

My name is Olympia Kazi. I'm a founding member of the NYC Artist Coalition and the Music Workers Alliance. Thank you, Committee Chairs Krueger, Weinstein, Kaplan, and Bronson for holding today's hearing on the economic development-related proposals in the Governor's Fiscal Year 2021-2022 Executive Budget.

This year's budget is critical, not only because of the pandemic, but also because of the shocking approach taken by Governor Cuomo who has imposed austerity and cuts of services that are impacting negatively the most vulnerable among us and could jeopardize the NYS recovery as a whole.

Today I'll ask you to fund two very important items that would be critical for the recovery of Arts and Culture, a sector that in 2019 contributed [\\$119.9 Billion to the New York State economy](#) and is one of the main drivers of tourism in the region: **Commercial Rent Relief and a WPA program for all workers in need.**

Many fail to realize that nonprofit and for-profit venues and arts and cultural institutions are commercial tenants and as such they face the same rent/landlord issues with all other small businesses. To establish a beloved cultural space with its community of artists, employees, suppliers and of course audience takes several years. This is even harder for smaller grassroots cultural spaces that serve low-income and minority communities. Before the pandemic many of these spaces were shutting down as a result of the affordability crisis and today the few surviving live with the uncertainty of what will happen when the back rent will be due and with the added risk of all the debt accrued during the pandemic. **We need to fund in this year's budget an equitable and accessible commercial rent relief program similar to the one proposed by S3349/A3190 bills for \$500 million.**

The NYC Artist Coalition advocates for the safety and preservations of grassroots cultural spaces and is a member of United for Small Business NYC (USBnyc), a coalition of community groups that fight for owner-operated, minority-run small businesses that serve low-income and minority communities.

Music Workers Alliance is a group of mostly independent musicians and DJs who got organized after being fed up with unfair treatment and lack of benefits, contracts, and representation. They fought for pandemic unemployment, healthcare and rent relief to address the urgent survival issues of artists but now they need to get back to producing work safely. The cultural production and overall economy in our State won't be fully back up and running for several years, so a WPA style program would be a good investment to employ the unemployed and underemployed artists and to make sure that our society as a whole has access to new, local, live arts and cultural performances and experiences.

Almost all of New York's performing artists have been shut down since mid-March 2020. A broken and piecemeal unemployment system has left culture workers struggling to survive. [Americans for the Arts](#) found 62% of arts and cultural workers are entirely unemployed, including more than 69% of Black and Indigenous artists and artists of color. According to a [survey](#) conducted between November and December 2020, the [Music Workers Alliance](#) (MWA) found, "71% of musicians and DJs surveyed have lost three quarters or more of their income." Many have dipped into savings, moved to cut expenses, and considered changing careers. Similar stories extend across the performing arts sector.

New York needs to create a program for its performing artists modeled after the depression-era Works Progress Administration (WPA) and Federal Theater Project (FTP). Under these programs, the government directly created jobs (i.e. non-grant-based direct funding) for the creation of public works of art and culture. Without immediate funding guaranteed for New York's arts and culture workers, New York's culture industry will never come back. These workers are moving out of NYS and/or abandoning their field after a year of a complete hiatus. **Funds must be added in this year's budget call for a modern-day New York WPA as outlined in [A02409/S01141](#)**

We also believe that to fund commercial rent relief and a WPA program that will be essential to economic recovery and development we need to pass the [Invest in Our New York](#) Act. We need revenue raised this year and we need not just to reinstate all the services that were cut but also add funding and increase the budget for programs and policies that put people first and empower them to succeed in our State despite adversity.

The arts in NYC are facing a crisis in unparalleled proportions. We need to go much further than the "[New York Arts Revival](#)" proposed by Governor Cuomo that despite its best efforts, fails to meet the overwhelming needs of struggling performers today. For hundreds of thousands of artists, the COVID-19 pandemic has erased their livelihoods, careers, and income sources. Musicians, DJs, composers, sound artists, dancers, choreographers, actors, playwrights, directors, theater-makers, and allperforming artists and other workers who support their creative endeavors stand ready to create public works. The State needs to prioritize getting money to New York's unemployed arts and culture workers so they can feed their families, keep a roof over their heads, and create the works of art that enrich and heal our communities. Now is the time to take bold and decisive steps by putting artists to work with a WPA program and initiating an equitable commercial rent relief program. The future of the arts in our state depends on it.