

Trump seeks to abolish crucial library and museum service

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In an attack on access to education and culture in the US, Donald Trump issued an executive order March 14 aimed at doing away with the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the only federal agency dedicated to funding library services.

As the American Libraries magazine explains,

The president cannot fully eliminate IMLS without congressional approval, but his order takes every possible step in that direction. The order calls for the elimination of IMLS, by limiting budget requests from the agency to only the funds needed to shut it down. Otherwise, the administration, through its Office of Management and Budget, will “reject funding requests.”

Trump’s action is intended to cut off a financial lifeline to museums and libraries, already woefully underfunded. Seventy-five staff will also lose their jobs.

IMLS describes itself as an institution that provides “opportunities that address regional challenges ... improving library services and access to resources, enhancing museum exhibitions and educational programs, digitizing historical documents and collections, promoting lifelong learning and cultural engagement, and supporting workforce development within libraries and museums.”

The institute gives out grants to large state libraries and smaller local ones, as well as to a large range of museums and historical societies in all 50 states, including those that serve the poorest demographics in the US, such as people living in rural areas and the

Native American population. The IMLS administered \$266.7 million in grants to museums and libraries across the US and Puerto Rico in 2024.

The role that museums and libraries play in educating millions of people about history, archaeology, art and science cannot be underestimated. Public libraries not only make books, videos and sound recordings freely available to anyone who has a library card, but serve as community centers and places for after-school programs. For millions of people in the US, especially those in the bottom 50 percent of income earners, libraries are among the only safe and intellectually stimulating public spaces available to them.

IMLS provides grants to numerous tribal libraries for basic operating expenses, such as purchasing books and computers; to programs that provide digital literacy training in underserved communities; and to efforts to digitize important historical collections.

This is a small sample of last year’s grants:

- The IMLS gave a \$10,000 grant to the Kaw Nation and the Kanza Library and Learning Center, a Native American library in Kaw City, Oklahoma, to purchase books and computers, and to purchase furniture for the library, including for a childcare center.

- The Griswold Memorial Library in the town of Colrain, Massachusetts received a National Library Medal from the IMLS that came with an award of \$10,000 for its “community-driven Kindness Reading Project to their partnership with public health nurses.”

- The IMLS provided \$240,000 to the Rochester [New York] Museum & Science Center for an exhibit that “will explore themes of Haudenosaunee cultural continuity and change, identity, and sovereignty through featured artists and artworks. A series of educational programs featuring traditional Haudenosaunee artistry through artist demonstrations,

workshops, and cultural festivals.”

- The institute gave \$249,000 to the Sciencenter in Ithaca, New York to “use input from prior library collaborations and listening sessions to co-create STEM activity kits and establish a learning community with library educators to support locally relevant STEM learning.”

- The New Mexico State University Museum received \$44,000 from the IMLS to “complete an inventory and assessment of its archaeological holdings to improve intellectual control and public access to the collection.”

- The Indianapolis Zoo in Indiana received \$114,000 for operating expenses.

- The Lorain Historical Society in Ohio received \$24,000 for “an oral history project to collect and share stories of older adults and foster dialogue with area youth.”

- The Maine State Library received \$1,500,000 to ensure that all Maine residents “have equitable access to high quality information resources through libraries” and to improve information services for “Maine’s diverse population, including people who are underserved and underrepresented, living in rural and remote communities, the disabled, those who are homebound, immigrants, or any resident who struggles with financial and other challenges.”

- The IMLS granted the Foundation for the Advancement of Conservation \$692,000 to “partner with researchers to understand the carbon impact of six activities central to museum collections work: treatment; environmental control; emergency preparedness; time-based media and digitization; pest control; and object loans.”

Library and museum associations have raised a hue and cry about the loss of this funding.

“By eliminating the only federal agency dedicated to funding library services,” said the American Library Association (ALA) in a statement, “the Trump administration’s executive order is cutting off at the knees the most beloved and trusted of American institutions and the staff and services they offer: Early literacy development and grade-level reading programs. And those who will feel that loss most keenly live in rural communities.”

The American Association of Museums (AAM) said in a statement: “This Executive Order threatens the

critical roles museums and museum workers play in American society and puts jobs, education, conservation, and vital community programs at risk. There is no efficiency argument when IMLS represents just 0.0046% of the federal budget, while museums generate \$50 billion in economic impact.”

The abolition of the IMLS has clearly come as a shock to many in the professional museum and library associations. They exhibit every sign of not knowing what has hit them. The ALA “implores” Trump “to reconsider this short-sighted decision,” and the AAM has made available templates of letters to senators and House members that “ask them to speak up to the Administration stressing the importance of IMLS.”

The decision to eliminate the IMLS is not an error that Trump and his administration will rectify. The defunding of libraries is part of the program of the oligarchy. The stream of executive orders since January 20 this year has had one purpose: to eliminate democratic rights and establish a dictatorship.

The role of libraries, and, by implication, museums, has been an inherent feature of American democracy since early in its development. In 1823, Thomas Jefferson wrote in a letter that “the establishment of such libraries in every town ... brings the use of books so much within the means of everyone that ... the public have the right and the understanding to judge for themselves.”

The oligarchy behind Trump abhors this concept and is determined to extinguish the right and the means to think critically. The drive to abolish the IMLS is part of this program.



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