Freshman Rep. Teresa Leger Fernandez (D-NM), along with Rep. Jay Obernolte (R-CA) introduced a bipartisan bill this month, entitled “Creative Economy Revitalization Act” (CERA). This bill would invest in jobs for artists and other creative workers, in support of local economies harmed by COVID-19. CERA would authorize $300 million through a grant program at the U.S. Department of Labor, in coordination with the National Endowment for the Arts. These grants would go to local, state, tribal, and workforce agencies, as well as public and private nonprofit entities, to support business initiatives to employ creative workers. Projects could include public artworks, festivals, performances, visual and media art, arts education, and written works that capture narratives from first responders and historically marginalized communities. The bill is endorsed by the Americans for the Arts Action Fund and over 175 organizations and unions, representing arts and culture workers across the country.

Additionally, the Congresswoman successfully added an amendment to the $3.5 trillion infrastructure and jobs bill that would include “arts and entertainment” among a list of industries eligible for $10 billion in partnership grants through the Department of Labor.

“Our country faces converging economic, health, and climate crises that have exposed and exacerbated inequities, while a historic movement for justice has highlighted the unbearable human costs of systemic racism. Our Nation deserves an ambitious whole-of-government equity agenda.”
-- President Joe Biden

President Joe Biden continues to follow through on his Day One Executive Order of “Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government”. The order requests every federal agency to conduct comprehensive reviews of their agencies and to submit an Equity Assessment by August 8, 2021, to the Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy. Each federal agency's Equity Assessment will include recommended changes that will advance racial equity within their programs and increase equitable access to opportunities in underserved communities.

Equity Assessment plans will specifically include:
- Investigating potential barriers to equity in agency policies and actions
- Proposing changes in presidential budget to promote equity
- Promoting equitable delivery of government benefits and equitable opportunities
- Engaging with members of underserved communities, and
- Establishing an equitable data working group

Research shows that closing racial gaps in economic factors such as wages, housing credit, lending opportunities, and access to higher education would also add $5 trillion to the GDP.
Message from Executive Director Nina Ozlu Tunceli

Dear Arts Action Fund Member,

The coronavirus has had a devastating impact on the nation’s arts sector. Artists and creative workers were—and remain—among the most severely affected segment of the nation’s workforce. At the height of the pandemic in 2020, 63% of artists and creative workers experienced unemployment and 95% lost arts-based income. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics captured the immediate crush of the pandemic on artist employment, noting that in the 90 days between February and April 2020, arts jobs dropped from 2.5 million to 1.2 million (a 53% decrease). The number of employed artists has since rebounded to 2.2 million—promising, but arts jobs are still down 12% since the pandemic’s onset.

Certain artist categories were extremely slow to recover. As of June 2021—when the nation’s unemployment rate dropped to 5.4%—actors had an unemployment rate of 35% and dancers/choreographers 28%. Similarly, job losses at nonprofit arts organizations were nearly four times worse than the average of all nonprofit organizations (-17.4% vs. -4.5%).

An ongoing survey of artists by Americans for the Arts has demonstrated additional challenges being faced by artists. 37% have been unable to access or afford food at some point during the pandemic, and 58% have not visited a medical professional due to an inability to pay. Alarmingly, our survey also shows that BIPOC artists experienced even higher rates of unemployment than their white counterparts in 2020 (69% vs. 60%) and lost a larger percentage of their creative income (61% vs. 56%). The Arts Action Fund is continuing to alert elected officials at the federal, state, and local levels, as well as private sector funders and decision makers about these dire statistics impacting the arts. You can access more COVID-19 research on both the Americans for the Arts and Arts Action Fund websites.

Shuttered Venue Operators Grant (SVOG) Update

As of September 20, 2021, the Small Business Administration (SBA) has awarded $9.7 billion in SVOG grants to 11,966 performing arts organizations and venues, museums and government entities with performing arts facilities, movie theaters, talent representatives, and theater producers. This is the largest federal arts and culture relief program in our nation’s history with a total of $16.25 billion appropriated.

