

FUNDING CUTS DOUBLE WHAMMY FOR ARTS

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For 18 years, the Angkor Dance Troupe, a traditional Cambodian dance ensemble, has tried to use the arts to smooth the rough edges of Lowell's teenagers, building self-esteem and ambition by teaching dance and showcasing students at venues like the White House and Jacob's Pillow, a national dance festival.

But one year after the Massachusetts Cultural Council's 62 percent cut in state funding, combined with reductions in private grant money, the Angkor troupe is among the cultural groups in this region that have scratched programs, laid off staff, and focused more energy on fund-raising to counter a bleak financial outlook. "When you have less money, you can do less. I don't care what anyone else says," said George Chigas, who became managing director of the Angkor Dance Troupe on Oct. 1.

In the past month, Mary Kelley, executive director of the Massachusetts Cultural Council, has heard similar stories from hundreds of arts groups at regional discussions, where she tried to gauge the damage from the state arts agency's cutbacks.

"In this challenging economic environment for the arts, sciences, and humanities, MCC remains committed to offering as much support as possible to cultural organizations, schools, and communities across the state, to help them continue offering programs that enhance the quality of life throughout Massachusetts," she said in a press release.

Recently, the Massachusetts Cultural Council announced the release of \$5.2 million in statewide grants for fiscal 2004, which began July 1, an amount unchanged from the prior fiscal year. The total state allocation for the arts remains at \$7.3 million, down from a recent peak of \$19.1 million in fiscal 2002.

Kelley has tried to remain positive. "We are pleased that the MCC is able to provide level funding to grant recipients this year," Kelley said at a regional discussion Sept. 23 in Duxbury.

In the next 14 months, Kelley hopes to solicit more input from the public and private sectors before beginning development of a new multiyear plan for financing, programming, and council goals.

According to Dan Hunter, executive director of the Massachusetts Advocates for the Arts, Science and Humanities, who joined Kelley's panel of public discussions, the first step is to recognize the arts as an industry, an asset to the state economy.

"Arts and culture is not dessert. It has to be seen as part of the main plate," he said in a recent address. Responding to uncertainties of future arts funding, Hunter said political leaders should understand that the arts could help the state's economic recovery. Margaret Lazarus, executive director of Cambridge Documentary Films in Belmont, agreed.

Lazarus said her nonprofit group cut one full-time position this year and reduced the work schedule for part-timers as a result of grant cuts. "These are bad times," she said. But the importance of the arts shouldn't be overlooked, she said.

"If the Massachusetts Cultural Council grant was our only cutback, that would be one thing. But losing their support has been a sharp sting since all kinds of our private granting agencies also cut back," she said.

"Our documentary films have been in major film festivals around the world. We've won Academy Awards. We represent Massachusetts well in the world. That's the economic side of it," she said.

"Our intellectual property and our creativity as people of Massachusetts are valuable. It's part of what attracts people to this area as a vital place to work and live."

Finances are also squeezed at the Northeast Document Conservation Center in Andover, which was awarded \$24,000 this fiscal year by the Massachusetts Cultural Council, down from \$64,000 in fiscal 2002. According to director Ann Russell, cutbacks in her budget have been severe. She has cut two employees, eliminated workshops, and seen decreased demand for her services since most of her clients are museums.

"We're even having a potluck Christmas party this year," she said.

But at least two cultural groups have survived the funding famine in a relatively healthy condition. Helen Tory, assistant director and cofounder of the Essex Art Center in Lawrence, said that extra

fund-raising and an increase in individual contributions helped offset a \$6,000 cut in state funding from fiscal 2002 to 2003.

"We didn't cancel programs," said Tory. "But the money we receive from the MCC is valuable since it can go toward operating expenses, which is not usually the case with foundations."

The Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover had a similar experience, but was able to raise the funds privately to ensure that local public schools, whose field trip budgets were eliminated, got to the museum.

B. J. Larson, the Addison's director of development, said that although the gallery doesn't charge an admission fee, towns couldn't afford student bus transportation to the museum. So the gallery provided transportation. "Fortunately, we were able to make a difference," she said.

In Arlington, several cultural groups responded to budget cuts by cooperating on a venture to raise their profile within the community.

Michele M. Meagher, executive director of the Arlington Chamber of Commerce, said the town's cultural council funded a collaborative cultural calendar, listing events by month.

"It's a collective marketing strategy that presents the arts groups in one listing," she said. "It's one way to encourage the local community to support the arts."

John Michael Kennedy, a Massachusetts Cultural Council spokesman, said the council is trying to help artists ride out tough times. It has developed an online job bank as well as a peer advisory network, providing up to two days of one-on-one consulting services in areas such as fund-raising and marketing.

"We're turning the binoculars around, to become more meaningful to you," Kelley told arts groups at the Duxbury session. "We want to know how people look at [the Massachusetts Cultural Council]. We want to make a difference."