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Trump Administration Sued Over Gutting of Institute of Museum and Library Services

Twenty-one Attorneys General have brought the suit, which pointed out, 'The Administration cannot dismantle federal agencies in this way.'



New York Attorney General Letitia James. Photo: David Dee Delgado / Getty Images.

by **Brian Boucher** (<https://news.artnet.com/about/brian-boucher-244>) April 4, 2025

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Attorneys General from 21 states, including New York, California, Illinois, and Washington, are suing Donald Trump and high-ranking officials in his administration today over the abrupt elimination or decimation of Congressionally mandated organizations, among them the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS).

"The Trump administration is launching another attack on vulnerable communities, small businesses, and our children's education," said New York Attorney General Letitia James, announcing the suit. "The agencies they are attempting to dismantle support workers nationwide, provide funding to help minority-owned businesses, and make sure our libraries and museums stay open so children can engage in lifelong learning."

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The suit names Trump as well as Keith E. Sonderling, acting head of IMLS; Howard Lutnick, secretary of commerce; Russell T. Vought, director of the Office of Management and Budget; and others. It argues that Trump cannot simply eliminate federal agencies that were created and funded by Congress (even if members of Congress are not standing up for them).

It prominently names the March 14 order to shut down the IMLS in the [executive order \(https://news.artnet.com/art-world/trump-executive-orders-arts-2605142\)](https://news.artnet.com/art-world/trump-executive-orders-arts-2605142), "Continuing the Reduction of the Federal Bureaucracy." His orders, it said, violate the Constitutional separation of powers and the Take Care Clause, which entrusts the president to carry out Congress's laws.



The offices of the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

IMLS, the suit noted, has placed 85 percent of its staff on administrative leave, "dramatically curtailed the administration of hundreds of grants and grant applications, and terminated statutorily mandated grant awards to several States."

The states rely on IMLS to fund their museums and libraries, said the suit. Other organizations that were ordered to be stripped down "well past the studs," namely the Minority Business Development Agency and the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, provide key funding and services to the states represented, said the suit.

While Trump and Elon Musk's "Department of Government Efficiency" have painted these as cost-cutting measures, IMLS accounts for just 0.0046 percent of the federal budget. Congress established IMLS in the Museum and Library Services Act of 1996 and has reauthorized and extended it three times since then—most recently, the suit noted, in a law signed by Trump in 2018 that extended its authorization until September 30. Museums and libraries in all 50 states benefit from IMLS grants.



Keith Sonderling was sworn in as acting head of the Institute of Museum and Library Services on Thursday. Photo: Rita Franca/Nur via Getty Images.

In the fiscal year 2024, IMLS distributed \$55.5 million in museum grants. Among the many recipients of its Museums for America grants—some amounting to as much as \$250,000—were the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Among its many programs are the Museums for All initiative, created in 2014, under which visitors who receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits are eligible for free or deeply discounted admission to 1,400 museums nationwide. Without staff to administer them, the employees’ union, the American Federation of Government Employees Local 3403, has said that “it is likely that most grants will be terminated.”



San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Michael Macor / The San Francisco Chronicle via Getty Images.

“The Administration cannot dismantle federal agencies in this way,” said the suit. “The Closure Order and the actions that Defendants have taken to implement it are illegal several times over.”

It cited a Supreme Court decision from five years ago that stated that “when an agency rescinds a prior policy, its reasoned analysis must consider the ‘alternative[s]’ that are ‘within the ambit of the existing [policy],’ ‘assess whether there were reliance interests,’ and ‘weigh any such interests against competing policy concerns.’” The Trump administration, of course, did none of these things when ordering seven agencies to eliminate all discretionary programs.

The suit noted that literally the day after Trump issued the order, Congress passed and Trump signed a statute appropriating tens or hundreds of millions of dollars to the very agencies he aimed to cripple.

“President Trump is leading a campaign to dismantle vast swaths of the federal government,” the suit pointed out, further naming his orders to dismantle organizations like the U.S. Agency for International Development, the U.S. Institute of Peace, the Department of Education, and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. He has also ordered various government departments to drastically slash staff.

This article was updated April 7, 11 a.m. ET, after Connecticut’s William Tong joined the suit late on Friday, bringing the number of participating attorneys general to 21.

UPDATE: On April 7, the American Library Association (ALA), the largest library association in the world, and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the largest union representing museum and library workers, filed a lawsuit in the District Court for Washington, D.C. against Trump, Sonderling, IMLS, DOGE (Elon Musk’s Department of Government Efficiency) and others over the administration’s gutting of IMLS.

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