



January 29, 2024

Dear Legislators,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony in conjunction with the Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the 2024-2025 Executive Budget Proposal on the topics of Economic Development and the Arts. I am writing from my vantage point as the Executive Director of New York Folklore, a statewide organization supporting equity in arts and culture through the mechanism of folk and traditional arts. I have served as Executive Director for twenty-five years and have witnessed the importance of the arts within New York's communities.

I am writing to request continuing robust support for the New York State Council on the Arts, and, in particular, for its mission to support the cultural heritage of New York State. In a study prepared in 2023, *Upstate's Creative Spark: How the Arts Is Catalyzing Economic Vitality Across Upstate New York*, The Center for an Urban Future examined the importance of the arts as an economic driver for Upstate New York. This recent study points to the robust increase in employment in arts and culture, and the increase by 25% of artists working in Upstate New York's small cities and towns from 2011 to 2021. The result has been the reinvigoration of downtowns throughout non-metropolitan New York. This has occurred even while the support by NYSCA overall has decreased from 35.6% from 63.1 million in grant support to the arts in FY 2008 to \$40.6 million today.

Support from the New York State Council on the Arts is an important tool for Upstate New York communities to enliven their Main Streets and to support the cultural heritage of all of New York's populations. As the Executive Director of New York Folklore, an organization dedicated to supporting traditional arts and culture throughout New York State, I have witnessed firsthand the impact of arts funding on marginalized communities, including communities of color and new immigrant communities. Those arts that are embedded within these communities are important for community health, as when people see their own cultural information being validated by governmental and community institutions, they also perceive that are valued by the greater community of New Yorkers. Folk Arts activity such as those promulgated by regional folk arts programs within arts councils have brought communities together.

For thirty eight years, the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) has supported a "folk arts" category to specifically reach underserved audiences and artists who reflect the diverse heritage found in New York State. Folk and traditional arts are those arts that are generated and nurtured by, and within, communities of affiliation. The artforms reflect community heritage, a shared history, and a shared understanding of what is "beautiful". The proliferation of folk arts expressions has been supported through the Folk Arts Program of NYSCA. Because of the outside validation provided by NYSCA, a member of the general public

can experience such diverse artistic expressions as West Indian Carnival in Brooklyn; Haudenosaunee beadwork in multiple native communities; Afghan kuchi dress making with newly resettled Afghan women in Albany; African American “step dance,” in Binghamton; old time Adirondack fiddling in Osceola; the Mexican Day of the Dead in Medina; Turkish ebru (paper marbling) in Niagara, and much more.

As champions for folk artists, regional folk arts programs funded through NYSCA’s folk arts program have worked with dozens of folk, traditional, and community-based artists to submit successful individual artist and apprenticeship applications to NYSCA. The work of these regionally based programs and the direct outreach to artists has dramatically increased NYSCA’s impact. From 2022 to 2023 Individual Artist Grants in Folk & Traditional Arts doubled from 5.5% to 9.4% of total applications. This advocacy on the part of established folk arts programs is important to NYSCA’s outreach to underserved communities. NYSCA support for individual artists has provided artists’ employment and vitality within New York State. However, while NYSCA continues to be a supportive mechanism for the arts in New York State, in the past few years it has abandoned its focus on regional arts programs generally. Through this shift, folk arts programs which serve the most marginalized of New York’s residents at the county and regional level have seen a loss of funding. Arts Education programs have also suffered through this dwindling emphasis on program support by the New York State Council on the Arts.

NYSCA has been and should continue to be a model for the nation in terms of arts funding. I implore the legislature to pass a robust budget for NYSCA and to encourage the new leadership at NYSCA to ensure that the funds reach the state’s underserved and indigenous communities - and its folk and community-based artists - through program-based initiatives.

Finally, I encourage the creation of additional support for the arts through the Regional Economic Development program of the Department of State. Support for the arts at the regional level is important for the vibrancy of Upstate communities. The arts need to be better instituted into New York’s economic development planning, providing another vehicle for supporting economic revitalization, especially within New York’s smaller cities, towns, and villages.

Thank you for your attention and thank you for your support for the New York State Council on the Arts and for New York’s arts and culture initiatives.

Sincerely,



Ellen McHale  
Executive Director  
New York Folklore  
129 Jay Street  
Schenectady, NY 12305