October 10, 2023

The Honorable Robyn K. Kennedy, Senate Chair

The Honorable Jay D. Livingstone, House Chair

Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities

Submitted Via Email: JointCommittee.Children&Families@malegislature.gov

***Re: H. 151/S. 113 An Act improving accessibility in the creative economy (The ACE Act)***

Dear Chair Kennedy and Chair Livingstone:

On behalf of the Mass Cultural Council, I am pleased to offer testimony on a critical matter pending before your Committee, the need for improved access to the creative and cultural sector for residents and visitors of the Commonwealth who identify as having a disability.

The ACE Act, H. 151/S. 113, proposed by MASSCreative and filed by Rep. Dan Donahue and Sen. Paul Mark, establishes a fund to provide grants to organizations focused on the arts, culture, humanities, and interpretative sciences to remove barriers encountered by people with disabilities. By dedicating these resources to cultural organizations, Massachusetts will continue to lead by example and build a creative economy accessible to everyone, regardless of ability.

Administered by the Massachusetts Office of Disability, the ACE grant program will support capital improvements and projects to improve programmatic access, and/or remove barriers encountered by persons with disabilities wishing to engage with the arts and culture.

As the state’s arts agency, Mass Cultural Council holds a seat on the board established in this legislation to help the Office of Disability manage this initiative. Mass Cultural Council is generally supportive of any state public investments to bolster the creative and cultural sector we are charged with supporting.

In December 2022 [Towards a Culture of Access: Findings from the Massachusetts Arts & Culture Access Survey](https://massculturalcouncil.org/documents/FINAL-TOWARDS-A-CULTURE-OF-ACCESS.pdf), a new report from [Open Door Arts](https://opendoorartsma.org/), supported in part by Mass Cultural Council, was released. The report shares valuable information to better understand where the arts and culture sector in Massachusetts is regarding accessibility for people with disabilities, what’s getting in the way of progress, and what may help the sector move forward.

It finds that despite representing 1 in 4 adults, and 1 in 2 adults ages 65+, people with disabilities continue to experience significant attitudinal, physical, and programmatic barriers to fully participate in the rich opportunities offered by arts and culture organizations in Massachusetts. Considering the wealth of cultures, backgrounds, and creative potential of this community, this results in the sector missing out on the valuable contributions and participation of people with disabilities. Further, cultural organizations are economically disadvantaged as access issues will deter this population from purchasing tickets and becoming engaged audience members.

This is why the ACE Act is important and meaningful and should be given due consideration by the Committee.

For years Mass Cultural Council’s [Universal Participation (UP) Initiative](https://massculturalcouncil.org/organizations/universal-participation-initiative/) has provided training, information, peer networking, education, and limited financial support to cultural organizations in universal design principles, audience engagement strategies, and compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance.

Additionally, this year we are working with consulting partners Open Door Arts and [Art-Reach](https://www.art-reach.org/) to evaluate our current systems and recommend steps forward to advance accessibility practices at cultural facilities throughout the Commonwealth. We expect to present a [draft Disability Equity Plan](https://massculturalcouncil.org/blog/join-us-in-building-a-more-accessible-future-for-the-deaf-and-disabled-community/) to our governing Council in January, and once it is endorsed we would be happy to present it to you and the Committee.

However, we know that more investment and attention to accessibility is critically important for this segment of the population. The ACE Act offers a potential solution to this critical issue. Mass Cultural Council is deeply interested in this topic and is available to the Committee as a thought partner, should the panel wish to engage further in this matter.

Please do not hesitate to reach out at any time.

Sincerely,

Bethann Steiner

Senior Director of Public Affairs