**COVID Impacts Arts Industry Disproportionally** Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak today before your committee. I’m here today to discuss the disproportionate impact COVID-related closures has had, and continues to have, on the entire arts industry. The short version is this: Arts and Culture Organizations were the first to close, the last to reopen, and in many ways, still closed. With the first COVID-related Executive Order issued by the Governor on March 15, the entire arts industry came to a screeching halt. This sector, which relies heavily on large public gatherings, employs over 115,000 South Carolinians and brings a $9.7 billion impact to the state’s economy, plus $270 million in state revenue. Almost all of that economic activity slowed to a crawl, and for many, has stopped completely. Downtown festivals, large arenas and arts centers, small performing arts centers, museums, concerts, and educational opportunities were all canceled to help stop the spread of COVID-19.

The SC Arts Commission received feedback from 187 nonprofit arts organizations across the State, in both our most metropolitan areas and our most rural, regarding the impact COVID19 had on them. The impact is tremendously devastating regardless of the size of the organizations

Some examples include:

From the small community of McCormick, The McCormick Arts Council reports:

a financial impact of $45,000 - $75,000 loss in arts revenue during the COVID crisis. $24,450 in programming loss, with additional losses to area artists, performers, and musicians, as well as a loss of fundraising income typically generated during this time.

From more metropolitan areas like Greenville they are reporting a $42M negative impact to the entire community from the arts sector based upon what their organizations reported to the Americans for the Arts.

The Peace Center alone reports having to go from a $26M operating budget to a $3M budget with 395 performances all cancelled or postponed indefinitely.

This same time last year they employed over 100 PT and 54 FT employees. Today there are 19FT employees, all of whom are essential to the Center being around and viable once they are allowed to reopen. The touring shows industry will announce their delay until the 2nd quarter of 2021, making those lifeline productions being out of commission for a solid year, since they began cancellations March of 2020.

All of this and I’m not giving you lost revenue details on all the other arts organizations in the surrounding area like: Warehouse Theatre, the Children’s theatre, The Greenville Symphony, The Greenville Museum and Children’s Museum, The Greenville Community Theatre, The Greenville Chorale… and the list goes on and on in each of our communities. Artisphere is a Greenville art festival which brings in around 80,000 visitors each year was cancelled, severely impacting their $1.5M budget….and in an attempt to move the entire festival onto a virtual platform, they’ve incurred $20,000 toward a digital platform which they had not budgeted for.

In Charleston, Spoleto Festival USA lost $2.3 M in earned ticket sales alone. A generous portion of customers donated their ticket money back, all total of $370,000 but that doesn’t come close to making up the difference.

The Newberry Opera House – 30 shows canceled or postponed

The Gullah Traveling Theatre from Beaufort…all performances canceled.

Columbia’s Trustus Theatre – 20-21 season canceled

The Columbia Philharmonic – canceled

Arts Council of York County – Lost $35,000 in space rental alone…not to mention the lost revenue from cancelled programing

And let’s face it, the “virtual pivot” that these organizations have HAD to make, did not, can not and will not replace the revenue stream they had through in-person live audiences and performers. The internet has experienced a DELUGE of virtual performance opportunities and getting through the endless list and noise of the internet to find one of OUR state’s performing and producing organizations presentation is extremely difficult, if not impossible.

The arts industry understands fully its role in helping mitigate the spread of COVID-19. The arts community continues to be a partner in ensuring the safety of attendees, employees, and artists are all maintained. For many though, ensuring safety has meant having to keep their doors closed, let go employees, dive deep into reserves, and struggle to develop a pathway forward to full re-opening. In South Carolina, the Brookings Institute estimates a total loss of over $1.2 billion for the arts industry, impacting over 30,000 jobs. Another survey completed by the National Independent Venue Association (NIVA), which includes many venues in our state, noted that 90% of independently-owned venues very well may shut their doors forever in the coming months without assistance. These numbers, rough in their own right, underreport the true impact of COVID-19.

In Closing , the vast majority of arts groups cannot get back on their feet until COVID-19 numbers drop, AND the public is comfortable with indoor mass gatherings with venues at 100% capacity, and until public health guidelines can be implemented without a severe impact to the bottom line. We don’t know when that time will come, but we do know that it is not today, nor tomorrow. This traumatic and potentially fatal impact to one of our state’s vital industries cannot go overlooked. The arts industry has been forced to close for the longest amount of time, and we are depending on our State to make every effort to support their efforts in reestablishing operations.

Thank you for your time today.