she
comes, we'll (INAUDIBLE).

All right, first on Zoom is Risa Shoup.

(PAUSE)

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin

RISA SHOUP: Hello.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Hi.

RISA SHOUP: Thank you, Council Member Brannan.
Thank you, Council Member Rivera, and everyone else
who is here today.

My name is Risa Shoup, and I am a Co-Executive
Director of the Alliance of Resident Theaters New
York, also known as A.R.T./New York. We represent
over 400 nonprofit theater companies throughout New
York City and New York State, and we work across
three facilities located both in Manhattan and in
Brooklyn. We are a service provider. We offer
subsidized workspace, including offices, rehearsal
spaces, and two theaters. We offer financial
resources, including three grant programs and a cash
flow loan program that we administer in partnership
with SeaChange Capital, and a wide array of
educational programs, which include in-person
convenings in the fall and the spring, online
roundtables and peer learning spaces, and expert-led
trainings and workshops. And, of course, we are
advocates for our constituents and the field. Thank
you again for the opportunity to testify today.

Theater is a big piece of why people love to
live, work in, and visit New York City. Theater is a
place where people feel safe, where stories are told,

where empathy is built, and where new worlds are imagined. And I can think of no greater opportunity before us right now than to imagine a more just, equitable, and inclusive world. And that's what we do in the theater every day. And we build those critical skills that everyone is going to need so much more of in the future.

And yet despite the importance of theater, our field has not recovered since the COVID-19 shutdowns, and you're probably tired of hearing it. And I'm certainly tired of talking about it, but I just completed a two-year research effort with A.R.T./New York that shows that ticket sales are still down 11% from 2019.

What we also learned that's huge, that is as encouraging as that is discouraging, is that free programming and the number of free attendees have both doubled since 2019. This shows us that people want to go to the theater. It also shows us that the cost of theater, just as the cost of everything, rent, food, and childcare, is getting in their way.

Public funding for the arts and culture, and theater specifically, is critical. Public funding is reliable. Public funding is available to the largest

theaters and the smallest theater companies that are being formed right now. We need public funding to continue offering a diverse array of programs and telling a diverse array of stories that reflect who New York City is and keep people living here, working here, and visiting the city.

And so it is with all of that in mind that I join all of my colleagues who have testified before I did today in asking for that additional \$30 million. (TIMER) to be (INAUDIBLE)... (CROSS-TALK)

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Thank you for your testimony. Time has expired.

RISA SHOUP: so that we... So that we can continue to offer this instrumental and important programming, thank you.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Thank you, Risa.

Now we have Melody Capote.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

MELODY CAPOTE: Buenos días, Co-Chairman Brannan and Co-Chairman Riviera, and New York City Council Members.

I am Melody Capote, Executive Director of the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute in East Harlem, a cultural organization dedicated to

using the arts and culture as a vehicle for promoting racial and social justice, uplifting the African diaspora, and preparing the next generation of artists, cultural activists, and administrators.

I want to begin my testimony today by thanking the New York City Council for listening to us and for securing the additional \$45 million that now lives in the Executive Budget as a baseline for the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs.

But I would be remiss if I did not thank my colleagues in the arts and culture field as well, because I believe that it was through our collective advocacy efforts, our rallies, meetings, testimonies, and hearings like today, and our educating of city council members and staff that we finally saw this increase to DCLA, the first in almost 16 years.

But how does this baseline funding actually break down? What does this mean for those small and mid-sized organizations that are eligible to receive CDF awards? And how do we define and assure equitable distribution of these funds?

With this "best budget ever" claim, we've learned that approximately \$21 million will be allocated to the 34 Cultural Institutions Groups and

that \$23 million will be shared between CDF, the Cultural Development Fund, and DCLA administrative expenses.

Yet we have already been advised as CDF recipients that, with this new baseline, we should not anticipate increases, and that the newest DCLA funding formula that is based on an organization's annual operating budget, does not allow for an organization like mine to receive an award greater than \$50,000. We presently receive \$31,000. And that the new Cultural Equity Fund (TIMER) for which eligibility is determined by (INAUDIBLE)... (CROSS-TALK)

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Thank you for your testimony. Your time has expired.

MELODY CAPOTE: for which my organization straddles both 10035 and 10029, in one of the most distressed districts in the city, and for which we received an additional \$7,000. That's a total of \$39,000 for an organization that has a historic and stellar track record of presenting artists and scholars for and from communities of color, and like DCLA, will mark its 50th anniversary next year in 2026.

