

ARTSBOSTON

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BEHIND RAISED CURTAINS AND OPENED DOORS: A NEW EFFORT UNCOVERS HOW GREATER BOSTON ARTS GROUPS ARE FARING ON ROAD TO RECOVERY

Findings from a recent qualitative survey by ArtsBoston of regional arts organizations indicate that groups across the sector are struggling with funding, audience return, staffing and other issues, even as more of them are reopening, producing performances, and hosting exhibitions.

The survey was conducted among more than 20 local dance, music, theater, opera, and visual arts groups, ranging in annual budget size from under \$500K to over \$50M. **ArtsBoston Executive Director Catherine Peterson**, whose group did the research, says she sought a snapshot of how representative groups were traversing the challenges of re-emerging, after two rounds of COVID variants and almost a year since live performances resumed. Surveys took the form of open-ended conversations; Peterson says ArtsBoston aimed to understand the status of ongoing challenges, unearth new ones, and surface potential solutions.

“Last year at this time we were saying arts groups can’t simply turn on the lights and be ready to go on day one after 18 months without live experiences,” Peterson says. “Now the lights are on and the reality of being back in business is more clear. The challenges we knew would come are taking shape. It is important for Greater Boston – an ecosystem that depends on a healthy cultural sector – to know how these crucial economic drivers are faring.”

From mid-2020 through this past spring, ArtsBoston kept close tabs on how area arts audiences felt about a variety of issues related to returning to performances, through its Audience Outlook Monitor (AOM) partnership with consulting firm WolfBrown. “AOM gave us indications that audiences in Greater Boston were eager to return, but also they would be cautious in that return,” Peterson says. AOM research showed an expected drop in audience sizes from 15-20%.

Among the common themes and challenges that were threaded through these organizational interviews:

- **There are challenges connecting and reconnecting with audiences**, both the loyal pre-pandemic ones and new, non-traditional arts goers. Many in the sector hoped when COVID shutdowns had lifted, culture-starved audiences would return quickly. Many arts groups report audiences are down 20-40%, double what was expected.
- **Funding is especially challenging now**, exacerbated by reduced ticket income, the end of government COVID-relief programs, and individual philanthropy hampered by inflation, a pummeled stock market and recession fears.
- **Staffing shortages and turnover** have impacted the arts sector like many other industries. A number of arts organizations have unfilled jobs due to a competitive hiring market, a

scarcity of experienced workers, and a high cost of living in Greater Boston. Additionally, many report that up to 50% of their staff is new – often new to the field – resulting in significant on-boarding needs, productivity dips, and loss of institutional memory.

- **Need for data and research insights.** Staffing shortages impact the workload for remaining workers, pushing aside crucial audience research and fundraising data analysis, which diminishes outreach to new ticket buyers and potential donors. Nearly all organizations report struggling for insights on demographics, consumer habits and other crucial information, Peterson says.
- Although they strive for it in their organizations, arts workers say **racial justice goals can feel unattainable due to other structural issues**. From not having time to give social justice its needed space, to concerns about audience diversification being more than a marketing strategy, organizations are still figuring out how to create and manage efforts to serve the entire community. Peterson says conversations with BIPOC arts leaders confirmed what is already known: the work of racial justice is iterative and must be ongoing. “Organizations of all sizes realize they can’t allow themselves to conclude that structural racism is ‘too hard to tackle,’” Peterson says. “They know it involves difficult conversations and a commitment to using time and resources”
- **Loss of community and convening is affecting morale.** With staff members taking on additional work due to shortages, high turnover, and onboarding new employees, opportunities to connect with peers at sector-wide events have been lost, leading to feelings of isolation, loss of important data sharing, and a diminished feeling of connection to a collective mission.

“What we see in these conversations are the paths forward that need to be paved on the long road to recovery,” Peterson says. “Arts groups are telling us they need more time and more resources to get where their business models and revised mission statements are pointing them. Governmental recovery money over the past two-plus years was crucial to keep artists and workers employed, and maintain theater spaces. But local, regional and national funders, and service organizations like ArtsBoston must move into the next phase of helping the sector.”

Despite the barriers, Peterson says that organizations and employees remain hopeful. “It is both concerning and comforting to see where arts organizations are on their move back to full activity,” Peterson says. “It is clear this is a critical moment for an essential part of Boston’s economy. From my decades of working with artists and arts organizations, I know they are resilient, but this recovery is different. This sector needs significant support if it’s going to remain vital to this community’s economy and its soul.”

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For more information on this survey and report
contact John Michael Kennedy, jmk@jmkpr.com or 781-620-1761