



Power of culture

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

**Minutes
Mass Cultural Council
Programs Committee Meeting
Thursday, August 13, 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, Chief of Staff
- Jen Lawless, Senior Director of Program Operations
- Bethann Steiner, Senior Director of Public Affairs
- Carmen Plazas, Communications & Community Engagement Manager
- Dan Blask, Program Manager
- Lisa Simmons, Program Manager
- Kortney Adams, Program Officer
- Colin Baylor, Grants Management System Officer
- Allie Rosenthal, Grants Management System Officer
- Cheyenne Cohn-Postell, 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 Julie Wake called the meeting to order at 1:02pm and asked Chief of Staff Ann Petruccelli Moon to read the Open Meeting Law statement. Julie then asked if Committee members had reviewed the minutes from their last meeting held on June 17, 2026. If they had, she would entertain a motion and a second to approve them. Donna Haghighat moved to approve the minutes; Co-Chair Cecil Barron Jensen seconded the motion. By roll call vote, it was unanimously

RESOLVED to approve the minutes of the June 17, 2026 Programs Committee Meeting in the form presented.

Julie welcomed Committee Members and staff to the meeting and said it was an exciting time, as we are in the first quarter of a brand-new fiscal year. She explained that the Committee was there to hear the plans created by staff for FY27 and emphasized the importance of supporting them, asking questions, and providing feedback. She hoped for a robust conversation and noted the Agency is incredibly fortunate to have a slightly larger budget this year. The Committee is eager to hear what the staff is planning and proposing. With that, she turned it over to Acting Executive Director Dave Slatery and Senior Director of Program Operations Jen Lawless.

Before beginning the presentation, Dave shared that the Executive Committee had met that morning and voted to recommend the spending plan that the grants that will be presented this afternoon are based on. He dispensed with a long Executive Director's report and moved directly to the grant and program recommendations. Jen shared her screen and walked the Committee through a PowerPoint presentation on FY27 grant and program recommendations (a copy of which is available upon request). She began with a high-level overview of the grant program lines in the spending plan and explained that the Committee would also hear from program staff who would introduce the memos included in the meeting materials. Then, there would be an opportunity for questions and discussion.

At the conclusion of Jen's presentation, Ashley Occhino asked a question about the Gaming Mitigation Fund, whether the fund applies only to physical casinos or also to online gaming.

It was clarified that it applies specifically to the two resort-style casinos in Massachusetts (in Everett and Springfield): 2% of the Commonwealth taxes from the two casinos are put in a special fund benefitting the Agency's programs. Dave explained that this meant for every \$2 spent at a casino, the Agency receives a penny.

Bethann added that all of this is set out in statute in the gaming law, which specifies where different pieces of gaming revenue need to go. There are

various recipients who receive different percentages, all of which are established in statute.

Jen added that the fund came about because a group of performing arts centers came together and recognized that casinos were able to pay more and charge less for touring artists, putting arts centers at a disadvantage. They advocated to the legislature to secure mitigation funding to compensate for competing for the same talent pool and the same audience.

Dave added that this was all part of the law when it was passed in 2011. The Agency first received money in 2020, describing the approach as very forward-thinking. The Agency has received between \$4.5 million and \$5.5 million per year over the past six years.

Julie was excited to see that the number of Gaming grants would increase in FY27. She also referenced the formula that had been mentioned and asked whether there was a simple way to describe what the formula is when staff refer to it. Lillian Lee stated she would address that.

Julie then asked Dave 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; rather than leaving the room for the vote on grant recommendations, their conflicts of interest are disclosed on a list, and they state that they abstain from discussing or voting on any organization which is disclosed as a conflict on the list. He asked Committee Members to review conflicts of interest list in their materials and indicate if there were any updates. There were none.

Julie then asked Jen and the staff team to present the grant and program recommendations.