How can we possibly scale up? I ask you again, where is the equity? We are not prepared to celebrate, at least not yet. We ask that you scrutinize how and where these funds are and will be distributed, and who is not reaping the benefits of these increases.

I come before you today to rally for the additional \$30 million to DCLA with an insistence that there be an assurance that funds be equitably allocated to the over 1,200 CDF program groups and to assure the sustainability and thrive-ability of its operations and programmatic success of our organizations. Let's work together with DCLA to secure greater transparency and practices, reexamine the agency's panel review process, and create a blueprint for equitable distribution of these additional funds. Let's make this a real win for us all. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Thank you very much, Melody.

Now we have Noel Allain.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

NOEL ALLAIN: Thank you, Chair Rivera, Chair Brennan, and all Council Members present. I'm Noel

Allain, Co-Founder and Artistic Director of the
Bushwick Starr Theatre.

First, I want to thank the Mayor's Office for
baselining DCLA funding at \$45 million. This is an
important, historic step to ensure stability for
cultural organizations in New York City, especially
in moments of great uncertainty, like the one we're
living through right now. And I want to emphasize the
tremendous significance of this decision.

My organization, the Bushwick Starr, has gone
through dramatic growth over the past five years,
having purchased and renovated a building in our
neighborhood of Bushwick, Brooklyn, through a capital
campaign with strong support from the city and state,
for which we are extremely grateful.

Because of the success of these efforts, after
18 years of existence, we have now established the
Starr as a permanent asset for arts and education in
our neighborhood. Our yearly season of programming
offers three, month long runs of premier works, six
readings of new plays, after-school classes for
elementary and high school students, writing
workshops for seniors, intergenerational workshops
with our seasoned artists, and more -- including

drama classes at the Ridgewood Public Library supported by the Friends of the Library that was mentioned earlier in earlier testimony.

We bring 5,000 visitors to Bushwick over the course of the season and serve our neighbors with our season programming and enriching programs. As the Starr grows, so does our ability to offer more paid internships, training, and employment opportunities to our neighbors. We are an institution that is a destination as well as a true neighborhood arts center. Yet in this moment, when we are flourishing, we are also facing the existential threat of a shifting and shrinking funding landscape. When major foundations are changing their priorities and funding that the field has relied on for (TIMER) decades suddenly disappears... (CROSS-TALK)

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Thank you for your testimony. Time has expired.

NOEL ALLAIN: (INAUDIBLE) that individual donors will be able to fill that void sufficiently.

The Starr's mission is to offer free programs and affordable tickets to ensure access to the work that we do. Our earned income is 16% of our total budget. In order for us to be able to continue to

serve our constituents, it is essential that we have reliable funding sources dedicated to preserving local institutions like ours to serve New York's communities.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Thank you...

NOEL ALLAIN: In this moment of uncertainty, I ask the City to add the additional \$30 million to the DCLA Budget, to ensure healthy and robust cultural institutions that will ensure that New Yorkers of all ages and income levels have access to the arts. Thank you very much.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Thank you very much.

Now we have Jimena Martinez.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

(PAUSE)

JIMENA MARTINEZ: Good afternoon, my name is Jimena Martinez, and I'm the Executive Director at the Cumbe Center for African and Diaspora Dance. Thanks so much for this opportunity to speak today.

Through year-round classes, performances, and cultural partnerships with community organizations, each year, Cumbe engages 7,500 preschoolers, public school students, adults, including older adults, (LOST CONNECTION) in the transformative power of

Africa (LOST CONNECTION) (INAUDIBLE) the members of
the Council, my sincere thanks.

Funding from the New York City Council and the
Department of Cultural Affairs has been incredibly
important to Cumbe. Without it, we wouldn't be able
to serve thousands of New Yorkers, aged three to 99,
each year.

And yet I add my voice to those of my
colleagues that we've heard today. This is an
extremely challenging time for smaller arts
organizations. We're struggling to sustain donation-
based and free programming while providing adequate
compensation for our staff and artists. And like many
of our fellow organizations, Cumbe's 2025 grants from
the National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities
New York, whose own funding from the National
Endowment for the Humanities was cut, have been
withdrawn.

Now, more than ever, we need New York City to
support cultural institutions, particularly those
that serve residents of color and smaller
organizations.

