



Power of culture

Unofficial Draft Subject to Approval by the Council at its next meeting

**Minutes
Mass Cultural Council
Programs Committee Meeting
Wednesday, June 17, 2026**

Online Meeting

Committee Members Present:

- Cecil Barron Jensen, Co-Chair
- Julie Wake, Co-Chair
- Ché Anderson, Council Chair
- Jo-Ann Davis, Council Vice Chair
- Emily Bramhall
- Simone Early
- Donna Haghighat
- Ashley Occhino

Mass Cultural Council Staff Members Present:

- David Slatery, Acting Executive Director
- Ann Petruccelli Moon, Acting Chief of Staff
- Catherine Cheng-Anderson, Chief Financial Officer
- Jen Lawless, Senior Director of Program Operations
- Bethann Steiner, Senior Director of Public Affairs
- Dan Blask, Program Manager
- Sara Glidden, Program Manager
- Lisa Simmons, Program Manager
- Kortney Adams, Program Officer
- Charles Baldwin, Program Officer
- Kelly Bennett, Program Officer
- Summer Confuorto, Program Officer
- Amy Chu, Program Officer
- Lindiana Flores, Program Officer
- Kalyn King, Program Officer
- Lillian Lee, Program Officer
- Allison Rosenthal, Grants Management System Officer

Co-Chair Cecil Barron Jensen called the meeting to order at 1:05pm and asked Acting Chief of Staff Ann Petruccelli Moon to read the Open Meeting Law statement. Cecil then asked if Committee members had reviewed the minutes from their last meeting held on February 11, 2026. If they had, she would entertain a motion and a second to approve them. Co-Chair Julie Wake moved to approve the minutes; Jo-Ann Davis seconded the motion. By roll call vote and noting that Simone Early abstained and that Ché Anderson had not yet joined the meeting, it was unanimously

RESOLVED to approve the minutes of the February 11, 2026
Programs Committee Meeting in the form presented.

Cecil then welcomed Committee Members and staff to the meeting and shared that she and Julie had met with the Senior Director of Program Operations, Jen Lawless, earlier that morning. She commended Jen for the outstanding work she had done preparing the presentation and noted that staff would be joining the meeting to present with Jen. Reflecting on recent grant celebrations on Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard, Cecil said it was impossible not to be struck by the impact that Mass Cultural Council funding has on communities, arts organizations of all sizes, and the people they serve. She encouraged members of the Programs Committee who had not attended a grant celebration to do so next year, describing them as valuable opportunities to see the work firsthand and thank legislators for their continued support. Seeing Bethann on the call served as a reminder of how important legislative engagement is at these events. Cecil congratulated everyone involved in organizing the celebrations. She then asked Jen to begin her presentation.

A copy of the presentation is available upon request.

Jen invited members to ask questions throughout the presentation. She described the meeting as an opportunity to reflect on the past year and emphasized that the presentation represented only a small portion of the work completed by the Programs team. She recognized the dedication of the staff who administer the programs and acknowledged the contributions of the Public Affairs and Business Operations teams, noting that successful grantmaking depends not only on awarding grants but also on communicating their impact and ensuring they are administered effectively. Members were encouraged to use the presentation to learn, ask questions, and think about future opportunities. Jen then shared her screen and began walking through the presentation, explaining that the first portion would review FY26 while the latter part would focus on high-level FY27 priorities.

During discussion of application trends, Jo-Ann asked about the change in applications from FY25 to FY26. Jen clarified that there was not only the new Organizational Grants for Organizations (OGO) program, but the old Cultural Investment Portfolio (CIP) reflected in the data as well. She noted that many new applications were for OGO and that it remained difficult to compare FY25 and FY26 directly because organizations were at different points in their grant cycles.

Jo-Ann commented that she is always struck by the relatively small percentage of individual applicants who receive funding compared to organizations. She wondered whether Mass Cultural Council should consider directing more funding toward individuals, noting that organizations often have multiple fundraising opportunities while individual artists have fewer options.

