

U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor
“The Economic and Employment Impact of the Arts and Music Industry”
Remarks - Michael Spring, Director, Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs
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My name is Michael Spring and I serve as Director of the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs. I am responsible for supervision of a public arts agency in Miami, Florida with an annual budget of more than \$26 million and a staff of 35. Thank you for this opportunity to talk about the economic and employment impact of the arts from a local perspective.

For the past twenty-seven years, our Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs has been at the epicenter of one of our nation’s most dynamic, diverse and rapidly growing arts communities. In 1982, there were a little more than one hundred non-profit arts organizations in our County; today, there are more than one thousand arts businesses.

This growth has occurred at every level - from grassroots, neighborhood groups energized by our tremendous diversity to major cultural institutions like the New World Symphony and the Miami Art Museum. We have been enriched by the waves of immigration that have brought new artists and arts supporters to our community and by the evolution of our County from a vacation and retirement spot to a major international center for commerce and tourism. Recognition of Miami’s cultural stature has been accelerated by the accomplishments of our artists across the world and by recent phenomena like Art Basel Miami Beach, where thousands of arts travelers and members of the international press arrive in our community every December for the country’s most exciting visual arts fair.

A one thousand percent growth rate is phenomenal for any sector of our economy. Our first generation arts enterprises are producing new work with a distinctive Miami “voice” and are helping to create a bold new city. Our community’s goal for investing in the arts is not modest; it is nothing less than establishing our place prominently in the global entertainment and economic marketplace.

I want to offer a short story about just one of our many outstanding arts organizations – Miami City Ballet. Each season, this 23-year old company employs hundreds of people – not just the more than fifty full-time dancers who have established Miami City Ballet as one of the nation’s great dance companies, but also company administrators, accountants, carpenters, stagehands, seamstresses, teachers and physical therapists. Two months ago, Miami City Ballet made its triumphal appearance at City Center in New York City. The New York Times raved about the performances saying, “this is as good an advertisement for its home city as any ballet company in America.” Less than two weeks later, back in Miami, the Ballet announced that due to the worsening economy, it was laying off 8 dancers and reducing its budget next season by more than 25%. There are more layoffs likely to come.

I could have told this story from a “human interest” perspective of dancers who have trained a lifetime and have mortgages and car payments to make. Or I could have talked about the legendary Edward Villella, the company’s artistic director, who has put his heart and soul into building this company. This would have been a shameless attempt to pull on your heartstrings; but that is not the point of my testimony today. Instead, this story points out that our cultural sector is a major player in promoting Miami’s new image for business and tourism. It also demonstrates that the non-profit arts industry, as an employer, is an integral part of our local economy. And it underscores the fact that arts organizations are subject to the very same forces affecting America’s and the world’s economic viability. The results – job loss and downsizing - are jeopardizing our ability to employ people and sustain this cultural segment of the economy.

Miami-Dade County is an endlessly surprising place, even for those of us who grew up there. It amazes visitors and even some residents that we are building one of the newest, major cultural centers in the world.

Our County government is investing more than one billion dollars in cultural infrastructure that is being matched multifold by businesses and individuals. Our Department of Cultural Affairs is one of the largest in terms of budget in the nation. Recently, we opened a major new, \$481 million performing arts center in downtown Miami. We are upgrading and building dozens of neighborhood cultural facilities. And just four years ago, the voters of our community passed a referendum by a two to one margin to approve more than \$450 million in general obligation bonds for cultural facilities building projects – including new downtown, bayfront art and science museums.

Why is Miami-Dade County investing so aggressively in the arts? The answer is very simple: our local elected officials, our business leaders and the public understand that a community’s culture is a cornerstone of its economic vitality.

We have the facts to support this. Our recent report on the arts and the local economy documented a \$922 million impact by Miami-Dade County’s arts and cultural industry each year. Our non-profit cultural organizations employ almost 23,000 workers. The more than 12 million attendees to cultural events each year spend more than a half a billion dollars beyond buying tickets to performances. They park their cars in garages and spend their money in restaurants, hotels and shops before and after being energized by theater, dance and art exhibitions. Our neighborhood businesses rely on the “traffic” created by our non-stop calendar of arts activities.

There is another powerful economic effect of the arts in our community. Cultural facilities and their performances and exhibitions are revitalizing our neighborhoods. Our Mayor and County Commission have seen the transformative effect of the arts on some of the most abandoned and neglected parts of our community. Miami-Dade is a living laboratory demonstrating how pioneering arts groups and artists have helped to transform places like Lincoln Road, South Beach and Little Havana from once forbidding to now thriving and safe neighborhoods. In fact, we designated our new performing arts center as the catalytic project for the tax increment district in the north part of downtown Miami. The Center’s effect on revitalizing this area has far exceeded even the most optimistic projections. Tax increment funds have grown ten times as much as expected. What was a part of downtown that people avoided is being transformed into a vibrant entertainment, education and business district.

These days in Miami, attempts at rhetoric that stereotype the arts as a “frill” are drowned out quickly. There is overwhelming evidence all around us that cultural facilities and non-profit arts organizations are employing people, making our community better, improving kids’ lives and playing a catalytic role in neighborhood and business redevelopment.

In fact, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation affirmed the power of the arts last year when they announced the investment of \$40 million of the foundation’s funds in our community through the Knight Arts Challenge. In considering the most promising way to continue to transform Miami into one of the great 21st century cities, the Knight Foundation selected the arts as its one strategic area for this significant infusion of private funds.

