

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS,
LIBRARIES & INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP
RELATIONS

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December 13, 2021
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HELD AT: Committee Room - City Hall

B E F O R E: Hon. Jimmy Van Bramer, Chair

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

Laurie A. Cumbo
Darma V. Diaz,
James F. Gennaro
Mark Gjonaj
Francisco P. Moya

Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries & International
Intergroup Relations

A P P E A R A N C E S

Linda E. Johnson,
President and CEO of Brooklyn Public Library

Anthony Marx,
President CEO of the New York Public Library

Dennis M. Walcott,
President and CEO of Queens Public Library

Gonzalo Casals,
Commissioner of Cultural Affairs for New York City

Sheelah Feinberg,
Deputy Commissioner at NYC Department of Cultural
Affairs

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Intergroup Relations

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2 CHAIRMAN VAN BRAMER: Good morning everyone. My
3 name is Council Member Jimmy Van Bramer, and I am
4 proud to be the Chair of the Committee Cultural
5 Affairs, Libraries and International Intergroup
6 Relations.

7 And, I'd like to thank all of you for joining us
8 this morning for this important and, uh, for me, very
9 personally momentous, uh, hearing.

10 Uh, I want to, uh, recognize, first of all, we've
11 been joined by Council Member Darma Diaz, uh, thank
12 you for joining us.

13 And, there are some other, uh, meetings going on
14 right now, so other council members will be joining
15 us.

16 Uh, this is, if you can believe it, my 125th, uh,
17 convening of this committee. I have chaired...

18 (APPLAUSE)... We... We went back and actually
19 looked at the record, uh, and Jack my Legislative
20 Director, came back and said, "To date, you've
21 chaired 124 Committee Cultural Affairs, Libraries
22 hearings," so this is number 125, and of course my
23 final as the chair.

24 Uh, 12 years ago, I was honored to be appointed
25 to chair this committee. And, I remember the first

2 hearing ever, uh, was with Libraries, and that's why
3 I wanted to end with Libraries; although, as a
4 special treat, our Commissioner of Cultural Affairs
5 is joining here as well, uhm, to speak.

6 Uhm, it was in chambers, and after having worked
7 for the Queens Public Library for 11 years and having
8 attended every meeting on the Committee Cultural
9 Affairs, Libraries as a staffer, to have, uh, stood
10 in this position, as the chair of the committee, was
11 a dream come true.

12 And, uh, today, we end this part of the journey.
13 And, so, it's very, very fitting that we're here
14 together with the three Presidents and CEOs of our
15 three great library systems in the City of New York.

16 Over the last 12 years, we've accomplished a lot
17 of great things for our libraries. I'm particularly
18 proud of the new libraries that have been constructed
19 and all of the existing libraries that have been
20 improved renovated, and needless to say, the
21 incredible levels of funding that we've been able to
22 achieve on behalf of our three public libraries. They
23 all deserve and need even more.

24 Uh, and it will be up to the next mayor and the
25 speaker, the next chair of Cultural Affairs,

2 Libraries, and the next council, uh, to make sure
3 that you all have the resources that you need to do
4 the great work.

5 But, I am proud, uh, not only did we do no harm,
6 we leave it better than we found it. And, that is
7 incredibly important to me.

8 Uh, a little over one year ago, uh, we gathered
9 virtually, uh, to hold an oversight hearing on our
10 public libraries and the COVID-19 pandemic. And, I
11 am not surprised, of course, because I worked, uh, in
12 this field for so long, but New Yorkers, I am sure
13 continue to be amazed, uh, impressed, and grateful,
14 uh, by the staff and the teams of all of our public
15 libraries who have, through their creativity, uh, and
16 hard work, and courage, reinvented public library
17 service at a time when people were desperately
18 isolated and so incredibly grateful for everything
19 that has been done.

20 And, to the three of you, who were there at the
21 moment when our public libraries had to close, uhm,
22 in those darkest days, uh, but it is also the three
23 of you, your teams, who are here today, and most
24 importantly the staff, who then came together and,
25 uh, went virtual, went online, uhm, started pick up

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2 service, and ultimately a return to library service
3 as we know it today.

4 Uhm, the pandemic only revealed what we know, uh,
5 which is that there is New York City without our
6 three public library systems. It is impossible to
7 imagine a community without your local public
8 library.

9 And, uh, I am thrilled that all of you will be
10 here today, uh, to talk a little bit about where we
11 are today, uhm, and also the work that we've done
12 together. But, uh, thank you for what you do for the
13 people of the City of New York.

14 Uh, I also want to thank my staff, my Chief of
15 Staff Matt Wallace, who has been with me for 11 ½ of
16 the 12 years; there he is over there, and Jack
17 Bernatovicz, who is here remotely, uh, from
18 Sunnyside, my Legislative Director, of course Cristy
19 Dwyer, uhm, here Aliya Ali, and Brenda McKinney who,
20 uh, taking care of two incredibly beautiful new
21 arrivals in the world, and so can't be with us today,
22 uh, personally, uh, but the staff of the committee
23 and the teams.

24

25

2 So, uh, I'll say a few more words, without
3 getting too choked up, uh, later, but with that, I
4 will invite all of you to begin your testimony.

5 LINDA JOHNSON: This is indeed a momentous
6 occasion. I am Linda Johnson, I am the President and
7 CEO As president and CEO of Brooklyn Public Library.

8 Mr. Chairman, thank you so much for giving us the
9 opportunity to testify, but mostly for the
10 extraordinary work that as you point out has been
11 accomplished during your tenure. I hope that noticed
12 that, at the outset, when you announced that we have
13 been doing this for many years as we have, uh, we all
14 clapped, real claps, not just the finger click that
15 you will normally get. So, uhm, we're all, uh, well,
16 it's bitter sweet. We're all thrilled to be here to
17 be testifying this morning with you.

18 You know, we are of course grateful for your
19 unmatched library enthusiasm, and that's not
20 hyperbole -- I'm sure it's unmatched --and unflagging
21 leadership and support over the course of the past 12
22 years, and so, uhm, it's great to be back in person
23 in chambers, uhm, for our last meeting with you at
24 the helm.

Two weeks ago... Two weeks ago, Brooklyn Public Library kicked off its 125th Birthday. On November 30th, 1896, The Brooklyn Common Council passed a resolution to establish Brooklyn Public Library. And, the first branch opened soon after in a former public school building.

I've been thinking about how rare it is to create a legacy that has a meaningful impact on the lives of four, five, even six future generations -- people whose reality's we can't fully imagine.

I am convinced that your library legacy has had a profound impact on our city, and will continue to touch the lives of New Yorkers for generations to come.

From the beginning, you understood the democratic versatile power of public libraries. And, along the way, you have brought so many in to that understanding. Thank you for so eloquently and persuasively advocating for our systems, for the 8 million New Yorkers we currently serve and for generations to come.

Since we testified last November, the way our libraries served New Yorkers has changed dramatically. In the winter of 2020, Brooklyn Public

2 Library was offering grab-and-go lobby service and
3 producing thousands of virtual programs. In the
4 spring and summer of 2021, we began to gradually
5 reopen our branches for book browsing and computer
6 use.

7 With a partnership of The Department of
8 Transportation, we also created outdoor library
9 spaces where Brooklynites could read and use our free
10 WIFI, listen to multilingual story time, or reconnect
11 with their neighbors.

12 By this July, all three library systems had full
13 reopened our collective 217 branches to the public
14 with the exception of those under construction.

