

The Honorable Muriel Bowser
Executive Office of the Mayor
1350 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington DC 20004

March 16 2022

CC: The DC Council Committee on the Whole, Chairman Phil Mendelson, Councilmember Kenyon McDuffie, Councilmember Charles Allen, Councilmember Brianne Nadeau, Councilmember Christina Henderson, Councilmember Anita Bonds, Councilmember Janeese Lewis-George, Councilmember Robert White, Councilmember Mary Cheh, Councilmember Trayon White, Councilmember Elissa Silverman, Councilmember Vincent Gray, Director Solana Vander Nat, Deputy Mayor John Falcicchio, Director Angie Gates, Associate Director Kennisha Davy

Funding and Relief for DC Independent Music and Cultural Festivals

Dear Mayor Bowser and Members of the DC Council

The undersigned independent festivals and event producers need your support. After two years of navigating an entertainment industry plagued by COVID, many of DC's beloved event producers have overcome incredible hurdles to bring their vibrant music and cultural events back to the public and yet continue to be excluded from citywide relief funding efforts. We are asking the Administration and Council for long term sustainable funding mechanisms for festival producers in the FY2023 budget and we are asking The Council for immediate FY 2022 relief funding by revising programs like The Bridge Fund and the Outdoor Venues Grant Program to allow these festival producers to apply for much needed relief as soon as possible.

The undersigned organizations host events of all sizes representing art, musical genres and communities from across all wards of Washington DC. These events are attended by over 200,000 DC-area residents yearly, and regularly draw close to 40,000 yearly attendees from outside the DMV. These festivals have donated or provided hundreds of thousands of dollars to DC based non-profits and local charities, and they've grossed over \$10 million annually for locally owned businesses, artists, craft and food vendors. Their guests have booked more than 10,000 overnight stays in hotels or Airbnbs per year, and spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on metro and rideshare services to attend. As a cohort, these festivals pay over \$1 million dollars to over 1500 local employees, just for day-of operations; and a similarly high figure to artists and performers, many of whom are also locally based. These numbers clearly indicate that festivals provide a significant economic benefit for the city. (We are happy to share this data we collected privately with any official or agency who would like to review.)

The organizers appreciate that the city has taken steps to provide the entertainment community with relief for the incredible losses suffered in 2020 and 2021 but many of the entities listed below have not been able to apply for any of this relief. A number of producers did not even

receive funding from the SBA's Shuttered Venue Operator Grants. Festival and event producers are not a monolith and each event presents a unique set of challenges and circumstances that can exclude them from traditional small business relief funding opportunities. Most festivals, promoters and event producers do not own their space and even fewer have brick and mortar establishments. These event producers have many different arrangements with the owners (private or public) of the space where they produce their events, and even though most do not pay traditional rent or mortgage that does not negate the losses they have suffered in the last two years. The challenge these festivals face after 2021 are threefold. 1) The price of throwing festivals has increased significantly since 2019 due to the increased costs of staging, sound, tenting, porta johns, EMT, staff and security, not to mention any potential future public safety compliance and PPE costs. 2) Due to the increased need for community support post pandemic, there are more entities competing for the same limited sponsorship dollars from local businesses and corporations and 3) Institutions like DCCAH who had a surplus of funding in 2020 have since significantly cut their event support budgets for non profit event and festival producers. One specific example is that DCCAH's maximum grant award for the Projects Events and Festival grants was cut from \$20,000 to \$15,000 in FY 2022.

Many festival organizers and promoters who received funding from the 2020 Bridge Fund, were prevented from applying for the Arts and Venue Relief Grant in December 2021 due to brick and mortar requirements, and were similarly denied funding through the 2021 Bridge Fund.

The Special Events Fee Relief Fund has been a great help to event producers who host events on streets or city owned property but those entities do not make up a majority of the festival producer community. For many event producers included in this letter, special event fees are not a primary expense. As mentioned above the primary production costs aside from talent include sound, lights, staging, tenting, staff, security, and medical. These production costs have doubled since 2019 due to a deficit in infrastructure service providers and vendors.

The most recent Outdoor Venue Grant could be a boon to these festival producers. On its face this seems like the ideal grant for many of these festivals that take place on private or public outdoor lots throughout the city. The grant however, requires the producers to have fee simple ownership or active lease of the premise where the event is held, it requires that the events take place over four days and it requires the applicant to show audited financials for the past two years. Each one of these requirements excludes independent festival organizers.

The upcoming Encore Project also seems like a unique opportunity for producers but this community has been informed that it will only fund events held at four specific locations across the city. Most festivals and events are already committed to their event spaces for 2022. Planning an event in a specific location is something that takes months and often years of planning. Organizers contract with vendors based on their space, they have detailed site maps and logistic plans to help deliver an ideal experience for the specific communities they serve.

In order to help sustain the work of this irreplaceable community of businesses, we are asking the Administration and the Council to include funds in the 2023 budget to continue to support all independent festivals. We understand the city has a surplus from 2021 along with the American Rescue Plan funding that needs to be spent in the next couple years. Given the size, scope and economic impact of the festivals in this city, an initial fund, outside of the Special Event Fee Relief Fund, of at least \$2,000,000 should be allocated to help these producers have a successful 2023 season. Since the impact of COVID is something that might take years to recover from, we also hope that \$10,000,000 - \$15,000,000 could be positioned to assist festivals for the next five years.

Finally, we call on the Council and DMPED to act now to reallocate relief funding support from either the Bridge Fund or other 2022 entertainment funding programs to support the independent music festivals planned for this year. There are communities and creatives that are already committed to these events and it is important to support these entities and their creative vision so we can all begin to move past the last two years and come together to enjoy one another and heal.

Thank you for your time and service to the community.

Sincerely,

Sunny Sumter, CEO, DC Jazz Festival
Caroline Phillips, National Cannabis Festival
Julianne Brienza, Founder, Capital Fringe Festival
Aaron Myers and Herb Scott, Hillfest DC
Ayanna Smith, Porchfest DC
Amy K Bormet, Washington Women in Jazz Festival
Dior Ashley Brown, DC Music Summit
Christopher Naoum, Down in the Reeds Festival
Daniel Buchner, Kingman Island Festival
Kyle D. Mimms, Events by David Rosa
Ariadna Mondragón, Día De Los Muertos DC - Día De Los Muertos Benefit Festival
Jim Thomson, Flash of the Spirit Music Series
Charvis Campbell and Jamal Gray, Home Rule Festival
Karen Baker, Black L.U.V. Festival
Angela Byrd, MADE Conference
Will Suter, All Things Go
Justin Johnson, Long Live Go Go Group
Jamie Sandel, CapitalBop / NEXTfest

