

Testimony of Congresswoman Louise M. Slaughter
Appropriations Subcommittee on the Interior and Environment
Thursday, April 19, 2007

Good morning. I would like to thank Chairman Dicks and Ranking Member Tiahrt for the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee today on an issue that is near and dear to my heart—the promotion of art and culture through support of the National Endowment for the Arts. Mr. Chairman, it has been a pleasure to work with you every year in support of federal arts initiatives, and I very much appreciate all of your efforts. I would also like to thank Congressman Chris Shays who will be here later to express his support for the arts and for working with me over the past 10 years to restore funding to the NEA.

The arts define our culture and instill unique character in the communities across our nation. Art transcends barriers of language, time, and generation, translating cultural differences, breathing life into history, and bridging experiences across cultures. Recognizing this, and the inherent educational benefits of exposure to art, the federal government has allocated federal funding to the NEA to promote the development and advancement of arts programs across the country.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Congress funded the NEA at \$170 million to carry out its mission to support excellence in the arts and ensuring that all Americans would have access to the arts. But the NEA's funding was eroded in 1995 and 1996, and has never recovered from the 40 percent budget cut it sustained.

Today, its invaluable programs remain seriously underfunded, and the agency continues to struggle to meet the growing demand for its popular programs including *Shakespeare in American Communities* and *The Big Read*. *Shakespeare in American Communities* brings the works of Shakespeare to small and medium sized communities across the nation that might not otherwise be able to put on those productions. *The Big Read* is reviving an interest in reading American classics by coordinating community programs in which cities read and discuss a particular book. In my own district, *Big Read* continues again this year after last year's very successful pilot program. Together, these programs are revitalizing a culture that has been overcome by reality TV and shows that do little to promote dialogue and discourse in our society.

In addition to its national education and literacy initiatives, the NEA's popular *Challenge America* program uses the arts to enhance America's communities through direct grants for arts education, youth-at-risk, cultural preservation, community arts partnerships and improved access to the arts for all Americans. Through this program, the NEA supports local arts programs in every congressional district across the country.

And it is therefore no surprise that the Nonprofit Arts Industry contributes \$134 billion to our national economy every year and provides nearly 5 million full-time equivalent jobs.

That translates into \$10.5 billion in federal tax revenue, \$7.3 billion in state tax revenue, and \$6.6 billion in local government revenue.

Federal funding for the arts has a ripple effect on our entire economy. A 2006 study by the Arts Education Partnership found that schools with large populations of students living in economic poverty can begin transforming themselves into vibrant and successful centers of learning and community life when the arts are infused into curriculums and daily activities. Investing in the arts is a sound public policy, and we must continue to do it.

Aside from the economic benefits we must continue to cultivate, exposing our young people to the arts is essential if we ever hope for them to reach their fullest potential. Employers today in America and abroad are looking for creative and dynamic young men and women to fill their rosters. To give our children the tools they need for success, we must invest in giving them access to arts education. NEA supports life-long learning in the arts which is critical to the development of our children. Students score higher on their SATs, have greater self-confidence, and are more focused in their studies when they have arts education.

More importantly, there is mounting evidence that arts programs designed for at-risk youth help prevent crime and reduce juvenile delinquency. A recent study conducted by the NEA, the Department of Justice, and Americans for the Arts, found that at-risk youth who participated in art programs had better communications skills and were able to follow-thru with assigned tasks when compared to those who did not participate in those programs. The youth were also more confident, had higher self-esteem, and fewer court referrals than their non-participating peers. Anecdotal evidence only adds credence to these findings. NEA support is essential to many community organizations that provide arts programs to these children, and it provides the resources necessary for educators and other community groups to integrate arts into their programming.

I understand that there are many important requests before your subcommittee this year, and that there are many federal agencies struggling to overcome funding shortages. However, due to the reasons I have stated here today I am compelled to ask that you take into consideration the returns we get on our investment in the arts. American artists share with us a piece of their spirit and their soul with every creation. It is a labor of love for artists, and it brightens the life of each one of us - bringing us joy and comfort, enlightenment, and understanding in ways impossible to find otherwise.

The arts and artists of America are our national treasure, which this great Nation needs, deserves, and must support as do other nations around the globe.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today, and I urge you to support funding for the NEA to the greatest extent possible.