

**ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON
ARTS, ENTERTAINMENT, SPORTS, TOURISM AND INTERNET MEDIA
“Restarting the Arts: Best Practices for Safely Reopening.”
February 2, 2021**

**TESTIMONY BY JOANNE DESMOND, ASSISTANT BUSINESS AGENT
INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCE OF THEATRICAL STAGE EMPLOYEES, IATSE LOCAL 16**

Dear Chair Quirk-Silva and Committee Members,

My name is Joanne Desmond and I represent IATSE Local 16 Stagehands in the San Francisco Bay Area. We are also members of the California IATSE Council. We are deeply grateful for the opportunity to appear before you today and for your recognition of the importance of our situation.

When COVID-19 hit our community almost a year ago stagehands throughout California saw all their works disappear literally overnight. Stage carpenters, riggers, painters, audio and visual technicians, electricians, wardrobe, hair and makeup have been left devastated due to this crisis. Currently our work force is at 95% unemployment. To say that this situation is catastrophic is a great understatement.

Losing their employment is just the tip of the iceberg for so many. A significant number of our members have also lost their Health Care Coverage due to lack of contributions. Many have been forced to move out of state in order to support their families. And many more are deeply concerned about how they will be able to pay back rent. All this is happening while they are forced to decide if they still have a future in a career they love and have dedicated their lives to.

In addition, Californian EDD has proved to be challenging and frustrating to far too many who have been trying to access their benefits. For many of them, unemployment insurance is currently their family’s only source of income.

Lastly, and not surprisingly, the effect this has taken on our members’ mental health cannot be overlooked. Sadly, we have proof of that reality, since we have

encountered several suicides due to the Pandemic and the disastrous situation it has created.

IATSE Local 16 has been working tirelessly to assist our members during this time. We are helping them to navigate EDD, we write rent relief letters to landlords, we contribute to and staff food bank drives. Yet, due to the fact we are a union 501C5 we have remained ineligible for crucial funds from the Payment Protection Program. The efforts to include Unions in the last Stimulus Bill were blocked, even while Chambers of Commerce and trade associations were deemed qualified and included.

Local 16 is a Labor Union committed to assisting not just our members, but all working people who have been devastated by the Covid -19 Pandemic including ancillary businesses that support the Arts and Entertainment Industry. However, we need preliminary guidelines for the criteria needed for Live Entertainment to reopen.

While the Federal Stimulus programs have been helpful, they are far from enough. We need economic support for organizations in the arts and entertainment to get people back to work. We need to create non-refundable tax credits for businesses to cover the costs of COVID-19 workplace safety compliance. We need unions to be included in the Payment Protection Program. We need to preserve access to health care via a 100% federal COBRA subsidy for workers. We are working hard to ensure that these and other provisions are in the Biden Administration stimulus bill. The support of this committee for our efforts would be invaluable and would help us at the federal level.

Looking to the future, the Performing Arts, music and other live events are essential to the economic as well as cultural well-being of communities throughout the state, as well as our tourism industry. It goes without saying that the sooner we can get this sector back to work; the sooner our State can begin a strong economic recovery.

While facing all this, IATSE Local 16 and our members are ready to be part of the solution. Stagehands are one of the most versatile labor forces in the country.

The California IATSE Council has reached out to Governor Newsom to offer our assistance in the setting up of large scale vaccination sites at various venues where our members work.

We are ready, able and willing. We welcome your support.

Thank you for your time in this matter.