



Worcester Cultural Coalition Annual Report: 2020

Advocacy

COVID-19 Response: in addition to acclimating to virtual environments, cultural workers and organizations have had many challenges due to the pandemic, which the Worcester Cultural Coalition (WCC) is working to address in a variety of ways.

- **Worcester Together:** The City of Worcester partnered with the United Way, Greater Worcester Community Foundation, and additional community partners to address acute and long-term needs of the Worcester community. Areas addressed include health, food, housing, education, youth opportunities, internet access, economic development, logistics, behavioral health, seniors, culture, and the clergy. In response, the City's Cultural Development Division (CDD), WCC and Greater Worcester Community Foundation (GWCF) established methods to identify the needs of the creative community and Worcester's residents, and to embed arts, culture, and creativity in the support of the city's needs.
- **WCC Member Survey:** In May, a survey of WCC members identified the impacts of COVID-19 on the cultural community. [This report](#) was shared with the Mass Cultural Council (MCC), Americans for the Arts, City Manager Edward M. Augustus Jr., and the Greater Worcester Community Foundation, which led to targeted funding to support cultural organizations and creative individuals. GWCF partnered with the WCC and CDD office on the following funding programs in addition to creating COVID-19 response funding for cultural organizations.
- **Creative Relief Fund Grants:** In response to the pandemic, and as a result to economic uncertainty amongst the creative community, the City of Worcester, in partnership with the WCC and the GWCF, developed the Worcester Creative Relief Fund. The fund awarded \$500 grants to 70 artists who live or work in Worcester whose creative practices and incomes were impacted by COVID-19.
- **Cultural Task Force:** Beginning in May, the WCC began holding discussions for local arts and cultural workers. Initial conversations focused on COVID-19 concerns and shifted to racial equity in early June. The Cultural Task Force now meets biweekly, and covers topics of interest to its attendees, including messaging, virtual audience engagement, COVID safety protocol, engaging with Worcester Public Schools, and more. [Register for these discussions here.](#)
- **Give Me A Sign:** The CDD, in partnership with the WCC and the GWCF, developed the Give Me a Sign project in an effort to highlight the relationship between creative expression and mental health, which is especially relevant during COVID-19. Nineteen artists were selected to design 12" x 18" signs to provide inspiration, education, and optimism. One hundred twenty signs were placed throughout the Worcester community, with 4 designs on area billboards in summer 2020.
- **Arts At Home + Creative Community Resources:** At the beginning of the pandemic, a shortage of local online programming inspired the creation of the Arts At Home section of WorcesterCulture.org – a collection of video content from WCC members and artists around the city. To help the WCC members and artists navigate COVID relief and access helpful information, the Creative Community Resources page was created to centralize funding opportunities, share culture-centric COVID news, and more.

Addressing Systemic Racism: The WCC stands together in outrage, sadness, and commitment, to address the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and countless others. These

unconscionable acts are just a few examples on a long list of systemic racism experienced by Black, Indigenous, and other people of color.

In [a statement released this summer](#), the WCC Executive Director and Board Chair encouraged Worcester's creative community to take action to address structural racism, cycles of violence, and injustices with our own voices and within our own organizations. The WCC is increasing diversity within its Board and staff, actively engaging with creatives and youth of color, communicating and encouraging creation in languages other than English, creating funding opportunities to amplify marginalized voices, and seeking out additional community partners who had previously not been part of our conversations.