At a time when our communities are exhausted,
the (INAUDIBLE) are at a high, dance invites people

back into their bodies and into meaningful
connection.

And I'll end by sharing this story that my
studio manager told me just this morning. Last year,
a Bed-Stuy resident (TIMER) would stand outside our
studio...

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Thank you, your time has
expired.

JIMENA MARTINEZ: (INAUDIBLE) and cry, saying,
"I don't really want to be alive." Our staff
encouraged her to keep coming and listening to those
drums. And a year later, she now takes two classes a
week and is looking lighter and happier.

Cultural funding, the \$30 million we are asking
to be added to the baseline, makes these
transformations possible. Thank you for your
leadership.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Thank you.

Now we have Seth Rosen.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

(PAUSE)

SETH ROSEN: Thank you to the Co-Chairs and all
Council Members present for the opportunity to speak

today. My name is Seth Rosen, and I am the Chief of
Development at the American LGBTQ+ Museum.

For FY26, we are requesting an increase in City
Council discretionary funding, specifically
increasing our Speakers' Initiative funding to
\$200,000 for LGBTQIA community service. This funding
will support the expansion of our educational
initiatives and partnerships across all five
boroughs, as well as the hiring of additional staff
members to implement this expansion.

The Museum is rapidly expanding its audience
across all five boroughs and online. Our e-
newsletter, the museum's main form of communication,
has grown from about 8,000 subscribers in 2024 to
almost 14,000 in the past year, representing an
astounding 75% annual increase. This is due largely
to investments made by the New York City Council
toward our public programs.

Within the last year, the museum has produced
over 40 educational events, extending our reach
citywide through a robust online presence and
satellite partnerships with community institutions
within all five boroughs. So far, we have developed
public programs in collaboration with the Queens

Public Library, Weeksville Heritage Center, NewFest -
LGBTQ+ Film Festival, Bronx Academy of Arts and
Science, the Schomburg Center for Research and Black
Culture, Alice Austin House, and many more.

Last month, we also launched the Museum's first
archivist preservation program in partnership with
SAGE USA and StoryCorps, named the Queer Legacies
Project, which includes facilitated archiving
workshops that convene LGBTQ+ elders and help them
preserve their personal archives and oral histories
for future generations.

Looking ahead FY26, we are currently piloting a
partnership with Culture Lab LIC to co-produce a
series of lectures, film screenings, and creative
workshops that illuminate local queer histories,
provide research, and activism (TIMER)

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Thank you, your time has
expired.

SETH ROSEN: and raise... and raise awareness
for our museum project.

These cultural partnerships are just the
beginning, and with discretionary support from
Speaker Adams, the New York City Council, and this

Committee, we are hopeful of expanding available
resources ahead of our 2027 opening.

I would like to thank you for your time, and we
appreciate your consideration of our request.

CHAIRPERSON BRANNAN: Thank you.

Now have Hew Evans.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

(PAUSE)

HEW ROSE EVANS: There we are, now I'm unmuted.

Hi, and thank you so much for the opportunity
to speak today on behalf of my organization. My name
is Hew Rose Evans, and I am the Senior Development
Associate here at the American LGBTQ Museum.

To add to my colleague's testimony and provide
some background, our museum's mission is to preserve,
investigate, and celebrate the dynamic histories and
cultures of LGBTQ people, as well as the emergent and
adjacent identities within our communities. Using
exhibitions and programs, we seek to advance LGBTQ
equality through the lens of social justice
movements, including, but never limited to race,
gender, class, immigration, and disability.

As of today, there is no major LGBTQ+ cultural
institution in the United States dedicated to

preserving queer history and culture, illustrating its many impacts on broader society or presenting it to the public in an accessible way. An American LGBTQ+ museum would be a unique cultural institution that would enhance the civic and historical infrastructure here in New York City, filling a great educational and cultural vacuum and recognizing LGBTQ+ people as major contributors to weaving the fabric of American society.

In 2027, our museum will open a core exhibition in Manhattan in partnership with the New York Historical. Over the next three years, our organization will embark on an ambitious strategic plan, which includes significant staff expansions, stakeholder engagement, design and construction, and public awareness initiatives. The resulting 6,000-square-foot exhibition will broadly explore the lives of LGBTQ+ Americans and their contributions to all aspects of our country's history. And it will be accompanied by a robust suite of public programs, digital exhibitions, and online resources that tell more specific stories about our various communities and identities.

