

Opening Statement of Ulysses Slaughter
Hearing : The Effects of COVID-19 on Arts and Humanities Organizations
Committee: House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee: Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
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Introduction

Good afternoon. My name is Ulysses Slaughter. I am the Senior Project Manager for the Pennsylvania Humanities Council and the Project Manager for the arts and culture initiative Chester Made. Today I'd like to talk to you about how COVID-19 has impacted places like Chester, Pennsylvania and cultural organizations throughout our state, and how CARES funds are helping us to continue to reclaim, repurpose, and rebuild our lives and communities. I want to thank subcommittee Chair Congresswoman Pingree and the members of this subcommittee for inviting me to testify at this difficult time in history where we are being called to rise to a challenge unlike any challenge we have ever known or faced as a nation.

The Pennsylvania Humanities Council is one of the many state humanities councils across the nation that partners with the National Endowment for the Humanities. We put the humanities in action to create positive change. We are the voice and leader for Pennsylvania's cultural sector, including our museums, historical societies, and public libraries.

Over the last two decades I've worked on the ground with Chester's creative and cultural communities through the project we call Chester Made. Though I was born in Chicago, Illinois, I am proud to say I was raised - I was made - in Chester Pennsylvania. I am in fact Chester Made. I am proud to be both a witness and actor on the stage of Chester's relentless fight to bring peace, joy and harmony to a town that refuses to be defeated.

Chester, PA

Chester, Pennsylvania is the first city of Pennsylvania, a city of 30,000 that lies just west of Philadelphia. Founded in 1682 by William Penn, Chester thrived in the early 20th century as a manufacturing hub. Like many industrial cities, fortunes fell when factories closed. Nevertheless, where some people see boarded up stores and disinvestment today, I see what other artists see: I see cultural assets. I see raw resources awaiting transformation. I know its most precious resource - its people, its human capital -- comes to life through the artists and entrepreneurs who populate Chester neighborhoods like Overtown, Sun Village and The West End .

To be clear, Chester is one of the hardest hit places in Pennsylvania, not just because of the pandemic, but because of a long history of racial, environmental and economic injustice. Still, it's not surprising that legendary martial artist Freda "Cheetah" Gibbs comes from Chester. This city has a resilient and fighting spirit that inspired The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, as a student at Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester. It inspired the melody of a woman named Ethel Waters as well.

Chester Made

Chester Made was named by the people of Chester and based on the slogan "What Chester Makes, Makes Chester." Chester Made is a humanities-based initiative to celebrate and promote arts and culture in Chester, Pennsylvania and harness that power as a force for community revitalization.

Chester Made is a community project The Pennsylvania Humanities Council co-creates with people who live, work, and play in Chester. PHC started the project by creating a story-based asset map with residents about the arts and culture they treasured, Chester Made is based on the simple idea that community revitalization can be accomplished by building on the strengths and talents of its community residents.

PHC worked with residents and artists on the creation of a downtown maker space, We produced videos that celebrated local arts and history, co-curated pop-up art shows, and provided workshops exploring the history of the downtown, artist exchanges, and youth summer camps to make mini museums on family history. Storefront properties along Avenue of the States downtown have been purchased and renovated by African American residents. A theater was opened, in addition to art galleries and workspaces, restaurants, and shops in the neighborhood. Chester Made was making a noticeable difference in the community.

One of the many painful results of COVID-19 was watching all the vital and vibrant spaces in the community that housed Chester Made programs and opportunities for connection, education, and inspiration close their doors. But Chester is resilient and creative -- and it's no stranger to adversity. With the support of the PHC and the NEH, we went virtual; the people of Chester built new platforms and found new ways to engage.

Chester Made started a Digital Storytelling Project to let the people of Chester tell their own stories and continue to reclaim their history and rebuild their community. This brought healing, community, and historical perspective during an isolating time. It also created an opportunity for residents to develop storytelling and media-making skills to not only grow the project in Chester but to take it on the road to other communities

across the state. Our storytellers shared memories of growing up in Chester and their desire to shape its future. The story circle continues to grow with younger residents stepping forward to offer their talents and perspectives. Chester Made stays in touch with local artists and is assisting them with new projects in anticipation of public gatherings in the near future.

It's no coincidence that President Joe Biden visited Chester this month -- Chester, Pennsylvania is at the forefront of the meaningful change that needs to happen everywhere.

As are the many communities PHC works with across the state with its PA Community Heart and Soul program. There are 14 towns, including one of its newest located in Committee member Congressman Matt Cartwright's district. Tucked away in Northeastern Pennsylvania, the City of Carbondale (pop 8,482), is renewing itself too and building on its historic charms and hidden treasures. Known as "The Pioneer City", it was one of the sparks that ignited the Industrial Revolution more than a century ago. But we need more support to build upon the work we've accomplished so far in places like Carbondale and Chester.

