

**Testimony
of
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Before the Senate Committee on Higher Education

April 29, 2025

Chairwoman Roegner and members of the Committee - thank you for allowing me to testify today on the proposed budget appropriation for the Ohio Arts Council.

I'm Sarah Sisser, Executive Director & CEO of CreativeOhio.

CreativeOhio is the statewide voice for Ohio's creative sector. With over 130 member organizations, we provide leadership, advocacy, and support to strengthen and enhance our state through arts, culture, and creativity. We strive to increase public support and public investment in the creative sector. Our members include world-renowned institutions like The Cleveland Orchestra, Toledo Museum of Art, Columbus Association for the Performing Arts, Dayton Live, and the Cincinnati Ballet, to name just a few. Our membership also includes important cultural assets and community-focused organizations outside of Ohio's major metropolitan areas, like the Marathon Center for the Performing Arts in Findlay, the Tuscarawas Arts Partnership in New Philadelphia, and the Decorative Arts Center in Lancaster.

In Ohio, we're fortunate to have one of the most vibrant arts ecosystems in the country. Likewise, the arts landscape in our state has been fortunate to have the enduring support of its residents, the Ohio Legislature, and the administration of Governor DeWine. While Ohio is the 7th most populous state in the country, we're home to the #1 city for street art in the nation, the 2nd largest entertainment district outside of Broadway, two of the top 10 largest orchestras in the nation, two of the top 10 best art museums in the nation, and I could go on! Additionally, our state is home to literally hundreds of arts organizations offering free or low-cost programming to Ohioans that is helping to create thriving communities, positively impact K-12 test scores, lower recidivism rates, and improve mental and physical health.

Not only do the arts generate civic pride and improve quality of life for Ohioans, but the creative sector is also an unstoppable economic engine in our state. Despite being disproportionately negatively affected by the COVID pandemic, Ohio's creative sector has come roaring back. In 2024, our creative sector directly contributed more than \$32.9B to the state's economy, employed more than 132,000 people, and generated nearly \$923M in state and local tax revenue. The creative sector accounts for more than 3% of the state's GDP, more than education or agriculture. The arts have proven to be a great return on investment for

Ohio. Like our professional sports franchises and stadiums, our arts organizations and entertainment venues are creating jobs, generating tax revenue, attracting business and talent, and bringing dollars into the state while driving tourism. As the legislature continues to consider options for the possible funding of professional sports venues in our state, we encourage a holistic approach that could incorporate the additional entities providing world-class entertainment and recreation options in Ohio, prioritizing those driving economic impact and growth.

Our state arts agency, the Ohio Arts Council, is a lifeline for many arts and culture organizations in Ohio. The State Programs Subsidies line item is the primary source for the grants awarded to hundreds of organizations across the state. A significant part of that line item goes towards the arts council's flagship sustainability grant program, which provides crucial operating support to these organizations.

Since FY16, the Ohio Arts Council has had the distinction of funding projects and organizations in all 88 counties. In recent years, they have worked to increase awareness of and accessibility to grant funding to benefit all Ohioans, particularly in rural counties where arts funding had not historically reached. As a result, they have seen a significant increase in funding requests. The executive version of the budget proposes that the State Programs Subsidies remain flat. However, the arts council is projecting that 193 new organizations will become eligible for sustainability grants in FY26. A flat budget would mean a significant cut in operating support to the hundreds of existing sustainability grantees, including the world-renowned cultural assets in our major cities, as well as the community centers providing some of the only arts programming available in our more rural counties.

We respectfully request this Committee to consider recommending an increase in the State Program Subsidies line item of \$4M in each fiscal year. This increase would allow for growth in the grants program and in Ohio's overall arts ecosystem - accommodating new organizations while maintaining a consistent level of support for existing recipients of sustainability funding.

Thank you for the committee's time and consideration.