Jen began with Partnership Grants and noted that Mass Humanities' funding is increasing because of the increase in the Agency's appropriation. Lillian Lee summarized Operating Support grant programs. Lisa Simmons summarized Communities grants – Local Cultural Councils, Tribal Cultural Councils, and Cultural Districts. Kortney Adams presented on YouthReach and Education Grants.

Julie asked if, when staff describe a grant duration as two years and then four years, whether that means the listed amount is the total amount for the full grant period or whether it is divided over two or four years.

It was clarified that the amount is per year, contingent on the organization completing its final report. Jen added that the grant amount in future years could change based upon the state budget and on the spending plan approved by the Council. The recommendation does not mean an organization will receive that exact dollar amount; the amount depends on each year's allocation, the spending plan, and Council approval.

Julie expressed enthusiasm for multiyear grants because it means organizations can plan, especially when working with youth.

Jen then explained that staff has been continuously consolidating programs. They had extended the YouthReach redesign process over a three-year period and were excited to relaunch it.

Kalyn King then presented on the Creative Experiences program.

Ashley asked Kalyn to reiterate how geography was considered. Kalyn explained that it is like what the staff has done for other programs: the percentage of applications coming from a county is matched as closely as possible with the percentage of grants recommended for each county.

Jen added that in prior years the process had been a little less formal, but this year they formalized it. In essence, they have a ranked list by county. The number of grants and the rank ranges differ by county, so there is not one giant list. Instead, they go down each county's list.

Cecil said that this is how they report on their grants and how they see them in the final reports at the end of the year. They get to see the number of applications and grants given align by county. She said it makes a great deal of sense and appreciated the diligence. When committee members go into their communities, all they need to say is, "Apply." The more applications there are, the more funding can be directed to a community.

Julie then asked about funding priorities for for-profit organizations and how they are reviewed.

Kalyn explained that staff first make sure the organizations are current with all their reporting to the state. After that, the rest of the funding prioritization categories are the same across both categories. They look at organizations that are BIPOC-centered, organizations participating in Card to Culture, organizations offering a free-to-the-public program, and funding history with the Mass Cultural Council.

Jen added that the funding priorities are applied to all organizations in the same way.

Julie asked a second question, noting that schools had been invited and asking whether this was the first year.

Kalyn explained that the Festivals and Projects program and STARS program had previously merged, and the Creative Projects for Schools program was included this year.

Julie said that the priority is similar but does not involve revenue or Card to Culture and asked how schools navigated through the process.

Kalyn explained that Creative Projects for Schools had funding priorities that mirrored the other Projects program. Schools self-identify as BIPOC-centered, and enrollment statistics are considered, including schools with a 50% or greater BIPOC student population. School programs are often, but not always, free to participants, so that is also evaluated.

Julie said she understood and appreciated the BIPOC priority but asked whether there was also a way to complement that with income.

Kalyn said yes. Another funding prioritization considers projects happening in, or schools located in, cities and towns that are underserved. The designation takes income and educational attainment into account, and there is a boost for any organization or school in those cities or towns.

Jen added that the question around schools was one of the things they had been thinking about. One issue they had to define was what “BIPOC” means. For schools, the team uses Dept. Of Elementary and Secondary Education data, which is rich and varied and includes information such as language spoken at home and disability status. When bringing these programs together, including free offerings and Card to Culture participation, the question is how to make sure funding priorities resonate with both schools and organizations. She said the breadth of eligibility is both a blessing and a curse of the program, and that these were questions the team had asked itself as well.

Julie asked another question about school systems' support of arts education and arts extracurriculars. She said they see this in her day-to-day work and that her review committee is surprised by how many schools are applying. There are a lot of questions about why schools do not have a line item for arts. She asked whether the Programs Committee has seen progress in this area and whether there is anything the sector can do.

The team discussed how there are different levels of investment across cities and towns. Each school has a report card, and there could be an entire meeting devoted to that measure. The challenge is that different districts are encountering different circumstances.

Cecil said that it is a lot to merge and thanked the team for everything they are doing.