Impact of COVID-19

There are communities across Pennsylvania that, like Chester and Carbondale, are fighting to rebuild and learn to adapt but the COVID impact on our state's creative and cultural sector is dire. Let me provide you some numbers to give you an idea of what we're facing.

- According to Americans for the Arts, last year, in 2020, our creative and cultural sector in PA experienced \$4.4 billion loss in revenue. More than half of our creative and cultural workers are now out of jobs and have no savings.
- In a nationwide study, the Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies recently reported that it is estimated that it will take the arts and cultural sector more than two years -- 26.4 months -- to improve.
- This last week, the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance released sobering data about what's happening in Chester and the entire region. The estimated total revenue loss for our sector from March 2020 - the beginning of the shutdown -- and now in March 2021 is \$371.7 million. 41% of responding organizations report they are not likely to survive beyond Fall 2021.

At PHC, we discovered similar circumstances among our applicants for CARES funding last year. In the first 6 months, our 313 statewide applicants reported \$66.8 million in losses, with our smallest organizations (with budgets under \$250k/year) like public libraries, hit the hardest. They reported over 2,131 layoffs, with 72% hourly staff. That's on average 7 layoffs per organization.

Impact of CARES Funding

The \$75 million that the NEH received in the CARES Act provided a lifeline for the organizations that received the grants and their surrounding communities. State councils received 40% of those funds -- \$30 million to distribute. In PA, together the NEH and PHC distributed over \$3.2 million to 161 organizations, with PHC awarding \$780,500 to 140 libraries, museums, and historic sites.

Though the funding was a lifeline, it was not enough to meet the need. Our applicants requested \$3.1 million. Nationwide, NEH could only fund 14% of its applications. Even with the increased additional funding we estimate to receive through the recent American Relief Bill, we will not meet the need in PA again, falling short by more than \$1.5 million.

“Road Trip” to Carlisle: CARES Grantee Cumberland County Historical Society

Let me tell you about one the recipients of our CARES awards: Cumberland County Historical Society in Carlisle, PA., which received \$10,000 to fund essential operations and creative, community-centered programming during this difficult time. Our funds helped to support staffing of a Community Outreach Director who worked in the Greater Carlisle area on PHC’s Community Heart & Soul program and to provide virtual and in person history programming in the community. Before and after the pandemic hit, Lindsay Varner Houpt played a key role in rebuilding and healing in the community. Like Chester Made, our Community Heart & Soul uses the tools of the humanities to creatively engage residents in planning and decision-making processes as a way to strengthen a town’s social, cultural and economic vibrancy.

In Mount Holly Springs, just outside of Carlisle, black residents were reluctant to share their stories about an abandoned church built by a former enslaved person. But a story-gatherer from the Greater Carlisle Heart & Soul project persuaded the Gumby family to bravely share their story, which led to community-led church preservation efforts leading to its eventual designation as a National Historic Landmark. That’s the humanities in action.

During the pandemic, that work did not stop. To raise awareness about the historic Lincoln Cemetery, the Cumberland County Historical Society worked with the Greater Carlisle community, the descendants of individuals buried in the cemetery, and local artists to recognize the over 600 people buried at Lincoln dating back to the 1900s. For years, the cemetery, which was a final resting place for many African-American residents, was neglected and ignored. There was no official recognition of this sacred land and headstones were removed or vandalized.

Humanities funding from PHC supported an effort to tell the story of the cemetery and restore honor to the individuals buried there. Residents wrote the names of the 676 individuals buried in the cemetery on colorful ribbons and tied them to the fence surrounding the land. The project culminated in the development of a permanent mural, led by local artist Jim Griffith, to honor those forgotten individuals.

According to Cara Holtry Curtis, archives and library director at CCHS, "This project led to renewed discussion about the history of the Lincoln cemetery. The borough recently issued an official resolution of apology for the treatment of this cemetery and the African-American community. There are still wounds that need to heal and stories that need to be shared but these projects are one step in the right direction."

Closing

These are the kinds of transformative stories we hear every day -- in places like Chester, Carbondale, and Carlisle. The humanities are helping PA communities reclaim, repurpose, and rebuild their future during this critical time. As we begin to open back up again, continue to support such efforts. Chester Made continues to celebrate the city's past and present, and is determined to support its residents through arts and culture to determine its future.

In closing, I'd like to re-emphasize that the cultural sector is resilient and our residents have the talent and will to come back stronger than before -- and it needs more substantive help at the federal level to support the work of the PHC and NEH to continue to make positive change with the humanities in PA.

Thank you.