



Power of culture

UNOFFICIAL DRAFT SUBJECT TO APPROVAL BY THE COMMITTEE AT ITS NEXT MEETING

MINUTES OF THE MEETING

MASS CULTURAL COUNCIL PROGRAMS COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 6, 2025

ONLINE MEETING

Committee Members Present were

Cecil Barron-Jensen, Co-Chair of the Programs Committee
Julie Wake, Co-Chair of the Programs Committee
Marc Carroll, Council Chair
Jo-Ann Davis, Council Vice Chair
Ashley Occhino
Mark Snyder

Staff Members Present were

Michael J. Bobbitt, Executive Director
David Slatery, Deputy Executive Director
Jen Lawless, Senior Director of Program Operations
Catherine Cheng-Anderson, Chief Financial Officer
Bethann Steiner, Senior Director of Public Affairs
Ann Petruccelli Moon, Deputy Chief of Staff
Charles Baldwin, Program Officer
Dan Blask, Program Manager
Sara Glidden, Program Manager
Lisa Simmons, Program Manager
Christian Kelly, Public Relations & Events Manager
Jay Paget, Program Director

Co-Chair Cecil Barron Jensen called the meeting to order at 1:02pm and asked Deputy Executive Director David Slatery to read the Open Meeting Law statement. Cecil then asked if Committee Members had reviewed the minutes of their last meeting held on June 25, 2025, and called for a motion to approve them. After motion made and duly seconded, by roll call vote and noting that Simone Early, Donna Haghighat, and Emily Bramhall were absent it was unanimously

Prepared on 9/12/25

RESOLVED: that the Programs Committee approves the minutes of the June 25, 2025 Programs Committee Meeting in the form presented.

Cecil then asked for the presentation on the FY26 Grants and Programs Plan. Before Jen Lawless began there was a brief pause as Michael explained the Agency's decision to accept a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). During the June Committee meetings, it was reported that the senior leadership team was developing the Agency's FY26 spending plan with the expectation that no federal funding from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) would be utilized. However, since that time, and after careful consideration and dialogue with the Healey-Driscoll Administration, they decided to accept the FY26 NEA partnership grant, which is \$1.3 million. This funding will be used in our spending plan to extend our grantmaking reach, as it has been used in prior years. The Administration felt quite strongly that Mass Cultural Council should follow the direction of all other state agencies in the Commonwealth and accept the federal funds made available. Further, their legal guidance tells us that if our equity plans were legal before the new administration, they are still legal.

Vice Chair Jo-Ann Davis asked Michael to explain the method for paying grants. Michael shared that should there be disruptions in federal or state funding during the year, there is always a reserve due to the way we pay out grants – certain grants are paid out on an 80-20 basis – with 80% of the grant paid upfront and 20% held back and paid upon filing of the final report. This is written into grant contracts.

There was no further discussion and Jen Lawless shared a PowerPoint presentation (available upon request) and joined by members of the staff gave the presentation on FY26 Grants and Programs Plan.

First, Catherine Cheng-Anderson provided a revenue summary showing total projected FY26 revenue of \$33.8 million, comprised of \$27.0 million from state appropriations and earmarks, \$5.1 million in estimated Chapter 23K Gaming Funds, \$354,000 from MassDevelopment for the Cultural Facilities Fund, \$1.3 million from the National Endowment for the Arts across several programs, and \$64,000 from the Harry Rice Trust. She detailed that the state appropriation includes \$26,045,152 for core operations and \$930,000 for 19 legislative earmarks funding specific arts and cultural projects, including a \$25,000 honorarium for the Commonwealth's first Poet Laureate.

She also noted that the Agency's legislative mandate requires that at least 75% of the Line Item 0640-0300 appropriation of \$26,975,152 be allocated to grantmaking, establishing a minimum of \$20,231,364. The FY26 plan exceeds this requirement, dedicating \$27,095,983 to grantmaking—134% of the statutory minimum.

From there, Jen continued the PowerPoint presentation. She summarized grant program allocations for Organizations, Artists & Youth, Communities, Equity & Inclusion, Advancement, and other programs.

Co-Chair Julie Wake inquired as to the amount (\$5000) of the proposed grant for the MassPort Artists Program bringing live music to Logan Airport. Michael explained that it is a pilot program this year, largely funded by MassPort. Mass Cultural Council wanted to make a modest contribution as a key partner in the initiative and a \$5000 grant will support 50 performances. Julie also expressed enthusiasm for the \$25,000 earmark for the Massachusetts Poet Laureate.

