The $3 million Philadelphia Cultural Fund (PCF), eliminated in Mayor Jim Kenney’s revised 2021 budget proposal, supports organizations in virtually every neighborhood of the city — most of them modest and community-focused. While iconic institutions like the Philadelphia Museum of Art also receive funding ($25,000 for the PMA in 2020), the vast majority of the 349 recipient groups from the 2020 fiscal year are small, their audiences mostly neighborhood audiences who often see themselves reflected on the stages or in the galleries.

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More than a quarter have annual budgets under $50,000, and more than 60% are under $400,000, according to city records. Most organizations receive grants of $10,000 or less, a pittance in the universe of the city’s original $5.2 billion operating budget, now shaved by $649 million in response to the COVID-19 economic crisis. Eliminating the fund and its home, the Office of Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy, frees up $4 million but also gets rid of the city’s only broad arts funding. In proposing the revised budget, Kenney said the city could only afford “the most essential city services.” The arts office, the city rep’s office, and other decimated agencies “are simply no longer affordable,” he said.

As City Council deliberates the revised budget proposal for approval by June 30, recipient organizations and neighborhood advocates are hoping to see at least part of the funding reinstated. “We need the arts,” said Theresa Rose, a civic leader in South Philadelphia. “It just feels so important, especially in a time like this between COVID and the protests. People need that outlet, that magic, you know, to be inspired.”

Here, eight recipient groups describe the impact of the PCF on their organizations and their communities.

**Theatre in the X, West Philadelphia: A grant to cover essentials**

**STUDIO 34 YOGA**
August 2019 Theatre in the X production of The Beast of Nubia by J.R.Bethea in Malcolm X Park
Back in 2013, when Theatre in the X was just an idea to mount plays in West Philadelphia, cofounder Carlo Campbell thought it would be a great idea to put them on in Malcolm X Park, at 51st and Pine Streets.

So he approached Gregorio Pac Colujun, the main friend of the Friends of Malcolm X Park, which was reviving from some bad years of neglect and abuse. “We never had a play in Malcolm X Park,” Mr. Greg, as he’s known, told Campbell. “Never even thought of having a play in Malcolm X Park. I told him, ‘Well, we never did it. So what the heck. Go ahead. Go for it.’"

Theatre in the X, cofounded by Campbell, LaNeshe Miller-White, and Walter DeShields, is the essence of community-based, neighborhood theater. They have a simple mission: To bring quality productions to a community largely ignored by mainstream theaters. Everything is free.

“It’s now tradition,” said Miller-White, with a show in the park every August. "It’s part of West Philly summer.” An all-black Othello mesmerized young people and adults in August 2015. Last year, it was J.R. Bethea’s The Beast of Nubia, which was submitted during the theater’s now-annual call for submissions. (This year’s show may or may not happen; stay tuned.)

The company exists on a budget of about $80,000 a year, including $2,468 from the Philadelphia Cultural Fund in 2020. That may seem tiny, but it is the only funding the company receives — apart from donations — that is completely unrestricted. The PCF money can be used for utility bills or consultant fees or cast sandwiches.

Theatre in the X provides work for roughly 50 to 85 artists and technicians of color every year, many of whom have difficulty finding jobs with mainstream stages around town.

Miller-White said everything the company does outside of the August show is completely dependent on the PCF grant money. This year, they were on track to receive a larger PCF grant specifically to fund a school theater program. Should the city eliminate the cultural fund, the company most likely will not work with those neighborhood schoolchildren.
Power Street Theatre, North Philadelphia: Money in service of community

LOUIS KANG
(Left to right:) Anjoli Santiago, Thomas Choinacky, Emily Fernandez, and Gabriela Sánchez in "MinorityLand" by Power Street Theatre Company, at West Kingston Ministry, October 2019.

The last two weeks in May were not filled with the best news for Power Street Theatre, a North Philadelphia community theater group founded in 2012 by Gabriela Sanchez and Erlina Ortiz, two Temple graduates interested in serving the city’s Hispanic neighborhoods.

First came the news that the city was going to cut the Philadelphia Cultural Fund, which had steadily provided general operating support for Power Street for three years running, including a 2020 grant of $4,228 — life or near-death to a shoestring collective serving a minority population. (It is believed to be the only theater founded by Latinas in the region.)

