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Testimony of David Garza, President & CEO, Henry Street Settlement
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Economic Development/Arts

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Introduction: On behalf of Henry Street Settlement and Abrons Arts Center, I would like to thank the Senate Finance Committee and Assembly Ways and Means Committee for your attention to the following testimony, and for your thoughtful consideration of the important issues impacting New York’s creative community.

For 132 years, Henry Street Settlement has opened doors of opportunity for Lower East Side residents and other New Yorkers through social service, arts, and health care programs. Today, Henry Street reaches more than 50,000 community members each year—including at Abrons Arts Center, which is the visual and performing arts arm of our organization and a home for contemporary interdisciplinary arts in Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Abrons believes that access to the arts is essential for a thriving city, serving more than 20,000 New Yorkers per year through a vibrant range of performances, exhibitions, arts education programs, studio/theater rental programs, and professional artist residences.

Henry Street is submitting the following testimony 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.

Need for a Statewide Creative Economy Plan: New York’s creative economy is a critical contributor to the state’s overall economy, but faces enormous challenges. With other regions presently emerging as hubs for cultural and creative entrepreneurship, many creative workers are leaving our state because they cannot make ends meet. As a social service agency that also operates an arts center, Henry Street is uniquely positioned to witness the ways in which NYC’s artists are directly impacted by the city’s acute

cost-of-living crisis. For example, we will soon be onboarding dedicated social work staff to our Abrons Arts Center team, in response to the persistently significant case management needs among our professional artists-in-residence. Further, in spring 2024 Henry Street conducted a focus group among Abrons' artist community which illustrated similar trends. One participant articulated the tension between the humanizing impact of art, which was felt to be stronger than ever in the wake of the pandemic, and the devaluation of artists within the cultural economy. *"I think people love art,"* he said, *"they just don't value the artists."*

Within this context, the state's economic policymakers should develop a statewide plan to counter these challenges, and to 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 our 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.

Impact and Opportunity of Artist Employment Programs: Henry Street urges policymakers to advance a Statewide Creative Economy Plan that includes a **feasibility and benefits analysis of creating artist employment programs** to address environmental, health, and safety needs in communities. A proven strategy to improve economic security among artists and creative workers is to provide public sector employment opportunities aligned with creative practices. We know that many artists and creative workers address public policy issues in their work—such as environmental justice, community safety, and mental health—and would be an asset to government efforts to address those issues in communities. Public-sector artist employment programs are not a new concept—most notably, federal programs like the Works Projects Administration (WPA) in 1935 and the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) in 1974 created thousands of jobs for unemployed or under-employed artists and creatives. Today, there is a growing number of artist-in-residence programs at all levels of government across the country. New York City's Public Artists in Residence (PAIR) program alone has employed over 24 artists to work directly within agencies spanning public safety, human rights, health, and immigration.

The impact and potential of such programs is further underscored within Henry Street's local community of artists. Among respondents from our aforementioned spring 2024 artist focus groups, many shared that the devaluation of artists manifests in both payment structures and precarious employment conditions. Many career artists find themselves earning unsustainable wages, with payment often tied to the completion of projects rather than a regular, stable paycheck. Several artists in the focus groups were part of Creatives Rebuild New York's (CRNY) groundbreaking Artist Employment Program—a cohort of professional artists who were on staff at Abrons Arts Center for two years (2022-2024), earning a \$65,000 salary and benefits—who emphasized the transformative impact of this financial stability on their capacity to plan and sustain their livelihoods. Yet, such reforms remain rare, and the overall gig-based nature of artistic work continues to generate significant anxiety for those striving to support themselves and their families.

As an indication of what other States are doing, and what New York can iterate upon: both the Minnesota and Washington State Departments of Transportation have hosted artists-in-residence to

great success. The broader creative placemaking movement, which has documented the impact that artists and arts organizations have across multiple sectors, can provide additional evidence and case-making for government officials.

Conclusion: 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. I urge New York's policymakers to allocate resources for New York to get strategic about expanding opportunities in our state's creative economy. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify, and for your attention to these vital issues for advancing our state's creative economy.