Construction of the Tang Wing of the New York Historical has already topped out, and we will begin the interior build-out of our space next year. With support from Speaker Adrian Adams in the New York City Council, we will be in New York and indeed our nation's LGBTQ+ museum, (TIMER) and we are opening very soon.

I would like to thank you for your time, and we sincerely appreciate your consideration of our request.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you.

We will now hear from Nicole Touzien.

NICOLE TOUZIEN: Thank you so much. Chair Rivera, Chair Brennan, Members of the Committee, and staff, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of Dancewave.

My name is Nicole Touzien, and I'm the Executive Director of Dancewave. Thanks to the Council's focused advocacy and the City's investment, Dancewave is empowered to provide accessible, inclusive, and culturally competent dance programming to an all-ages citywide audience. We spend 80% of our budget, \$1 million annually, employing artists and art workers who engage 6,200 individuals with

meaningful arts experiences. Take Shaël, for example. Shaël has been a student at Dancewave for 14 years. We have seen her grow from a shy toddler into a highly accomplished young woman, poised and excited to start college next fall as a dance education major. Dancewave has played a crucial role in Shaël's development, nurturing her artistic growth, expanding her perspectives and networks, and, thanks to our career development program, connecting her with over a million dollars in scholarship offers from universities across the country. Shaël's story is special to me because I've witnessed her grow up at our organization, but her story is not unlike many others at Dancewave.

As someone who is tasked to work miracles with a budget one one-hundredth of a percent of the City's budget, I understand and respect the dance of creative compromise we do during this process. Our administrative team is entirely composed of artists who have honed and polished their business skills, and, because of their lived experience as artists, have been able to maximize the impact of each of Dancewave's programs with less and less funding support each year.

The stark reality we are facing now is that we are running out of creative compromises. We have eliminated all non-essential spending, diversified our income, and implemented a three-year strategic plan to help us improve every aspect of our business model. We simply need more funding. An additional \$30 million (TIMER) needs to be added to the budget, on top of the \$45 million baseline...
(CROSS-TALK)

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Thank you, time has expired.

NICOLE TOUZIEN: which we are so grateful for, so that organizations like Dancewave can continue to play such a vital role in our communities. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you so much.

We will now hear from Potrirankamanis Queano Nur.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Hi, Potri,

POTRI RANKA MANIS: Hello, (INAUDIBLE). Thank you so much. Our Council Members are present here. Thank you for this privilege that we artists are able to present our cause.

My name is Potri Ranka Manis, and I'm the
Artistic Director and Founder of Kinding Sindaw
Heritage Foundation.

I am about to start my show tomorrow. If you
see my set, it's here. Our event is well-supported by
DCLA. So I'm here to help and really assert that
there should be good funding that will be allotted to
DCLA because groups like mine are small, and we are
33 years old. We have been asserting, reclaiming, and
amplifying the voices of the unknown indigenous
people in Southern Philippines.

I am a nurse who came to America in 1990, and
I'm a traditional bearer, and I'm so afraid that the
culture and tradition that I grew up with -- it is
very essential to the life of the world's people,
because Indigenous culture carries history that is
not written.

So, I'm here to amplify that request from the
Council that \$30 million has to be added, and has to
be maintained, or more, to be given to the DCLA so
that we, artist of this situation right now, who are
facing endangerment to the current budget of
different levels in our society, particularly in the
federal level. Also, we're endangered with the list

with the NAA funding. We haven't received any message yet, but we're such a small organization, hearing from the big organization that their budgets are cut. So, we're appealing that -- we artists in New York (TIMER) will preserve the tradition (INAUDIBLE)... (CROSS-TALK)

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Thank you, your time has expired.

POTRI RANKA MANIS: and about that. Thank you so much.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you, Potri. Thank you for sharing.

Let's hear from Christopher Leon Johnson.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Yeah. Hello, my name is Christopher Leon Johnson. Thanks, Chair Brannan and Rivera, for holding this hearing today.

So I'm calling on the preservation of all libraries. We need to make sure that they stay open seven days a week. All libraries, I'm calling for all libraries in the City of New York to be open seven days a week. There's certain libraries in City of New York, like in my area, like, Eastern Parkway, my house is not open at -- is not open on a Sunday.

