



Testimony to the NY State Assembly Standing Committee on Economic Development, Job Creation, Commerce and Industry legislative hearing on the Fiscal Year (FY) 20250-26 Executive Budget Proposal: Economic Development/Arts

Submitted to the New York State Assembly, on February 14, 2025

Prepared by Candace Thompson-Zachery, Co-Executive Director of Dance/NYC

Dear Legislators,

Thank you for this time today. My name is Candace Thompson-Zachery, she/her pronouns and Co-Executive Director of Dance/NYC. I am submitting this testimony on behalf of Dance/NYC (dance.nyc), a service organization that reaches over 6,000 individual dance artists, 1,700 dance-making entities, and the many for-profit dance businesses based in the metropolitan New York City area. Its areas of service are of special benefit to BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and Peoples of Color), immigrant, disabled, low-income, and small-budget dance workers. Our action-oriented research and advocacy seek to represent and advance the interests of the dance industry embedding the values of justice, equity, and inclusion.

*I am here to help make the case to our leaders in the Assembly and Senate that **New York needs a Statewide Creative Economy Plan** and to urge you to allocate resources for an intergovernmental effort to advance this work.*

I request that the State Apparatus consider building a Statewide Creative Economy Plan that includes:

1. *An assessment of the opportunities and possibilities available to expand **benefits and labor protections**.*
2. *A feasibility and benefits analysis for creating **Portable Benefits Pilots***



New York's creative sector is a critical contributor to the state's overall economy but faces enormous challenges. From my industry, **dance organizations and workers in NYC are still reeling from the effects of the pandemic, the subsequent retraction of pandemic relief funding and the continued effects of inflation and the affordability crisis.** Dance/NYC's 2023 research report on the State of NYC Dance tells us that,⁶ 40% of dance organizations are classifying their financial health as weak or very weak, there is an increase on the reliance of contributed income, up by 8% and more than half of organizations do not have access to reserves. We saw 22 dance venues/organizations permanently close in the pandemic and that number has continued to grow. Dance workers themselves on average earn about 15% below NYC's living wage with that percentage continuing to grow, with dancers and choreographers earning the least with an average annual wage of about \$23K from dance. From CRNY's most recent research we know that 63% of NY state artists report their finances as unstable or extremely unstable and have no emergency savings. Additionally, these impacts are felt most acutely by arts workers who identify as BIPOC, immigrants, and disabled among communities with less access to capital reserves. **We need strong support at the state level to ensure our workers and organizations can survive this economic climate,** remain in the state and continue in the creative sector. Our 2021 COVID-19 Research Brief indicated that around 5% of dance workers had relocated permanently and another 17% were considering permanent relocation. Our assumption is that as economic conditions continue to worsen this trend will persist.

Our state's economic policymakers cannot remain on the sidelines of this industry catastrophe. Our leaders must develop **a statewide plan to counter these challenges** and ensure a thriving creative economy in New York that creates opportunities for a broad swath of New Yorkers. A Statewide Creative Economy Plan can help government study new opportunities to address **the needs of creative organizations, businesses, and workers** -- and to turn those opportunities into concrete, coordinated proposals for new investments, programs, and legislative initiatives.



Dance/NYC urges policymakers to advance a Statewide Creative Economy Plan that includes a careful assessment of opportunities to **strengthen labor protections and improve working conditions for creative workers in our state**. One of the main challenges dance workers face is one of weak working conditions and protections. They share this challenge with the broader community of independent and gig workers. Our country has created a benefit and social safety net largely around the single-employer model that is increasingly untenable, as the way work happens is evolving to be more flexible and iterative in nature. We need policies that support this type and arrangement of work that do not automatically make freelance workers into a second-class population. We believe that one goal of the Creative Economy Plan should be to identify feasible, creative, and sustainable policies and programs for freelance creative workers to **access high-quality healthcare benefits**. While some creative workers can access benefits through unions, many others are left out because of the project-based nature of their work. This is true for dance workers in NYC as 37% of them do not have medical coverage, 82% are not part of a union and 41% of artists in a survey by CRNY of 2400 artists across the state reported being vulnerable to a single medical emergency.

New York's Creative Economy Plan should incorporate an **assessment of the feasibility and impact of New York State establishing a grant program to fund portable benefits pilot programs** that work for uninsured creative workers. Portable Benefits enable non-traditional workers to accumulate employer contributions and maintain benefits that stay with the worker across different jobs and gigs. To design a pilot program, there are ample precedents to draw from. Since 2018, state lawmakers in at least ten states have introduced legislation to establish portable benefits programs for gig workers or create funds to study program feasibility and need. These kinds of efforts to support New York's creative workers also have the potential to support freelance, gig, and other nontraditional workers, and ultimately help to position our region as a pioneer in supporting the future of work.



Committing to the creation of a Statewide Creative Economy Strategic Plan can help New York set itself up to advance these kinds of solutions as part of a **coordinated effort to support creative organizations, businesses, and workers across a wide range of needs**. We urge New York's policymakers to allocate resources for New York to get strategic about expanding opportunities in our state's creative economy.