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Access to Cultural Institutions in New York City

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Over the past several decades, we have witnessed a systematic process of denying low- and moderate-income New Yorkers access to our public cultural institutions. The American Museum of Natural History, the Bronx Zoo, the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art - these and other places that New York is famous for all over the world - have been allowed to become playgrounds for the wealthy and the upper middle class.

Major New York cultural institutions are publicly funded, primarily through city, state, and federal tax dollars and tax-deductible contributions. The city's Cultural Institutions Group operates on city-owned land and receives significant taxpayer support in exchange for providing services that are accessible to the public - but at a price.

The price is too high. The cost of culture in New York City - already higher than in any other American city - has effectively priced out a large segment of the city's population.

New York is a city increasingly divided by race, income, and class - with a largely white affluent population and a largely black and Latino low-income population. One factor that intensifies this divide is the ever-rising fees for the use of public amenities. The tax dollars of all city residents are being spent to support institutions that only a relatively few can afford.

This situation goes beyond dollars and cents. These fees promote a social separation, a segregation that is unhealthy for the future well-being of the city. Given the onset of the economic recession, this situation is only getting worse.

In a survey conducted by the Community Service Society a few years ago, 58 percent of low-income New Yorkers said that they rarely visited museums, zoos, or other cultural institutions. When asked why, more than one in five - which computes to about 286,000 low-income adult New Yorkers - said that these places cost too much.

Some institutions provide a free day for school children or a day - during the week - free to all. But this precludes a family visit, which is a large part of the educational and cultural value of these institutions. Working parents - especially low-wage workers - can hardly take a day off the job for a free day at a museum.

Our survey found that 38 percent of those who rarely visit these places say they do not have enough time to visit. Work and poverty in New York City do not allow for a scheduled day off.

Cultural institutions provide a vital service to New Yorkers. At a time when fewer than half of the city's public high school students are graduating after four years and jobs are moving overseas, the future success of our labor force will

depend on workers' knowledge, flexibility, and innovation. The opportunity for learning and inspiration offered by cultural facilities is being lost to many who might benefit from them.

In 2004, the Museum of Modern Art raised its mandatory general admission fee for adults to \$20. The Guggenheim Museum costs \$18 and the American Museum of Natural History charges as much as \$32 for adults and \$20 for children for a visit to all its attractions. A trip to the Bronx Zoo costs \$16 for adults and \$12 for children under 13, but that does not include its rides. And while the Metropolitan Museum's \$20 admission fee is not mandatory, most visitors don't know this.

These public institutions operate in a city where more than a third of the population lives near or below the federal poverty line. More than 40 percent of all low-income New Yorkers have less than \$100 in savings; one in three has nothing. Consider what a family of four pays for a trip to a museum or the zoo. How can low-income families expect to enjoy these cultural institutions?

It doesn't have to be this way. The Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., the Getty Center in Los Angeles, and the Cleveland Museum of Art are free. So are museums in Minneapolis, Baltimore, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Dayton, Des Moines, and Richmond, Virginia.

The Metropolitan is the foremost museum in the country. It could take the lead among New York cultural institutions by making its collections freely accessible. The city's museums were once free. It works in Britain.

All of London's major museums are free. Throughout the United Kingdom, most museums have been free to the public since 2001, when the government offered a program of tax rebates in exchange for eliminating entrance fees. In the first year of the program, attendance at British museums increased by an average of 69 percent.

Our cultural institutions should at least provide discounts or free days when working families are able to attend. "Cool Culture" offers a free admission card for low-income families at more than 90 cultural institutions in the city. Last year, more than 50,000 families took advantage of this program. We need more programs that reach out to low-income New Yorkers.

The American Association of Museums contends that admission fees cover only a fraction of the cost of serving museum visitors. If that is true, then returning to free admissions would mean forgoing only a small amount of income.

I am not asking these institutions to commit financial suicide or damage their financial integrity. Public officials could craft innovative tax policies that along with private

endowments could reduce and eventually eliminate admission fees - at least for city residents.

We should not allow these institutions to be misused in ways that separate and segregate New Yorkers. The result would be the creation of a two-tiered city, something that we already seem to be moving toward with increasing rapidity.

The city's cultural institutions - the jewels of our society - ought to be free all the time.