The SBA team recently announced that it would start disbursing Supplemental grants to eligible SVOG awardees beginning Wednesday, September 22, 2021. Awardees with at least a 70% loss in earned revenue in Q1 of 2021, as compared to Q1 of 2019, will be eligible to receive up to 50% of the original grant award, not to exceed a total of $10 million. Look for an actionable item in your SVOG application portal asking you to update your Q1 or Q2 financials for 2021. SBA is now requiring the Q1 2021 information be updated to trigger an invite to a Supplemental grant. Responding to the Supplemental invite will also give awardees the opportunity to extend their budget deadline to use all SVOG funds for an additional six months to June 30, 2022.

SBA also confirmed that there will be sufficient funds to cover all eligible SVOG grant requests, any successful appeals or reconsiderations, and all eligible supplemental awards. If you have any issues with your application, please e-mail svogrant@sba.gov.

Congressional Earmarks

For the first time in a decade, Congress has reinstated member-directed spending, commonly known as congressional earmarks. Because of this change, members of Congress now have the opportunity to direct about $15 billion toward projects in their home districts. Historically, arts and culture organizations have benefitted from member-directed spending, receiving funding for local museums, theaters, arts education programs, community and cultural centers, and public arts spaces. So far this year, members of Congress have proposed over $200 million in member-directed spending on arts and culture projects. Americans for the Arts recently hosted a webinar that explained the member-directed spending process and how local and state arts leaders can work with their congressional delegation to fund these arts-related projects. You can find the August 4, 2021 webinar recording and resources on ArtsU.
National Endowment for the Arts COVID-19 Relief Grants

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has created two COVID-19 relief grant programs with the $135 million provided through the American Rescue Plan. The programs recognize the central role that local arts agencies and arts organizations play in supporting artists, enhancing the quality of life in their communities, and increasing public access and equity to the arts and BIPOC artists.

Americans for the Arts and the Arts Action Fund held two webinars on these new NEA programs. National Endowment for the Arts speakers encouraged first time applicants, BIPOC organizations, and other groups who are looking to center equity in their mission statements to apply. Webinar recordings and resources are available below:

6/29/21: Applying for the NEA Grant Program for Local Arts Agencies to Subgrant
7/6/21: Applying for the NEA Direct Grant Program for Arts and Culture Organizations

Major State Arts Appropriation Increases

History is also happening this year in the states with record investments in the arts. In California, under the leadership of Julie Baker, Californians for the Arts Executive Director, Governor Gavin Newsom and the state legislature allocated a substantial arts investment package. This includes $50 million to fund the Go Biz program providing grants to small nonprofit performing arts organizations; another $150 million for Go Biz and the California Office of the Small Business Advocate for live events venues and businesses; and $128 million to the California Arts Council of which $60 million is to be used for the California Creative Corps Pilot program among other programs. You can read the Californians for the Arts press release on their website.

In Ohio, a record $40 million has been funded to the Ohio Arts Council. In New Jersey, the State Council on the Arts saw an increase close to $12 million, for an all-time high of $31.9 million.

In South Carolina, the state arts commission in partnership with the state department of education announced a $20 million investment to assist public schools to respond to pandemic-related loss of learning using arts-based initiatives.

Earlier this year, Congresswoman Alma Adams (D-NC) introduced the Saving Transit Art Resources (STAR) Act, which would restore local control to transit authorities regarding the integration of art and non-functional landscaping into federally funded transit projects and facilities. As a promising step in advancing the legislation, the STAR Act was successfully incorporated into the House version of the mega Infrastructure bill. Unfortunately, the Senate did not follow suit. There may be another opportunity this fall to include this arts provision when the House and Senate negotiate the final Infrastructure bill.

Public art has been incorporated into U.S. transportation projects since the 1800s, and federal support for art to embellish public facilities is a longstanding tradition that began in the mid-1930s under the Works Progress Administration (WPA). In 2015, however, Congress prohibited local transit authorities from using Federal Transit Administration (FTA) funds for art in transit. The STAR Act provision would reverse the 2015 rule and give local transit authorities the opportunity to commission art in transit projects. This would encourage ridership, improve customer experience, deter vandalism, galvanize community spirit, and increase safety and security.

For more details, visit the Americans for the Arts News Room.

Artwork by Jacob Lawrence, “New York in Transit”, 2007
Photo Credit, @mksfca Creative Commons.
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Click here to make a gift to the Arts Action Fund.