Education: The WCC Education Working Group partnered with the Worcester Public Schools (WPS) and Worcester Education Development Fund to implement 13 Culture LEAPS in the FY20 school year. Many programs were curtailed due to COVID-19, prompting the WCC to engage Worcester Together in education and other areas. Led by the Worcester Education Collaborative, the WCC joined the Education Working Group to discuss current educational priorities. This work manifested in:

- Continued development of the Woo-Labs model, a virtual enrichment academy concept to address out of school learning needs.
- A summer enrichment academy, in which 12 cultural organizations collaborated with youth programs taking place via REC Worcester and providers such as the Boys and Girls Club to provide virtual camp curriculum and kits. WCC provided guidance in the call to cultural organizations and outreach, and GWCF provided funding support to the cultural organizations.
- Following the summer academy's success, the WCC is assisting the WPS to provide virtual cultural programs during school hours in the first semester, which will involve 10 to-be-determined cultural organizations.
- Through WEC's education roundtable, [Now Is the Time to Address the Digital Divide](#) addresses the needs for Internet connectivity and access to be provided equitably across the city.

Cultural Plan: Arts, culture and creativity are important to the vibrancy, sustenance, and growth of the City of Worcester. The City's commitment to these priorities resulted in increased financial support for arts and cultural initiatives throughout the City, including public art; shifting the CDD to report directly to the City Manager; elevating the Cultural Development Officer to a cabinet level position; and appointing a Deputy Cultural Development Officer, a new position.

To execute the objectives of the Cultural Plan, the City partnered with the WCC and GWCF. The Cultural Plan, titled [Becoming Worcester: The Evolution of a Creative City](#), became public in June 2019. Working groups are currently developing and implementing over the next ten years. The CDD team began hosting workshops with local nonprofit organizations, artists and creatives, Worcester Public School staff, and youth groups to encourage adoption and success of the Cultural Plan. An oversight committee was convened to weigh in on the strategies and impact over the first year of implementation.

Legislative Advocacy:

- MASSCreative is an advocacy organization promoting support of the arts, sciences, and humanities. WCC staff and board serve on the MASSCreative Board of Directors and in its Leadership Council as well. These voices increase Worcester representation in statewide arts and cultural advocacy.
- Due to COVID-19 and the resulting hold on the state budget, WCC member organizations continue to advocate for federal, state, and local funding for the creative sector.
- The WCC joined MASSCreative, the MCC, and cultural institutions to successfully advocate for \$10 million in funding for the MA Cultural Facilities Fund, and participated in cultural advocacy at the Statehouse.
- Cultural Town Hall: In May, the MCC joined the WCC and Congressman Jim McGovern to learn about the needs of the creative sector. As a result, Congressman McGovern established a working group to seek additional appropriations for the cultural sector from federal appropriations. In addition, the WCC serves on the Americans for the Arts Putting Creatives to Work Roundtable,

which advocates for national funding for the creative sector. The WCC continues to advocate locally and at the state level, along with the MCC, for COVID-19 relief funding and public art initiatives.

Promoting Arts and Culture

- **Media Buys & Trade:** For years, the WCC has run a multi-faceted advertising campaign on a variety of outlets including print, radio, local television, and online. These cash and trade efforts were paused in March in response to COVID-19 and will resume as soon as possible and appropriate.
- **Newsletters:** WCC publishes the Arts & Culture Connection, a biweekly e-newsletter with over 26,000 subscribers. Over the past year, adjustments were made to improve visual accessibility, quantity and range of programs included, and more. Further considerations were made to meet the needs of WCC members and newsletter subscribers after the beginning of the pandemic. Additional emails include the monthly newsletter from the JMAC, press releases, calls for collaborations, special meetings, and WCC-programmed events and opportunities. In FY20, the WCC sent nearly 940,000 emails, with an average open rate of 12% and an average click rate of 9%.
- **Social Media:** WCC maintains active social media channels, with approximately 9,500 followers on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram – up 8% from FY19. Total posts generated nearly 300,000 impressions, with a core audience of women ages 35-44, followed by women ages 25-34 and 45-54. An estimated 950 social media posts were created in FY19 to promote the many events and initiatives of WCC members. #makearteverywhere #artsforall #artsmatterhere
- **Website:** Launched in 2018, the original design of WorcesterCulture.org included a member login section, a customization which impacted the entire site. As technology evolved and we learned how members and viewers use the site, we found benefits of the member login did not justify the challenges. It was also noted that the site design didn't translate well to non-desktop environment, which account for 42% of visits. Web developers are actively engaged to address these issues and refresh the site, improving the user experience for visitors and site managers alike. In FY20, WorcesterCulture.org had 14,669 visitors and 46,000 page views. The WCC Calendar of Events page accounts for 29% percent of the website's traffic, with a total of 13,304 page views. After the Home Page, the next highest viewed pages were for the Worcester Creative Relief Fund and Creative Community Resources (detailed above). These data show that the website is an effective tool for both reaching the cultural community and sharing creative happenings. Half of all traffic to the WCC site was direct, with organic search as the second highest traffic source.