Then came the email informing them that funding through another arts office performance program would be canceled. That meant Power Street’s first-ever children’s festival had its budget wiped out.

“We actually already began rehearsals and contracting artists,” said Sanchez. “This event, it was envisioned by our community. Actually, our community was asking us to create some work free for young people.”
Ortiz interjected: “The whole point is to meet with the community ask them what they want, what they need, or what we’re not giving them that, you know, that they’re desiring. And the main thing that they said was that there’s so few activities for children.”

Sanchez and Ortiz are unwilling to let go of the festival and stiff the artists who have already signed on. So they’ll scramble and come up with funding — probably out of their own “limited, limited, limited funds,” said Sanchez.

Since 2012, Power Street has grown from virtually nothing to an organization with a $150,000 budget and kudos from the neighborhood. Ortiz is resident playwright, and her efforts have won praise. (“Everyone should see this play,” wrote Inquirer critic John Timpane of her first effort, MinorityLand, set in a North Philadelphia ravaged by gentrification.)

» READ MORE: *In 'MinorityLand' from Power Street Theatre, a look at gentrification and the impact of change*

Power Street’s story circles and community feedback sessions have all gone virtual thanks to the pandemic, the case with many arts organizations. But with a largely low-income community, a significant portion of Power Street’s audience is not online, severing the connection between arts organization and audience.

The loss of cultural fund money hobbles both the company and the community, said Sanchez. “I think the impact feels devastating because there is no cushion to breathe right now.”

**Nashirah, the Jewish Chorale of Greater Philadelphia: One-third of a tiny budget**

Nashirah performing during the Annual Memorial Ceremony for the Six Millions Jewish Martyrs in 2012 at Rodeph Shalom Synagogue.
A little money comes from ticket sales. Choir and board members kick in a membership fee. Donations come from the board, family foundations, and patrons. And with a tiny budget of about $25,000, Nashirah, the Jewish Chorale of Greater Philadelphia, can put on four concerts per year.

“We are the only organization that is bringing high-quality Jewish music to our audiences and the community,” says Julia Zavadsky, artistic director of the group, which rehearses in Center City at the Curtis Institute (but not at the moment, given the COVID-19 pandemic).

If the PCF drops out of the picture, the group would lose a grant that was about $8,320 in the last round — a third of its annual budget. “I am right now hard-pressed to see how we would be able to continue. A third of our budget is shattering,” says Zavadsky.

The choir director wrote to Councilmember At-Large to urge continuation of the fund, and his response “wasn’t promising,” she said. Allan Domb

“I understand this is a difficult period for all of us, and the many financial challenges facing our great institutions are painful to see,” Domb wrote in an email. “I’m hopeful we can find alternative ways to fill our budget gap and maintain some support for the sectors that help Philadelphia to thrive.”

Nashirah was founded in 2003, which means that next year it turns 18 — a number Zavadsky hopes holds significance for the future of the group. In Judaism, 18 is interpreted as *chai*, which means life. “We hope. Right now, everything is a hope.”

**Kun-Yang Lin/Dancers, South Philadelphia:**
**Stable funding that enables new efforts**

![Image of Kun-Yang Lin/Dancers](FRANK_BICKING_PHOTOGRAPHY

When Mayor Kenney attended a City Hall courtyard performance mounted by Kun-Yang Lin/Dance in spring 2016, he was bowled over. He called the performance of the company’s *HOME/S. 9th St.* “magnificent” and vowed that “the response they garnered from their audience” inspired him “to find a way to continue showcasing our city’s rich community of performance artists at City Hall.”

It didn’t quite work out. With the mayor’s decision in May to kill off the Office of Art, Culture and the Creative Economy, the City Hall series and all city-backed performances ended.

The $11,664 PCF grant awarded to Kun-Yang Lin for 2020 represents about 3% of the company’s total budget of about $350,000, said Katie Moore, business director. “It doesn’t seem like a big number but when looking at next year’s budget, it’s crucial.”