Co-Chair Cecil Barron Jensen was pleased to see level funding for so many programs, especially after so many unpredictable Covid pandemic-impacted years. She then asked David to review the conflicts-of-interest list.

Dave explained that under state ethics law Council Members may not take official action pertaining to any organization in which they have a financial interest, employment, or board membership; and, rather than leaving the room for the vote on grant recommendations, their conflicts of interest are disclosed in the minutes, and this indicates that they take no part in the discussion or the vote on funding for any of those identified organizations. He asked Committee Members to review conflicts of interest list in their materials and indicate if there were any updates. There were none.

Cecil thanked Dave and then asked Jen and her team for their presentation on FY26 Grant & Program Recommendations.

Jen let Committee Members know that full and detailed information regarding the recommendations was included in their meeting materials.

Jen shared that Operating Grants for Organizations(OGO) and Cultural Investment Portfolio (CIP) funding levels are flat from last year. As noted, CIP is sunsetting, so there will be fewer CIP organizations and more OGO grantees going forward. We have already reviewed the OGO grants, and there are no major program changes. The one adjustment made in FY25 was the expansion of the financial health and equity impact points, which now apply to both CIP and OGO. More detail on the formula is included in the appendix. The appendix does not list specific grant amounts—those will be shared at the full board meeting.

Sara Glidden then explained the financial health analysis, which looks at three years of 990 data to assess organizational surpluses or deficits, as well as unrestricted liquid net assets in the third year. Last year, this analysis was done only for the 150 new OGO grantees, reviewing FY20–FY23 data. The findings were somewhat surprising: the overall pool showed stronger financial health than expected, with only 2% of organizations reporting a three-year deficit, though many had very small surpluses and limited cash on hand. This year, the analysis was expanded to include all CIP and OGO organizations. The results indicate that 9.5% of organizations now show a three-year deficit. As we move further from the pandemic, when many groups saw both drastic expense reductions and one-time infusions of relief funding—we are beginning to see greater instability and stress in the system. Next steps include conducting a longitudinal study of the original 150 organizations to track year-over-year trends in financial health.

Cecil asked if there are any plans for interventions based on this information. Sara explained that there are. The most important intervention is focused on organizations with budgets of \$1 million or less. Staff is proposing to increase grants for those groups, with a minimum increase of about \$3000 and up to roughly 40% of the total grant. In some cases, the increase would essentially cover the deficit those organizations have been carrying. The goal is to make a meaningful impact without having to reallocate excessive funds away from other grantees. This approach ensures the additional support goes where it can make the greatest difference.

Vice Chair Jo-Ann Davis expressed her curiosity about the funding organizations may have received during COVID and if that funding impacted their financial health. Sara thanked the Vice Chair for her question and explained that to answer it fully, we would need to dig into earlier data and conduct a more extensive longitudinal analysis. What's valuable about the work being done now is that it allows staff to track organizations over time and see the broader story of the sector. Some segments were already experiencing stress before the pandemic, but COVID accelerated those challenges. Audiences have not returned at pre-pandemic levels, while costs have risen significantly—especially in the performing arts sector—so the pace of financial strain has increased.

Jen moved along to the next item: Cultura District Initiative Investment Grants which remain level-funded. Local Cultural Councils (LCC) remain level-funded as well with no changes to the program. Cecil supported the idea of training LCC chairs; Ashley Occhino agreed and emphasized the value of strengthening collaboration across councils. Jen noted that councils may choose to regionalize, but it can be challenging to get towns to coordinate and share resources. She asked Lisa Simmons to elaborate. Lisa explained that the last major effort at regionalization was in 2002–2003. Councils are often reluctant to collaborate, so staff are exploring ways to incentivize it—possibly by bringing on a consultant. Many LCC volunteers are older, and regionalization could reduce the workload while doubling available funds. Even achieving two new regionalizations per year would be considered a success.

Jen asked Lisa to continue and report on plans for the Tribal Cultural Council program. Lisa explained that this program recognizes tribes in Massachusetts and provides them with the opportunity to administer grants directly within their communities. Councils receive 40% for programming and 10% for administration (compared to 20%/5% for LCCs). The first year of the program went well, with councils reporting positive experiences. The goal is to add Mashpee Wampanoag in the coming year. The four councils moving forward will follow the LCC grant cycle. A list of funded projects from the past year is available.