Jean McDonough Arts Center

Given their corresponding missions, the Worcester PopUp and BrickBox Theater formed a hub of accessible creativity as the Jean McDonough Arts Center (JMAC). After months of work by the WCC board and staff, in partnership with the Worcester Business Development Corporation, the Hanover Theatre, and the City of Worcester, life-long patron of the arts and WCC Arts Angel Jean McDonough donated \$2 million to fund the JMAC's continued construction and operations. An additional \$200,000 was awarded from Mass Development and the Mass Cultural Council's Cultural Facilities Fund.

On March 5, 2020, nearly 100 artists, creative workers, funders, and cultural enthusiasts attended the official unveiling of the Jean McDonough Arts Center, which culminated in Jean McDonough lighting the venue's JMAC sign on Franklin Street for the first time. The WCC and partners continue to collaborate on the implementation of the Worcester PopUp, a collaborative co-working and creative space, and the creation of the BrickBox Theater.

The PopUp and BrickBox joined promotional and networking efforts by combining staffing, [website](#) and social media presences, and are actively working to unify the spaces under the JMAC. Local artist Travis Duda of Hunchback Graphics designed the JMAC and BrickBox logos and redesigned the PopUp logo to unify the entities.

- **Worcester PopUp:** Since opening in April 2018, the PopUp has hosted 300+ creative community events produced by WCC member organizations, artists, creative entrepreneurs, and staff. According to Managing Director Hank von Hellion, more than 3,000 people have attended public events including traditional gallery exhibitions, musical concerts, and a wide range of performance art. The PopUp is committed to supporting arts education and professional development through workshops and networking events. The PopUp staff also collectively manage the Worcester Windows program, which installs visual arts in the storefronts of partner businesses and City Hall on a rotating schedule.
- **BrickBox Theater:** In September 2019, former producing artistic director of Bridge Reparatory Theater Olivia D'Ambrosio Scanlon became the Managing Director of the BrickBox. In her first months, she worked to establish the space, coordinate upcoming events, build contacts, and took part in creating the branding materials for the BrickBox and JMAC along with WCC staff. Early in 2020, the BrickBox looked forward to hosting a wide range of events, including a live podcast recording, a night of music with TONY-Award Winner Laura Benanti, an independent film festival, a youth rock concert, and more. Despite event postponements, the BrickBox has continued to move forward in construction and acquiring equipment, including two grand piano and live streaming equipment, to be installed in November. In the first month of FY21, the Hanover Theatre became the first producer in MA to earn approval from Actors' Equity Association to host an indoor production, scheduled in the BrickBox during weekends in October. This space will be marketed for a variety of uses: live-streaming events, small-group events, a location for photo shoot and filming, even a space where large-scale visual art can be created.
- **Mentorship:** In addition to actively supporting and promoting cultural equity (#artsforall), the PopUp has worked with 2 interns and 3 mentees to date. Each intern and mentee gained valuable exposure to and experience in the business of the arts, event production, venue management, marketing, and customer service during their tenure with the PopUp. Two mentees each used their experiences to host their own successful events. Growing from mentee to full-time employee in late 2020, Hal Gaucher has become the coordinator for the Worcester Windows program.

