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Trump administration sued by 21 states' attorneys general for trying to eliminate Institute of Museum and Library Services

The agency has placed 85% of its employees on administrative leave

Torey Akers

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US President Donald Trump in 2018

Official White House Photo by Joyce N. Boghosian, [via Flickr](#)

A coalition of 21 state attorneys general is suing the administration of US President Donald Trump for attempting to eliminate the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and several other agencies

through executive orders and actions that, the group says in its legal filing, "are illegal several times over".

The lawsuit, filed Friday (4 April) by the top legal officers for states including California, Illinois, New York, Rhode Island, Wisconsin and more, comes after most of the agency's employees were placed on administrative leave on March 31. The 85% reduction in staff followed Trump's executive order naming the agency as one of several federal bodies to be "eliminated to the maximum extent of applicable law".

"The Trump administration is once again violating the US Constitution and the rule of law by attempting to unilaterally shut down agencies the president doesn't like, including agencies that give the public access to facts, knowledge, and cultural heritage for free or at low cost," Rob Bonta, the attorney general of California, said in a statement [↗](#). "Dismantling these agencies would have a devastating impact on the public and on states across the nation—they provide important services for Americans and collectively provide billions of dollars to states to support libraries and museums, innovation and entrepreneurship for disadvantaged businesses, and help resolve labor disputes."

On 20 March, the director of the IMLS, library professional Cyndee Landrum, was replaced by Keith E. Sonderling, the deputy secretary of labor. After several visits by Sonderling and a team including at least one member of the Department of Government Efficiency (Doge), more than 70 employees were placed on 90-day administrative leave and barred from the agency's offices.

"This action is not punitive but rather is taken to facilitate the work and operations of the agency," Antoine L. Dotson, the agency's director of human resources, wrote in a letter cited by The New York Times [↗](#).

The union representing IMLS staff, the American Federation of Government Employees, said in a statement that 2025 grants would be paused, since there would be no workers to process applications. "Without staff to administer the programs, it is likely that most grants will be terminated," the statement read.

The agency was created in 1996 and re-authorized under Trump in 2018; like the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, IMLS is funding through annual appropriations determined by Congress. Its appropriation for fiscal year 2024 was \$294.8m and last year it awarded \$267m to museums and libraries; its grants support more than 726,000 jobs. Its [Grants to States](#) programme, the largest service the IMLS provides, gives \$160m annually to state library agencies, a figure that, according to a [statement](#) by the Chief of State Library Associations, covers up to one half of the typical library budget.

Museum advocates across the country have issued statements against the layoffs and the Trump administration's stated goal of eliminating IMLS, citing the agency's cultural importance. The American Alliance of Museums (AAM), a nonpartisan non-profit, has launched a [Call To Action](#) urging the public to pressure Congress into reversing Trump's executive order.

"IMLS makes up only 0.0046% of the federal budget and efficiently provides critical resources to libraries and museums in all 50 states and territories in communities rural to urban," a spokesperson for AAM said in a statement. "The museum sector, in turn, generates \$50bn in economic impact. Museums are vital community anchors, serving all Americans, including youth, seniors, people with disabilities and veterans. Museums are not only centers for education and inspiration but also

economic engines—creating jobs, driving tourism and strengthening local economies.”

A bipartisan group of senators, led by Jack Reed, a Democrat from Rhode Island, authored a [letter](#) calling on Sonderling to allow IMLS to continue its mission.

“The MLSA (Museum and Library Services Act) established the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and tasked the director with the 'primary responsibility for the development and implementation of policy to ensure the availability of museum, library and information services adequate to meet the essential information, education, research, economic, cultural and civic needs of the people of the United States,'” the letter reads in part.



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US agency that funds museums and libraries ‘cannot’ be unilaterally eliminated, advisory board warns

Benjamin Sutton

In addition to seeking to do away with IMLS, Trump has abruptly cancelled the NEH's most recent grants and so that the funds can be used in "a new direction in furtherance of the president's agenda". His administration has also sought to pressure the Smithsonian Institution to change the programming at the 21 museums, National Zoo and the research institutes it oversees.

Trump has also purged the Democratic appointees from the board of the foremost federally funded performing arts centre in Washington, DC—the Kennedy Center—and installed his own supporters, who swiftly elected Trump as board chair. Federal arts agencies and institutions including the Smithsonian and National Gallery of Art have complied with the Trump administration's crackdown on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, while the NEA has shifted its grantmaking priorities away from underserved communities and towards supporting projects related to the 250th anniversary of the US in 2026.

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