Jen then reviewed plans for YouthReach. Cecil asked about typical award size as grants have been a flat \$22,000 for three years. Jen explained that staff would like to increase YouthReach awards to make them more meaningful; the plan is to award fewer grants at higher amounts. Organizations have been informed that not all will receive funding this cycle. Michael noted the Asset Inventory revealed 15,000 organizations statewide, underscoring the challenge of balancing distribution of multiple versus no grants.

Jen noted that the Artists & Youth team is a relatively new team combining the Artists team and staff members who managed programs for young people. Dan Blask who manages the team explained that while Mass Cultural Council has long supported individuals at different stages of their artistic careers, combining Artists and Youth programs allows for a more intentional trajectory—from YouthReach or Creative Experiences for young people, to Grants for Creative Individuals, the ArtSake blog, or MITx for adults. The same team that supports initiatives like the Poet Laureate program also works on Poetry Out Loud, allowing for stronger connections. One early project was compiling resources for teaching artists on ArtSake, addressing needs that had not been included in the Agency's toolbox before. Joining teams has created beneficial synergies.

Jen then presented plans for the Creative Experiences program in FY26. This program combines the previously separate, Festivals & Projects and Creative Projects for Schools into a single program. The spending plan calls for an allocation of \$3,350,000 to support organizations (including schools) to fund festivals, projects, residencies, and other cultural activities in the arts, humanities, and sciences. Additionally, The NEA is offering supplementary funding of \$25,000 to support projects celebrating America250.

Cecil asked for more detail on the America250 funding from the NEA. Jen explained that six organizations applying for Creative Experiences grants were identified as strongly aligning with the NEA's America250 priorities. If any projects do not move forward, backup organizations are available. She also previewed a forthcoming NEA Arts & Health initiative: a small call for community health centers interested in "arts prescriptions." Mass Cultural Council will bring three grantees forward in October; this will be outside the current memo.

Jen then asked Charles Baldwin to present briefly on UP Innovation Fund & Access Grants highlighting the launch of the Access Hub which was created in collaboration with Open Door Arts. Charles described the Hub as a centralized, disability-led resource for cultural organizations. A "one-stop shop" for guidance, self-assessments, and peer learning, it expands what had been UP's limited peer learning (20 organizations/year) into a resource for all organizations. Participation in the self-assessment is incentivized in grant applications, slightly improving funding is a likelihood. Already, 500 organizations nationwide have completed the assessment—430 from Massachusetts—demonstrating significant reflection and planning around accessibility. Results are tracked geographically and longitudinally, showing growth in organizational skill and practice over time. An Open Door Arts presentation and information session is scheduled for the fall. Jen added that 40 artists with disabilities are featured in the Hub, with thoughtful design throughout.

Cecil asked for clarification on the potential reallocation of funds. Dave explained that if grants are canceled or if fewer Tribal Cultural Councils are funded, resources will be reallocated—typically to Creative Individuals. This practice is built into each memo and Jen confirmed that a full list of recipients and dollar amounts is included in council materials. Marc asked if reallocations apply only to this grant cycle. Jen clarified this is typical practice, especially for dynamic programs like Creative Experiences, where festivals are occasionally canceled. Canceled funds are tracked and reallocated into additional Grants for Creative Individuals. Dave offered that the resolution printed in the meeting materials will be further clarified to indicate that funds could be re-allocated to any other **FY26** recommended program.

Dave shared that the October and winter Council Meetings would include updates on Grants for Creative Individuals, Gaming Mitigation, Arts and Health, and potentially Advancement grants.

Marc requested that the resolution in Section 9C should correct a typo to reflect \$100,000 for the Hub and the final resolution should specify FY26. Staff will make this update.