15 In Brooklyn we have already welcomed more than
16 900,000 patrons, of all ages, back to their
17 neighborhood library to enjoy safe, clean, dignified
18 space, browse our collection, use a computer or
19 printer, and enlist the help of our librarians.

20 We have reopened several refurbished library
21 spaces including Rugby, Windsor Terrace, and
22 Cortelyou; our newly renovated flagship central
23 library has a new Welcome Center, named after
24 Brooklyn's Librarian of Congress, Major Owens; a
25 Civic Commons for community engagement, a new and

2 noteworthy book gallery and contemporary business and
3 career center.

4 We have also opened a first new branch in nearly
5 four decades, the Adam Street Library serves the
6 communities of DUMBO, Farragut, and Vinegar Hill and
7 serves as an accessible and inspiring mode for 21st
8 century libraries.

9 Throughout the borough, our dedicated staff have
10 worked diligently and creatively to restore library
11 services to our communities.

12 In all of our branches, we have implemented
13 safety guidelines in order to gradually restore in
14 person programming.

15 Brooklyn Public Library librarians and staff have
16 simultaneously continued to produce thousands of
17 virtual programs from English Conversant groups to
18 cooking classes, to personalize resume help.

19 Of course, we are keenly aware of the hundreds of
20 thousands of Brooklynites without access to
21 affordable broadband, and have been doing everything
22 in our power to bridge the digital divide -- a divide
23 which has only grown more extreme during the
24 pandemic.

1 When we realized, for example, that our adult
2 Basic Education students could no longer attend
3 virtual classes towards the end of the month when
4 their cell phone data plans ran out. We teamed up
5 with two organizations, No One Left Offline (NOLO),
6 and Devices for Students, to lend mobile hotspots.
7 No one should be barred from improving their reading
8 skills because they can't afford broadband.

9 The Emergency Broadband Benefit, which the FCC
10 implemented this spring, offers new subsidies to
11 qualifying households. And, the new federal
12 infrastructure bill includes a permanent subsidy.
13 This is meaningful progress toward digital equity
14 only if people successfully enroll in and receive the
15 subsidies. So, Brooklyn Public Librarians created a
16 Broadband Benefit Guide, and are now helping patrons
17 navigate the government applicant -- a powerful
18 example of how public libraries can connect New
19 Yorkers to impactful benefits.

20 To date, we have installed rooftop antennas at 50
21 branches amplifying free, reliable WIFI 300 feet in
22 every direction. And, at select outdoor library
23 spaces, we offer laptop loans for patrons without
24 devices to log on.
25

1 Seeking to fully activate our outdoor spaces, we
2 also created several outdoor exhibitions including
3 Brooklyn Resists at the new Center for Brooklyn
4 History.

5
6 In October 2020, Brooklyn Public Library merged
7 with the former Brooklyn Historical Society to create
8 Brooklyn's first research library and the largest
9 archive of Brooklyn history in the world.

10 Brooklyn Resists introduced patrons to the power
11 of that collection with photographs, documents, and
12 ephemera that tell the story of how generations of
13 Black Brooklynites have risen up against racial
14 injustice.

15 Whether it's democratizing Brooklyn's archives or
16 amplifying WIFI from our rooftops, Brooklyn Public
17 Library strives to remove barriers to access. That's
18 why with our partners in Queens and New York Public
19 Libraries, we have permanently eliminated late fines
20 this fall. Now patrons are only charged for lost
21 materials more than four weeks overdue -- charges
22 which are removed as soon as the materials are
23 returned. In other words, as long as you return your
24 books, you will always be able to check out more. No
25 one will be prevented from using their library

2 because of unpaid late fees. This is a major
3 milestone in the history of our city's libraries. We
4 have joined several urban library systems across the
5 country in setting a new precedent -- one informed by
6 our ideals of access and equity.

7 In the wake of the pandemic, Brooklyn Public
8 Library is especially focused on ensuring our city
9 rebuilds a more equitable economy. Our newly
10 renovated Business and Career Center is offering
11 Finance and Marketing workshops for small businesses,
12 and our annual PowerUP! Competition awarded seed
13 money to aspiring entrepreneurs.

14 This year, 70% of our PowerUP! participants had
15 never before owned a business, 68% were women, and
16 56% were Black, and all are now better equipped to
17 achieve their dreams and enrich their communities.

18 If we are to foster equity in our community, we
19 understand we must foster equity within our
20 organization. This fall, Brooklyn Public Library
21 launched a new scholarship program called Pathways to
22 Leadership to support members of our staff from
23 underrepresented groups who wish to earn their
24 Master's in Library Science.

In addition to financial support, participants will receive mentorship and leadership training, and will eventually have the opportunity to become librarians at Brooklyn Public Library. The program is designed to diversify the field of librarianship, which has long been dominated by white women. We're extremely excited to for our inaugural class who will matriculate this January.

There is much to look forward to. Our libraries remain committed to helping the city end the pandemic.

Brooklyn Public Library has continued our partnership with an NYC Test & Trace Corps; we helped older adult patrons make vaccine appointments and hosted vaccine information sessions with partners such as Brooklyn Methodist and the Caribbean Women's Health Association. We are partnering with the city to offer walk-in COVID vaccines to 5 to 11-year-olds, at five of our branches, beginning with Coney Island and New Lots in the coming weeks.

Even if we all managed to vaccinate every last eligible New Yorker, we know our city still faces unprecedented challenges: Learning loss; high unemployment and extreme economic inequity; the

2 effects of social isolation of trauma. But,
3 libraries are not powerless in the face of these
4 challenges. We have long known how to support
5 students and job seekers and how to create more
6 equitable and more cohesive communities. With the
7 renewed support of this committee and the incoming
8 city council and administration, we know that public
9 libraries can help our city rebuild. No other
10 institution interacts with every neighborhood on a
11 human scale; no other institution is trusted by
12 teens, immigrants, and older adults alike, and offer
13 versatile services to them all. We're grateful to the
14 committee and to the entire city council for
15 recognizing that and consistently championing public
16 libraries as one of our city's most important assets
17 and allies.

18 Thank you.

19 ANTHONY MARX: Mr. Chairman, it's an honor to be
20 here. It's a pleasure to be here in person with
21 everyone and with you especially. I'll come back to
22 that before we're done.

23 Uhm, but, uh, thanks to the entire committee and
24 all of the members of the city council for their
25 extraordinary work and under extraordinary

2 circumstances, and for their extraordinary support of
3 the library system on behalf of the citizens of New
4 York.

5 So, I'll be... I will summarize rather than read
6 the testimony if that's alright, Mr. Chairman. You
7 have the testimony, uh, as with Linda and Dennis,
8 Brooklyn and Queens, amazing systems, we have
9 maintained our commitments to the citizens of New
10 York through this difficult period. We pivoted
11 instantly, because we could and we had to, to digital
12 platforms, remote offerings, and partnerships with
13 the city, uh, through the pandemic.

14 We closed our branches right away, if not in
15 advance of some, uh, back in March 2020, by three
16 months later we had branches open, as Linda
17 described, for grab-and-go, as well as our, uhm, as
18 well as our online opportunities and offerings, which
19 exploded. For instance, e-books, we had a
20 circulation of 10 million lends since March 2020.
21 So, a new world, well-timed, and of course the
22 circumstances pushed us ahead. As well... Not just
23 e-books but TechConnect classes, one on one career
24 counseling, Brainfuse tutoring, all of that, and the
25 Research Library, over 800,000 pages of archives

2 scanned on demand and sent, together with doubling
3 the size of the research collection available to all
4 New Yorkers, very quietly, by making public the
5 collections of Harvard, Columbia, and Princeton for
6 the first time in history.

