

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

AUDIO EXCLUSIVE - THE FIGHT TO SAVE OUR STAGES: NIVA MOBILIZES

JANET HERNANDEZ: Before the pandemic, this is where you'd find me. Pressed up against a stage next to smiling fans, feeding off of the palpable excitement in the room. These are the nights that I miss terribly, but the return of music and performance spaces hasn't come soon enough. Some independent venue owners are still waiting for federal relief that the industry was promised last December. The National Independent Venue Association, or NIVA successfully lobbied Congress for aid, now known as the Shuttered Venue Operators Grant, or SVOG. Here's Senator Chuck Schumer.

SENATOR CHUCK SCHUMER: I want to tell folks in the arts help is now on the way.

JANET HERNANDEZ: The group now represents over 3,000 venues and promoters and is fighting tirelessly to ensure everyone gets their payout. I spoke to Stephen Chilton, NIVA's founding board member, vice-president and independent venue owner to find out how venues are holding up.

STEPHEN CHILTON: It's probably about 15 or 20% of applicants still haven't heard anything. We're over seven months since the bill passed and we still have a considerable amount of venues that have not seen aid.

JANET HERNANDEZ: I wanted to bring up that your venue, in Phoenix, Arizona is open, and you had reopened before you knew the status of your application.

STEPHEN CHILTON: Yeah, kind of in a lucky spot. We re-pivoted and opened as a coffee shop last year. And then opened, started doing some socially distanced light shows in April and then opened full capacity in June. You know, we just took on a massive amount of debt to get through this, kind of in the good faith that we were going to get this grant. You know, that like before we got SVOG, I was in more debt now than when I opened the place.

JANET HERNANDEZ: So you've received the SVOG payment?

STEPHEN CHILTON: We got it like two weeks ago, like we just got it. You know, a lot of people can't open until they get this grant. You know, I know a venue that didn't have their power — I mean, literally had to cut every expense to the bone. So like they didn't even have power in their venue and they're like, I can't turn the power on until this grant comes in.

JANET HERNANDEZ: Absolutely. And I would say that, I mean, without the group, I don't think this would have happened, but it's a true —

STEPHEN CHILTON: I absolutely don't. We would have all been closed.

JANET HERNANDEZ: Yeah. The NIVA group is a true testament to how people can come together.

STEPHEN CHILTON: We had to form so quickly and so rushed because there wasn't anyone to turn to. There was no organization that was really representing our businesses before and so we had to create it. That's really exciting, is just, I don't know what in 2025 or 2030 is going to be the issue of the day, but hopefully NIVA is there to represent us in whatever that issue happens to be.

JANET HERNANDEZ: Stephen Chilton, Vice President of NIVA, and also independent venue owner of The Rebel Lounge in Phoenix, Arizona, it was great talking to you. I really appreciate it.

Independent venues need to open now, so that every business can bounce back. While my friends and I wait in line for hours for a show to begin, we need to fuel ourselves with some takeout from a local restaurant. One study out of Chicago says that every dollar spent on a ticket yields \$12 in economic impact. If the government understood how vital performance venues are for everyone, would relief have come any faster? As I return to the rooms that hold so many memories, the resilience of independent venues won't be lost on me. I'm Janet Hernandez.