There was no further discussion and Cecil asked for a motion and a second to approve the recommendations and bring them forward to the full Council on August 19. There will be one vote taken for all recommendations. Marc moved to approve the

recommendations; Julie seconded the motion. By roll call vote and noting that Emily, Simone, and Donna were absent and

WHEREAS the Massachusetts State Budget for Fiscal 2026 has been signed into law and contains an appropriation of \$26,045,152 (plus \$930,000 in earmarks) for the Mass Cultural Council for FY26 (the "FY26 State Budget"); and

WHEREAS, previously today Mass Cultural Council's Executive Committee recommended to the Council for approval a draft of the FY26 Budget and Program Allocation Plan submitted by staff; and

WHEREAS, based on such Plan staff has recommended grant allocations for Mass Cultural Council programs to the Programs Committee at its meeting on August 6, 2025 ("Programs Committee Meeting"),

NOW THEREFORE, it is hereby

RESOLVED: That, the Programs Committee recommends that the Council approve the allocation of grants and processes and procedures presented at the Programs Committee Meeting in accordance with the following resolutions:

Section 5(a)

RESOLVED: To recommend to Mass Cultural Council a grant to Mass Humanities totaling \$983,056 as presented at the Programs Committee Meeting.

Section 5(b)

RESOLVED: To recommend to Mass Cultural Council a grant to NEFA of \$70,000, as presented at the Programs Committee Meeting.

Section 5(c)

RESOLVED: To recommend to Mass Cultural Council a grant to MASSCreative for \$30,000 as presented at the Programs Committee Meeting.

Section 5(d)

RESOLVED: To recommend a grant of \$5,000 to MassPort to support their Live Music At Logan program as presented at the Programs Committee Meeting.

Section 5(e)

RESOLVED: To recommend to Mass Cultural Council implementation of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)-funded Arts & Health Project in the amount of \$75,000 as presented at the Programs Committee Meeting.

Section 5(f)

RESOLVED: To recommend to Mass Cultural Council a grant to Massachusetts Institute of Technology (or related entity) for \$10,000 for the MITx Arts Entrepreneurship Online Program as presented at the Programs Committee Meeting.

Section 6(a)

RESOLVED: To recommend endorsement of the approach by staff to provide \$7,200,000 in unrestricted operating support grant to cultural organizations under both the Cultural Investment Portfolio program and Operating Grants for Organizations as described in the memo provided at the Programs Committee Meeting.

Section 7(a)

RESOLVED: To recommend up to \$870,000 in Cultural District grants as presented at the Programs Committee Meeting.

Section 7(b)

RESOLVED: To recommend an allocation to the Local Cultural Councils totaling \$5,700,000 as presented at the Programs Committee Meeting.

Section 7(c)

RESOLVED: To recommend up to \$103,950 allocation to Tribal Cultural Councils as presented at the Programs Committee Meeting.

Section 8(a)

RESOLVED: To recommend grant allocation to the YouthReach program in the amount of \$1,870,000, as presented at the Programs Committee Meeting.

Section 8(b)

RESOLVED: To recommend a Creative Youth Development and Education grants in the amount of \$36,000 to the Youth Arts Impact Network with EdVestors and \$25,000 in support of the NEA-funded Poetry Out Loud program, all as presented at the Programs Committee Meeting.

Section 9(a)

RESOLVED: To recommend approval of the Creative Experiences program grants totaling \$3,350,000 and an additional \$25,000 from the NEA for program applicants focusing on "America 250," all as presented at the Programs Committee Meeting.

Section 9(b)

RESOLVED: To recommend to Mass Cultural Council \$465,000 in UP Innovation Fund Grants, as presented at the Programs Committee Meeting.

Section 9(c)

RESOLVED: To recommend to Mass Cultural Council a **\$100,000** grant to Open Door Arts for the Arts and Culture Accessibility Resource Hub, as presented at the Programs Committee Meeting.

General

RESOLVED: To recommend to Mass Cultural Council the ability of staff to re-allocate unused grant funds for any program to any other **FY26** recommended program as described throughout the memo presented to the Programs Committee.

The following Committee Members abstained from voting and/or discussing grants pertaining to the organizations listed under their name:

Marc Carroll

- a. Boston Youth Symphony Orchestra
- b. The Rivers School

Jo-Ann Davis

- a. The Care Center
- b. Springfield Museums
- c. MASSCreative

Cecil Barron Jensen

- a. Artists Association of Nantucket
- b. Egan Maritime Institute
- c. Nantucket Cultural District

Julie Wake

- a. Arts Foundation of Cape Cod
- b. Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute

Ashley Occhino

- a. Fall River Arts and Culture Coalition/One South Coast Chamber Foundation
- b. Southeastern Massachusetts Visitors Bureau
- c. SouthCoast Community Foundation
- d. Textile Society of America

Cecil thanked Committee Members and congratulated staff. The end of the agenda had been reached and Cecil, as Co-Chair, adjourned the meeting at 2:05pm.