7 We expanded our data bases, our research books,
8 like as with our partners, and academic e-books. We
9 focused vital resources on health and wellness, food
10 security, and housing and tenant rights, all
11 obviously essential issues, for which New Yorkers
12 need and deserve their information from a trusted
13 source. Which is why they come to the library.

14 The pandemic also saw some milestones that we've
15 been working on together in partnership, uhm,
16 obviously the, uh, the opening of our central branch
17 library the Niarchos Foundation Library with huge
18 thanks to the city for its partnership to make that
19 possible. Uh, we also opened our Treasures Exhibit
20 in the main building, uh, so 125 years later, we have
21 amazing, amazing collections that mostly sat in the
22 safe and nobody got to see them. We're now keeping
23 them safe, but making them available for everyone in
24 the public to see, and we're super excited about
25 that.

1 We've had close to 60,000 visitors despite the
2 pandemic in the first two months or three months in
3 which Treasures has been open.
4

5 Let's see, we, uhm, as I said we had grab-and-go,
6 we restored full service back in July 2021 at all
7 locations, uhm, as well as expanding through
8 bookmobile, outreach in to the communities. Uh, we,
9 of course, came out of the pandemic understanding
10 that the rifts in New York society, the lack of
11 security for people who are doing essential work, but
12 do not have security of jobs, of housing, of health,
13 of education -- which are essentials -- that we
14 needed to double down, because those communities had
15 been explicitly hit by the pandemic in ways that the
16 wealthy communities simply have not.

17 And, so really for the first time in our history,
18 we've said we're not going to reduce our investment
19 across the system, but we're going to invest
20 additional resources in the neighborhoods of the
21 greatest need. And, we have some of the poorest
22 neighborhoods, in fact legally the poorest
23 neighborhoods, uh, in the country, uh, within our
24 three boroughs.
25

1 So, whether that's Summer Reading or ,you know,
2
3 whatever we can do, and as Linda said, the late
4 fines, eliminating of late fines was a pretty clear
5 statement of that value, but that's just part of what
6 we need to do to get people back in and get people
7 using the library who haven't been using the library.
8 That is an essential issue at this point.

9 We have moved forward with our capital agenda.
10 Grateful to you and for the city for making that
11 possible.

12 We have seen renovations in Carnegie branches
13 like Melrose, Fort Washington, 125th St, Hunts Point,
14 and Port Richmond. Our new Inwood Library, the
15 neighborhood I grew up in, uh, has broken ground and
16 it will be bigger, better, connected to a community
17 center, a STEM center, uhm, various community
18 activities, and have a 177 (100%) affordable housing
19 units above it. And, that I think is an important
20 precedent for how libraries can use space on top of
21 it. I know my colleagues have been, uh, creative in
22 those ways as well.

23 We're seeing the completion of New Amsterdam,
24 Bloomingdale, and Roosevelt Island earlier this year.
25 We're continuing the construction for a brand-new

1
2 Charleston branch, and we hope to get to much more --
3 Stapleton, Washington Heights, Van Cortlandt. And, a
4 big shout out here to Iris Weinshall and her team for
5 really extraordinary capital work, uh, and working
6 with you all in partnership.

7 We retained our focus on civic engagement whether
8 it's supporting national voting and local census
9 efforts, uhm, voter engagement initiatives. We've
10 collaborated with the City as Brooklyn and Queens
11 have also, whether it's COVID testing sights, cooling
12 centers, learning labs. And, we know that there are
13 major challenges ahead.

14 We need to reconnect with people in person, which
15 we are doing. But, we also need to reach to people
16 who are not using us. We are the most used, most
17 trusted, most respected, and yet we know in the
18 poorest neighborhoods people are still not borrowing
19 as many books as in the middle-class neighborhoods.
20 We have to get at that. So, we know that. We know
21 we can't reduce our digital investment. That is
22 clearly an important part of the future, and we are
23 on it.

24 Uhm, I'll just say, this creates a challenge. We
25 are, all of us, trying to do more, we have additional

2 support, again huge thanks to you, but just think
3 about it, we're running larger physical ,you know,
4 offerings; we've massively increased our educational
5 programs, that's... And, the budget has increased.
6 But, we're also running a digital library, in many
7 ways, not just for New York but for the world, because
8 New York is the leader of the world -- we should --
9 we must. And, we're trying to add additional
10 resources to target the poorer neighborhoods. That's
11 like trying two and a half or three things on one
12 budget. And, the truth is that's what my colleagues
13 are doing. And, it is extraordinary, an
14 extraordinary accomplishment.

15 We will continue. We must continue. But, we
16 can only do that with your help.

17 Let me conclude by saying, in the end, for all
18 these accompaniments -- the buildings, the programs,
19 the books -- it all comes down to people. It comes
20 down the amazing colleague that I work with, many of
21 whom are here; it comes down the staff of the
22 libraries -- who are there every day -- even at risk
23 -- to meet the needs of the community -- to learn.
24 What could be more powerful than that? It depends on
25 donors, but depends essentially on the partnership

2 with The City. This is a unique public/private
3 partnership that has created the most trusted civic
4 institutions in town -- the most used -- with a
5 balance of public and private support that has gotten
6 us to new heights, though there are challenges ahead.
7 That only works because of you. Because of you
8 understanding what we do and how central it is, even
9 if it isn't always as flashy as other things that
10 might happen, it's the steady powerful force,
11 foundational force, and again that is only possible
12 because of this partnership. And, this partnership
13 is only possible because of your leadership.

14 And, today, I just want to say in particular,
15 during this decade, my experience here, Jimmy, your
16 partnership, your passion, your commitment, your
17 persistence, and your delivery has made a difference
18 for the lives of millions of people who rely on these
19 libraries -- in additional to everything else you've
20 done -- and that, that is an amazing accomplishment,
21 for which everyone is incredibly grateful. Thank
22 you.

23 DENNIS WALCOTT: First, let me say, good morning
24 to all of you, Council Members, pleasure, Chair. And
25 to all the hardworking team members that are part of

2 the Chair's staff, thank you for your constant
3 support and your leadership.

4 Uh, I will not really go in to my testimony,
5 because Linda and Tony really captured a lot of what
6 we did as a team. But, I will start by saying, uh,
7 my first contact with The Chair, is prior to his role
8 as a City Council Member. It was at the Saint Albans
9 Library where the Chair was then working for the
10 Queens Public Library. And, he was with the Friend
11 of the Saint Albans Library, and in particular Rita
12 Robinson and a variety of people there, her sister,
13 and it was the first time I really got a chance to
14 see his advocacy about libraries and the importance
15 of libraries. And, Saint Albans, for those who may
16 not know, while that particular building, is my home
17 library when I was growing up as a child. So, it was
18 a nice symmetry to see The Chair there in his Queens
19 Public Library hat and that relationship has
20 continued over the years.