Our burgeoning cultural life also is a strategic element of promoting Miami as a tourism destination. Our Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau gets it. They understand that a community’s cultural assets give it a competitive edge in attracting tourists and conferences. When we vie with the Caribbean for vacationers, submit our successful bids to host Super Bowls or compete for major conventions, we sell our

destination as the “sophisticated tropics” – featuring fabulous beaches, great shopping and cuisine, America’s preeminent cruise ship port and an art scene that entertains 24/7.

What do our business leaders think about the arts? Our local economic development agency, the Beacon Council, did a survey of Miami businesses last year. They found that more than 75% of our local businesses consider having vibrant cultural activities as important or very important to their companies. Almost 80% support the arts through employee participation on boards or as volunteers with cultural organizations.

In a survey of citizens undertaken by Miami-Dade County last October, 60% of our residents were very satisfied or satisfied with the quality of the cultural offerings in our community. This was up by more than 10% from the 2005 survey results. This is remarkable given the youthfulness of our cultural life and the newness of most of the population of our County. The vast majority of Miami-Dade’s cultural organizations are less than a generation old; most of the residents of our community were not born here. In spite of the youth of our cultural community and its audiences – and the fact that in Miami, traditions of arts-going have not yet had generations to take hold – our citizens are increasingly recognizing the quality and diversity of our arts activities.

Even today, at a moment when disposable income for our citizens is at a premium, attendance by Miamians at concerts, museums, plays and dance performances is reported as “up” this season. People are expressing their priorities by what they are willing to purchase as their buying power diminishes. Admittedly, ticket sales do not make up for the significant downturn in contributions by individuals and businesses but our enthusiastic audiences are demonstrating that people value the arts as an integral part of their lives.

For our young city, the job of reaching the children of our community is critically important. Like other local arts agencies across America, our Department focuses resources on making the arts affordable and accessible for families and kids. Cultural activities supported by our Department serve more than 2 million children annually. Our Department directly reaches thousands of kids each year with a scholarship program to make summer arts and sciences camps available to those who might otherwise not have the means or opportunity to go. In addition, through our Culture Shock Miami program, high school and college students, ages 13-22, can buy tickets for only \$5 to almost any arts event in town. Thousands of students are online buying these tickets to the arts and discovering the wonder of live performances and learning about the richness of our diverse cultures. In our day care centers, in our schools and on standardized tests, we are seeing a direct correlation between a child’s involvement in the arts and success in the classroom. The arts are an essential part of preparing students to excel in an increasingly complex, competitive and sophisticated job marketplace.

I know the people in our cultural workforce. They are passionate about what they do. They have to be or they would not be in our business. The average cultural worker in Miami-Dade County makes about \$28,000 a year – that’s approximately 30% less than our community’s overall average salary. Like other American workers, many arts employees work more than one job to make ends meet. Most artists and arts administrators work without the kinds of benefits that are offered to their peers employed by the for-profit sector or even government. And they are committed beyond reason to making sure that only the best quality product reaches our stages and gallery walls. They believe deeply that the arts can change lives and put this into action by producing programs for school kids even when money is scarce to do this.

Miami-Dade County Mayor Carlos Alvarez and the thirteen members of our County Commission see this kind of phenomenal commitment every day. The budget for our Department of Cultural Affairs has more than quadrupled over the last decade. This is an explicit recognition by our elected leaders that the arts are a great investment for our community. Last year, due to the enactment of statewide property reform measures, our County government had to reduce its budget by more than \$200 million. Now that’s a lot of money where I come from. I am proud to report that the budget for our Department of Cultural Affairs was not reduced.

The signal that our County is sending to our cultural workforce and to the businesses and individuals who support the arts is powerful. It is akin to the signal that this Congress recently sent across our nation when \$50 million was approved as a part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. It says to me and the thousands of people who support and work in the arts in my town that you recognize the contributions that we are making every day to the economy. It says that you realize that non-profit cultural groups employ people in our cities who work hard, day and night, weekdays and weekends, to make a better life for our families and kids. It says that you understand that like other industries, jobs in the cultural sector are being lost and jeopardized. It says that progressive governments understand the amazing return on investment that adequate support for the arts produces – for our cities and for our people. It says to us that artists and cultural businesses are part of the solution for restarting our economy and rekindling the creativity and character that continue to make America great.

I thank you for your support of the arts and urge you to reinvest even more significant resources as a strategic and productive way to help achieve America’s economic and human recovery and renewal.

I am proud offer this testimony along with our nation’s leading non-profit organization for advancing the arts in our country, Americans for the Arts, where I serve as a board member. Together, we attest to the vitality of the arts across our country and to the essential role of local arts agencies, artists and arts organizations in cities and towns throughout America. We also affirm the remarkable returns being realized by progressive governments in setting policies and investing support in the work of non-profit arts organizations and artists.

For an online copy of “The Impact of the Arts in Miami-Dade County” study please go to www.miamidadearts.org/Documents/Publications/2008%20Arts%20Economic%20Impact%20Study.pdf

For more information about the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs, please go to www.miamidadearts.org.

To see the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs’ discount ticket program for high school and college students, Culture Shock Miami, please go to www.cultureshockmiami.com.

For information about the thousands of intrepid local arts agencies throughout our nation making America’s communities more vibrant and economically successful, please go to www.americansforthearts.org.

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