



**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
COMMISSION ON THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES**

Fiscal Year 2020 Performance Oversight Hearing

Testimony of

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Executive Director
Commission on the Arts and Humanities

Before the

Committee of the Whole
Council of the District of Columbia
The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chairman

March 17, 2021
Via Zoom Video Conference Broadcast

GOOD AFTERNOON CHAIRMAN MENDELSON, COUNCILMEMBERS, COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND STAFF. MY NAME IS HERAN SEREKE-BRHAN AND I SERVE AS THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR FOR THE COMMISSION ON THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES. IT IS AN HONOR TO BE HERE TODAY TO TESTIFY ON THE COMMISSION'S PERFORMANCE IN FISCAL YEAR 2020, OUR ACCOMPLISHMENTS TO DATE IN FISCAL YEAR 2021, AND OUR PLANS FOR THE REMAINDER OF THE CURRENT YEAR AND BEYOND.

I'D LIKE TO BEGIN BY THANKING THE COUNCIL FOR CONFIRMING MY APPOINTMENT TO THIS POSITION IN NOVEMBER 2020. I DEEPLY APPRECIATE THE COUNCIL'S AND THE COMMISSION'S CONFIDENCE IN MY ABILITIES. I DO NOT TAKE THE RESPONSIBILITY OF SERVING IN THIS CAPACITY LIGHTLY AND CAN CONFIDENTLY SAY THAT I, ALONG WITH THE STAFF, CONTINUE TO PUT OUR BEST FOOT FORWARD IN SERVICE TO OUR ARTS AND HUMANITIES COMMUNITY, AND DISTRICT RESIDENTS, EACH AND EVERYDAY.

TODAY I WILL REPORT ON OUR PROGRESS IN SEVERAL OF THE PRIORITY AREAS IDENTIFIED AT LAST YEAR'S HEARING. THE FIRST OF THESE PRIORITIES WAS TO CREATE A NEW STRATEGIC PLAN AND A NEW PUBLIC ART MASTER PLAN THAT WOULD CHART OUR PATH FORWARD FOR THE NEXT THREE TO FIVE YEARS. I'M HAPPY TO REPORT THAT WE HAVE BEGUN BOTH PROCESSES AND ARE WORKING THROUGH CONSULTANTS TO ENGAGE VARIOUS STAKEHOLDERS, INCLUDING THE EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE MAYOR, COUNCIL, COMMISSIONERS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS.

BOTH PLANS WILL ALSO HAVE PUBLIC COMMENT PERIODS BEFORE WRAPPING UP AT THE END OF JUNE THIS YEAR.

OUR SECOND PRIORITY WAS AGENCY DEVELOPMENT, ASSESSING AND IMPROVING AGENCY STRUCTURES AND OVERALL OPERATIONS. WHEREAS IN THE PAST WE HAD ONLY ONE PERSON DESIGNATED AS MANAGEMENT SUPERVISORY SERVICE (MSS) AT THE AGENCY, IN NOVEMBER 2020 WE SUCCESSFULLY CREATED A FORMAL MANAGEMENT TIER. THIS ALLOWS DEPARTMENT HEADS TO PERFORM CERTAIN PERSONNEL ACTIONS, LIKE ANNUAL REVIEWS OF STAFF PERFORMANCE, GOAL SETTING AND MONITORING. THESE MSS POSITIONS GIVE THE AGENCY A MUCH-NEEDED MANAGEMENT AND REPORTING STRUCTURE, AND WILL ULTIMATELY ALLOW US TO BE MORE EFFECTIVE IN OUR WORK.

MOST SIGNIFICANTLY, FROM OCTOBER TILL DECEMBER 2019, I WAS HEAVILY ENGAGED WITH DCHR'S CENTER FOR LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT (CLD) AND THE NON-PROFIT NATIONAL ARTS STRATEGIES (NAS) TO CRAFT A HOLISTIC PLAN FOR AGENCY DEVELOPMENT THAT IS BEING IMPLEMENTED FROM NOW UNTIL SEPTEMBER THIS YEAR. TOPICS WILL INCLUDE MINDFUL COMMUNICATION, STRENGTH- AND PERSONALITY-BASED ASSESSMENTS, AND UNPACKING BIAS IN THE WORKPLACE. THESE AGENCY-WIDE TRAINING SESSIONS ARE INTENDED TO FOSTER A COLLABORATIVE AND VALUES-CENTERED ENVIRONMENT FOR ALL, WHICH IN TURN WILL ALLOW THE AGENCY TO BE MORE EFFECTIVE AND EFFICIENT IN DELIVERY OF OUR SERVICES.

OUR THIRD PRIORITY WAS TO DEVELOP NEW METRICS TO ASSESS CAH GRANT PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES AND EVALUATE THE IMPACT OF OUR FUNDING. ONE OF THE MOST PROBLEMATIC THINGS THAT WE HAVE COME TO KNOW IS THE REALIZATION OF WHAT WE DON'T KNOW.

WHEN WE SURVEY OUR GRANTEE PROFILES IN AN EFFORT TO DETERMINE HOW EQUITABLE OR INEQUITABLE OUR GRANTMAKING HAS BEEN IN REGARD TO RACE OR OTHER DEMOGRAPHICS, WE ARE CONFRONTED WITH THE FACT THAT THE AGENCY HAS NEVER COLLECTED THIS DATA, AND WE HAVE NO EVIDENCE FROM WHICH TO DRAW A CONCLUSION.