21 So, before I go in to any type of testimony that
22 I'll read, I wanted to personally say thank you for
23 everything that you've done over the years. It has
24 been a commitment both of the public side of your
25 life and the city council side, but even prior to

1 that, in overall commitment as an individual, a human
2 being, and the commitment to what libraries represent
3 to all of the people that Linda and Tony have talked
4 about.
5

6 So, like my colleagues, we shut down and we
7 reopened through our virtual world. And, our team at
8 The Queens Public Library did a masterful job just
9 like the teams Brooklyn and New York as well. And, I
10 really want to thank them and our trustees for their
11 leadership in allowing us to really reach that point
12 of serving the public virtually.

13 As you know, Queens was the epicenter of the
14 nation's coronavirus outbreak, Elmhurst in
15 particular, but throughout the borough, and our
16 libraries responded in kind.

17 We set up our virtual world rather quickly and a
18 matter of fact, a number of the programs that we put
19 in to place, they were really transferred to the
20 virtual world in a way that even outpaced at times
21 some of the onsite, on ground programs.

22 Now, at Queens we started and had a 24-hour Black
23 Health Summit. And, it was a huge success, and I'm
24 not sure if I had said this before at a hearing, but
25 the crazy person that I am, I was up at three at

1 o'clock in the morning to watch the insomnia session
2 -- at *why the heck I should be up at three o'clock*
3 *watching it?* -- but we wanted to really reach in to
4 the community. And, the beauty of this particular
5 summit, it reached beyond the borough of Queens. It
6 was able to reach people nationally, and we even had
7 some folks from South Africa looking in.
8

9 So, our Black Health and Healing virtual summit
10 really was something that addressed the mental
11 health, health equity, parenting, civil rights, and
12 racism, and disproportionate effects of the virus on
13 different communities. Over 7,000 people viewed the
14 event on a live basis or in real-time, with many more
15 viewing it when the recordings became available as
16 well.

17 Our STACKS after school program, we shifted that
18 into a virtual world as well. And, then that was
19 able to grow and operate 13 enrichment sites, 11
20 homework centers through our library, and the staff
21 was able to modify the program to fit a virtual model
22 -- offering STEM workshops, art projects, and more
23 children in kindergarten through 5th grade received
24 the services.
25

1 For our adult learners, we transitioned classes
2
3 for our customers to take remotely, such as our Basic
4 Education High School Equivalency, our Citizenship
5 Classes, as well as our Case Management sessions as
6 well.

7 In fiscal year 2020, our Adult Learning Program
8 hosted more than 760 sessions, totaling 2,700
9 instructional hours, with an attendance of nearly
10 8,000, all in a virtual setting.

11 Since implementing the virtual program, we have
12 hosted over 25,600 virtual programs, and with 423,000
13 live attendees.

14 Our Archive virtual programs have one million
15 views, as those who could not tune in live watched
16 the content when their schedules permitted.

17 We added over 86,000 items to our digital
18 collections in order to meet the demand of our
19 customers in the virtual world.

20 And, from July of 2020 to June of 2021, we
21 circulated over 1.4 million e-books and e-magazines,
22 a more than 68% increase when compared to the same
23 period from the previous year.

24 As we continue moving forward towards our full
25 pre-pandemic operations, Queens Public Library will

2 continue to offer a highbred of in person and virtual
3 programs, as well as continue to enhance our e-
4 content and digital resources to ensure our customers
5 can safely secure what they need in our branches via
6 the digital platforms.

7 The pandemic, has highlighted, as indicated by
8 both Linda and Tony, the inequities in our society.
9 Inequalities that we knew about, but now that's even
10 more pronounced as a result of the pandemic.

11 And, what we've seen in the issue that Linda
12 talked about and what Brooklyn and New York have done
13 so well, is how we increased our broadband access to
14 make sure we reach the public as well. In Queens
15 we've done some of the same, and also we've examined
16 what some of the needs are to the public, and try to
17 work in partnership with others to make sure we
18 expand our broadband reach.

19 Working to narrow the digital divided, Queens
20 Public Library loaned 475 mobile hotspots systems in
21 2020 through our ongoing collaboration with the New
22 York City Department of Education.

23 In October, we announced an initiative funded by
24 Sterling National Bank, National Grid, and the Thomas
25 and Jeanne Elmezzi Private Foundation to provide over

250 hotspots and laptops to loan to the public specifically at Lefrak City, South Jamaica, Astoria and Long Island City Libraries.

All of our locations provide free WIFI access to individuals even when our buildings are closed. And, in 20 locations, we currently have enhanced WIFI capabilities where the signal is available up to 150 yards beyond our physical walls.

From July 2020 through June 2021, over 500,000 New Yorkers accessed Queens Public Library's WIFI network -- an 11% increase from the same period the previous year.

In the response to the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and many other Black people, and the national reckoning around race, the systematic racism in our society, we established a working group at the library called "The President's Council on Racial Equity."

In the beginning, we had 55 of our members from staff, through a variety of different partners who've been involved in it, we've divided up in to subcommittees. With a steering committee, we were able to receive a grant to support it as well. And, the mission of PCRE is to identify racial barriers in

1 policy, procedure, practice, and history that may
2 have a negative impact on Black employees and
3 customers and to identify solutions to create a more
4 equitable workplace.
5

6 PCRE members, who total over 50 dedicated
7 employees, are reviewing QPL's recruiting, hiring,
8 and promotion practices, its culture, its learning
9 and growth opportunities, governance, programs,
10 services, collections, and other opportunities on
11 rectifying issues of racial inequity, and taking a
12 look at outreach and marketing strategies, which will
13 culminate in a comprehensive plan for lasting change
14 at our institution.

15 Throughout the pandemic, we collaborated with New
16 York State and New York City on a variety of
17 initiatives. Our Lefferts, Kew Gardens Hills, and
18 Windsor Park branches served as COVID-19 testing
19 sites. Our Flushing branch served as a vaccination
20 site, and our Ozone Park branch continues to serve as
21 a vaccination site.

22 Additionally, QPL has hosted many mobile testing/
23 vaccination pop-up events at our libraries including
24 one just last week at our East Elmhurst branch.
25 Moreover, we are collaborating with the city to

1 assist in the effort to vaccinate as many children
2 possible age five through 11. Thirteen of our sites
3 served as polling locations similar to my colleagues'
4 as well.

5
6 I'm not going to read the rest at the time of
7 testimony, but I do want concentrate on a couple of
8 things that Tony and Linda both said.

9 One, we are there for The City. Plain and
10 Simple. We are there in so many different ways.
11 And, in addition to the shout-out to Iris and the
12 capital people at Linda's shop and what they've done,
13 our team at QPL continues to expand as well
14 capitally. New branches are opening, renovated
15 branches are being addressed, and as a result of
16 additional money from the city council, the executive
17 side, we continue to make sure we improve it. But,
18 what we are seeing is that a balancing act is taking
19 place right now where a lot of our Lindsay (sp?)
20 boxes, which were 7,500 square feet, are now being
21 moved to roughly 13,000 - 18,000 square feet, and
22 that puts a pressure on us that we've never
23 experienced before. Because, it's nice to say, "Oh,
24 we're expanding from 7,500 to 15,000 - 18,000", but
25 it requires staffing to do that as well.

2 So, that's part of the balancing act, as well as
3 what Tony indicated in his testimony, addressing the
4 issue of the virtual world with the real world and
5 making sure we have onsite services. And, we're
6 doing all of that as well as meeting the needs of
7 today's society.

8 We are there for the public. And, as a result
9 of your leadership, Chair, the members of the
10 committee, as well as The Speaker, and The Mayor's
11 Office, we continue to expand. But, that expansion
12 and the support will only be successful if we have
13 that ongoing support from The City.