Dave observed that outreach efforts have significantly increased over the past several years, and so the number of individual applicants has grown substantially compared to earlier years, particularly following outreach efforts that began around the pandemic recovery funding.

Cecil added that although the total number of applicants has declined from pandemic-era highs, the decrease has not been as steep as expected. She speculated that many individuals who first became connected to Mass Cultural Council during the pandemic have remained engaged with its programs.

Jen agreed that these were important observations. She shared that staff anticipates a significant increase in individual applications in FY27 because many artists who received grants in FY23 are becoming eligible to apply again after their waiting period. She emphasized that supporting artists remains a priority. While organizations receive much of the Agency's funding, those organizations employ artists, and final reports include data on the number of artists hired through funded projects. She suggested that incorporating this information into future reporting could provide a more complete picture of how investments in organizations also directly benefit artists.

Ashley Occhino asked whether inflation had been considered when evaluating grant amounts for individuals. She noted the anticipated increase in FY27 applications and asked whether staff had discussed how inflation has affected the impact of current grant awards compared to when the program began.

Jen explained that this is an ongoing discussion. She shared that she had recently compared the purchasing power of \$500 in 2019 to today and found it to be roughly equivalent to \$650. She explained that current individual grants are \$5,000, compared with the former fellowship model, which awarded \$15,000 grants to far fewer recipients. Mass Cultural Council intentionally lowered individual award amounts while increasing the total investment to support more artists. Determining the appropriate grant amount remains an ongoing conversation, particularly as organizations and artists continue to experience rising costs due to inflation.

Before moving into the program snapshots, Jen paused to take additional questions and reminded members that they were welcome to email her at any time with follow-up questions about specific programs or data.

Cecil remarked that receiving a Mass Cultural Council grant likely provides value beyond the funding itself. She suggested that being able to list Mass Cultural Council support on a résumé or in a biography likely carries professional recognition, even if that impact is difficult to measure.

Dan Blask agreed, stating that this reputational benefit is an important consideration when balancing grant amounts against the number of awards made. Across the various iterations of the Agency's grant programs for creative individuals—from fellowships to smaller professional development grants—artists have consistently reported that receiving a Mass Cultural Council grant strengthens their professional credentials and creates additional opportunities.

Julie added that this effect is visible through her work at the Arts Foundation of Cape Cod. Applicants who have support from Mass Cultural Council often present stronger funding requests because other funders recognize the value and credibility associated with support from the Agency.

Cecil thanked Julie for the example and suggested that as Mass Cultural Council continues to evaluate its individual artist programs, the professional recognition associated with an Agency award should be considered alongside the grant amount itself. She also wondered whether there might be additional ways for the Agency to provide that type of professional development and recognition to artists.

Jo-Ann agreed and said she would like the team to continue examining the issue over the coming year. She noted that nearly half of individual applicants appear to be new each year and supported exploring additional ways to recognize and support artists beyond direct grant funding.

Jen agreed that the discussion aligned closely with ongoing Advancement conversations. She noted that even during the years of unprecedented pandemic funding, the Agency was unable to meet the full level of demand. Staff continues exploring ways to leverage partnerships and additional resources to supplement grant funding and appreciated the observations about the professional recognition that already occurs organically through Mass Cultural Council support.

Jen then introduced the FY27 program overview, explaining that staff members would each present highlights from their respective programs and that questions would be held until the conclusion of the presentations. Staff presenters included Dan, Summer, Kortney, Sara, Lisa, Charles, Lindiana, Lillian, Lisa, and Jen for Creative Experiences.

Following the presentations, Jen invited members to share questions, comments, and feedback.

Cecil thanked all the presenters, commenting that it was enjoyable for Council members to hear directly from staff. She congratulated everyone on their work and expressed appreciation for the thoughtful presentations.

Simone remarked on the impressive volume of grant opportunities and asked how prospective applicants determine which program best fits their needs. She wondered whether this information was easy to find on the website.

