

Fighting Trump's Museum and Library Funding Cuts

By SI DUNN

When a Donald Trump executive order in mid-March cut the funding for one small, little-known federal agency, the impact was swift, widespread, and troubling.

Established in 1996 during the Clinton Administration, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), has been distributing Congressionally-approved funds across the 50 states and U.S. territories to help support museums, libraries, and several archive programs.

Trump's order, titled "Continuing the Reduction of the Federal Bureaucracy," declared that the IMLS and several other agencies should be eliminated "to the maximum extent consistent with applicable law."

The funding cutoff quickly caused some museum and library staff layoffs and budget cuts and shut down a number of museum and library programs funded by federal grants. Some libraries also became unable to continue buying ebooks, audiobooks, and other works popular with patrons.

On May 1, some of the destruction was briefly halted after the American Library Association (ALA) and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) sued and won a temporary restraining order issued by the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia. Then, on May 13, Judge John J. McConnell Jr., the chief judge on the United States District Court for the District of Rhode Island, sided with 21 state attorneys general in their lawsuit against Trump's efforts to dismantle the IMLS and two other small agencies.

Judge McConnell issued a preliminary injunction that enjoined Trump and relevant appointees from continuing to dismantle the IMLS and the other agencies. Among his

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directives, the judge ordered that the IMLS should resume the "processing, disbursement, and payment of already-awarded funding," as well as bring back staff members and contractors laid off because of the executive order.

Whether the Trump Administration will cooperate with the court orders, ignore them, or file appeals remains to be seen. Meanwhile, the words "temporary" and "preliminary" continue to hang over America's public museums and libraries, and many activities and services remain stalled or in low gear.

The American Association of Museums (AAM) has urged individual citizens to contact their elected officials to express concerns about the IMLS funding cuts, according to Natanya Khashan, an AAM spokesperson. Museum goers also can write letters to the editors of publications, write opinion-editorial pieces about how museums impact their lives, and likewise raise their concerns on social media, she adds.

"Museums will also need their communities' direct support. Individuals can step up through actions large and small. Visiting, becoming a member, and making a donation of any size can help museums try to close the gap and feel their community's support during this difficult time," Khashan says. To help museums cope with the IMLS cuts and communicate with the public, the AAM has posted some guidelines here: <https://www.aam-us.org/2025/04/11/grant-terminations-appeals-and-other-activities/>.

The American Library Association (ALA) likewise is calling for public action to help restore funding, staff, and ongoing programs at the nation's public libraries. "The best thing library patrons can do to help their local libraries [is] spelled it out completely on our 'Show Up for Our Libraries' web page: ala.org/showup, says an ALA spokesperson, Shawnda Hines. "Right now," she adds, "we are focused on getting Congressmembers [cq] to support funding for IMLS in fiscal year 2026. Even if ALA wins our lawsuit against the administration and the agency stands, if Congress doesn't appropriate funds for IMLS in the budget, libraries won't get funding."

How important is the funding that recently has been hovering in legal and political limbo? "The funding that the government provides, while miniscule in proportion to the federal budget, makes an enormous impact, especially when it comes to affording services that libraries across a state can share, including digital resources that offer everything from homework help on demand to online college test prep to genealogy research tools," Hines explains. "In-terlibrary loan programs, also run by state libraries and often paid for by IMLS funds, are particularly critical for folks who live in rural areas, where libraries tend to have smaller collections."

Friends of the Library of Hawai'i [cq] reports that Hawai'i's public libraries, for example, are losing \$1.5 million in IMLS funding that has been used "to ensure access to the internet, technology, collections, and digital and physical resources that support reading and learning. This includes ebooks, audio books, and databases for research and learning."

To give new books, ebooks, audio books, and other materials to affected libraries, individual donors are urged to contact their local "friends of the library" group to help coordinate the contributions to meet the library's current needs.

Si Dunn is a freelance writer in Franklin, Mass. He previously worked as a reporter and photojournalist for newspapers in Texas and Arkansas and currently is a book reviewer for *Lone Star Literary Life*. He also worked as a journalism librarian in college. Email sidunn@sagecreekproductions.com.

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