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## ARTS FUNDING

### Imagine a world without art

**Tracey I. Batt / Special to NLJ.com**  
**April 7, 2008**



New Jersey Volunteer  
Lawyers for the Arts  
director Tracey Batt

I have been a good girl. For an entire year, I have used this space to recount amusing anecdotes about the practice of law, provide cautionary tales to young lawyers and law students, and exhort my readers to engage in pro bono and mentoring programs. I have restrained myself from using this platform to further the agenda of the organization that pays my salary, New Jersey Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts, Inc. But right now, I feel that I must address an issue that is of primary concern to my organization, and should also be of concern to every person and every organization, including every attorney and every law firm, in the United

States.

It is that time again. Budget time. The time when those of us who work in the non-profit sector in general, and in the Arts in particular, lie awake at night, wondering what will happen to our respective organizations in the next fiscal year. Will our grantors be able to continue funding us at last year's levels? Will we be able to carry out our planned expansions? Will we need to lay off employees?

Believe me, it has not escaped my attention that the United States' economy is not, strictly speaking, the picture of health. The state legislature of New Jersey currently is wrestling with an enormous budget deficit. Many other state legislatures are in the same boat, paddling furiously against the current. County and municipal governments are wringing their hands. Clearly, belts must be tightened.

Unfortunately, one of the first line items to feel the steel of any budget axe is the Arts. The draft budget currently under consideration by the New Jersey legislature calls for a nearly 30% decrease in funding for the Arts in fiscal year 2009. I hold out great hope that this mammoth budget cut will not pass, and I do not just say that out of fear for my job or my organization, both of which have been funded in large part by the generosity of the New Jersey State Council on the Arts.

Now, I know what you are thinking. When so many worthwhile causes and organizations are clamoring for a slice of the governmental pie, how can any governmental unit, in good conscience, funnel money to the Arts? The answer is that it must.

I realize that maintaining adequate funding for health care, education, social services, etc., is of paramount importance. I even realize that providing equal access for the indigent to the justice system is in some unquantifiable way more "important" than what NJVLA does.

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But it is imperative that those who control the purse strings keep an eye on the larger picture. A dollar spent on the Arts is never a dollar wasted. It is a dollar, invested in the future, that will pay a tremendous dividend.

It is incontrovertible that the Arts contribute to the economy in a myriad of ways. Think of how many people go to New York City to see a Broadway show, a museum exhibit, or a concert. Now consider how much each of those people spends on food, transportation, accommodations, and even souvenirs during that trip. Imagine New York with no Arts; imagine what that would do to the city's economy. Although all the big businesses (and, of course, the law firms) would continue to make money, loss of the Arts would be a devastating blow. Equally important, think of how much sadder a place New York City would be if all of those hard-working people could not relieve their stress by attending a Broadway show, a Metropolitan Opera concert, or an exhibit at MoMA, let alone a performance in a tiny Off-Broadway theater, a concert at a hole-in-the-wall bar, or an exhibit in an art school gallery.

The same is true in New Jersey and, to one degree or another, in every jurisdiction in this nation. The Arts bring people into an area and make them happy, and the Arts keep the people who live there happy to stay. Happy people contribute to an area's economy. New Jersey is full of cities basing their economic renaissances on the Arts.

The notion that the Arts can be a pivot on which an economic swing is based is not new. Franklin Delano Roosevelt made an incredible variety of Arts projects a central part of the Works Progress Administration and the New Deal. Many of the resulting works, the murals at La Guardia Airport's Marine Air Terminal to name just one example, are considered American treasures to this day. The same can be said for the series of songs, including "Roll on Columbia" and "Grand Coulee Dam," written by Woody Guthrie to promote the Department of the Interior's construction of the Bonneville Dam. Think about that. Beyond simply funding the Arts, the government of the United States once actually employed artists, giving them the wherewithal to participate in the economy as consumers while at the same time encouraging the citizenry at large to have reason to be proud to be American. Sheer genius!

There are other, less direct, ways in which the Arts benefit society as a whole. For example, students who are involved in art and music programs are more likely than are other students to pursue higher education, and an amazing percentage of inner-city students who attend schools such as the Newark School of the Arts and Camden's Creative Arts High School go on to college. The lives of these students are permanently and positively impacted by the Arts, and they will be better able to contribute to society than they would be otherwise.

I encourage you to support the Arts in any way you can. Contact your legislators and encourage them to fund the Arts, if you are so moved. Contribute money directly to your local Arts organizations. Offer your expertise as a Board Member for a non-profit Arts organization. Provide pro bono legal services through your local volunteer lawyers for the arts organization. Or just go to a concert, play, dance recital, or exhibit. When you are reminded of what the Arts mean to you on an individual level, you will realize that we as a nation cannot live without them.

*Tracey I. Batt is the Executive Director of New Jersey Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts. Before joining NJVLA, she was the Associate Director and Legal Services Manager of Philadelphia Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts and an associate at Weil, Gotshal & Manges in New York, where she practiced copyright and music licensing law for seven years.*

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