

Testimony in Support of H.B. No. 6119
AN ACT CONCERNING ARTS, CULTURE AND TOURISM FUNDING

TO: Co-Chair Senator Hartley, Co-Chair Representative Simmons, Vice-Chair Senator Cohen, Vice-Chair Representative Rochelle, and members of the Commerce Committee

My name is Lori Robishaw and I live and work in Stonington where I serve as the Executive Director of La Grua Center, a small nonprofit arts and culture center that has been presenting concerts, art exhibitions, and speakers on a wide variety of topics in our space for the last 13 years. We also present several Youth Art Workshops, an annual Holiday Arts and Crafts Fair, and the annual Stonington Sounds Summer Music Festival. At least we did until last March.

Our mission is to engage community through arts and culture, and we have done that by bringing audiences together in our beautiful welcoming space, a Great Room than can seat 150 people at full capacity. Our dilemma has been how we can still engage community when we can't gather together in person. Like everyone else in our sector, we have done so by pivoting to the virtual world where we can. We are known for having wonderful acoustics for classical, chamber, and early music, as well as jazz and world-folk-ethnic music, so we have turned to hiring solo musicians and small ensembles to record a concert in our empty space, along with a camera operator, and then hiring a videographer to edit it, and then uploading it to our YouTube channel and offering the link to an audience that pays a modest ticket fee of \$10. This means our expenses have gone up—the camera operator and videographer—while our revenue has gone down—you can't really charge as much for a virtual event. We now find ourselves in competition in the virtual world with artists on the scale of the New York Philharmonic and John Legend. Guess who has more resources.

We continue to offer speakers and panel discussions, only now they are on the Zoom platform—and the same premise holds. We now find ourselves in competition with streaming services like Netflix, as well as network and cable television. Again, guess who has more resources.

For visual art exhibitions, we are partially open three half-days a week under the state's Museum guidelines so this is still better than when we tried virtual exhibits on Facebook and Google. While we are delighted to welcome visitors into our space, not many have chosen to venture out, and exhibiting art on our walls was never intended to be a revenue generating activity.

Our annual operating budget pre-COVID was around \$300,000 with two full-time staff members, and we hold a mere \$10,000 in our Endowment Fund. Our biggest hit has been in earned income from subscribers to our music series, ticket sales for concerts and speakers, sponsorships for our summer music festival, rentals to other community groups and health/fitness class teachers, and contributed income from our annual fundraising event, which had to be cancelled. Although we have received a PPP loan, the staff still took a salary reduction after it was forgiven. While we're doing our best to address ventilation issues, buying air purifiers for our HVAC system is costly. More funding from the state will be critical in getting us back to be fully able to serve our Southeastern Connecticut region. The hit to these very same income streams holds true for almost every other nonprofit in our sector.

With the many challenges facing the legislature during this pandemic, please understand that our arts and cultural organizations are part of the solution. Preserving these assets will address our state's economy in a positive fashion—and most importantly, preserve the jobs of tax-paying arts and culture workers like me—while ensuring state residents of the quality of life that Connecticut is known for. Arts and culture organizations are also a huge part of encouraging tourists to visit and spend their money here. That's why it is altogether fitting that the Tourism Fund's name be changed to Arts, Culture, and Tourism, and why the percentage of the hotel and lodging tax that supports the fund be increased from 10 to 25%, a terrific example of where increased investment leads to increased returns, while not raising the hotel and lodging tax. Further, this bill memorializes the current percentage of the fund that is allocated to Tourism at 60% and Arts and Culture at 40%, a formula that has worked well for all parties affected.

Our country's arts and culture sector has been decimated by this pandemic—and we know this by asking ourselves how soon each one of us will go back into a theatre or concert venue and sit shoulder to shoulder with other audience members for two hours. We are creative people and are trying myriad ways of staying afloat like the examples I cited earlier, but the financial models will just not work without considerable public support in the short term. We see the light at the end of the tunnel, but it will not be for a while.

The funding proposed in this bill will prevent further decline, address the shutdown, and accelerate recovery for our sector and for all of our state's communities as we get to the other side of this horrendous pandemic.

We are deeply grateful to the federal government and Governor Lamont—our state grant from the COVID Relief Fund for the Arts was enormously helpful for us, and we look forward to the legislature stepping up to do its part. Thank you so much for what you do for our state and for considering my comments.