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Washington's libraries face 'deep and dramatic' funding cuts as Trump abruptly terminates federal grants

**Katie Campbell**

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Patrons are shown inside the Seattle Public Library Central branch on Thursday, Jan. 2, 2020, on Fourth Avenue in Seattle.

KUOW Photo/Megan Farmer

The Trump administration is notifying library systems across the country that grant funding is being terminated, despite pending litigation.

Washington State Librarian Sara Jones told KUOW the cuts could amount to as much of a third of the State Library's budget — especially impacting rural and underserved communities.

"There's state funding crisis too, so the State Library is looking at deep and dramatic cuts from the state, regardless of the federal money," Jones said. "When you combine those two things, essentially, everything

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Trump's March 14 executive order, [Continuing the Reduction of the Federal Bureaucracy](#), in which Trump targeted programs he deemed "unnecessary." The Institute for Museum and Library Services — which provides funding to libraries, museums, and archives in every state — was among several relatively small federal agencies ordered to make reductions.

[According to The New York Times](#), about \$160 million of its \$290-million budget goes directly to state systems. [The Institute's state allotment data](#) shows Washington received about \$3.9 million in 2024.

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On April 3, all but a dozen employees of the Institute for Museum and Library Services were terminated. The next day, Sonderling also fired the agency's 23 board members.

Now library systems across the country are receiving notices like the one the State Library received, cutting their grant funding.

Read the letter the State Library received here.



[Notice of Grant Termination \(IMLS\)](#)

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Jones said the State Library's grant termination could result in about \$1.4 million in lost funds. About \$600,000 has already been spent and not reimbursed, with no indication that it will be, and another \$800,000 was promised but now appears to be off the table.

Deputy Secretary of State Randy Bolerjack — whose role supports the State Library, State Archives, and the Corporations and Charities Division of the Office of the Secretary of State — said that grant funding pays for staff, among other things.

"We've got about 32 positions that are fully or partially funded through those federal grants, and we do not have state dollars to buy these folks long runway," Bolerjack said.

Jones was at the Washington Library Association's annual conference Friday when she spoke to KUOW. She described the atmosphere as somber, though she and her colleagues are trying to stay resilient.

"As much as I don't want to say this, I think this is just the tip of the iceberg," Jones said. "With all honesty, however we come out of this, the State Library that's known and the services that are provided — we won't

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written word due to visual impairments, physical disabilities, or reading disabilities like dyslexia

Support for institutional libraries in state prisons, including through the Department of Corrections, the juvenile detention center at Echo Glen, and the two state hospitals

Continuing education opportunities for school librarians, including a career program for young librarians

Digital and historic preservation efforts

Broadband access and equipment for 25 libraries in the state.

In a nutshell, Jones called the library cuts a "clear and present danger."

"I...unequivocally tell you that every library in the state of Washington is going to have serious, negative consequences if the federal funding does go away," she said.

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The effect will be more pronounced in rural and underserved communities, Jones noted, but major urban systems won't be spared either.

The Seattle Public Library has lost grant funding, too.

Brian Lawrence, CEO of the SPL Foundation — the library's nonprofit fundraising and advocacy arm — told KUOW the organization got notice that a three-year grant received in 2022 for a teen mental health program had been canceled. It was slated to wind down this year, but the early termination could mean the foundation will not be repaid money it was promised.

"We have about \$90,000 in already spent and committed funds that we're at risk of losing payment [for]," Lawrence said. "There's a possibility that we might be able to absorb that financial hit, because we have really caring donors in our region who help enhance our libraries above and beyond what public funding provides, but it is a big hit."

The teen mental health program supported by the grant was designed in partnership with the University of Washington and SPL's digital media team. Lawrence said they've been working with teens to design spaces where young people can talk openly about how they're feeling. The final phase of that project was to market and promote the program to other libraries across the country — a plan that's now in jeopardy.

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["The way the administration is going about this, in my opinion, is reckless and a little immoral," Lawrence](#)

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And while Lawrence said the SPL Foundation may be able to weather this "period of tremendous uncertainty" with the help of its donor network in Seattle, it's a much more precarious position for smaller and rural library systems.

"My message to listeners is this: Support your local libraries as they are coming under attack," Lawrence said. "If you're a believer in libraries, if you can make a small gift to help your local library — I'm pretty confident that we can get through this, but it is not going to be an easy time."

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There are legal efforts to stop the dissolution of the Institute for Museum and Library Services.

The American Library Association and a union representing 1.4 million public workers nationwide have filed a lawsuit.

Among its membership, the union — the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees — represents about 45,000 cultural workers, including Seattle Public Library workers who are members of AFSCME Local 2083.

Local 2083 President Jessi Lucas said having the American Library Association and national union leaders step up to support members means a lot, but the full reality of what these cuts could mean to librarians' livelihoods and communities hasn't fully set in yet.

"We're finally starting to get some stability in our staffing, and to think that we might lose that again really quickly," Lucas said, expressing concern for newer hires and librarians in rural areas in particular. "When we see those folks losing their jobs because they rely more heavily on federal grants...we know that those services are suffering.

"They'll have a less educated population, and maybe that's part of the plan," she added.

In addition to the challenge filed on behalf of workers, Washington Attorney General Nick Brown joined 20 other states' attorneys general in a similar lawsuit to stop cuts to the Institute for Museum and Library Services.

The states' argue cutting cultural agencies like the institute "will immediately put at risk hundreds of millions of dollars in grant funding on which the states depend, and undermine library programs, economic opportunity, and the free flow of commerce throughout the country."

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"It was insulting to [hear] Acting Director Sonderling's quote calling this work 'anti-American,'" Bolerjack said, referencing a statement that cuts to agencies like the Institute would eliminate "divisive, anti-American programming."

"What is more American than the freedom to read, the freedom of information, the freedom of speech?"

Clarification notice, Friday, 4/11/25 at 5:28 p.m.: This story was clarified to reflect that the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees represents 1.4 million public workers nationwide. Of that, about 45,000 are cultural workers, like librarians.

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Katie joined KUOW's online team as an editor and reporter in 2024, after serving three years as senior producer of the local Morning Edition program. She has covered a variety of local topics, including the Seattle City Council, elections, and breaking news. She also brings readers some levity with a weekly news quiz.

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