
Massachusetts Poetry Outreach Project

1. Goals:

- to connect large numbers of Mass. residents with poetry, to bring poetry into more lives, create a much larger active public for Massachusetts poets, and to spread reading, listening to and writing poetry to more people,
- to make poetry a significant part of the identity of Massachusetts, helping to create a total environment that will help the Commonwealth attract and keep a creative, skilled workforce;
- to help bolster the “creative economy” of the Commonwealth;
- to increase the visibility and economic opportunity for Massachusetts poets;
- to use the unique insights and power of poetry to reach and support people at the margins

2. Explanation:

Poetry is as important to a culture as is music and song. Poetry creates new ways of looking at the world, its magic and its meaning. It connects people with their emotions and values in new ways. It creates a love of language, of words, and a new appreciation for their beauty, music and effectiveness. It has a unique ability to reach and support people who are living on the margins, facing difficulties and living troubled lives

For decades now, poetry has retreated to the academy. Colleges and universities have been the only places of employment for those who want to immerse themselves in poetry. The result has been that for decades poetry has been growing away from any large public audience. This has had a stultifying effect on poetry and on our culture at large. Massachusetts has more talented and published poets than almost any other state in the union. It has even more poets studying and learning their craft in dozens of workshops and small groups. These poets are an important cultural and potentially important economic resource for the Commonwealth. Yet little is being done to recognize them and even less to open up economic opportunities for poets.

Families and individual workers, as well as employers, make location decisions based upon a complex grid of factors. The cost of housing, the availability of skilled workers, the cost of living overall, all are significant factors. Still over and over studies have found that individuals and families are drawn to and stay in areas because of the total environment – not just economic factors alone. Creative, skilled workers want to live in a rich and creative environment. Massachusetts has a chance to retain and attract a creative and skilled workforce and expand its very significant “creative economy” through promotion of an overall creative culture. Poetry can play a major part in that effort. We are not suggesting that public poetry will by itself

compensate for a lack of affordable housing but it can become a part of a public culture that creative workers value and want to be part of.

Finally, poetry has proven its unique ability to move, support and provide great comfort to people under stress, on the margins and leading troubled lives, Poetry can heal; poetry can provide hope and magic; poetry can provide a person with new ways of understanding their lives and new ways of viewing themselves and the possible. The power of poetry has been known and documented for hundreds of years. The Commonwealth has a unique opportunity to tap into the great resource that is its poets to use that power to reach out to those, young, old, homeless, imprisoned, troubled,-- all those on the margins.

The purpose of Mass POP is to bring poetry back into the everyday lives of hundreds of thousands of people in our Commonwealth.

3. **Key components of the project:**

- **Resources Inventory:** a comprehensive inventory of existing poetry resources across the Commonwealth including, but not limited to: poetry societies/groups, poetry festivals, working poets, small presses, college and university resources (poetry professors, workshops, centers, projects), poetry related historic sites, and poetry websites. The completed inventory will be an important resource itself and will be available on line.
- **Public School Outreach:** we propose to engage and train 50 Massachusetts poets to go to public school systems. First they will work directly with teachers around poetry and how to connect students to poetry. Then they will work with teachers and students, and finally with students and parents in after school situations. Each year the project will also produce 40 grade appropriate poems for teachers (K-8) to read aloud and distribute to their classes once a week each week of school.
- **State Colleges and Vocational High Schools:** we propose create a “mini-Poetry Festival” perhaps combined with music to bring poetry to a larger college and technical high school student population.
- **Public Libraries Outreach:** the program will provide a stipend for public libraries to create poets-in-residence for one month twice a year and/or local Poet Laureates. The poets-in-residence will organize readings; lead a workshop for community poets, etc. There already exists a terrific State Library Association and libraries have a history of working well with each other.

- **Poetry for those on the margins:** we propose to design a program to bring poetry to a variety of places: prisons, community health centers, homeless shelters, food pantries, battered women's shelters, etc. We will seek to learn from existing successful programs (BU's Prison Education Program, the Clemente Program, etc) and to create a task force of practitioners already in those organizations and poets and poetry teachers to design the new program.
- **Creating increased recognition and new opportunities for Massachusetts Poets:** the goal would be to create increased recognition, economic opportunity, and public outlets for Massachusetts poets.
- **Syndication Project:** The project would work to sign up newspapers (both daily papers and weekly papers) that would publish the work of Massachusetts poets on a regular basis.
- **Massachusetts Poetry Awards:** using the Shattuck Excellence in Public Service Awards as a model, we will create a set of awards for poets and those who promote poetry. To promote new poets, there will be a series of awards for New Massachusetts Poet, First Time Chapbook, First Time Book, etc. The award ceremony will include readings and generate a program with the poems of those being honored. The award ceremony could be part of the Festival below.
- **Festival:** once a year the project will pull together the various activities and programs of the project into one large Massachusetts Poetry Festival that would spotlight the awards, local poets both established and emerging, the project and have readings and workshops open to the public in a manner similar to the Mabel Dodge Festival in NJ. While we would seek nationally known poets to headline readings, forums and workshops, we would weave local Massachusetts poets into all the festivals activities and highlight them.
- **Website & Podcasts:** to support the project we will create a new website that will list all the activities, create forums for poets to interact with each other, forums for schools and libraries to compare notes, have the most comprehensive links to online poetry resources, a total calendar of Mass poetry events, both the projects and others, have on line libraries of the project, and publish new works by Massachusetts poets. The new works will also be available as free podcasts with the poets reading their works.