

## THE CONVERSATION

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ExplorationWorks, a children's museum in Helena, Mont., received \$151,946 in 2024 from the IMLS to expand its early childhood programs. Lisa Wareham

# Trump administration seeks to starve libraries and museums of funding by shuttering this little-known agency

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### Devon Akmon

Director of the MSU Museum and CoLab Studio, Michigan State University

*On March 14, 2025, the Trump administration issued an executive order that called for the dismantling of seven federal agencies “to the maximum extent consistent with applicable law.” They ranged from the United States Agency for Global Media, which oversees Voice of America, to the Minority Business Development Agency.*

*The Institute of Museum and Library Services was also on the list. Congress created the IMLS in 1996 through the Museum and Library Services Act. The law merged the Institute of Museum Services, which was established in 1976, with the Library Programs Office of the Department of Education.*

*By combining these two departments, Congress sought to create an overarching agency that could more cohesively and strategically support American museums and libraries. The agency's mission, programs and funding have been reaffirmed through subsequent legislation, such as the Museum and Library Services Act of 2003.*

*The Conversation U.S. interviewed [Devon Akmon](#), who is the director of [the MSU Museum at Michigan State University](#). He explained how the agency supports the nation's cultural institutions and local communities – and what could be lost if the agency were dissolved.*

### **What does the Institute of Museum and Library Services do?**

The agency provides financial support to a wide array of cultural and educational institutions, including art, science and history museums, zoos, aquariums, botanical gardens and historic sites. Libraries of all types – public, academic, school and research – also benefit from the agency's funding.

Through grants, research and policy initiatives, the IMLS helps these institutions better serve their communities.

 Two women and one man look through old books.

Anne-Imelda Radice, right, former director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services, inspects Denver city records and neighborhood histories in 2008. The volumes were digitized to make them more accessible to the public. Brian Brainerd/The Denver Post via Getty Images

In the 2019 fiscal year, for example, the IMLS [awarded funds to libraries in Nebraska](#) to support economic development in 30 rural communities. The project created rotating “innovation studios” in local libraries and provided residents with tools, instructional materials and programming to foster entrepreneurship and creativity. More recently, IMLS [awarded a grant to the Hands On Children's Museum](#) to develop a toolkit that museums across the country can use to support families with relatives who are in prison.

For libraries, the IMLS might fund technology upgrades, such as virtual reality learning stations, AI-assisted research aids or digitization of rare books. The agency also pays for community programs that take place in libraries, from early childhood reading initiatives to workshops that help people land jobs.

### **How has the Institute of Museum and Library Services supported your work at the MSU Museum?**

IMLS grants have played a vital role in enabling the MSU Museum to preserve, enhance and expand access to its collections.

For example, we've used IMLS grants to develop high-quality audio aids for museum visitors who are blind or have poor vision. Recent funding has supported the digitization of over 2,000 vertebrate specimens, including rare and endangered species.

Beyond financial support, the MSU Museum benefits from IMLS policy papers, professional training opportunities and resources developed through the National Leadership Grants for Museums program. Our staff members also contribute to national campaigns spearheaded by the IMLS, such as its [Strategies for Countering Antisemitism & Hate](#) initiative.

Through these efforts, the IMLS, alongside the American Alliance of Museums, operate as cornerstones of learning and innovation within the museum field.

### **Looking beyond Michigan State, what might be lost with its shuttering?**

The IMLS is more than a grantmaking entity – it is the only federal agency dedicated to sustaining the entire museum and library ecosystem in the United States.

Its funding has sustained museums, advanced digital preservation, expanded accessibility for low-income communities and fueled innovation in educational programming. In 2024 alone, the agency distributed US\$266.7 million through grants, research initiatives and policy development. For example, ExplorationWorks, a children’s museum in Helena, Montana, received \$151,946 in 2024 from the IMLS to expand its early childhood programs that serve low-income and rural families.

Without this support, many institutions will struggle to hire and retain qualified staff, leading to fewer exhibitions, stalled research and reduced educational outreach.

The consequences would be particularly severe for small museums and rural museums, which lack the fundraising capacity of larger urban institutions. They’re often the only sources of cultural and historical education in their regions, and their loss would create cultural voids that cannot easily be filled.

### **Trump’s executive order dictated that the Institute of Museum and Library Services and other agencies be eliminated “to the maximum extent consistent with applicable law.” What is the applicable law in this case?**

I’m not a lawyer. But my understanding is that the “applicable law” in this case primarily refers to the Museum and Library Services Act, which, as I noted earlier, was created in 1996 and has been reauthorized multiple times since then.

Since the IMLS was created through this congressional legislation, it cannot simply be eliminated by an executive order. Congress would need to pass a law to repeal or defund it.

 Man seated at desk signs piece of paper while surrounded by seven men and one woman.

President George W. Bush signs into law the Museum and Library Services Act on Sept. 25, 2003. Tina Hager/White House via Getty Images

Additionally, the Antideficiency Act prohibits federal agencies from operating without appropriated funding. If Congress were to defund the IMLS rather than repeal its authorizing statute, the agency would be forced to cease operations due to a lack of money, even if the legal framework for its existence remained intact.

### **Is there anything else you’d like to add?**

Museums are among the most trusted institutions in the country. They are rare bipartisan beacons of credibility in an era of deep division.

A 2021 [American Alliance of Museums report](#) found that 97% of Americans view museums as valuable educational assets, while 89% consider them trustworthy sources of information. A 2022 [American Library Association survey](#) revealed that 89% of voters and 92% of parents believe local public libraries have an important role to play in communities.

More than just cultural repositories, museums and libraries bring together citizens and offer learning opportunities for everyday people. By presenting science and history through engaging, evidence-based storytelling, museums [help bridge ideological divides](#) and encourage informed discourse. People of all political stripes rely on libraries for free internet access, job searches and literacy programs.

The Institute of Museum and Library Services is central to this work. The agency provides leadership, while funding programs and research that help museums and libraries expand their offerings to reach all Americans.

Stripping this support would threaten the sustainability of these institutions and weaken their ability to serve as pillars of education, civic engagement and truth. I see it as a disinvestment in an informed, connected and resilient society.