TO REMEDY THIS, WE CONDUCTED RESEARCH WITH LOCAL, STATE AND NATIONAL ARTS AGENCIES, TO LEARN FROM BEST PRACTICES AND HAVE ALREADY BEGUN COLLECTING DEMOGRAPHIC DATA FROM ORGANIZATIONAL GRANT APPLICANTS. WE WILL MAKE DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS A STANDARD PART OF OUR APPLICATIONS MOVING FORWARD.

WE PLAN TO CONSULT WITH PROFESSIONALS IN ANALYZING THE FINDINGS OF THIS DATA TO HELP DETERMINE HOW BEST TO LEVERAGE THE IMPACT OF OUR PUBLIC FUNDING TO STRENGTHEN THE VALUES OF INCLUSION, DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND ACCESS.

IT HAS ALREADY BEEN A LONG-STANDING PRACTICE OF OURS TO CONDUCT BLIND REVIEWS OF OUR GRANT APPLICATIONS. THIS WAS

IMPLEMENTED YEARS AGO IN AN EFFORT TO BE AS UNBIASED AS POSSIBLE. APPLICANT IDENTIFYING INFORMATION IS NOT SEEN BY THE GRANT REVIEW PANELISTS NOR BY THE COMMISSIONERS SO AS TO AVOID THE POSSIBILITY OF FAVORITISM OR BIAS. THE DEMOGRAPHIC DATA COLLECTED SHOULD HELP US IN REFINING THE PANEL REVIEW PROCESS AS NEEDED.

IN ADDITION TO RESEARCH AND PLANNING, WE HAVE TAKEN SOME CONCRETE ACTIONS TO BE MORE EQUITABLE AND INCLUSIVE IN OUR GRANTMAKING. IN 2020 WE REMOVED THE REQUIREMENT TO SUBMIT THE ARREST AND CONVICTION STATEMENT AS PART OF OUR GRANT APPLICATIONS. WE HAVE ALSO CREATED A NEW AND WEIGHTED EQUITY REQUIREMENT TO OUR REVIEW CRITERIA BEGINNING IN JANUARY 2021.

PERHAPS THE MOST SIGNIFICANT PRIORITY FROM LAST YEAR WAS TO REAFFIRM CAH'S ROLE AS A LEADING VOICE FOR THE ARTS AND CULTURE IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, AND THIS WILL CONTINUE TO BE A PRIORITY GOING FORWARD.

CHAIR KENDALL HAS ALREADY SHARED AN EXAMPLE OF HOW CAH HAS SHOWN LEADERSHIP THROUGH RELIEF FUNDING INITIATIVES DURING THIS PANDEMIC. ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF LEADERSHIP IN THE FIELD THAT I CAN SHARE RELATES TO THE DISTRICT'S OFFICIAL MUSIC: GO-GO.

AS PART OF OUR STATE ARTS AGENCY SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS IN 2020, WE INCLUDED A PROPOSAL TO LAUNCH A TRADITIONAL ARTS PROGRAM IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION, CULTURE AND MEDIA STUDIES AT HOWARD UNIVERSITY, WITH GO-GO BEING A KEY FOCUS OF THE PROGRAM. IF THIS PROPOSAL IS ACCEPTED BY THE NEA, CAH WILL RECEIVE ADDITIONAL FUNDS FROM THE ARTS ENDOWMENT DESIGNATED SPECIFICALLY FOR THIS TRADITIONAL ARTS PROGRAM.

THE POSSIBILITIES OF COLLABORATION AND EXCHANGE WITH HOWARD UNIVERSITY ARE INCREDIBLE, WITH THE POTENTIAL TO SHINE A SPOTLIGHT ON GO-GO AND ASPECTS OF DC'S CULTURE AND HISTORY.

IN CLOSING, I'D LIKE TO SAY THAT WE HAVE ALL EXPERIENCED A YEAR LIKE NO OTHER IN 2020. I AM ESPECIALLY GRATEFUL THAT WE HAVE MANAGED TO ACCOMPLISH SO MUCH AND STAY THE COURSE, DESPITE EVERYTHING.

THE THREE WORDS THAT EMBODY OUR EXPERIENCE AND SERVE AS A COMPASS FOR THE NEAR FUTURE ARE RESPONSIVENESS, RESPONSIBILITY AND RESILIENCE.

WE LOOK FORWARD TO SERVING OUR BELOVED ARTS AND HUMANITIES COMMUNITY BY STRENGTHENING OUR EFFORTS TO BE NIMBLE AND RESPONSIVE TO THEIR NEEDS. WE WILL CONTINUE TO

EXERCISE RESPONSIBLE OVERSIGHT OVER PUBLIC FUNDS. WE WILL SEEK WAYS OF SUPPORTING THE RESILIENCE OF THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES COMMUNITY THROUGH FUNDING AND RESOURCE SUPPORT.

I'D LIKE TO REAFFIRM THE AGENCY'S PLEDGE TO TEND TO THE HEALTH AND VIBRANCY OF THE ENTIRE ARTS AND CULTURE ECOSYSTEM, SO THAT INDIVIDUAL ARTISTS AS WELL AS SMALL-MEDIUM-SIZE AND LARGE ARTS ORGANIZATIONS CAN CONTINUE TO THRIVE IN THE DISTRICT.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME CHAIRMAN MENDLESON. I AM HAPPY TO ANSWER ANY QUESTIONS YOU MAY HAVE.