

---

## Calgary Arts Development's "hospice" grant means orgs facing hard decisions don't have to walk alone – and don't exit uncelebrated

Title: Calgary Arts Development's "hospice" grant means orgs facing hard decisions don't have to walk alone – and don't exit uncelebrated

Author: Angela Long

Published in: *The Philanthropist*

ISSN: 2562-1491

Date: April 5, 2021

Original Link: <https://thephilanthropist.ca/2021/04/calgary-arts-developments-hospice-grant-means-orgs-facing-hard-decisions-dont-have-to-walk-alone-and-dont-exit-uncelebrated/>

Date of PDF Download: April 18, 2021

When Kyle Russell, interim director of Alberta Theatre Projects (ATP), hears on the radio that the Alberta government is banning all gatherings of 250 people or more, he's on his way to Walmart in search of hand sanitizer. The entire front-of-house staff is scouring Calgary for the elusive product – a quest shared by millions around the world in March 2020 – in preparation for that night's performance of *Actually*.

But the curtains won't be rising for *Actually* that night. Nor will they for the world premiere of *Cowgirl Up* in April, a production that's been years in the making. By the time the summer of 2020 is over, thousands of events will have been cancelled across the city: *Peter Pan*, *Million Dollar Quartet*, Calgary Opera's entire season.

For many Calgary arts organizations, the phrase "the show must go on" is now "the show can't go on." In September 2020, a Calgary Arts Development (CAD) impact survey showed that nearly 50% of respondents from the city's more than 300 non-profit arts organizations thought they might not make it to the end of the year. And now, as 2021 limps along in the grips of a third wave, [Calgary Foundation's "urgent needs" directory](#) is filled with numerous arts organizations. "Any amount appreciated," ATP requests. They've laid off technicians and front-of-house staff and have reduced their administration team from 15 to nine.

Patti Pon, CAD president and CEO, remembers that March evening when the curtains didn't rise. "The immediacy of the impact was severe," she says. Ticket refunds started that night,

---

with no real prospect of when they'd be sold again. CAD took action, announcing a \$1.1-million COVID-19 relief fund for the city's arts organizations. But as weeks turned into months, Pon knew such measures wouldn't be enough. Instead of just bracing for impact, CAD decided to cushion the fall. In February 2021, CAD introduced an ["organization structural change" \(OSC\) grant](#), a kind of "hospice" grant to help organizations "who find themselves at a crossroads," says Pon. With up to \$40,000 of funding available to support three phases of either restructuring or closure during a one-year period, the grant seeks to not only assist with costs such as lawyers' fees but also to "honour the work of organizations who choose to close their doors."

All across the country, arts organizations may be closing more and more doors: the arts and culture sector has been disproportionately affected by the pandemic – a crisis within a crisis. Imagine Canada's [Sector Monitor: Ongoing Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) reports much higher figures, often double or more, for the "hard hit" arts sector – from revenue decline (83%) to decreased capacity (67%). But Alberta's crisis in particular resembles a set of Russian dolls – a crisis within a crisis within a crisis. Some sector leaders have [described this as a "triple whammy"](#) – reduced philanthropic spending from a decimated energy sector, deep cuts in provincial government funding, a worldwide pandemic.

Even pre-pandemic, Pon understood the precarity of her city's arts landscape. She hopes the OSC grant will help prevent organizations from closing with little or no warning. She recalls a phone call in 2018 when the board chair of the Calgary International Children's Festival said they'd just had an emergency meeting after a major sponsor pulled out. "We're closing," he told her. "Tomorrow." The [ensuing media "hoopla."](#) Pon says, focused on the festival's failure rather than its legacy.

"Nothing about the 32 years of bringing world-class children's art to Calgary for the benefit of hundreds of thousands of kids," says Pon. "Nothing. To me, that's just wrong."

If an organization chooses to restructure or close, CAD wants to "be in service in a way that is more than just giving a grant," Pon says. "As a funder, I really feel like we should be walking with you on that journey, and it shouldn't be the day before."

Besides, it's time to start new conversations about restructuring or closures, she says. "For years we've all talked about the different kinds of ecosystems – arts ecosystems, charitable ecosystems. And what we fail to acknowledge is that within ecosystems there is old growth that gives way for new growth. That's how ecosystems work." Before we introduce the "new stuff," however, it's important to address this old growth – which, by the way, doesn't necessarily mean an organization is "past the best-before date and should close." Ecosystems are more complex than that.

The pandemic has afforded leaders such as Pon a chance to "really sit back and reflect," she says. "Am I serving my mission? Do I understand what it is we're here to do? Do I understand how we're doing it and the costs associated – not only financial, but human costs?"

The human costs of the pandemic are front of mind for many arts organizations. As the ATP continues to pivot to remain financially viable, it's the "human element" that most concerns Russell. He thinks of the hundreds of artists who've spent months and years training to perform now sitting idle. He thinks of how the tentacles of a theatrical production reach into every crevice of a city – breathing life into catering companies, print shops, truck rental services, building

---

supply stores.

At the Alberta Ballet School, director Ashley McNeil worries about the human costs to their young students, aged 12 to 19. Since the onset of the pandemic, the school has closed, reopened, then closed again. They've flown anxious students home to South Korea, Australia, and Mexico. While they've created a virtual training program and the International Affiliate Program, "nothing replaces in-person," McNeil says. After just three weeks you begin to notice "weaknesses," she says. For safety reasons, such as proper flooring, at-home training isn't as rigorous. But it's the less tangible aspects of classical ballet – facial expressions, musical and artistic nuances – that are challenging to teach virtually. While the school has reopened, again, McNeil notes it will take months for students to catch up.

CAD recognizes the less tangible and human aspects unique to the arts and designed the OSC grant accordingly. Three principles of [inclusive design](#) – "nothing about us without us," "one size fits one," "perpetuating a virtuous cycle, not a vicious cycle" – guided its formation, Pon says. In addition, program officers sign non-disclosure agreements to maintain confidentiality. "We're trying to do everything we can to ease the anxiety, the stress, because that's why people call me the day before. They think I'm going to get mad," Pon says. "That's not the relationship we want to foster as the city's funder of the arts. It doesn't come from a place of empathy, and it doesn't come from a place of generosity."

Ultimately, CAD wants Calgary's arts organizations to know they're not alone in this crisis. "You don't have to do this in a little bubble all by yourself," says Pon.

Several reports containing similar messaging have been cropping up lately. CAD recommends Muttart Foundation's [It's Time to Go: A Self-Guided Workbook to Assist with Nonprofit Organizational Closure](#) and [Paths Forward in Financially Troubled Times: A Restructuring and Insolvency Guidebook for Charities and Non-profit Organizations](#) in the OSC grant application guidelines – reports Pon says they've been "sharing like crazy." (Read Angela Long's story about [Paths Forward](#).)

Even though Pon sees the OSC grant as a path forward, these are still difficult conversations to have. While her glass remains half full, this takes constant effort, she says: "If you asked me, 'What are the things that keep you up at night?' I'd answer, 'Trying to keep the glass half full.'"

What fills it up is her firm belief in the transformative power of the arts. "I've seen what artists can do," she says. "I've been inside those theatres and those concert halls that moved me to tears, that brought a kind of joy that I have never experienced in any other way."

The pandemic has shown Pon that her city also believes in the arts. From city council distributing a one-time, \$2-million emergency relief fund for the arts to a chain hotel transforming an outdoor swimming pool into a stage, Pon has added drop after drop to her glass.

"These things were perfectly timed," she says. "Just when I was at my lowest, something would happen."