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# Libraries are under siege: How Trump's cuts put community hubs in peril

*Librarians, states say cuts will decimate local libraries. Feds say they will eliminate bloat and 'better showcase American exceptionalism.'*

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USA TODAY

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**Key Points** AI-assisted summary ⓘ

The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), which provides grants to libraries and museums nationwide, has been effectively shuttered and its staff placed on administrative leave.

This decision, made following an executive order from President Trump, has resulted in the cancellation of previously approved grants and halted the processing of new applications.

The move has drawn criticism from library advocates and Democrats in Congress, who argue that the IMLS plays a vital role in supporting libraries, particularly in rural and underserved communities.

The White House and the Department of Labor defend the decision, stating it will reduce bureaucracy and eliminate "divisive, anti-American programming" in cultural institutions.

MOUNT AIRY, Maryland – On Wednesday night and Thursday morning, libraries across the country were informed that grants approved last year – and in many cases already spent – are being terminated.

The grants violate an executive order recently signed by President [Donald Trump](#) and are inconsistent with the administration's priorities for the Institute of Museum and Library Services, according to the termination letter received by the states.

The IMLS was effectively shuttered earlier this week, and all work on approving federal grants for state, local and academic libraries was immediately halted.

California's, Connecticut's and Washington's State Librarians offices confirmed to USA TODAY that their grants had been ended six months early. Other states are anxiously awaiting to find out if they are next.

Even though their grant hasn't yet been terminated, Mississippi's Library Commission cut off access to the state's eBook system this week so that "if we did not receive the funds the obligation would not be there," said spokeswoman Kristina Kelly.

In anticipation that they too will face cuts, Ohio has frozen its summer reading program grants for over 50 libraries and Montana has halted all nonemergency spending, their state libraries said.

On Thursday, library advocacy group EveryLibrary issued a statement saying the terminated contracts included already authorized and approved grants that Congress created the agency to disburse, including the Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian grants.

"This abrupt termination of *Grants to States* comes in the middle of the federal fiscal year and will create sudden, significant shortfalls in nearly every state library budget," the statement said. "Funding these grants is not optional — they are part of the agency's core mandate and must be administered and disbursed in accordance with law," the release states.

In fiscal year 2024, the Institute of Museum and Library Services distributed nearly \$267 million in congressionally approved funds to libraries and museums in all 50 states and Washington, D.C. and to library, museum, and archives programs through grants. It serves 35,000 museums and 123,000 libraries across the country, [according to its website](#).

Every state receives an amount of money proportional to that state's population. Often states use it to offer services to every library that would be difficult for individual libraries to purchase, like access to a pool of eBooks, subscriptions to research databases or materials for summer reading programs.

On March 31, the entire roughly 70-person staff was abruptly placed on administrative leave after the Department of Government Efficiency met with agency leaders, according to their union AFGE Local 3403, a branch of the American Federation of Government Employees.

"Museums and libraries will no longer be able to contact IMLS staff for updates about the funding they rely upon," according to a statement from the union local. "In the absence of staff, all work processing 2025 applications has ended. The status of previously awarded grants is unclear. Without staff to administer the programs, it is likely that most grants will be terminated."

IMLS did not respond to an emailed list of questions USA TODAY sent before staff was placed on leave.

## 'Shall be eliminated'

On March 14 [President Donald Trump](#) issued an [executive order](#) eliminating the Institute of Museum and Library Services "to the maximum extent consistent with applicable law."

The order states that the Institute must be reduced to its "statutory functions." It also requires that "non-statutory components and functions ... shall be eliminated."

White House press aide Anna Kelly told USA TODAY that "President Trump's executive order is cutting bureaucracy and bloat to deliver better services for the American people. Thanks to the President's refocus of the agency, the Institute of Museum and Library Services will be able to better showcase American exceptionalism with greater efficiency for the public."

Keith Sonderling, Trump's Deputy Secretary of Labor, [became acting director of the Institute March 19](#). He was accompanied by a team of security and staff from the Department of Government Efficiency, the federal advisory agency led by billionaire [Elon Musk](#).

The Labor Department issued a statement to USA TODAY that said, "President Trump was given a clear mandate by the American people, and his Executive Order delivers on that by reducing federal bureaucracy. This restructure is a necessary step to fulfill that order and ensure hard-earned tax dollars are not diverted to discriminatory DEI initiatives or divisive, anti-American programming in our cultural institutions. These changes will strengthen IMLS's ability to serve the American people with integrity and purpose."

## 'Libraries are part of our national culture'

Stephanie Matthews, 58, comes to the Carroll County Public Library in Mount Airy, Maryland, every other day. She attends a knitting club while her adult daughter brings her own child to toddler play time.

That's why Matthews is so worried about the funding cuts.

"The library is super important and should not have the cuts that are coming," Matthews said. "Libraries are just foundational to every community."

Her daughter, Rebecca Matthews, 27, said she's never considered herself the type of person to call her member of Congress, but after hearing about the cuts: "now I will."

A steady stream of patrons flowed through the Mount Airy library doors for hours Wednesday. Moms trickled in with tiny hands in their grasp on the way to story time. Seniors joked around a large conference table, needles clicking as the conversation flowed.

