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Problems Persist, but Arts Advocates See Progress Under Obama

By [ROBIN POGREBIN](#)

Washington continues to be consumed by economic turmoil, but cultural professionals say they are cautiously optimistic about the future of the arts under [President Obama](#). Among the positive signs: The \$50 million in stimulus money going to the [National Endowment for the Arts](#), the additional \$10 million for the Endowment in the recent omnibus spending bill and the decision to give a White House official responsibility for arts and culture, though this has yet to be announced.

There is still a considerable distance to go, arts advocates say. More than two months into his presidency, Mr. Obama has yet to name a new chairman of the Endowment. This leaves the country's most important arts agency without a permanent chief, as arts groups around the country scramble to submit their applications for stimulus funds by the April 2 deadline.

The \$50 million in stimulus money apportioned to the Endowment — after a fight in Congress to get any money at all — is not a lot, given that it is to be distributed nationwide. Moreover, only groups that have received grants in the last four years are eligible to apply. The Endowment said this was to make sure that all applicants had been vetted at least once by the agency's peer panels, who will select the stimulus grantees.

Robert L. Lynch, the president of Americans for the Arts, a lobbying group, called the requirement limiting. "There are 100,000 arts organizations out there," he said. "They're all in need."

The \$10 million increase for the Endowment — the same amount given to the [National Endowment for the Humanities](#) — brings the annual budget to \$155 million, still considerably short of its high, \$176 million, in 1992.

It is "a step up from what we've had before," said Representative [Louise M. Slaughter](#), a New York Democrat who is co-chairwoman of the Congressional Arts Caucus. "I don't think we're yet up to where we were." And, she added, "I would certainly like to see that."

Still, Ms. Slaughter said she was heartened that the administration's point person for the arts would be working out of the West Wing, rather than from the first lady's office, as in the past.

Shin Inouye, a White House spokesman, said, "President Obama recognizes that support for creative expression is an essential part of who we are as a nation and he is committed to ensuring that the arts community has an open line to the White House."

The staff member charged with the arts portfolio, Kareem Dale, is relatively young (in his 30s) and potentially overextended (he is already special assistant to the president for disability policy) with little arts experience. And his position has yet to be defined. Mr. Dale is expected to serve temporarily and to be replaced by someone with full-time responsibility for the arts, said a White House official, who asked to remain anonymous because personnel issues had yet to be resolved.

Mr. Dale, who was trained as a lawyer and is partly blind, served on policy committees for arts and for disability when Mr. Obama was an Illinois senator. Mr. Dale will work in the Office of Public Liaison and Intergovernmental Affairs under [Valerie Jarrett](#), a senior adviser to the president.

Mr. Dale served for nearly five years as chairman of the Black Ensemble Theater in Chicago, succeeding his father, Bob Dale, an advertising executive. As chairman, Mr. Dale helped raise \$15 million for a new building, said Jackie Taylor, the theater's founder and executive director.

"He was very strong," Ms. Taylor said. "He was a good leader."

Ms. Taylor said Mr. Dale's first involvement with the company was onstage as a teenager; he had a small role in a musical in 1991. "His father wanted him to get past his shyness and to be an extrovert," she said. "So we put him in a production."

Of the stimulus money, 40 percent will be distributed by formula to state arts agencies and regional arts organizations. The remaining 60 percent will go toward individual projects.

"It's good, but when you consider the United States of America, they're trying to do a lot with a little," said Celeste M. Lawson, executive director of the Arts Council in Buffalo and Erie County in upstate New York.

Until 1995 the Endowment gave grants to individual artists and also allowed organizations to use grants for general operating funds. The so-called culture wars put an end to both practices.

"I am a passionate supporter of unrestricted operating support," said Margot Knight, president and chief executive of United Arts of Central Florida, which raises funds for arts and science organizations. "We need an Endowment for this new century."

During the presidential campaign Mr. Obama was one of the few candidates with an arts platform and an arts policy committee. During his transition he dedicated a team to the arts and humanities.

Just what shape the Endowment will take under the Obama administration will depend largely upon whom the president appoints as the agency's chairman. Patrice Walker Powell, the Endowment's deputy chairwoman for states, regions and local arts agencies, has been serving as interim chairwoman since Feb. 2.

Michael C. Dorf, a lawyer who served on Mr. Obama's arts policy team during the campaign and was an adviser during the transition, emerged as an early favorite, and a few other names have been floated. But there have been no concrete developments, even as cultural organizations are cutting back drastically or closing their doors because of the economic downturn.

Representative Norm Dicks, Democrat of Washington, chairman of the Interior Appropriations Subcommittee, which oversees the National Endowment for the Arts, said convincing his fellow legislators of

the importance of the arts remained a challenge. “There are still some people in the House — a handful of Democrats and a significant number of Republicans — who vote against us,” he said.

He said Mr. Obama had requested \$161 million for the Endowment for the coming fiscal year, which starts in October. “I think that’s a little modest,” Mr. Dicks said, adding he thought that the budgets for both the arts and humanities endowments should increase to \$170 million.

“There was a big reduction when the Republicans cut us,” he added, referring to a 40 percent reduction in the budget in 1995. “We’re still coming back from that.”

Given the battle in Congress to include money for the arts in the [stimulus package](#), cultural groups say Washington officials still fail to recognize artists as workers. “The third violinist in a chamber orchestra goes out and buys groceries just like everybody else,” said Bill Ivey, a former chairman of the Endowment.

Teresa Eyring, the executive director of the Theater Communications Group, which represents the country’s nonprofit theaters, said: “Local and regional elected officials and community leaders are seeing and talking about the connection between the arts and the overall health of their communities. The same sensibility hasn’t quite landed at the national level.”

“In President Obama we have a leader who is making the connection,” she added, “who seems to understand both the spiritual and economic necessity of the arts to our nation’s strength.”

Mr. Ivey, who led the [transition team](#) devoted to the arts and recently met with Mr. Dale, said he expected the White House position to involve coordinating the work of the Endowment, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

“It’s great to have a direct West Wing connection,” Mr. Ivey said.

“I don’t think we’ve ever had an administration that thought about the vibrancy of our cultural life as a central public policy,” he added, “as a marker of quality of life in a democracy.”

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