

# The Washington Post

## Arts an easy target as many states cut budgets

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LAWRENCE, Kan. -- Ben Ahlvers is a full-time arts education coordinator, but his passion is with the fanciful creatures, human figures and oversized hammers he fashions from clay.

The nationally recognized ceramic artist was chosen to receive a fellowship from the Kansas Arts Commission to attend an artist residency in Montana. But after Kansas officials cut the commission's budget midyear by \$300,000, he didn't receive the \$1,000 check.

"They were still going to have a reception and I joked to somebody that I was going to go and eat \$1,000 worth of finger food," said Ahlvers, 35, who said he and his wife had to live off their credit cards and sell more of his artwork to fund the trip.

"The \$1,000 would have made it a lot easier and I wouldn't have had to fret as much," he said.

States across the country are slashing their arts funding for the second year in a row as they cope with falling tax revenues. Those cuts, which often happen during recessions, are a serious blow to arts agencies and individual dancers, painters and actors at a time when private donations are down and many art organizations are being more selective in what they produce.

Julie Britton, vice president of development or the Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center in Florida, said officials may have to skew away from avant-garde art designed to push boundaries in favor of things more certain to sell tickets.

"Part of our mission is to bring people things that are new," said Britton. "That's very difficult to do when you have to be risk-averse in this situation."

The Tampa Bay center's state grant is expected to be \$25,000 or less this year, which is down from \$200,000 a couple years ago.

The National Assembly of State Arts Agencies estimates states reduced their arts funding an average of 7 percent in the fiscal year that began July 1. That average doubles to 14 percent when Minnesota is not included because the state almost tripled its art budget to \$30.2 million thanks to a new sales tax.

In financially strapped states like Arizona, South Carolina, Georgia, Ohio, Louisiana and Florida, the reductions are steeper, falling 30 percent or more, forcing agencies to trim the amount or value of grants, shutter programs that provide arts education and lay off employees. In two states that haven't completed their annual budgets - Pennsylvania and Connecticut - lawmakers are considering eliminating their state

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arts agencies entirely.

States did get a boost this year in funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and some one-time job preservation grants through the federal stimulus bill. But administrators said the money won't make up for all the funding they've lost.

"It's really going to have a devastating effect," said Terry Scrogum, executive director of the Illinois Arts Council, which saw its budget fall 51 percent this year to \$7.8 million. "We're going to try to maintain as many of the operating grants as we can. They're obviously going to be at a reduced level. Others will be whittled down or suspended."

Overall, states contribute just 2 percent of the total annual pool of arts revenue in the U.S., according to Americans for the Arts. While a seemingly small percentage, arts advocates say organizations use those dollars to leverage donations from local governments, match federal funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and attract the private donations that make up the bulk of their annual budgets.

That private giving has also suffered during the recession. According to the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University, private donations to the arts decreased 6.4 percent between 2007 and 2008, the latest years available, and has likely fallen farther this year.

The cuts in arts aren't universal. Besides Minnesota, a handful of other states, such as Oregon, New York and Texas, have seen increases, either because their states are in better shape or because of one-time surges of new revenue.

The arts typically take a hit during recessions, as state budget writers are forced to balance theater expenses and sculpture grants against cuts to social service agencies, education or transportation. Arts budgets have fallen 20 percent in the past two years, compared with 38 percent during the 2001-2004 recession and 28 percent during the early 1990s, said Angela Han, spokeswoman for the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies,

But arts agency leaders said legislatures make a mistake when they look at the arts as a luxury as opposed to a key source of jobs and community identity.

"I don't think any government entity in the United States has ever understood the true value of the arts in terms of economic development, arts education or in community revitalization," said Sue Weiner, executive director of the Georgia Council for the Arts.

In a 2007 study, the Americans for the Arts found that the nonprofit arts and culture industry annually generated \$166.2 billion in economic activity and 5.7 million jobs.

Han said that while the recession may show signs of abating, she doesn't expect state arts funding to snap back soon.

"Following the 2001 recession, it took budgets three years to recover," she said.

Back in Lawrence, Ahlvers recently found out that the Kansas commission may get funding to give him his \$1,000. But with state revenue still hurting, he'll believe it when he sees it.

"As an artist, I think of course they (states) should put money in the arts," he said. "But there's another side of the arts that thrives on an underdog side of life."

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