

Trump Threatens NEA, Massachusetts Responds

By GRACE Z. LI, CRIMSON STAFF WRITER 2 days ago



Despite last year's failed attempt, the Trump administration is again planning to significantly slash the National Endowment for the Arts' budget. If their budget proposal goes through, the NEA's budget will be cut from \$150 million to \$29 million by 2019. Yet, some Massachusetts arts organizations are fighting back against the proposed cut through a petition started by MASSCreative, a Boston-based arts advocacy group.

Titled "Stop Trump's Attack on the Arts and Humanities," the petition is addressed to the Massachusetts Congressional Delegation, and has received over 1,600 signatures as of Mar. 4. It seeks to maintain the NEA's budget for the fiscal year of 2018 and to raise it to \$155 million in 2019. Matthew L. Wilson, the executive director of MASSCreative, says that the petition was conceived out of a necessity to safeguard arts funding.

"We think it's important that the arts and creativity are funded and supported by our government, both on a state and national level," Wilson says. "The latest proposal by President Trump proposes to eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts, and would in essence stop the funding of critical arts and cultural projects throughout the country."

"We're looking for the congressional representatives of Massachusetts to be leaders in the fight to maintain the NEA," Wilson says. The petition calls on the government's responsibility to maintain the NEA's budget. Local arts and culture groups have responded to MASSCreative's call as well.



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"I think that this is important for society at large," Jennifer R. Hughes, executive director of the music group Cantata Singers, says. "Government money is vital for small and mid-sized organizations. We really depend on this money to provide general operating work, and for carrying on projects that we wouldn't be able to do on our own."

"The arts are a vital part of American democracy, and deserve public support," Greg P. Liakos, the communications director of Mass Cultural Council, a state agency for the arts, says. According to Liakos, the Mass Cultural Council is a state partner of the NEA. He says that there are several key parts in thinking about the benefits of the arts, one of which is economic growth.

"The arts are central to job creation, economic growth, and separately, the arts are vital to ensuring a creative and entrepreneurial workforce," Liakos says. On Mar. 6, the NEA and the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis released data that revealed that arts and cultural production contributed to 4.2 percent of the nation's GDP, adding "four times more to the U.S. economy than the agricultural sector and \$200 billion more than transportation or warehousing." "Both the arts opportunities our residents have and the quality of life the arts provide as a result track and retain a quality workforce," Liakos says.

Another reason to protest the slashing, according to Liakos, is that public arts funding is necessary for keeping the arts available for everyone of different socioeconomic backgrounds.

"It ensures that everyone, regardless of their background, their income level, or their geography can participate in the arts and culture," Liakos says. "If we rely solely on private funding, there's a chance that a lot of individuals from underrepresented communities, or in rural communities, and/or poor neighborhoods—urban and suburban communities—wouldn't have access to music, to theater, to visual arts. Culture should be available and accessible to everyone."

Both Liakos and Hughes mention that arts funding is critical, adding to a larger, national conversation that Trump's budget proposal has prompted. But Wilson also wants to remind people that smaller, local governments are responsible for both keeping leaders accountable and providing adequate financial support for the arts.

"Over the past three years we've had to fight here in Massachusetts to keep the budget at where it is—at 14 million dollars," Wilson says. "It's really time for Massachusetts to step up and increase their investment to the arts."

The work is necessary, according to Liakos.

"Arts and culture have always been a vital part of American democracy," Liakos says. "The government has a small but important role to play in fostering a rich and diverse cultural life for American citizens and visitors."

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