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# American Museums Face Deep Cuts Under Trump

*Opposition abounds from state governments and institutions as the culture war continues*

📅 April 7, 2025   👤 Sharyn Vane

The reshaping of arts and the humanities in the second Trump administration continues with a slew of new executive orders. The edicts call for dismantling the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to the “maximum extent of the law” and stripping the Smithsonian and other museums of funding for exhibits deemed to “degrade American values.”

On March 31, the government put the entire IMLS staff on administrative leave.

The changes follow cuts to the National Endowment for the Arts and Trump installing himself as chair of the Kennedy Center board. They forward a gauzy worldview of America, one devoid of any hint of racial strife or gender fluidity.

“We will revitalize IMLS and restore focus on patriotism, ensuring we preserve our country’s core values, promote American exceptionalism and cultivate love of country in future generations,” vowed Keith Sonderling, the agency’s new acting director.

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Established in 1996, the IMLS distributes millions in grants annually to museums and libraries of all types in every state and U.S. territory. Its biggest program provides funds to state library agencies across the U.S., supporting on average between a third to a half of their budgets. It also bolsters a variety of museums nationwide, like the Madison Children’s Museum in Wisconsin.

The museum has received \$1.2 million in IMLS grants in the last decade, money matched by local donors. It’s a small fraction of their overall budget, but the money has helped support some of the “really beloved exhibits” currently on display, said Jonathan Zarov, the museum’s director of marketing and communications.



Madison Children’s Museum June 11, 2024. (Photo © Andy Manis)

IMLS funds helped the museum launch and lead Caretakers of Wonder, a collaboration between nine children’s museums and science centers devoted to exploring climate change and fostering connection to nature for children 8 and younger. That work underpins the museum’s Nice Age Trail, which invites children to investigate the seasons, pretend they are animals, and develop empathy and kindness. By design, the exhibit doesn’t explicitly mention climate change, Zarov noted.

“That is not a good approach for that age,” he explained in a phone interview. “They’re not developmentally ready for that.”



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The museum has completed the Caretakers of Wonder work funded by an IMLS leadership grant. But the new executive order and agency-wide staffing suspension mean the museum doesn't know when or if it will get the remainder of a different IMLS grant awarded for a new strategic plan. There's no one at IMLS to ask because they're all on forced leave, potentially through June. Meanwhile, the museum already has hired consultants and begun initial work.

"The uncertainty is not efficient and it's not a healthy place to be. I can tell you it doesn't make our lives or work more efficient," Zarov said.

Adding to the woes: The museum learned shortly before midnight on April 2 that the National Endowment for the Humanities terminated an already-awarded Climate Smart grant connected to ongoing work on Caretakers of Wonder. "As of this moment, we have received 0 percent of the \$268,202 promised in the award. We are owed all of it. The museum has been incurring expenses since September 2024," it said in a statement that lamented the "DOGE-driven tsunami defunding and dismantling federal agencies that improve the lives of Americans."

The museum has joined forces with the Madison Public Library to advocate for several IMLS-supported city museums, zoos, libraries and cultural centers. It added a postcard-writing station to federal lawmakers so visitors can share their own stories.

"Tons of people, probably hundreds of people, have written postcards and thanked us for the opportunity to do it," Zarov said.

Trump also issued a March 27 executive order that singles out the Smithsonian's African American history museum, alleging that it has promoted the idea that "hard work" and "individualism" are aspects of "white culture." The same order directed the Interior Department to revisit the post-2020 renaming of statues and monuments, aiming to reverse a widespread effort to eliminate the U.S.'s many shrines to the Confederacy. And it called for a ban on anything featuring trans women in the American Women's History Museum.

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Opposition abounds.

Attorneys general in 21 states filed suit April 4, charging that the administration’s moves illegally flout Congressional directives and will “inflict immediate and irreparable harms” to the public.

The IMLS board sent a March 24 letter to Sonderling that details a variety of programs the board says the law requires, including the Grants to States for Library Services and Native American Library Services. Senators who authored the bill reauthorizing the agency sent their own letter March 26, outlining statutory requirements and reminding Sonderling of the economic impacts.

“The IMLS Office of Museum Services is the largest dedicated source of investment in our nation’s museums, which typically support more than 700,000 jobs and contribute \$50 billion annually to the U.S. economy,” read the bipartisan letter.

Dozens of library and museum advocates also have criticized the administration’s moves, from the American Library Association and Freedom to Read Foundation to the National Civil Rights Museum and the Vermont Historical Association.

“Without this core federal funding for state libraries, museums, and archives, we risk losing critical programs and services in every state,” nonpartisan library advocacy organization EveryLibrary said in a statement. As of April 3, the group’s petition supporting federal funding of libraries included than 53,000 signatures.

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Tags: Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), Kennedy Center, Madison Children's Museum, National Endowment for the Arts, Smithsonian



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