Funding consistency is invaluable for a small-to-midsize organization like Kun-Yang Lin, she said. “Many small and midsize organizations and artists throughout Philadelphia have really grown to rely on the Philadelphia Cultural Fund as a consistent source of general operating support — a very hard thing to come by nowadays, with many people, many foundational programs wanting to support specific programs.”

Losing that money makes everything tighter, all around, so works like *HOME/S. 9th St.*, created with the immediate community, will reach fewer audiences and venues — and new collaborations might not be created at all. KYL/D’s dance program in the schools will probably be scratched. “That is a part of our mission — to provide access to dance and movement and mindfulness, especially in those communities that don’t typically have access to those types of resources,” said Moore.

Neighborhood leader Rose, a resident of the 1300 block of Federal Street and a board member of the Passyunk Square Civic Association, lauded the company for bringing its dancers directly into city schools.

“They actually do dance programs and choreograph or do projects around the neighborhood, using stories for people that live here,” said Rose. “The community would miss them in South Philadelphia. There is not a ton of cultural organizations, especially dance companies. It’s really special that they’re here.”
G-Town Radio, Germantown: ‘The PCF is validation’

Tom Casetta, station manager of G-Town Radio, a low-frequency station in Germantown.

G-Town Radio offers R&B, funk, praise music, rock, jazz, talk, and more at 92.9 FM (as well as via online streaming), a signal G-Town shares with three other radio stations. On one recent day, the programming moved seamlessly from jazz pianist Vince Guaraldi to reggae to bossa nova, with a brief message reminding listeners of some Germantown history.

The low-power, community radio station sees itself as a source of “information and comfort” to a local audience in northwest Philadelphia, says Tom Casetta, station manager. “We work with fellow nonprofits, art galleries, music, and education groups, so when they are doing something in the area people come on our shows. We are an outlet to help our neighborhood and listeners become more aware.”

Its current grant from the PCF is just over $7,000 — a substantial portion of an annual budget Casetta puts at around $25,000. “I jokingly say we are held together by the sweat of volunteers and duct tape,” he says. "It’s a significant amount of money.”

Losing it would “make us more scrappy” and forced to "dig deeper" for other sources of money, like listener donations, Casetta says.

And there would be another, associated loss that would be huge, he says. "The Philadelphia Cultural Fund is validation. It says, ‘We believe in you.’ We are hyper-local. We are connecting directly with our neighbors and our community, and that’s hugely validating when the cultural fund says we believe in you and want to support you.”
That validation has a multiplier effect. “We can use it as we engage with funders and in talking to our donors. It makes the community more aware of us — [they say], ‘Oh, the culture fund supports you, so you are worth checking out.’”

Not that the money itself isn’t important. The PCF was the source of G-Town Radio’s largest grant until recently, when the station received funding from the Independence Public Media Foundation.

**Wagner Free Institute of Science, North Philadelphia: General operating money to keep the lights on**

“Every loss is significant,” says Susan Glassman, executive director of the Wagner Free Institute of Science. Some losses of income, though, have significance beyond the dollar amount.

The Wagner, in North Philadelphia, has an annual budget of just over $1 million, so the Victorian natural history museum’s $13,255 PCF grant isn’t going to make or break the institution and its educational programs.

But the Wagner won’t be able to make up the money with tickets. Its charter prohibits charging admission. (A donation jar is at the door for voluntary donations.)

That leaves philanthropy as a major source of income, and funders often want to give money to start specific projects or new programs. The cultural fund’s granting of
unrestricted money — dollars groups can use to keep the building open, pay staff, and fund basic operations — is rare.

“Other funders and foundations have moved away from that over the past 10 to 15 years,” says Glassman. “The culture fund, for a relatively small amount of money, they have a pretty big impact.”

How will the Wagner make up for the money if it stops? “Right at the moment I can’t answer that question,” she says. “That isn’t the only line item on the chopping block. All of us are looking at a very frightening future.

"I remember hearing this and feeling it in the last recession, which is that nonprofits have a longer recovery time, and we are going to be feeling this on the back end. It’s heartening that both individuals and foundations have stepped up, but this is going to be going on longer, and no one knows what the second half of the year is going to be like.”