14 So, I want to take this opportunity to personally
15 thank you for everything that you have done in
16 helping us transform our libraries in to modern day
17 facilities that continue to serve the public's needs.

18 And, we are there to serve The City, the
19 respond to The City, address the emergency needs of
20 The City, but that also requires us to have the
21 ongoing support of The City.

22 Mr. Chair, thank you for your leadership over the
23 years, we truly appreciate it. And, I think we want
24 to do something, right? Before any question and
25 answer take place? So, hold on one second, let

2 Security know we're not storming the front of the

3 (LAUGHTER)... We're not storming the front...

4 (INAUDIBLE CONVERSATIONS 00:38:53) If you wanted a
5 picture go right here. You want a picture? Thank
6 you. (INAUDIBLE)

7 CHAIRMAN VAN BRAMER: Not until after this
8 hearing, but thank you very much for...

9 DENNIS WALCOTT: We just want to say a big thank
10 you for everything that you've done. (LOST
11 CONNECTION 00:39:10) (APPLAUSE 00:39:39)

12 CHAIRMAN VAN BRAMER: So, uh, first of all, let me
13 say, thank you very much. Uh, I was not prepared for
14 that. Did not know that was coming.

15 COUNCIL MEMBER DARMA DIAZ: (INAUDIBLE 00:40:23)

16 CHAIRMAN VAN BRAMER: Thank you very much, Council
17 Member Diaz.

18 Uhm, so just a few thoughts, uhm, and I see
19 Commissioner Casals has joined us, uhm, you know
20 where I'm coming from, and I am of you and the people
21 behind you. UH, YOU know, no institution does more
22 to address the issues of equity and access and
23 inclusion that everyone is rightfully talking about.
24 Uhm, and libraries always say, yes. Right? They
25 always say, yes, to the folks that we serve, uh, the

2 communities, but you also always say yes to The City
3 of New York. Right? When The City of New York says,
4 "We need your help to do this," whether it's IDNYC,
5 right, whether it's testing, whether it's
6 vaccinations in the middle of the pandemic. Uh,
7 Dennis knows well that I got tested several times at
8 The Queens Library's facilities, and then just by
9 chance, I was assigned to get my first two vaccine
10 shots at the Flushing Library, and it was just so
11 perfect that I would go to the Flushing Library to
12 get my first two shots. Uhm, and you always are
13 there. You always say, yes. And, so, The City of
14 New York, uh, always needs to say to you, "What more
15 could we be doing to allow you to reach even more
16 people to do the work that you do?" We know how
17 important you are, because we always come to in times
18 of need. We always rely and lean on our Public
19 Library systems to do more, and you always say, yes,
20 you always come through for the City of New York.

21 So, I am really proud that we did our part. You
22 know, that when I was on the budget negotiating team
23 and libraries came up, when we were meeting in this
24 room or downstairs, all of the members would turn to
25 me, uhm, and say, "Okay, what is Jimmy gonna say

1 about libraries?" Uh, and I fought and sometimes like
2 an animal, uh, to make sure that libraries were
3 protected.
4

5 So, it's been a great privilege and honor. When
6 I first walked in to that chamber, working for The
7 Queens Library, uh, the late Reverend and Council
8 Member Wendell Foster, was the chair of this
9 committee, uh, but that also included Parks if you
10 could believe or not. It was Cultural Affairs,
11 Libraries, Parks, and International Intergroup
12 Relations. Uh, and I drafted these testimonies for
13 11 years. So, I want the staff to know that I read
14 them. I absolutely read the work that's done.

15 And, uh, and of course, uh, the three of you,
16 were not there at that time, Martine Gomez was The
17 President of Brooklyn Public Library, and Gary
18 Strong, of course at Queens, and Paula Claire at
19 NYPL. But, each of you have, uh, in your own ways,
20 transformed the public library systems that you now
21 lead, uh, and I'm so grateful to all of you.

22 I think, uh, Tony, you're a great leader. I've
23 enjoyed your testimony, uhm, I'm sure that George has
24 a hard time sometimes getting you to say what's
25 exactly on the piece of paper in front of you, uhm ,

2 but your eloquent when talking about this. It's so
3 passionate and so passion driven.

4 And, you know, Linda, you have brought a
5 stability and a real strength to the Brooklyn Public
6 Library. You know, that was not always there. And,
7 you know, we often were very proud of how our Queens
8 delegation would come through, uh, when I both worked
9 at the Queens Library and of course here. And, you
10 all have built a great deal of strength in Brooklyn,
11 so that there is that kind of support from your own
12 home borough. And, I think that's really an
13 incredible testament to your leadership and obviously
14 your team as well.

15 And, Dennis, I want to say, I don't know if I've
16 ever told you this, but when your appointment was
17 announced, another, uh, former Queens council member
18 came to me ,you know, and said, "Thank God, because
19 now we have a President and CEO that is worthy of the
20 institution." Right? Someone who is prominent;
21 someone who is accomplished; someone who is so, so
22 respected. And, Queens Public Library, uh, and its
23 staff, and its people always deserved that. So,
24 thank you very much.

1 Uhm, I don't know if you have anything to say,
2 Council Member Diaz, but I'm about to cry, so please
3 say something.
4

5 COUNCIL MEMBER DARMA DIAZ: (INAUDIBLE 00:45:52)
6 you mentioned (INAUDIBLE 00:46:00) who crossed paths
7 many times. So, definitely... Definitely, uhm, as
8 The Chair stated, it was great to see your elevated
9 to where you are today. As a parent back then, I
10 knew that our system was in a much better place,
11 better educator, someone that brought to the table
12 what was much needed within this system.

13 To the rest of you, thank you. Thank you for what
14 you've done throughout the pandemic.

15 My local library, Arlington Library the 37th,
16 definitely felt the love and the encouragement from
17 staff. It was a pleasure to see staff in the local
18 park trying to outreach the parents, and be that
19 community partner that we definitely needed,
20 especially, as it was stated early, in communities
21 like mine, that don't know the library to be a safe
22 haven, and do not often engage in the library.

23 So, thank you also for seeking this opportunity
24 to engage again communities like mine that are not
25 used to coming to the library whether it's to get a

2 book or immigration conversation and advocacy. So,
3 thank you. Thank you for your service. And, many of
4 us don't know in New York City how lucky we are to
5 have people such as yourselves at the top.

6 CHAIRMAN VAN BRAMER: Thank you.

7 COUNCIL MEMBER DARMA DIAZ: Thank you, thank you
8 for all your service.

9 CHAIRMAN VAN BRAMER: You just saved my life,
10 thank you, Council Member Diaz. Thank you for, uh,
11 thank you for those words. And, I know that our
12 Cultural Affairs Commissioner, Gonzalo Casals is
13 here. And, uh, and folks should know, and I think
14 the three President/CEOs appreciate this, uh,
15 Commissioner Casals was appointed The Commissioner
16 just as COVID hit. Uh, and he has never testified as
17 The Commissioner inside City Hall. So, it was
18 particularly, uh, important to me, uh, to invite The
19 Commissioner here today so he would have the
20 experience, uh, at least once of testifying inside
21 City Hall as a citywide commissioner. Uhm, and, so
22 we're grateful to be able to do that, uhm, this is,
23 uh, ostensibly about libraries, of course the, the
24 convergence and the synergies between libraries,
25 culture, the arts and programming is deep. It's one

2 of the things that I have loved about chairing this
3 committee so much. Uh, and, I will just say that
4 when I became chair of this committee, and, you
5 know, this is what asked for when Christine Quin was
6 The Speaker, uh, and I had just been elected, and she
7 said, what would you like to chair? And, I said, the
8 only thing I'm asking for is to be Chair of Cultural
9 Affairs and Libraries. Uh, she said, you know,
10 that's a very popular committee, they're a lot of
11 folks who would like it. And, I said, I know that,
12 uhm, but I still want it. (LAUGHTER) And, I got it.
13 And, when I did, uh, because I worked at the Queens
14 Public Library for 11 years, I felt like I needed to
15 also signal to the Cultural Affairs, uh, part of the
16 committee and the cultural sector, that I'm going to
17 fight for you and love you just as much as you know I
18 love libraries. And I think we have done that. Uhm,
19 but I will always be a library person.

