



Abrupt \$1 million loss for Illinois Humanities after Trump cuts funding

WBEZ | By [Mike Davis](#)

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The Trump administration canceled \$175 million in grants made by the National Endowment for the Humanities, which funds programs in 50 states. Illinois Humanities is scrambling to determine what projects to keep whole and which to scale back.

Cuts to the National Endowment for the Humanities could have a trickle-down effect on Illinois museums, history programs and higher education.

An abrupt cessation of federal humanities funding will leave Illinois Humanities short an estimated \$1 million for this fiscal year, which could have a trickle-down effect on the state's museums and historical preservation efforts.

The Trump administration this week canceled \$175 million in grants made by the National Endowment for the Humanities, which funds programs in 50 states. The agency is also [undergoing deep staff cuts](#) by the Department of Government Efficiency, as first reported by the New York Times.



Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, the Art Institute of Chicago, several colleges and universities, and even the city's newest cultural institution, the [National Museum for Public Housing](#), which formally opened Friday.

"This happened in the dead of night," said Gabrielle Lyon, executive director of Illinois Humanities. Lyon said she received a letter around midnight on April 2 from NEH acting interim chair Michael McDonald, informing her that the grant awarded to Illinois Humanities had been eliminated. The annual \$2 million grant represents about one-third of the organization's budget; so far this year, the group had received about half of the award before the termination letter informed them no more funding would arrive.

A grant termination notice sent to state agencies and [obtained by NPR](#) said the termination was "necessary to safeguard the interests of the federal government, including its fiscal priorities."



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State Senator Robert Peters took part in one of Illinois Humanities' public conversations series in 2024.

Illinois Humanities is the state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the federal program founded 50 years ago to interpret, explore and preserve the diversity of human culture. Programs include museums, music, literature, lectures and more, as organizations that support humanities provide cultural experiences across the country.

For Lyon, the cuts are significant because they are coming midyear, when projects have



“To be really clear, the problem is acute because we’ve all been doing our work,” said Lyon. “In fact, our termination letter stunningly said, ‘No more money as of April 1, but we expect you to complete your obligations as outlined.’ ”

Now, the group is determining what projects to keep whole and which to scale back. For example, the Chicago Odyssey Project, which supports adult education, could be impacted. Its primary purpose is providing free college courses for low-income adults. But the program also provides wraparound services, such as childcare and transportation stipends, that help the program be more accessible.

The [Chicago Humanities Festival](#), which has received money from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts in the past, will press forward with a packed spring lineup that includes talks by musician Jon Batiste, local author Eve Ewing and comedian Ed Helms, said the group’s president and executive director Phillip Bahar. The calendar of programming aims to explore what it means to be human and includes lectures on topics such as how transportation structure reinforces racial inequity.



Toni Morrison appears at the Chicago Humanities Fest in 1991. The popular event has received money in the past from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The Chicago festival did not take federal funding this year, but Bahar said the cuts will shift the industry. “Work will continue at cultural institutions all across the country,” he said, reached Friday. “But the adjustments that are happening right now at the federal level will limit our ability to do some of that work at the scale that we think is important.



And certainly, there will be institutions that are going to face very challenging financial issues.”

Several museums in Chicago have historically received federal humanities dollars. In a statement, the Field Museum, which also receives funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), said it had received \$1.8 million in federal grants since 2018. “IMLS was the second largest source of federal agency funding for the Field,” the museum statement said. “These grants have been very important to how we fulfill our mission, and it would be a significant disappointment if that funding were to end.”

On the Near West Side, Chicago’s National Museum of Public Housing is bracing for the impact. Like most major cultural institutions, the museum – which is located in the last remaining building of the Jane Addams Homes – is supported by a wide range of funders. Executive Director Lisa Yun Lee said the impact of losing federal humanities funding is not yet clear.

Lee said she was told in a letter earlier in the week from National Endowment for the Humanities officials, just as the organization prepared for a major opening day event, that the new museum’s “vision and mission didn’t align with the executive office.”



Lisa Yun Lee, executive director of the new National Museum of Public Housing, said that the museum is waiting to see if the government will be allowed to pull its federal grants.

She said she’ll be watching closely to see whether the federal government will actually



“We’re waiting to see what happens with the legality of [the cut],” said Lee. “I never thought that the work of the NEH and the NEA and all of these institutions that represent the American people were supposed to only align with the executive office’s mission.”

The cuts to the National Endowment for the Humanities are the latest in a series of mandates that have roiled arts and culture leaders across the United States. In February, the Trump administration [issued sweeping changes](#) to the way it funds arts programs through the National Endowment for the Arts. While some questions remain about current grants, the changes primarily targeted future grantmaking.

Now, groups [are still wrestling](#) with where federal funding for arts and cultural institutions is headed, and if funding will be available for those whose missions conflict with federal executive orders around race and gender. Leaders of arts organizations across the country have decried executive orders that prohibit use of federal funds for programming that promotes “diversity, equity and inclusion” and “gender ideology” or that aim to censor the language used in [museums to discuss](#) the nation’s history.

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