

THE HONOURABLE PATRICIA BOVEY, FRSA, FCMA
SENATOR – MANITOBA



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SÉNATRICE – MANITOBA

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CANADA

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Dear Friends and Colleagues,

The COVID-19 pandemic continues and its impact is devastating in so many ways. My condolences go out to all across this country who have lost loved ones, and to those who are ill or have ill family members and friends. These are uncertain, unprecedented, worrying times.

As you know my focus in recent weeks has been on the impact COVID-19 has on artists, and arts, culture and heritage organizations, impacts in both the short and longer terms. I want to thank everyone who has been in touch with me during this crisis, and those one hundred or more with whom I have spoken. A number of the concerns I have heard are consistent across the country, particularly those regarding the criteria for CERB and the business wage subsidy program. In the Senate we have organized an informal working group to address concerns and issues which are coming forward and had our first meeting by phone last week. Another is planned for later today. Each of the members are likewise reaching out throughout their regions and networks. Our goals are to:

1. Advise the Government and the Minister on the realities and needs of arts community
2. Advise the arts community, artists and organizations regarding federal assistance programs
3. Assist the sector with information and actions as possible.

In my own consultations with the sector, the concerns, issues and creative initiatives also fell into timeline categories, and we have seen that these are similar across the country:

1. Immediate crisis management
2. Mid-term and program and financial planning uncertainty
3. Longer-term recovery concerns

A key immediate concern for organizations is cash flow. All with whom I have spoken or heard from are pleased the Canada Council and other funding bodies have, and are, advancing grants and relaxing reporting and use of funds.

CERB has been applauded, but for artists the overriding concern is the rigidity of the criteria for eligibility. I can assure you that in a call I had with Minister Guilbeault this week, he confirmed, as has the Prime Minister, that the criteria is being revised to address the realities.

Likewise, the business emergency wage subsidy program IS open to arts groups, and I know many are assessing its benefits given their individual situations. From a briefing call with Finance yesterday, may I suggest that those of you with questions please go to the government website and ask for advice from Finance staff. We are expecting the legislation to come to the House of Commons and the Senate shortly.

None of us know how long this pandemic will continue, and none of us know when we can return to 'normal', or what that 'normal' may be. I can say from my conversation with the Minister that he asked me to continue to bring concerns I am hearing to him. He too is hearing many of the same issues and is working on ensuring the programs are of assistance to situations of specific sectors. We talked about the immediate, and the issues as we all face as we come out of the pandemic in rebuilding audiences and re-establishing programs. Discussions of communication plans and audience support will be forthcoming.

All of us on our working group are well aware of the fact that festivals have 'drop dead dates' for deciding 2020 summer programming; that performing arts have concerns regarding artist contracts and licencing agreements; that galleries and museums have their own programming commitments which have various implications; and that small seasonal regional museums, primarily or totally volunteer run, are facing other pressing realities. The private sector support, fundraising and foundation support is another factor in the overall mix of discussions. Added to that is the intermittent, or lack of, internet in some parts of the country, as well as other specific regional concerns.

In the midst of all I am hearing, I am so heartened and inspired by the many creative initiatives of artists, and arts, culture and heritage organizations. Some artists are able to put their work on line, singly and collaboratively; some performing organizations are able to put previous programs on line, and galleries and museums are presenting exhibitions and collections digitally too. Where possible organizations are shifting the timelines of their strategic plans, bringing some goals forward while slowing others.


In addition to the Arts and COVID-19 informal Senate working group that Senator Cormier and I pulled together, several other working groups are addressing COVID implications. Senator Deacon from Nova Scotia is working informally with some senators on the impact of the COVID on small business. He and I have spoken about the overlaps between the arts and small business. Senator Pate has organized an informal group looking at a Guaranteed Living Wage. I am part of that group, for as we all know, artists comprise the largest percentage of working poor who live below the poverty line even at the best of times.

It is increasingly evident that the arts sector is tremendously important to the individual spirit, community and personal well-being, and the economic vitality of our regions and the country. The arts and cultural industries' sector IS the third largest employer in the country and its impact on every aspect of society is significant and measurable. If any of you want details please let me know! Also, please know that my work with organizations and artists will continue throughout the pandemic and into the period of recovery. Feel free to reach out my way with any concern you may have. I will add what I hear to my master file and bring it to our working group.

In the meantime, I wish good health to you and yours, and stay safe on this long weekend and beyond.

The mantra of my late husband is so true: "We are all better off when we are all better off." Let's all be better off in the coming months!

Best wishes,



Patricia Bovey, FRSA, FCMA
Senator for Manitoba