20 Uh, so thank you all very, very much. Thank you
21 for being here.

22 (APPLAUSE)

23 (INAUDIBLE CONVERSATIONS)

24 CHAIRMAN VAN BRAMER: Alright, as we say good-bye
25 to our three public library systems, we are going to

2 uh, move forward with, uh, as I... The
3 aforementioned, uh, Commissioner of Cultural Affairs
4 for The City of New York, uh, Gonzalo Casals, and I
5 believe Deputy Commissioner Feinberg is also joining
6 us for this portion of the testimony. And, I think
7 we'll start with the formalities, and, uh, pass it
8 over to Cristy Dwyer for the oath of office.

9 LEGISLATIVE POLICY ANALYST: Hi, good morning, and
10 thank you for joining us. Would you raise your right
11 hand, please, while I administer the oath to Deputy
12 Commissioner, Sheelah Feinberg, and Commissioner
13 Gonzalo Casals from the Department of Cultural
14 Affairs?

15 Do you affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth,
16 and nothing by the truth, in your testimony before
17 this committee, and to respond honestly to council
18 member questions?

19 COMMISSIONER CASALS: I do.

20 LEGISLATIVE POLICY ANALYST: Thank you so much.
21 You may begin when ready.

22 CHAIRMAN VAN BRAMER: Thank you, uh, fist let me
23 just say, a couple of words. Uhm, as I mentioned
24 before, uh, when I first became the chair of this
25 committee, uhm, our cultural sector invited me to a

2 gathering at the Public Theater, uhm, and I felt it
3 was very important at that meeting to remind everyone
4 that I would... I would take the Cultural Affairs
5 portions of my title just as seriously as the
6 libraries, uh, and... And, I believe we have done
7 that, uh, to an extremely successful degree.

8 And, Commissioner Casals, you know, tenure here
9 has been, uhm, under the most challenging of
10 circumstances, uh, but you have made a difference,
11 and, uh, in this city, uhm, very trying
12 circumstances. And, we have had you testify from
13 your apartment in Jackson Heights, uhm, many times.
14 Uh, but, I felt it only appropriate and very
15 meaningful, you know, because you have been the
16 commissioner. Uh, you've done great work. You've
17 made a big difference. But, uh, this building is
18 very significant, uhm, in many ways and, uh, very
19 important that you have the opportunity to testify at
20 least once here in this building, and particularly,
21 with myself chairing, uh, the committee.

22 So, thank you, and with that, I'll ask you to
23 begin your testimony.

24 COMMISSIONER CASALS: Before I start my testimony,
25 uhm, I want to thank you for the opportunity, and I

2 want to thank you for your leadership, your
3 partnership, and your friendship throughout, you
4 know, not only these 22 months that I was
5 Commissioner, but throughout the (INAUDIBLE 00:58:10)
6 years in which you were helping us, you know, make a
7 case for arts and culture. And, without getting too
8 personal, almost two years ago, when I sick of COVID
9 and I was in the hospital, the nurses were making
10 sure that under the... They wore double masked, they
11 were wearing goggles, and every time they would
12 engage us, they would make sure that they knew they
13 were smiling behind their masks. Right? Just to give
14 us some comfort. I just want to make sure you know
15 that I've been smiling behind this mask, because how
16 meaningful this moment is for me, so, thank you.

17 Good morning, Chair Van Bramer and members of the
18 committee. Thank you for the opportunities to
19 testify today.

20 Having only to present testimony virtually up
21 until now. Much like cultural programming, there is
22 no substitute for life experience. So I'm very
23 excited to be here.

24 Well the past two years having many ways felt
25 like an eternity; I want to begin my update on the

2 cultural community's COVID-19 recovery by looking
3 back even further to the beginning of this
4 administration.

5 Much of the groundwork for our collective
6 response to the pandemic I was laid during this time,
7 both within the agency and throughout the cultural
8 sector.

9 When my predecessor, Tom Finkelpearl, joined with
10 hundreds of cultural leaders at the Ford Foundation
11 in 2015 to launch our agency's diversity, equity, and
12 inclusionary initiative, let's be honest: it caused a
13 lot of anxiety.

14 While many advocates have been calling for
15 greater racial equity, demographic diversity, and
16 inclusive practices for generations - many more
17 people weren't comfortable speaking about these
18 issues. In part, this came back from a lack of
19 understanding of how we could address the profound,
20 systemic problems we faced. But to fix a problem, you
21 need to understand it and talk openly about
22 solutions. At that time, I was still working at one
23 of the nonprofits represented in it in that room.
24 And, agencies work is one of the factors that

1 propelled the systematic shift in the tone and
2 attitude towards DEI work that we've seen around us.

3
4 When the Black Lives Matter movement gained
5 mainstream momentum last year, New York's cultural
6 community was better prepared to understand where the
7 anguish and calls for change were coming from and to
8 respond meaningfully.

9 While these conversations reverberated throughout
10 the cultural community, here at the agency we
11 launched new programs to address problems.

12 We started with a landmark study that backed up
13 with data what so many of us already observed: the
14 cultural workforce was far less diverse than the city
15 itself.

16 So with programs like the CUNY Cultural Course,
17 the Leadership Accelerator, and new funding for
18 diversity programs across the sector, DCLA made this
19 work a top priority for the agency in the early years
20 of the ministration.

21 As we'd come to see, we were also laying the
22 foundations for greater equity in our funding and,
23 ultimately, a pandemic response that focused on
24 getting relief fund to the hardest hit communities.

1 Then came to the CreateNYC Cultural Plan, thanks
2
3 to legislation sponsored by you, Chair Van Bramer and
4 your colleagues, the agency embarked on the
5 tremendous task of developing New York's first ever a
6 comprehensive cultural plan strategy.

7 At that time, I worked with a consultant for the
8 plan, and I saw firsthand the amazing energy
9 residence brought to the public engagement process
10 across the city. Following months of intensive public
11 input, the plan released in 2017, built on the equity
12 work started in the preceding years, and laid out a
13 vision for where it would go next.

14 While DCLA is so much more than a funder,
15 providing financial support to cultural organizations
16 is one of our core functions. As a result, many of
17 our efforts to foster equity focus on greater equity
18 in funding.

19 For the members of the cultural institutions
20 group, CreateNYC resulted in a requirement for them
21 to adopt DEI plans - among the first anywhere in the
22 country for cultural sector.