There’s a role the city’s cultural office has played that’s hard to put a number to, she says: that of cheerleader. “It’s not just the money they give away,” she says, “but the role they play in advocating for arts and culture in the city — the economy of the city and the life of the city.”

The Colored Girls Museum, Germantown: 'A gateway grant'

DAVID MAIALETTI / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER


There is nothing like it, certainly not in the region and quite possibly the nation: A museum dedicated to marking the lives of black women. Not necessarily the famous ones like Michelle Obama, but regular people, their triumphs and burdens and quotidian pursuits.
And of course it is located in an ordinary Germantown house, a twin on Newhall Street, a domestic setting for lives as lived out at home. The museum started in 2015 in Vashti DuBois’ home, a new kind of house museum.

Two years ago, DuBois told her volunteer partners, curators Michael Clemmons and Ian Friday, that she was going all in, “emotionally, economically,” for a year. At that point the museum generated about $20,000 in annual revenue from ticketed tours, DuBois said.

» READ MORE: Germantown’s Colored Girls Museum is on a serious search to find the heart, mind, body, and soul of black women | Elizabeth Wellington

Following that year, she was going to step back “and really think about what we’re doing, because I don’t know if it’s sustainable.” That’s when the first cultural fund grant arrived. The museum was awarded $8,000. This year’s grant is $9,008.

“So $8,000 might not seem like a lot of money but if I’m telling you our revenue’s $20,000, if you get $8,000 unrestricted grant money, that’s actually a very big deal,” said DuBois, especially since PCF funds can go toward general operating expenses — a rarity in the arts world where money is very often earmarked for specific projects. “If you can’t pay your light bill or replace a boiler or hire a contractor because a grant restricts your ability to do so, it’s difficult.”

Once the cultural fund stepped up, the museum subsequently received a technology grant from the Knight Foundation of $175,000 to create a virtual reality program and similar cutting-edge experiences. “Cultural fund awards are gateway grants — which is very important,” she said. “They signal the field and the city that you are supported and the work you are doing is having an impact, and that makes a huge difference with funders big and small.”

“One of the things that funders are looking at is, well, who else? Who else is acknowledging that your work is having an impact where you are? So when your city arts organization says we believe in the work that this organization is doing and we’re going to fund them, then other funders will stop and take a look.”
Cleaver magazine, Chestnut Hill: Without PCF, is it even possible?

DAVID MAIALETTI / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Karen Rile, Cleaver magazine chief editor, with her dog, Pogo.

The quarterly online literary magazine Cleaver is a mix of short stories, poetry, essays, visual narrative, and art by local, national, and international contributors (and other genres like book reviews and interviews published between the quarterly issues).

The poem “Autumn’s Reckoning” by Bucks County author John Middlebrook is one of about two dozen offerings in Cleaver’s spring issue. This is the first stanza:

*The fiery fist above slowly loses its hold and the musky lungs of autumn grow dry. At last, fall staggers and drops upon the rattling grass breaking the arched back of summer.*

Cleaver operates on a minuscule budget, largely under the steam of volunteers and the labor of its founder and chief editor, Karen Rile. While the PCF normally caps grants at a third of an organization’s budget, it also counts sweat equity like Rile’s, so $8,025 of Cleaver’s annual $15,000 budget this year is covered by a cultural fund grant — more than half.

In 2019, the magazine drew 82,000 unique page views from around the world. It was able to develop quickly, says Rile, because it has received a PCF grant every year since its launch in 2013. That growth “gave us capital in the literary world,” she says.

For the first five or six years, Rile was putting her own money into the operation — an “editor’s gift” of several thousand dollars helped to balance the books. More recently, “we have become self-sustaining, but that is because of this wonderful generosity from the city” and other modest sources of income.
But growth has meant higher expenses. It costs more to buy storage space on the server, and fees keep going up for a service that manages the thousands of submissions the magazine receives each year. At the same time, ad revenue has dropped off.

To help bring in money, Rile has started an education division that offers online classes. What’s not clear, is whether that will generate enough income to make up for a potential loss in PCF money — not to mention whether it’s possible for Rile to work enough hours in the day to keep it all going.

She says: “I’m personally committed to keeping this magazine alive in whatever form. But I don’t know if it’s sustainable forever.”

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