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A Struggle to Slice Stimulus Fund Pie

By [ROBIN POGREBIN](#)

More than 2,000 applications have poured in to the [National Endowment for the Arts](#) from cultural organizations all over the country seeking a piece of the stimulus pie allotted to the arts by [President Obama](#).

Now the Endowment faces the tough task of sorting through these applications to determine which groups are the most deserving. The criteria are clear: each arts group seeking funds must demonstrate how it would use the money to preserve jobs or pay contractual workers.

Of the \$50 million that the Endowment received as part of the stimulus bill, 40 percent of the money, or about \$20 million, is being awarded to state arts agencies and regional arts organizations, which will then distribute the funds to cultural groups in their areas. On Friday the Endowment announced which state and regional groups would receive money.

They include the New York State Council on the Arts (\$399,900), the Western States Arts Federation (\$593,900), the Guam Council on the Arts and Humanities (\$25,000) and the Idaho Commission on the Arts (\$294,200).

The remaining 59 percent of the funds (1 percent will cover administrative costs), or about \$29.5 million, is up for grabs by nonprofit organizations.

But there are more struggling organizations out there than there is money to help them.

"It's going to be difficult," said Douglas Sonntag, who is the Endowment's director of dance and is serving as team leader for putting the stimulus bill's provisions into effect. "There are a number of very fine organizations with very strong cases to retain musicians or to retain dancers or to make sure their education departments are staffed."

President Obama has yet to name a chairman of the Endowment. Patrice Walker Powell, the agency's deputy chairwoman for states, regions and local arts agencies, has been serving as the interim chairwoman since Feb. 2.

Under an extensive — if hastily conceived — evaluation process, each arts group was required to submit a one-page application detailing how the money would go toward job preservation or contractor fees. Organizations could fill an existing vacant position or rehire someone who was let go. The money cannot be used for general operating support, which excluded organizations like the [Los Angeles Philharmonic](#), despite a 30 percent decline of its endowment. "People need turn-on-the-lights money," said Deborah Borda, the orchestra's president and chief executive.

Only groups that had received a grant from the Endowment in the last four years are eligible. That cut out the [Bronx Museum of the Arts](#). "It was a huge blow for us," said Holly Block, the museum's executive director, adding that she would have used the money to pay for a curator, security guards and maintenance staff.

And the grants will be awarded in either \$25,000 or \$50,000 increments — not portions of those amounts. "They get it or they don't," Mr. Sonntag said.

"I just don't know how this is going to play out," he added, "because we've never been in this situation before."

The Harlem Stage requested \$50,000 in stimulus funds to help pay the 23 artists involved in staging "The Voice Within," an original musical-theater work by Deidre Murray, scheduled for later this year.

"We did not want to let it go because of the economy, but at the same time we were trying to figure out how we were going to sustain it," said Patricia Cruz, the executive director.

The Endowment plans to winnow the 2,676 applications (submitted electronically) with an elaborate voting system that lets readers, who were selected by the Endowment, rate each one from "noncompetitive" to "good," "fair," "excellent" or "outstanding." Some readers may review as many as 100 applications.

These readers are evaluating whether applicants can carry out the proposed project, their artistic excellence, their contribution to the field over time and their capacity to serve their areas, Mr. Sonntag said.

During the last two weeks of May, peer panels of four to six people will review the readers' recommendations. Panels are charged with choosing groups that "reflect the composition of the country in terms of geography," Mr. Sonntag said, "in terms of genre, in terms of cultural and ethnic diversity."

Finally, the panelists' determinations will be forwarded to the Endowment's National Council — its governing body — which will select the recipients over a three-day period starting on June 25.

Administering the grants will be almost as complicated. Because funds can be used only to pay salaries and fees, the arts organizations will have to be reimbursed or request money 30 days before they incur costs. Costs can start being incurred as of July 1. The money will be sent straight to the groups' bank accounts.

"We could be seeing hundreds of cash requests coming in every 30 days," Mr. Sonntag said, adding, "This is having a pretty dramatic effect on the workload of the agency."

There will be extensive reporting requirements, with arts organizations obligated to file quarterly and final reports. "The administration really wants to know what effect the stimulus money is having," Mr. Sonntag said. "So we're going to have to develop a whole other team to monitor."

While the money over all doesn't amount to a lot when distributed to so many organizations, the Endowment officials said they hoped it would help arts groups get through this rough patch, when contributions and endowments are in decline. "I think it will buy them some breathing room," Mr. Sonntag said.

"It's more than a drop in the bucket," he added. "I think it will make a difference."

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