23 We also worked out a deal with the Met Museum,
24 where funds raised through a mandatory admission fee
25 for non-New Yorkers was reinvested in a smaller group

1 and more underserved areas around the city. These
2 investments drew on the work of the social impact for
3 the arts project, whose research found a powerful
4 correlation between cultural assets and public
5 health, education, and safety. Based on these
6 findings, we've continued to increase investment
7 steadily and systematically oppressed communities - a
8 strategy we'd come to build in the wake of COVID-19
9 with its disproportionate impacts on communities of
10 color.
11

12 After the release of CreateNYC, we also
13 redirected investments and launched a new funds
14 intended to focus on particular areas of need in our
15 sector. These including The Mayors Grant for Cultural
16 Impact, which supported collaborations between arts
17 groups and city agencies; The Disability Forward Fund
18 expanded opportunity for disability access in
19 artistry; The Language Access Fund opened up new
20 pathways for non-English speakers to connect with our
21 cultural sector.

22 These funds join the city councils growing number
23 of cultural indicatives, likewise supporting
24 underserved segments of the population. These include
25 The Cultural Immigration Initiative, The Correlation

2 of Theaters of Color, The Cultural After School
3 Adventures Program, and SU-Casa.

4 Together, the administration and the city Council
5 grew city funding for the arts to record levels, with
6 a major emphasis on increasing investments for New
7 Yorkers most often excluded from cultural
8 opportunities and engagement.

9 The cultural plan also helped to establish
10 something that would become critical components of
11 the cultural community's response to COVID-19:
12 Culture at 3, a sector lead initiative that's still
13 going strong - The Museum Reopening Task Force, and
14 many other collective efforts emerged as an essential
15 source to mutual aid and resource sharing.

16 As cultural administrators, we tend to group
17 ourselves together by discipline, by size, by
18 location, by audience - all for understandable
19 reasons. But the true cross sector collaboration
20 that emerged from spring to 2020, showed that we have
21 more to gain from working together than we do from
22 fighting for resources alone. All of the terrible
23 things to happen in the past two years, this is one
24 bright spot that I hope we can continue to build on.

1
2 In March 2020, we all learned very quickly just
3 how fragile our communities could be. My appointment
4 as Commissioner was announced the very same week that
5 all of New York City was shut down. On a weekly group
6 call with my fellow museum leaders - a call that
7 would eventually be absorbed into Culture at 3 - we
8 thought the reopening might just be days away. As we
9 know now, it would be many months before cultural
10 reopening could begin in earnest.

11 Successive surveys conducted by DCLA of our
12 constituents showed how profound the damage was: from
13 a billion in lost revenue, to risk of permanent
14 closures, to layoffs and furloughs that affected arts
15 educators and organizations of color far more than
16 their larger, wealthier counterparts - the damage to
17 our culture community has been widespread and
18 massive.

19 As I mentioned, cultural groups found support in
20 their collective solidarity. Private philanthropy did
21 what they could to stop the hemorrhaging. And at
22 Cultural Affairs, we leaned on everything that we
23 have learned about investing in and uplifting our
24 historically and marginalized communities through the
25 arts to rush support where it was needed the most.

In last year's budget, we set aside over 12 million dollars for COVID relief, and made more targeted investments based on our survey data such as replenishing a relief fund for the hard-hit arts educators' community.

The role culture has played in these past two years goes far beyond economic recovery. The role culture has played in these past two years goes far beyond economic recovery. For example our public arts and residence - or PAIR - with the commission of human rights - Amanda Phingpodhipakkia -, created *I Still Believe in Our Country* in the fall of 2020. As incidents of an anti-Asian bias were on the rise here and across the country, this powerful public art campaign reminded our Asian Pacific Islander neighbors that we were here for them, and called on New Yorkers to stand in solidarity with our Asian communities.

Our Public Artist in Residency with a Civic Engagement Commission - Yazmany Arboleda- led the transformation of decommission corrections bus into a community center on wheels called The Peoples Bus, it was anchored a citywide festival this past summer and continues to drive civic engagement at events around

2 the city. At a time when New Yorkers were suffering
3 from isolation associated with the lockdown, the
4 artist led effort helped to repair our civic fabric
5 and reconnect residence socially and has resonated
6 powerfully.

7 Public Artist in Residence, which DCLA created in
8 2015 - is another example of laying the groundwork
9 for cultural connections and relationships that could
10 be relied on in a moment of crisis. It could be a
11 major challenge to start something totally new under
12 the best circumstances. So, doing this work
13 thoughtfully, and deliberately, and overtime, is work
14 that pays dividends when you need to respond quickly
15 to new challenges, like those created by the
16 pandemic.

17 Thanks, in part, to this long-term effort to
18 foster a greater understanding of the central role
19 artist play in the life of New York City, we were
20 able to work with The Mayor to create the City Artist
21 Course this year. This \$25 million program, funded by
22 federal relief money, show just how far we've come
23 and helping our civic partners understand the power
24 artists have to heal and to bring people together.

1 Starting this summer, thousands of artists
2 received an infusion of much-needed money, helping to
3 make sure they could stay in New York and help drive
4 or recovery. At the same time, it filled out open
5 spaces, classrooms, galleries, and other spaces with
6 the creative energy we all miss so dearly, which is a
7 critical ingredient for healthy communities.
8

9 Between these programs and the broader reopening
10 that our collective commitment to public health has
11 permitted, we've been overjoyed to see the return of
12 creative programming to New York City. It's been
13 important both as a potent symbol of recovery, and a
14 very real return of the immense value that cultural
15 culture brings to our communities.

16 The city has worked to support these reopening
17 efforts. For example, our partners in The Mayor's
18 Office created programs like Curtains Up NYC to help
19 groups navigate the federal and state relief funds
20 available to them. And at DCLA, our staff worked
21 tirelessly to provide process changes to grant
22 applications to make sure the City dollars could
23 continue to flow to the cultural community.

24 Starting in March of this year, Open Cultural
25 NYC, created through legislation sponsored by Chair

1 van Bramer, thank you for that, was another bright
2 spot for our cultural community. Hundreds of events
3 were permitted since the program began alongside with
4 programs that have brought city streets to life with
5 dining, and performances, open culture gave New
6 Yorkers a chance to engage with arts programming in
7 their neighborhoods; it also gave artists and arts
8 groups the opportunity to earn much-needed revenue.

9
10 As administration draws to a close, we are
11 committed to building on and expanding the work began
12 during the pandemic. Just last week, DCLA announced a
13 record high 51.4 million in grants for more than 1,
14 000 cultural groups distributed from The Cultural
15 Development Fund.

16 Again, we set aside funding for areas of the
17 hardest hit by the pandemic, and for members of the
18 cultural community who are most affected, like arts
19 educators. Working with council to adopt our largest
20 ever budget this year means we are also in a position
21 to include relief funding for all CDF baseline
22 grantees.

23 Importantly, far from putting it on hold, DCLA
24 staff have use the crisis as an opportunity to
25 advance our ongoing work of fostering greater equity

1 within the sector. For instance, we've expanded a
2 multiyear funding to all CDF grantees, something
3 previously only available for larger groups. We're
4 weaving DEI further into our funding application and
5 review process. And we'll be rolling out additional
6 reforms to our funding process to reduce barriers and
7 enhance equity in the months ahead.
8

9 How we've been able to rely on our equity work to
10 respond to the pandemic shows, to me, that together,
11 we've been on the right path. While we have come so
12 far and struggled so much - there's much more work to
13 do.

