

Posted on 12/5/25



*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, OCTOBER 22, 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  
Emily Bramhall  
Donna Haghighat  
Ashley Occhino  
Mark Snyder

**Staff Members Present** were

Michael J. Bobbitt, Executive Director  
David Slatery, Deputy Executive Director  
Catherine Cheng-Anderson, Chief Financial Officer  
Bethann Steiner, Senior Director of Public Affairs  
Ann Petruccelli Moon, Deputy Chief of Staff  
Dan Blask, Program Manager  
Erik Holmgren, Strategic Partnerships & Advancement Manager  
Lisa Simmons, Program Manager  
Carmen Plazas, Communications & Community Engagement Manager  
Timothea Pham, Program Officer

Co-Chair Julie Wake called the meeting to order at 1:02pm and asked Deputy Executive Director David Slatery to read the Open Meeting Law statement. Julie then asked if Committee Members had reviewed the minutes of their last meeting held on August 6, 2025, and called for a motion to approve them. After motion made and duly seconded, by roll call vote and noting that Simone Early and Cecil Barron Jensen were absent it was unanimously

**Prepared on 12/5/25**

RESOLVED: that the Programs Committee approves the minutes of the August 6, 2025 Programs Committee Meeting in the form presented.

Co-Chair Cecil Barron Jensen joined shortly after the vote was taken. She thanked Julie for starting the meeting and asked Michael Bobbitt for his Executive Director's report.

Michael reflected on the fall Programs efforts and the strength and reach of the Agency in general. He noted that several major programs had opened for the season, including the Local Cultural Council (LCC) program, which experienced a rise in applicant volume and record participation. Michael emphasized the dedication of staff and the importance of advancement work, highlighting the redesign of the Cultural Investment Portfolio (CIP) which led to the launch of Operating Grants for Organizations (OGO). He noted that former CIP recipients had expressed disappointment at not being successful in OGO, and staff are working to ensure all applicants feel seen and supported. Michael also highlighted Public Affairs' celebratory campaign for new grantees through stickers, selfie frames, and welcome letters. He also shared that the Agency's advancement efforts have unlocked over \$2 million for the cultural sector, with additional resources on the horizon. Michael praised staff, particularly Erik Holmgren and Carolyn Cole, for leading work that positions creativity as a problem-solving tool across sectors. Michael shared that one of the most promising initiatives, Arts Prescriptions, has generated interest from various agencies, including public health providers and municipal health plans. Beyond this, the Agency is engaging with the Executive Office of Economic Development, MassHire, MassHousing, Department of Conservation and Recreation, MassPort, the Department of Public Health, and opioid relief funds which are establishing the cultural sector as an integral partner in addressing critical health and human services challenges. Michael also noted several upcoming events, including upcoming grant celebrations, the Council Meeting on October 29, and an arts in higher-education convening at Boston University on October 31. There were no questions for Michael.

Cecil and Julie then invited Program Manager Lisa Simmons and Program Officer Timothea Pham to present an update on revisions to the Cultural Districts Initiative (CDI). Lisa explained that the redesign focused on maintaining program intent while improving sustainability, professionalization, and municipal engagement. The process involved close examination of the enabling act, feedback from focus groups, and consultation with multiple agencies. She emphasized that districts were being redesigned to ensure stronger municipal buy-in, to better align with economic drivers and tourism, and to help districts become sustainable over time. New guidelines for districts are expected by mid-November. Timothea Pham, who has managed the Creative Experiences Program for seven years, introduced herself and with Lisa walked the Committee through the presentation deck which is available upon request.

Committee Members asked questions about the number of current districts (58) and how many are expected to succeed under the new metrics. Lisa noted that she expects about 75% of districts to meet the standards in the first 18 months but acknowledged challenges for districts lacking municipal support. Emily Bramhall thanked Lisa and Timothea for their presentation and raised concerns from the perspective of small towns, emphasizing that some municipalities may not have resources to provide funding or staff support, questioning whether districts would struggle to meet the new expectations, and asking if alternative funding sources, such as community foundations, could be

considered. Lisa clarified that municipal contributions could be in-kind rather than cash and could include support such as permitting or security services, helping districts meet the requirements without overburdening municipal budgets.

