

From: Christopher Kaufman Ilstrup
Sent: Thursday, September 10, 2020 9:45 AM
Subject: Support for Vermont Arts Council COVID-19 request

Dear Senator Sirotkin and members of the Committee,

I write today in strong support of the Vermont Arts Council's request for \$6 million dollars in additional COVID-19 relief for the cultural sector. Vermont Humanities has worked closely with the Vermont Arts Council since the beginning of the pandemic. There is no organization better placed to manage distribution of relief funding and services for the sector than the Arts Council.

As the Arts Council has testified, hundreds of cultural institutions are shuttered or operating at extremely reduced capacity, with great hardship not just for their own employees but also for the many local businesses like restaurants, retail stores, and gas stations, that rely on the traffic that cultural organizations bring to our city, town and village centers. Vermont Humanities worked in partnership with the Vermont Arts Council to distribute federal CARES Act relief dollars from the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities in the early months of the pandemic and we can testify to the enormous losses suffered by our sector over the summer that are now likely to continue throughout the remainder of 2020 and well into 2021. Many experts predict that the cultural sector will not be able to fully reopen until the summer or fall of 2021.

Vermont Humanities supports the Vermont Arts Council's for request \$6 million to address the two most urgent needs in Vermont's creative sector.

1) Prevent permanent closure of Vermont's core cultural institutions (\$4 million)

Grants are needed to help cover fixed operating expenses for cultural organizations that remain closed or operating at reduced capacity in order to protect public health. These organizations need immediate and direct support to make up for a devastating loss of revenue and to help meet basic operating expenses until they can safely re-open. Vermont Humanities works with museums, galleries, and libraries across Vermont that are struggling to maintain their historic infrastructure during a time when there is no possibility of reclaiming lost earned revenue. And we must emphasize that private philanthropy cannot fill the gap. Many of our partner organizations rely on the busy summer and fall tourist seasons, as well as shoulder season school field trips, for the majority of their earned income. Iconic organizations like the Shelburne Museum, the Old Stone House, the Fairbanks Museum, and the American Precision Museum are in deep trouble without immediate and ongoing financial assistance.

Costs for maintaining infrastructure for these institutions do not go away simply because they are closed or operating at reduced capacity. Many will not survive without additional relief. We support providing relief grants that would cover 40% of an organization's monthly fixed operating costs for 4-6 months, while they remain

closed or operating at reduced capacity to protect public health. Grants would be awarded based on demonstrated urgent economic need.

2) Technical support for cultural nonprofits and creative sector businesses to meet the challenges of operating safely in a COVID-19 environment. (\$2 million)

As the Arts Council noted in their testimony, across our state, artists and cultural organizations are creatively navigating through the economic disruptions caused by COVID-19, re-imagining their missions, offering online concerts, workshops, lectures, and drive-in performances, and struggling to revise their business models. However, this creativity and innovation can only go so far – pop-up concerts or on-line lectures provide a morale boost for struggling neighborhoods and put a little cash into the pockets of a few artists or scholars, but they are not a sustainable or long-term solution to the disruption caused by the pandemic. The Arts Council has proposed a thoughtful technical assistance and business model consulting program that would invest real dollars in struggling cultural institutions. This will help them not only weather the storm of the next 12-18 months but also develop skills and resources that will be valuable far in to the future.

Vermont Humanities joins with the Vermont Arts Council to state emphatically that the cultural sector is poised to help Vermont recover. But we need our museums, theaters, galleries and studios to be there for Vermont when the worst of this pandemic is behind us, to bring us back together, inspire us, and enable our communities and businesses to thrive again. Please support their proposal. I am available to answer any questions that the Chair or committee members may have, at your convenience.

Thank you,
Christopher Kaufman Ilstrup

Christopher Kaufman Ilstrup
Executive Director
Vermont Humanities

Working at home, please use my cell phone to call.

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