And sometimes I need to use the library on a Sunday, so I (INAUDIBLE) I hope that my Council Members, Darlene Mealy, Crystal Hudson, find a way -- and Reynoso, will find a way to open the library on Eastern Parkway on Sundays. Not only do they need to do that, but they also need to make sure that the library on Eastern Parkway is open at 10:00 a.m. instead of 1:00 p.m. I've been living there for 34 years, and it's always opened at 1:00 p.m. That's kinda -- it's kind of stupid to me. I think it's kind of stupid. They need to open the library at 10:00 a.m. on Tuesday mornings -- 10:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. every Tuesday, every day -- 10:00 to 6:00, but from 10:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. And on Tuesday, it should be 10:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m., too, not just 1:00 to 8:00, even 09:00.

So I'm calling for more extended -- find a way to allocate some money to the Brooklyn Public Library to add more time to my Library, the Eastern Parkway branch. I have to go all the way (INAUDIBLE) Library to do my -- do my thing, because it's open all day, every day, and it's open till 09:00. But I could travel two-three blocks away to my house, but it's not that good.

So I'm calling for you to find a way to help out the Brooklyn Public Library allocate money for that Library, Eastern Parkway Branch. I hope y'all listen to this.

And by the way, while we're here, I know I have a few seconds left, (INAUDIBLE) Justin Brannan and Rivera, I know you have to get about the work (INAUDIBLE) project, the Deliveristas, ya'll need to give the (INAUDIBLE) hub outside City Hall Park.

That's all, and put it outside City Hall Park, and make sure you give us some money for (TIMER) out of the Culture budget for their nonprofit (INAUDIBLE)...

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Thank you. Time has expired.

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Thank you so much. Thank you, and enjoy your day.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you. Seeing no one else online, I want to call on Sheila Lewandowski.

SHEILA LEWANDOWSKI: (INAUDIBLE)

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Of course, thank you for your patience.

SHEILA LEWANDOWSKI: So, thank you, Chairwoman Rivera, for all you do.

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Take us home.

SHEILA LEWANDOWSKI: Take us home!

I'm Sheila Lewandowski, Founder and Director of The Chocolate Factory Theater in Long Island City, of immigrant parents, born in New York, a member of my community board, homeowner, voter, all of the above.

I stand with New Yorkers for Culture and the Arts and all of my colleagues, asking -- thanking the Administration for the baseline, asking for the bump, the \$30 million bump. I'm also sitting here from an organization that has been zeroed out for two years in a row, still standing here for all of us to get more funding. We don't fully know why, but we all stand together. We are just about out of our savings, but we're keeping going. We provide commissions. We provide salaries. We produce, host, and support other events, and we do this with a small staff on a relatively small budget.

I will just with close this. June 30th is my last day as Executive Director after 27 years in leadership for an organization, but I have fought since I was a child -- my mother ran cultural programming at the community center, and had us out petitioning, and I will continue as a board member of

New Yorkers for Culture and the Arts, and I know you care. We need those dollars – so that The Chocolate Factory isn't zeroed out, so we keep children in arts education, so they grow up to be the artists who are in these cultural spaces or at Lincoln Center, or traveling the world, taking our culture out there, because culture is what it is to be alive. It is how we are empathetic. It is how we share. It's how we get to know each other.

And one thing I did want to say is, it needs to be supported (INAUDIBLE) I'm not looking, in New York City at the highest level, especially now when culture and freedom of expression and speech is being oppressed, suppressed, manipulated, attacked, and whitewashed. New York City will be the sanctuary for freedoms *if* we don't underfund and undermine the power of artists and shared cultures on a major scale. Culture is living, and artists are our guides. Please bump up that budget.

(APPLAUSE)

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: That's the way you deliver a testimony!

(CHEERS AND WHISTLING)

CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: And thank you to everyone
who stood with us through the hearing. I want to
thank Chair Brannan.

I am just making sure that if anyone else is
present in the room who has not had the opportunity
to testify but wishes to do so, please raise your
hand. And seeing no one who wishes to testify, I want
to thank you all. We all know that arts and culture,
and our libraries are transformative and important to
our city.

And with that, the hearing is adjourned.

[GAVEL]

C E R T I F I C A T E

World Wide Dictation certifies that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings. We further certify that there is no relation to any of the parties to this action by blood or marriage, and that there is interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date June 27, 2025