14 Thanks again for the opportunity to testify, and
15 I'm happy to answer any questions you might have.

16 CHAIRMAN VAN BRAMER: Thank you very much
17 Commissioner Casals.

18 And, uh, you know, when you talk about March of
19 2020 in your testimony, it's, uh, very powerful, uhm,
20 both because of what... what you are experiencing on
21 a personal level and what all of us, uh, were
22 experiencing. And, uhm, you know, culture, our
23 sector, was just devastated and many others were as
24 well, but few devastated in the way that Culture and
25 the Arts were. And, that fact that we are, uh, far

2 from recovered, but as strong as we are, uhm, is in
3 no small part due to your leadership, uhm, and you're
4 serving as Commissioner during this time. I think
5 there are few have the trust that you do in the
6 sector, uhm, and I think that that's been really
7 important. I do think you've been able to get some
8 things out of this administration that, uhm, maybe
9 others might not have been able to, uhm, because of
10 your tenacity and your skills, and your passion,
11 right? And, so, I'm just really grateful that you've
12 been our Commissioner for these last, uh, 22 months.
13 And, uhm, and I know that whatever comes next, you'll
14 be still that trusted partner to our sector, uh, and
15 to artist everywhere.

16 So, I did have just a couple of, uhm, questions.
17 What have you enjoyed the most (LAUGHTER) about being
18 Commissioner? Because you have had a tenure unlike,
19 I hope, any other Commissioner has. Right? I mean,
20 so I hope that there have been moments of joy for you
21 as you were doing this work. Uhm, you know, often
22 times remotely, during a pandemic, that... It has
23 just not been easy.

24 COMMISSIONER CASALS: You know, uhm, as you asked
25 me that question, uhm, I'm thinking, you know,

1 February 2020 when you and I were standing out at the
2 uh, 7 train station in Jackson Heights one evening
3 collecting signatures ,you know, for your, uh,
4 nomination. And, I was like, should I be doing this
5 or not? You know? I feel like I'm... Everything is
6 done, there's nothing more to be done, and you were
7 like, "Are you crazy? You should just go ahead and
8 do it." So, thank you for that vote of confidence
9 without even knowing what was coming next.
10

11 Uhm, I've been saying that I would not want to be
12 doing anything else in a moment like this -- for our
13 city -- for our sector -- than this job. For an
14 immigrant that came almost 20 years ago to The City,
15 uh, the Cultural Sector not only gave me my job, my
16 career, my network, my friends, my life, but it was
17 an incredible opportunity for me to be able to give
18 back in a way ,you know, for everything that I have
19 received from all of you.

20 Uhm, it was also a tremendous opportunity to be
21 able to do this job in a moment that we all came
22 together. Uhm, I seriously, uhm, thank you for the
23 partnership that we are able to create while it was
24 very clear that we were doing the work from our own
25 roles, uhm, we all -- with the sector -- with you --

1 with the administration -- we all understood what was
2 the priority, what was needed, and we're all working
3 together towards that. And, I appreciate that a lot,
4 and I am very thankful that I... The meaning that an
5 immigrant can be The Commissioner of Arts and Culture
6 of New York City, if you would just take a minute to
7 think about how meaning is that? Right? On the heels
8 of ,you know, the legislation that you passed last
9 week about non-residents being able to participate in
10 democracy, uhm , this is very meaningful for the
11 immigrant community, and we thank you for that.

13 CHAIRMAN VAN BRAMER: Absolutely, and, you know,
14 we... I have served in this position with, uh, three
15 different commissioners. Obviously when I came in,
16 uh, as brand new council member and chair, uh, Kate
17 Levin was our commissioner, and of course was very
18 well established, you know, at that point. Uh, and,
19 uh, but we worked well together and did some great
20 things. And, then, of course, I too was one of those
21 who encouraged Tom Finkelparl to become The
22 Commissioner, uh, and, uh, we worked very closely
23 together. And, so, I also encouraged you to accept,
24 uh, the position, and I hope both you and Tom are not
25 upset with me for encouraging you to take the

1 positions. But, uhm, you know, you... You and I
2 have worked, uh, very closely together, uhm, and, uh,
3 and it's been a real joy, you know, not just because
4 we, uhm, you know, are friends and care about the
5 sector, but because of... `of how meaningful the
6 conversations are. Uhm, and I think, again, I think
7 there are few people in our community that, uh, that
8 just have that universal respect and admiration and
9 trust, right? Which is a very rare word that we use
10 in governmental and politics. Uhm, but, uh, people
11 trust you, uhm , they know where you're coming from,
12 uhm, they know you're not just talking about
13 diversity, equity, inclusive, you're just, uh,
14 mouthing the words, that that's actually your value,
15 uh, system and structure, and that your life and work
16 has been committed to that. So, indeed, you've been
17 the right person at the right time, uh, because we
18 all needed someone that genuine to be in this
19 position at this moment. Uhm, so, I'm just very
20 grateful that you got this opportunities to be The
21 Commissioner. I don't often agree with The Mayor,
22 but I agree with him wholeheartedly on this one. Uh,
23 it was a great choice, uhm that he made, uh, to his
24
25

2 credit. And, you've been a great Commissioner of The
3 Department of Cultural Affairs.

4 So, with that, I just wanted to... (Cross-Talk)

5 COMMISSIONER CASALS: But, Chair, ,you know, I
6 feel like it's important to, uhm, acknowledge that
7 there's only so much one can do from this position if
8 there's no people outside ,you know, putting on
9 pressure and making us do the work. And, again, I
10 want to highlight your leadership in bringing the
11 sector together, you know, behind the right agenda.
12 So, when the administration, when The Commissioner of
13 Cultural Affairs needs to make a decision, uhm ,
14 again, the agenda, the goal, what needs to be done,
15 is very clear, and the goals of the sector is very
16 clear. So, I'll thank you for that.

17 CHAIRMAN VAN BRAMER: Yeah, no, I, you know, you
18 just reminded me of something. When I voted against
19 the budget two Junes ago, uh, and there was a massive
20 group of folks assembled outside this building...
21 uhm, ,you know, and often times, people in powerful
22 positions in government and politics, sort of the
23 resent the pressure that's being applied to us by
24 activists. Uhm, and I luckily began as an activist
25 and someone who did lots of civil disobedience and

1 got arrested. And, in my speech that night, I talked
2 about uh, Act Up, and how Act Up was often times not
3 convenient, sometimes not polite, because people were
4 dying. And, they... They were forcing and
5 compelling elected officials to be held accountable.
6 And, so I always have welcomed that, right? That is
7 the role of activists/organizers, uh, members of the
8 community, members of the sector, right? It's to
9 push us. And, so, I think we share that, too, uh,
10 which is a healthy respect for the folks that we are
11 accountable to in this work while we are in these
12 positions, uhm, instead of being resentful of those
13 who are continuously pushing us to do more.

14 So, thank you again to your team. Uh, I
15 appreciate, uhm, the ability to do this with you
16 today, uh, and I want to thank you again, uh, Cristy
17 Dwyer, uhm, Aliya Ali, uh, Brenda, who is, once
18 again, taking care of two adorable little ones, Matt
19 Wallace my Chief of Staff, uh, Jack Bernatovicz who's
20 watching in Sunnyside.

21 Uhm, and with that, I will gavel out for the very
22 last time as the Chair of Committee Cultural Affairs,
23 Libraries and International Intergroup Relations --
24

2 the longest name of any committee in the New York
3 City Council.

4 Thank you all very much, with that, this hearing
5 is adjourned.

6 **[GAVEL]**

7 (APPLAUSE)

8 Thank you.

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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 January 27, 2022