Carmen explained that the Agency publishes a *Programs-at-a-Glance* guide each year – print and digital – which summarizes every opportunity, identifies whether each program serves organizations or individuals, and links directly to each program's webpage. The printed guide is distributed at events, shared with legislators, provided to prospective applicants, and always available digitally as a central resource.

Simone asked whether staff had considered using an AI chatbot that would allow someone to describe their project or organization and receive guidance on the most appropriate grant program.

Jen replied that the Agency has experimented with similar approaches, including eligibility quizzes. Over the past five years, staff has intentionally reduced the number of grant programs to simplify navigation. She noted that AI tools continue to evolve and that improving communication with applicants remains an ongoing priority.

Cecil observed that Council Members also play an important role by becoming familiar with Mass Cultural Council's programs and helping connect artists and organizations in their communities with the appropriate staff and funding opportunities.

Simone agreed but explained that an interactive tool could make navigating the programs feel more accessible and user-friendly. While she regularly refers people to Mass Cultural Council, she felt that technology could offer another welcoming pathway for applicants.

Jen responded that some sister agencies are currently using AI chatbots, though they require significant staff oversight because every interaction must be reviewed. She reiterated that directing applicants to the correct program remains the priority and that staff will continue refining how information is communicated across the many different types of applicants served by the Agency.

Dave added that when meeting with communities across the state, he frequently connects people directly with members of the Programs team.

Jo-Ann commented that the presentation itself demonstrates how important it is for Council Members to understand the breadth of Mass Cultural Council's work. She described the presentation as informative, inspiring, and valuable because it consistently generates thoughtful discussion and deepens the Council's understanding of the programs.

Simone added that the presentation reinforces the message that everyone has the potential to receive a Mass Cultural Council grant, particularly applicants from smaller organizations.

Cecil complimented the team's ongoing attention to geographic equity throughout its grantmaking.

Dave then gave a brief Acting Executive Director's report. He noted the success of the Creative Sector Summit hosted by MassCreative, which drew approximately 350 attendees, many of whom expressed appreciation for Mass Cultural Council's work and programs. After thirteen years with the agency, he reflected on how rewarding it has been to spend more time meeting people throughout the Commonwealth during his months, thus far, as Acting Executive Director. He also highlighted the success of the events on Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard, and thanked Cecil and Emily for their leadership in curating those days and Julie for accompanying the team and participating in both events. Dave added that he had recently attended the New England Foundation for the Arts executive directors' retreat and reported that fellow state arts agencies view Massachusetts as a leader. He commended Jen and the Programs team for helping communicate Mass Cultural Council's impact during their presentation today.

Cecil remarked that although the Agency's grants may sometimes seem modest in size, they have an extraordinarily meaningful impact throughout the Commonwealth.

Jen then recognized Grants Managements System Program Officers Allison Rosenthal and Colin Baylor, emphasizing that the work is made possible by a collaborative team effort and that their work produced much of the data shared today. She expressed excitement about FY27 and noted that Bethann and the Public Affairs team also use the presentation to promote the Agency's work more broadly, helping share these stories with audiences across the state.

Bethann shared that the Public Affairs team was preparing a year-end blog post inspired by the work presented during the meeting. The post would be published the following week in conjunction with the Agency's final grant celebration event of the year on June 25 from 11:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. More than 100 attendees, including grantees, legislators and the Poet Laureate, were expected and the event would be held virtually via Zoom. She noted that the data presented during the meeting, along with ongoing conversations with the field, directly informs Mass Cultural Council's storytelling, advocacy efforts, blog posts, press releases, and broader communications strategy.

Cecil reminded members that a link to funding reports had been shared by Ann in the meeting chat and encouraged attendance at the June 25 event, noting that several Council members had already registered. She then adjourned the meeting at 2:27 p.m., with thanks extended to Committee Members and the entire Mass Cultural Council team.