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Virginia institutions face uncertainty as Trump administration suspends museum and library agency

By Nathaniel Cline Virginia Mercury
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The Children’s Museum of Richmond has been able to support children through an initiative called the Trailblazer Club to help prepare students for kindergarten.

Courtesy of Children’s Museum of Richmond

FindItVirginia, a platform that provides free education resources and tools for children, parents, military veterans and English language learners, is one of several programs statewide whose funding could be gutted by the shuttering of the federal Institute of Museum and Library Services

(IMLS), the latest in a series of moves by President Donald Trump's administration to slash "wasteful" spending.

The platform has helped connect military veterans to employment resources, provided tutoring services for children and tools to learn different languages, all for free — federal funding through IMLS offsets the costs of the \$1.6 million system.

"All of these resources, which would ordinarily cost individual libraries or even individuals a lot of money if they wanted access, are shared here as a resource with all public libraries," said Lisa Varga, executive director for the Virginia Library Association.

She added that the platform is also available to Virginia's schools and is "an incredible asset, because there are so many schools, like rural schools, that don't have the money for these databases." IMLS grants make it possible for every student in the state to have access to programs and services like FindItVirginia, Varga said.

Federal agencies in the crosshairs

The Institute of Museum and Library Services, the primary source of federal support for the nation's museums and libraries, is one of the several entities included for elimination in Trump's March 14 executive order to cut government waste, along with the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness and the Minority Business Development Agency.

In the order, Trump directed the government entities to be "eliminated to the maximum extent consistent with applicable law" and to "reduce the performance of their statutory functions and associated personnel" to the minimum required by law.

The order also directed the offices to "reject" funding requests if they were inconsistent with the president's directive. The office had seven days to file a plan, but Trump appointed a new IMLS director in the closing days, which could have led to the office's delay in submitting its plans.

The public learned later that officials placed staff on administrative leave before the end of March.

Varga said, as of last week, she was unaware of any plan IMLS may have drawn up or submitted. In the meantime, libraries are now "scrambling" to ensure they can still provide resources.

"The hard part is not knowing, and we don't know what to plan for," Varga said.

Virginia received at least \$6 million in grants from IMLS in 2024 to help fund educational programs and digitize historical records, according to agency records. Those funds were provided through the Library Services and Technology Act, which is designed to support library services, technology, access and literacy programs for underserved communities.

The funding has also supported higher education institutions like Old Dominion University, Virginia Tech's libraries, Virginia Union University's Center for African American History and Culture & Library Services, George Mason University's Virtual Library of Virginia and the University of Virginia Library.

Statewide implications for universities, museums and libraries

In 2024, the Children's Museum of Richmond received a \$188,000 grant from the Museums for America Grant fund to expand its school readiness programs and resources in the Richmond area. The grant will also help educators with Virginia Commonwealth University's School of Education to gather insights.

Sarah Newman, a spokeswoman for the Children's Museum of Richmond, said the organization is still assessing the implications of the IMLS suspension. Other institutions, including the Christiansburg Institute and the Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art, are doing the same.

Newman said that nearly half of Virginia's kindergartners still need to build literacy, math, self-regulation and social development skills. In response, the museum supports families preparing children for kindergarten through its Trailblazer Club. She said the disparities are even more alarming for Hispanic and English language learners. The threat of losing funding could devastate the program and several others.

"As a small nonprofit, this funding is not just meaningful—it's essential. The Museums for America grant enables us to commit staff time, develop curriculum, offer materials to families, and build lasting partnerships with early learning providers. Without this investment, the Trailblazer Club would not be possible at its current scale."

Annually, IMLS awards funding to states including Virginia from the Grants to State Library Administrative Agencies fund, which is the largest source of federal dollars for library services in the U.S.

Last year, Virginia received \$9.7 million from IMLS, including \$4.3 million for LVA, dedicated to supporting the library's goals over the next five years: developing community libraries for "lifelong learning" and "civic engagement"; providing access to information and cultural heritage to develop an informed community; and enhancing training for library leadership and staff to adapt to a changing environment.

The grant funding has supported the state's newspaper archive program, adult services consulting and public library infrastructure.

Dennis Clark, the Librarian of Virginia, stated that it is "extremely unlikely" the Library of Virginia would be able to make up any funding cuts to its statewide initiatives. He noted that 16% of the library's budget comes from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and this funding supports between 30 and 35 positions, which accounts for 25% of the Library of Virginia's workforce.

"Rural public and school libraries in particular depend on the online databases, summer reading programs, and interlibrary loans that IMLS funding provides," Clark said in a statement. "Libraries are the nexus of community and civic engagement, and are available to every Virginian, regardless of education, income, or status and the elimination of the IMLS puts that in jeopardy."

Clark said the library expects the funding from the grants to remain available through the end of the fiscal year, which closes Sept. 30. However, as of Friday afternoon, the library has not received its last funding infusion.

"All other funding — the majority of what Virginia receives — would likely be considered discretionary, and it's unlikely that those obligations will be met, as there are no longer active IMLS employees," Clark said.

He said given that the Museum and Library Services Act expires this year, and the intent of Trump's executive order, the act "seems unlikely to be reauthorized."

Virginia's 2024 Grants from the Institute of Museum and Library Services

The following institutions received federal funds distributed from the Institute of Museum and Library Services:

- Library of Virginia: \$4,289,358
- Virginia Polytechnic Institute (Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Libraries): \$115,398
- Christiansburg Institute: \$318,830

- Virginia Union University (Center for African American History and Culture & Library Services): \$52,253
- Children’s Museum of Richmond: \$188,245
- Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art: \$32,399
- Virginia Polytechnic Institute (Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Libraries): \$441,724
- George Mason University (The Virtual Library of Virginia): \$248,235
- University of Virginia (University of Virginia Library): \$149,842
- Old Dominion University: \$117,707
- The Library of Virginia: \$172,828

Total: \$6,126,819

Source: Institute of Museum and Library Services