Parents read while their children clambered through a make-believe forest in the kids section. A mother explained how libraries work to her young son who was afraid he'd never see his book again if he put it in the return slot.

Outside, the library's bookmobile was being restocked. Emblazed on the side was a credit: "this project was made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and

## Library Services."

In Maryland, the State Librarian uses the funds for summer reading programs, the Digital Maryland database, library websites, ebooks, technology training and bookmobiles as well as training for librarians.

For Chris O'Daniel, 44, the Mount Airy library offers free Internet and a quiet place to focus as he applies for jobs. For his wife, it is a way to fill her voracious appetite for eBooks, he said. Any potential cuts to services would be terrible for them.

"Libraries are part of our national culture. Ben Franklin and the founding of the first libraries, all that stuff like that is part of who we are as Americans, and having access to free knowledge and free exchange of ideas – the library is the place for that," O'Daniel said.

## **Public and members of Congress sign letters of protest**

Multiple advocacy groups are calling for Americans to contact their governors and federal lawmakers about the future of the Institute.

More than 21,000 people have [signed a petition](#) sponsored by EveryLibrary, a nonprofit that organizes grassroots campaigns for library funding and stopping book bans.

John Chrastka, Executive Director of EveryLibrary, said they hope the petition causes people to contact their elected officials and demand accountability about whatever changes are made to a "backbone agency" that most people don't even know exists.

"We want to educate them, inform them, and activate them because it's the kind of agency that would be very easy to see slip away in so much chaos in Washington, DC, and yet, if it did, there would be down-channel negative effects in almost every community in this country," he said.

In Congress, Reps. Suzanne Bonamici of Oregon and Dina Titus of Nevada collected signatures from 127 Democratic colleagues on a letter urging Trump to reconsider closing the Institute. No Republicans would sign on.

"I'm extremely concerned," Bonamici told USA TODAY. "It's completely unacceptable that they're trying to eliminate the Institute for Museum and Library Services. It's overall, a tiny drop in the bucket in the federal budget, but makes a huge difference, not just in urban but in rural communities as well to have a library or a museum."

She's also worried about whether Congress will be able to come together across the aisle to reauthorize the Institute this fall. It was last renewed in 2018 during Trump's first term with a bipartisan vote, despite Trump's repeated calls to close it.

## **State libraries plan ahead**

State librarians have been trying to give local libraries and districts an honest take on what could happen if the federal funding ends or if the federal government tries to claw back money that was already approved and dispersed, as it has with other agencies.

USA TODAY found that states have received conflicting guidance from IMLS on whether to continue spending their grant money and whether further grants would be approved.

In Illinois, Secretary of State Alexi Giannoulias, who is also the State Librarian, has sent periodic notices to local districts to prepare themselves for services to end.

He said the \$5.7 million Illinois received this year goes to all Illinois public, school, academic and special libraries and includes providing computer access to kids in high-risk communities, books to people in prison, and the cost of the online library catalog system and online programs.

Illinois spends about \$2.5 million of its funding on one of the country's largest intralibrary loaning systems, which allow libraries to keep their collections small and borrow from one another. Last fiscal year, 11 million items were transferred among more than 1,700 public, school, academic, and special libraries in Illinois.

In emails, Giannoulas has urged librarians and library administrators to keep their governing bodies aware of what the funding loss would mean. He called on school districts to talk with school boards and he urged everyone to contact their members of Congress. Ultimately though, he said it is up to the public to raise a fuss if they want these services.

“Everyone should be worried,” he said. “I think particularly in rural areas, in underserved communities, they'll see the greatest impact, and they'll see it immediately.”

## **'They're under siege right now'**

Rural Arkansas is bracing, knowing it cannot replace the endangered services. The state library pays to offer eBooks and a research database to every library in the state as well as books for the blind, the summer reading program and access to federal document repositories.

Adam Webb, executive director of the Garland County Library, said if every library in Arkansas had to pay for the state-offered research database separately it would cost about \$47 million, rather than the \$800,000 the state currently pays.

“Every school and public library, even universities in Arkansas, use it,” he told USA TODAY. “For us in Garland County, that resource goes away because IMLS goes away. I don't have the money to pay. That's more than my material budget in a year for one resource.”

The community has a high poverty rate, a high rate of adult illiteracy, and low reading scores, he said. “By decreasing our library's ability to provide resources, it's going to affect all of those different things, the low-income families and seniors that

depend on our resources, school age kids who need access to libraries to help boost their literacy scores, and just the general public who use us.”

The county library received a separate IMLS grant a few years ago to help it purchase an “invaluable” new bookmobile, he said. Even with the help of a private Arkansas nonprofit to cover the rest of the cost, the library system couldn’t have purchased it without IMLS, he said.

Webb said he's trying to warn the 250,000 people who walk through his library's doors each year that cuts are likely. Along with the potential end of IMLS funding, Arkansas libraries face possible cuts from the state legislature. A case pending before the [Supreme Court](#) could end reduced price high-speed Internet access for rural libraries.

“A lot of Arkansas libraries feel like they're under siege right now,” he said.

Webb said there’s only a small group of people who need to be convinced to restore funding.

“We're having to spend a ton of time telling a very small number of people all the good that we do,” he said, “when, if you go into our communities, you can talk to anybody that can tell you how much they love our libraries.”

*(This story has been updated to add new information.)*