Cultural Development Division

Programming

- **Festival of Lights:** The 2019 Festival of Lights expanded to a two-day event, including a market of 30+ local artisans and crafters, live performers, and interactive lighting displays from LuminArtz.
- **I Am Worcester:** Over 100 portraits of Worcester community members were captured by photographer Matt Wright during two public photoshoots in March. To celebrate Worcester's 508 Day in 2020, portraits and personal stories were released throughout the month of May on social media and the [City website](#), and additional banners and billboards showcase the images publicly.
- **Arts @ Home:** To encourage physical distancing during the pandemic, the Culture Division shared weekly creative prompts for all ages to enjoy in their own homes.
- **Worcester Women's Suffrage:** Throughout FY20, the Worcester Women's Suffrage working group convened to program and market celebrations of the 19th amendment's 100th anniversary and women's rights, and to discuss to whom these rights applied. August 26, "Worcester Women Changemakers: Celebrating Women's Equality Day and Suffrage" and the need to get out the vote and encourage women to seek public office was livestreamed, highlighting 30+ Worcester women in a panel discussion, historical and contemporary suffragist readings, music, poetry, and calls to action. Senator Harriette Chandler played a major role in leading the charge for women to make their voices heard and seek public office.
- **Book Festival:** Scheduled to include over 30 diverse local and regional authors on April 17 & 18, 2020, the inaugural Worcester Book Festival was postponed to spring 2021. Programming will celebrate Worcester's unique literary character, stories from the community, and array of genres from nonfiction to poetry.

- **Community from Home:** The Poets Laureate hosted a series of virtual open mics in May, June, and July. These open mics highlighted original multigenerational and multilingual poetry, spoken word, and music from dozens of local poets.
- **Movies on the Lot:** In collaboration with the Worcester Downtown Business Improvement District, the Culture Division hosted a drive-in movie at the Francis J. McGrath Municipal Parking Lot on August 20, celebrating summer and offering a physically-distant variation of the annual Movies on the Common series.
- **Create the Vote:** As the first phase of an effort to increase voter registration and engagement, the Worcester Create the Vote campaign was launched on August 31, offering local creatives \$300 stipends to redesign Worcester's "I Voted Today" stickers with the new message "My Vote Counts" in multiple languages. The winning images can be viewed [on the WCC Facebook page](#).
- **Cancellations:** In compliance with COVID-19 gathering guidelines, many annual spring and summer events hosted on the Common were cancelled including the REC Spring Garden Festival, Out to Lunch Festival and Farmers' Market Series, Movies on the Common, City Field Day, Latin American Festival, and the Caribbean American Carnival.

Additional Initiatives:

- **Levitt AMP Grant:** Though Worcester was ultimately not selected for a \$25,000 Levitt AMP [Your City] grant, which would have funded a summer concert series in Crompton Park, the initiative saw strong community support, improved connections with area organizations, and helped identify underserved areas of Worcester.
- **Poets Laureate:** In late 2020, a committee reviewed numerous well-qualified poets before ultimately selecting Juan Matos and Amina Mohammed to serve as [the City's Poet Laureate and Youth Poet Laureate](#), respectively. During their first year, the Poets served as ambassadors of Worcester's historic, vibrant cultures of poetry and literature, using their positions to promote the city's great writers and the transformative qualities of poetry and the written word. The Poets Laureate delivered their first public reading at the 2020 Mayoral Inauguration, made the cover of Worcester Magazine, joined a state-wide reading with Mass Poetry, and hosted the Community from Home Open Mic summer series. They also appeared on numerous media platforms including the Pop It Podcast, the WXLO Community Radio Show, and Senator Chandler's "Beacon Hill Chat" on WCCA-TV. The Poets delivered keynote poems for a variety of community events including the Advisory Committee on the Status of Women's Women of Consequence Award Ceremony, Worcester Women Changemakers: Celebrating Women's Equality Day and Suffrage, and the Worcester Senior Center's July Distinguished Speakers series.
- **Public Art:** The City's dedication to enhancing public space through Public Art evolves as conversations with organizations such as Art in the Park, Square Squared, and independent curators and producers continue. The Public Art Working Group, made up of representatives of the creative community, and City staff serve as advisors to public art initiatives. The City has continued pursuing opportunities for gateways into districts around the city. GWCF is working with the city and WCC to create a public art fund.
 - Main Street Reimagined, a public art streetscape program initiated by City Manager Edward M. Augustus Jr, is underway, incorporating public art into the redesign of Main Street. Nine works have been procured for the Main Street corridor with plans to finish installation in 2021.
 - Wayfinding: public art installations and web-based storytelling trails create a sense of place and engagement. The second round of artists have been selected, with installation planned for spring 2021.
- **Special Events:** The Special Events Committee has continued to hold monthly meetings as a means of assisting event organizers and continues to update its permitting process based on best practices and these unprecedented times. Due to COVID many events were unable to be held in person, so the CDD staff pivoted to virtual opportunities for the community to come together. Two major films and multiple commercials and videos were on location in Worcester in FY20.