Bethann made a policy connection after the ballot question that eliminated MCAS. The Governor created a K–12 working group, which the Agency was a part of. One recommendation from that group is an arts requirement for high school graduation. Even if not every school is budgeting for every opportunity, and even if every application cannot be funded, the Agency was part of that policy conversation.

Jen then reviewed the last memos covering the UP initiative and access grants.

Program Officer for Access & Inclusion Charles Baldwin was not present because he was being recognized for his work nationally at the LEAD Conference in Washington, DC. Public Relations Manager Christian Kelly had written a beautiful article for the Agency's blog about this national recognition for Charles, and Jen shared the post with the Committee.

Jen then reviewed the UP grant recommendations, about which there were no questions.

That concluded the grant and program recommendations presentation.

Julie asked for a motion to approve all recommendations and bring them forward to the full Council at its meeting on August 27. Cecil moved to approve the recommendations; Emily Bramhall seconded the motion. By roll call vote, Committee Members unanimously voted to approve the following:

WHEREAS the Massachusetts State Budget for Fiscal 2027 has been signed into law and contains an appropriation of \$27,348,072 plus \$758,000 in earmarks) for the Mass Cultural Council for FY27 (the "FY27 State Budget"); and

WHEREAS, previously today, Mass Cultural Council's Executive Committee recommended to the Council for approval a draft of the FY27 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 13, 2026 ("Programs Committee Meeting"),

NOW THEREFORE, it is hereby

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

Section 5(a)

RESOLVED: To recommend to the Council a grant to Mass Humanities totaling \$1,032,234 as presented at the Programs Committee Meeting.

Section 5(b)

RESOLVED: To recommend to the Council a grant to New England Foundation for the Arts (NEFA) of \$70,000, as presented at the Programs Committee Meeting.

Section 5(c)

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

Section 5(d)

RESOLVED: To recommend to the Council a grant to Regie Gibson, the Massachusetts Poet Laureate, for \$25,000 as presented at the Programs Committee Meeting.

Section 5(e)

RESOLVED: To recommend to the Council funding of the \$758,000 of legislative earmarks as presented at the Programs Committee Meeting

Section 6(a)

RESOLVED: To recommend endorsement of the approach by staff to provide \$7,350,000 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 \$5,850,000 as presented at the Programs Committee Meeting.

Section 7(c)

RESOLVED: To recommend up to \$71,250 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 \$1,950,000, as presented at the Programs Committee Meeting. Page 2 of 3

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 \$3,442,500 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 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:

1. Ché Anderson
 - a. City of Worcester
 - b. College of the Holy Cross
 - c. Ecotarium
 - d. Institute of Contemporary Art
 - e. Museum of Worcester
 - f. New Balance or New Balance Foundation
 - g. New Commonwealth Fund
 - h. Rose Kennedy Greenway
 - i. The Hanover Theatre
 - j. The Quin House
 - k. UMass Chan Medical School
 - l. Worcester Art Museum
 - m. Worcester County Mechanics Association (Mechanics Hall)
 - n. Worcester Historical Museum

- o. Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce
2. Jo-Ann Davis
 - a. MASSCreative
 - b. Springfield Museums
 - c. The Care Center
3. Donna Haghighat
 - a. WAM Theater
4. Cecil Barron Jensen
 - a. Artists Association of Nantucket
 - b. Egan Maritime Institute
 - c. Nantucket Cultural District
5. Ashley Occhino
 - a. Fall River Arts and Culture Coalition/One South Coast Chamber Foundation
 - b. SouthCoast Community Foundation
 - c. Southeastern Massachusetts Visitors Bureau
 - d. Textile Society of America
6. Julie Wake
 - a. Arts Foundation of Cape Cod
 - b. Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute

Julie congratulated the incredible team and said there were about to be a lot of happy people across the Commonwealth. She thanked Jen and the team, noting that this is a lot of work. She said she appreciated the team's knowledgeable, kind approach to the work and is grateful to be part of it.

She thanked the Committee for its questions and intentionality and adjourned the meeting at 2:08.