

P O E T S H O U S E

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Response to FKA Poets House Staff Allegations

Following is a response from the Executive Committee of the Poets House Board:

Poets House staff was informed in April 2020, and again in June and August, that Poets House would likely need to downsize, as funds were quickly being depleted and adequate income was not forthcoming due to the pandemic. The staff received full salary and benefits in good faith for the past eight months, despite dwindling funds. Although the Board of Directors made emergency contributions throughout the spring to help bolster the budget and keep the staff employed, this was not sustainable.

Despite the need to suspend operations at this time, staff are receiving two weeks of salary in lieu of notice, plus payment for unused vacation time, severance of one week's pay for each year of employment, and extended healthcare benefits. This totals more than \$85,000 and further compromises dwindling reserve funds. Poets House closed when it did so that there would still be funds to compensate the nine staff members, three of whom had been at the organization for more than ten years.

While we understand and empathize with the staff's sense of loss, it is simply not the case, in any way whatsoever, that Poets House, a vibrant organization for the last 30 years, would shutter due to staff complaints or an effort to unionize. The board affirms that unionization is an important right, and no objections were raised to its prospect. While former staff are accusing management and the Board of suspicious timing, we note that Staff members only filed a petition to unionize on November 4, when they were aware that the financial situation had put jobs in jeopardy. We look forward to a vibrant work force in the future, and if a union is part of that, we will welcome it with open arms.

The bottom line is: weekly payroll was \$17,000. We had been operating in a deficit for months. Emergency relief and individual giving couldn't keep pace with expenses. The cash reserves were near depletion. We were not able to program our way out of this financial hole. The board acted to preserve the mission, the space and the collection for the public, which was and remains its primary obligation. And if we hadn't acted when we did, there would have been nothing available to pay out in severance.

The other allegations currently circulating are simply untrue. While no actual examples of “workplace discrimination, sexual harassment, and exploitative labor practices” have ever been provided by those who lodged them, the allegations were taken seriously when made, and the board and leadership worked hard to engage and satisfy staff concerns. An independent HR professional was brought in to investigate these claims and found that they were insubstantial.

Literary organizations are among the most at-risk cultural institutions during the best of times, and we are all living through the most difficult of times. Poets House is simply the latest addition to the tens of thousands of organizations that have been forced to shutter. It is now time to get back to the business of rebuilding Poets House for the post-COVID world and for generations to come.

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