- **Worcester Arts Council:**

- In its 2020 grant cycle, the [Worcester Arts Council](#) (WAC) awarded over \$163,000 to 51 projects and 2 fellows: filmmaker Cyrille Vincent NDOMAKETTE SAMBA and puppeteer Amanda Gibson.
- For its 2020 Council-led project, WAC partnered with the CDD and community partners to plan the City's first Book Festival. For more information on this event, please see the Programming section above.
- WAC's 2020 Funding Priorities Survey received more than twice its previous input, with over 1,000 people sharing what types of art and creative projects are most important to them. As a result of this detailed input, paired with the Council's drive to address racial equity, the Funding Priorities for the 2020 grant cycle are:
 1. Project Categories – projects that focus on Public Art, Arts Education & Instruction, Children's Programs, and Musical Performances.
 2. Cultural Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion – Projects that elevate the voices and experiences of historically marginalized groups to highlight the current and historical diversity of Worcester. Projects should create opportunities for artists and community members who identify as Black, Indigenous, POS, LGBTQX, refugee, immigrant, or person living with a disability.
 3. Locations – Projects that take place in or benefit areas of Worcester that are historically underserved.
- Worcester Arts Council distributes Commonwealth funds allocated to City arts initiatives. These funds come from the Mass Cultural Council (MCC), a state agency. Before the pandemic, the MCC was aiming for a 20% increase in its allocations. Since the pandemic began, the Commonwealth has not yet passed an annual budget for FY21, operating monthly for the time being, which means the FY21 MCC funds are currently uncertain. To allow for this uncertainty, the FY21 grant cycle has been pushed back by one month state-wide. Applications to MCC and WAC grants will be open October 1 - November 16, 2020. Announcements on #WACfunded projects and fellows will be announced in February 2020.

Worcester Cultural Coalition Operations

Leadership: In October 2019, the WCC Executive Board elected Tracy Kraus to succeed Honee Hess as the Chair of the Worcester Cultural Coalition. Tracy has worked as the Executive Director of the Worcester Chamber Music Society (WCMS) since 2006, taking on everything from budgeting, advertising, and public speaking to performing at WCMS concerts – she's played the flute since high school!

The WCC Board of Directors has also added new members: Tim Loew (Mass DIGI), Joy Murrieta (Main IDEA), Lucy Hale (EcoTarium) and Nadia McGourthy (McGourthy Dresser Law).

Working Groups Facilitators:

- Education: Lucy Hale
- Executive: Tracy Kraus
- Finance: Ellen S. Dunlap
- Governance: Grace Elton
- Marketing: Nikki Erskine
- Public Art: Ché Anderson
- Advocacy: Erin Williams

Funding: In FY20, the WCC was funded in part by: Jean McDonough, The Barr Foundation, WCC Membership, City of Worcester, Massachusetts Cultural Council, Greater Worcester Community Foundation, George I. Alden Trust, and Stoddard Foundation, Hermann Foundation, Pell Family Foundation and revenue from the JMAC.