WORKFORCE

Libraries push back against cuts to a federal library support program

"It could be the end of the library if the funding is cut off," said Alan Inouye.

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The Institute of Museum and Library Services has been around for nearly 30 years. It only has about 75 employees, and the Trump administration wants to cut that number by half. The move isn't sitting well with libraries who receive federal dollars via the IMLS, leading to a lawsuit from the American Library Association to restore the agency. The Association's policy chief Alan Inouye, joined ***the Federal Drive with Tom Temin.***

Interview transcript:

Tom Temin: And first of all, this is a small independent agency. What does it actually do? Tell us more about the IMLS from the library standpoint.

Alan Inouye: It's small but mighty. It has 75 employees, well, before the recent action. One of the big responsibilities is to provide grants to the states, as well as grants to other kinds of recipients to do all kinds of library research and services and things to advance how libraries function in communities. But it also has a national purpose in the sense that it's the federal agency for library funding and for libraries in many ways. And so it has the responsibilities for the national data collection, it's the coordinator for interagency activities on libraries. Because libraries are everywhere, you know, from kids to veterans to research to teaching. So it's all over the government and so IMLS is a coordinator to help ensure that libraries are leveraged in the best way to advance federal missions.

Tom Temin: And tell us a little bit about the state of libraries themselves in the United States. I mean, there are university libraries, there are private foundational libraries, there are state-run public libraries. And my experience is mostly the local library run by the county or the municipality. I mean how does that all break down? And what does the industry look like these days?

Alan Inouye: Yeah, to many people that when you say library, they think of the public library. As you said, the city or county kind of library. But there are many other kinds of libraries. And you mentioned some of them. Some other ones are libraries in K-to-12 schools, libraries on tribal lands. There are 200 libraries in the Department of Defense. I mean, there's over 125,000 libraries in the United States. And there's been quite an evolution. So way back, like in the 20th century, the core service of libraries would be to provide access to books. People come in and borrow books and take them home and so on. I mean, there are other services too, but that's what you thought of. But in the past decades, libraries have evolved considerably, adopting to technology, providing all kinds of services to help people find jobs, improve their job skills, to help do research, to find health information, and all kinds of community services.

Tom Temin: Got it. And so what is the primary benefit to the average library? Is it grant money? And I guess the question would be, what did libraries do before 1996 when Congress established this particular agency?

Alan Inouye: The grant money is important because the majority of funding for libraries comes from the local entity to kind of keep the doors open. But to do more advanced services and cutting-edge services and things like that, other kinds of funding are needed. And also there are some areas, which are especially very low-income areas where they don't really have a lot of alternatives and the most pressing case are in tribal lands, and IMLS has special programs to fund libraries in tribal lands. And for some of those libraries without IMLs those libraries are going to close and that's very concerning. It's one thing to take a budget hit, but then when it's actually going to close the library, then it's it's really really problematic.

Tom Temin: And I guess that might be true in urban areas, where you might have one central library, but then there are what they used to call when I was a kid branch libraries. And some of them were small, but they were neighborhood near or adjacent, or they might be in an area that is mostly poor or lower income, where the people felt they should have a library with easy access also. Fair to say?

Alan Inouye: Exactly. That's that's also another issue. But there's also the national side of things, too. And that's like you say libraries. Libraries go all the way back to Benjamin Franklin in this country. And so, you there's there's going to be libraries in some sense. How well we provide services and opportunities to the people in our communities is a different question. So just to give you one example of a national-level program. So during COVID, there was question of like, how do you handle library materials, physical things, physical book, DVDs and so on, and nobody knewm and so each library or each state could initiate a research program to like figure this out but that would be grossly inefficient, obviously, and so it's like, well that really should be a national thing, but this should be one big research project done by the national entity, which is IMLS, and let them figure it out and you know hire experts and they'll do the report and then everybody can benefit from that. All libraries. And that's exactly what happened, and so it's one of the good reasons to have a federal agency like IMLS is that you do derive considerable efficiencies that way instead of having to reinvent the wheel in every state and even in every locality.

Tom Temin: And you have joined a couple of other groups in suing. What is the status of the case? What are you specifically pressing the courts for? And how does that all stand at this point?

Alan Inouye: We've filed a complaint and we've also requested a preliminary injunction. So we haven't heard yet back from the court in terms of the schedule or anything like that. So it's at its early stages as far as the legal proceeding goes.

Tom Temin: And what does the agency look like from your standpoint? Does it look like the people are not operating, that they're down to 35 people, or is this all in limbo?

Alan Inouye: Oh, well, I wish they were down to 35 people; our information is that they're down to 12 employees, that the rest of them have been or are slating to be terminated. And so it's really just the statutorily required employees and some lawyers and people like that. Sure. Very skeleton-style staff, so it looks bleak.

Tom Temin: And getting back to that funding issue for the money that comes through, I guess if the people are gone, I imagine the administration wants to cut the funding available to them for making these grants. Getting back to the average library, whatever that is, what is the biggest cost in operating a library these days? It sounds like it might be labor because the acquisition of books might be a smaller portion relative to history just because so much is online nowadays.

Alan Inouye: Yes, that's true. I mean, labor is often the largest component, but also large are acquisitions or buying stuff, if you will, because as you pointed out, a lot of stuff is online, or it's in digital form. But that stuff is often expensive. So it's not like it's an actually when it comes to like, some e-books and some other media, the price might even be higher than it is for the equivalent print version. And so buying materials or services is still a major component.

Tom Temin: Right, if someone wants to borrow the Kindle version of a book, the library has nevertheless paid full price to acquire that title, correct?

Alan Inouye: Right, and has probably purchased the print book too. And maybe a digital audio book too.

Tom Temin: Yeah, and so then this money that comes from the IMLS, does it tend to fund the research and the types of look-aheads that libraries do, or does it help actually with operating expenses for libraries?

Alan Inouye: That varies a lot. The simple answer is that it does all of that. And it depends on locality and on the state. There are different kinds of grants. There are some grants that go directly to the state libraries who provide services within their states. There are other grants which are awarded based on a national competition. And so those are more idea project-oriented. And so it runs the whole gamut of things.

Tom Temin: But for those marginal libraries, financially, let's say, that might be operated by a small village or a tribe or something, would it be accurate to say they depend on the federal funding to keep their doors open and their lights on?

Alan Inouye: Yes, and especially, as I mentioned before, with the tribal libraries, because IMLS has tribal libraries and some historically Hawaiian libraries, too. There are special programs for certain communities like that. Much more than majority of their budget can come from IMLs. And it could be the end of the library if the funding is cut off.

Tom Temin: Right, so right now, then, the American Library Association and your compatriots in the lawsuit, it's kind of waiting to see at this point for what happens in court.

Alan Inouye: That's right. As far as a legal proceeding, I mean, we just filed, you know, it was just like last week. And we need to hear from from the judge in terms of like, what's going to be happening and when. But we're prepared and we have our lawyers are ready and we're ready to go.

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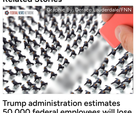

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