Michael emphasized that the program is designed as an economic development and placemaking tool and that districts must demonstrate infrastructure and sustainability. He noted that state funding comes from designated funds, that districts are still eligible for other grants, and that staff will support districts in building capacity during the transition.

Julie and Jo-Ann discussed the potential challenges of smaller or resource-limited districts, noting concerns about equity and unintended consequences if wealthier communities have more capacity to comply. Michael responded that multiple paths exist for districts to comply, including leveraging other resources and philanthropic support and in-kind support, and that the Agency would provide guidance and support to help districts succeed. Ashley highlighted that municipalities could use supplemental taxes, business improvement districts, or other creative revenue streams to support districts, while Michael noted that districts could also generate earned revenue, such as ticketed events or partnerships with local businesses.

Council members discussed the three-year sustainability timeline for districts, emphasizing the need for districts to develop infrastructure and municipal partnerships while continuing to receive Agency support. Cecil shared experience with the Nantucket Cultural District, noting that transitioning nonprofit staff to municipal employment had been successful. Dave clarified that cultural areas can naturally form on their own in municipalities and that state recognition of an official "district" is an additional designation rather than a requirement. Michael emphasized that municipal buy-in is critical and that the program has built-in flexibility to account for varying local capacities. The Committee also discussed upcoming resources, webinars, and peer support networks to help districts share best practices and navigate the redesign.

Cecil then asked Dave to remind the members of the conflicts of interest policy. Dave asked if any members had a conflict of interest with any of the four proposed grantees named in the meeting materials. Marc disclosed he had a connection with Fenway Community Health Center and that he would abstain from voting and/or discussing grants pertaining to Fenway Community Health Center.

Cecil then asked Erik Holmgren to give his presentation on advancement programs potentially receiving grants. For Arts on Prescription, Erik explained that the Agency received \$75,000 from the National endowment for the Arts to expand partnerships with community health centers, anticipating the ability to accommodate approximately 1,000 prescriptions. Michael noted that most funding goes directly to arts organizations and patient experiences, creating new revenue streams for the sector. Erik highlighted the patient journey, including connections with care navigators and support for transportation or companion tickets, and emphasized tracking of outcomes such as adherence, general wellness, and social engagement. Council members inquired about operational details and support for health centers, with Michael confirming that the program is designed to provide both financial and logistical support for implementing the pilot.

Erik also discussed a \$25,000 planning grant for MassChallenge, focused on connecting creativity and entrepreneurship in the innovation economy. The grant is intended to begin a longer-term partnership that includes public storytelling, joint fundraising, and engagement with the broader entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Then Dave reviewed the vote for clarifying the process for reallocating unused approved funds if grantees become ineligible or otherwise don't accept an approved grant – funds may be reallocated to the next eligible grantee for that or another grant program. There were no questions, and Cecil requested a motion to recommend to the full Council the three grants outlined by staff. Upon motion duly made and seconded, and by roll call, noting Simone was absent and with abstentions noted, it was unanimously

RESOLVED: To recommend to Mass Cultural Council the Social; Prescription: NEA Arts & Health Grants in the amount of \$75,000 as presented at the Programs Committee Meeting.

RESOLVED: To recommend to Mass Cultural Council a Creative Advantage grant to Mass Challenge of \$25,000, as presented at the Programs Committee Meeting.

RESOLVED: To recommend to Mass Cultural Council the ability of staff to re-allocate unused approved grant funds for any program to other grant applicants who would have been next eligible for such funds under such program or any other FY 26 recommended program as presented to the Programs Committee.

Cecil and Julie confirmed there were no further questions and adjourned the meeting at 2:31 PM.