

Contextualizing This Issue: Events Affecting the Institute of Museum and Library Services Since January 20, 2025

EVERYLIBRARY INSTITUTE

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The following issue contains articles written between December 1, 2024, and February 23, 2025. Since then, events at the federal level have rapidly unfolded, and the landscape of library funding is changing daily.

On day one of his new Administration, President Trump revoked President Biden's Executive Order 14084, "Promoting the Arts, the Humanities, and Museum and Library Services", a 2022 action that elevated the importance of the arts, humanities, museums, and libraries as critical to democracy and public life. It emphasized federal investment in cultural and educational infrastructure. This Order recognized the vital role of the arts, humanities, museum, and library services in strengthening democracy in the United States. It emphasized their importance in fostering creativity and community cohesion, promoting equity in underserved areas, and bolstering the creative economy. A President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities was established within the Institute of Museum and Library Services to support these initiatives. The revocation of Executive Order 14084, which is part of President Trump's expansive 'Day One' Order, is a direct blow to the recognition and support of libraries, museums, and cultural organizations as pillars of society. It risks undermining their ability to serve as equitable access points for education, cultural preservation, and civic engagement, all while signaling a broader dismissal of their importance.

On January 28, 2025, President Trump demanded a freeze on all federal grants and for all agencies to "temporarily pause all activities related to obligations or disbursement of all Federal financial assistance." The memo also called for each agency to perform a "comprehensive analysis" to ensure its grant and loan programs are consistent with President Donald Trump's executive orders, which aimed to ban federal diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and limit clean energy spending. Programs affected are "including, but not limited to, financial assistance for foreign aid, nongovernmental organizations, DEI, woke gender ideology, and the Green New Deal." Represented by Democracy Forward, the National Council of Nonprofits (NCN), the American Public Health Association (APHA), and SAGE – Advocacy & Services for LGBTQ Elders sued to challenge the policy. As a result, the Office of Management and Budget rescinded its memo that had previously paused all agency grants and loans.

On January 29, 2025, President Donald J. Trump signed Executive Order 14189, titled “Celebrating America’s 250th Birthday,” to coordinate federal efforts for the 250th anniversary of American Independence on July 4, 2026. This order established the White House Task Force on Celebrating America’s 250th Birthday (Task Force 250), chaired by the President and including key cabinet members and agency heads such as the Secretaries of State, Treasury, Defense, Interior, Agriculture, Housing and Urban Development, Education, and the heads of the National Endowment for the Humanities, National Endowment for the Arts, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Task Force 250 is responsible for organizing a grand celebration and ensuring that federal agencies contribute to commemorating this milestone in American history.

On March 15, President Trump issued an executive order naming the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) along with the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, the United States Agency for Global Media, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in the Smithsonian Institution, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, the Community Development Financial Institutions Fund, and the Minority Business Development Agency. The Order states that IMLS must be reduced to its “statutory functions” and requires that “non-statutory components and functions . . . shall be eliminated to the maximum extent . . .”

Congress was clear in the 2018 Museum and Library Services Act that IMLS is statutorily required by Sec 9133 to send federal funding to state libraries under the Grants to States program (Sec. 9141). Without this core federal funding for state libraries, museums, and archives, we risk losing critical programs and services in every state.

On March 20, Trump appointed Keith E. Sonderling as Acting Director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services. In the press release announcing his installation, Mr. Sonderling said, “I am committed to steering this organization in lockstep with this Administration to enhance efficiency and foster innovation. We will revitalize IMLS and restore focus on patriotism, ensuring we preserve our country’s core values, promote American exceptionalism, and cultivate love of country in future generations.”

On March 23 and then again on April 3, the Institute of Library and Museum Services Advisory Board issued two formal letters to the Acting Director outlining IMLS’s legal obligations under the Museum and Library Services Act. These letters plainly and directly advised the Acting Director about the agency’s required duties and the scope of its lawful operations. They received no response. On April 4, 2025, the President dismissed the board.

On March 26, U.S. Senator Jack Reed (D-RI), joined by U.S. Senators Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), Susan Collins (R-ME), and Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), sent a letter to Keith Sonderling. They urged him to continue The Institute of Library and Museum Service’s mission as Congress intended when it created the agency. “As the lead authors of the Museum and Library Services Act (MLSA) of 2018 (PL 115-40), which was signed into law by President Trump, we write to remind the Administration of its obligation to faithfully execute the provisions of the law as authorized,” the Senators wrote. In addition to the Reed Letter, U.S. 127 House of Representatives members wrote a letter to the Trump Administration supporting the Institute of Museum and Library Services. They expressed grave concerns about dismantling the Institute of Museum and Library Services. “Eliminating the IMLS would not only jeopardize these essential services but also dismiss the everyday needs of millions of Americans who rely on libraries and museums for learning, job opportunities, and community engagement,” the representative stated.

On March 31, Institute of Museum and Library Services staff were placed on administrative leave. While on leave, the staff are prohibited from continuing their duties. All

employees were required to turn in government phones and other property before leaving the building, and their email accounts were disabled. Libraries and museums were no longer able to contact the IMLS for updates.

Beginning April 2, state libraries and other grant recipients began receiving official notices from the Acting Director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services terminating their grants, effective April 1, 2025. This includes authorized and approved Grants to States projects, National Leadership Grants, and Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian grants. In 2024, 633 grant recipients entered into legally binding plans with IMLS, delivered services, and fulfilled obligations in good faith, and are now being denied reimbursement by the federal government. The reason given is that the grants are “inconsistent with IMLS’ priorities” and that President Trump’s Executive Order of March 14, 2025, “mandates that the IMLS eliminate all non-statutorily required activities and functions.” The Grants to States program, authorized under Section 9141 of the Museum and Library Services Act (20 U.S.C. § 9141), is the largest source of federal library funding, distributing over \$180 million annually to every state and territory library administrative agency. The program also requires states to submit five-year plans outlining goals and measurable outcomes, which are reviewed and approved by IMLS under statute. 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.

On April 4, 2025, twenty-one State Attorneys General filed suit to stop the dismantling of the Institute of Museum and Library Services. The lawsuit argues that President Trump’s Executive Order of March 14, 2025, unconstitutionally overrides Congress’s power of the purse by directing IMLS to eliminate programs for which Congress has explicitly authorized and appropriated funds. As the suit states: “Neither the President nor an agency can take any action that exceeds the scope of their constitutional and/or statutory authority.” The attorneys general of New York, Rhode Island, and Hawaii lead the lawsuit. Joining the suit are the attorneys general of Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oregon, Vermont, Washington, and Wisconsin. In addition to IMLS, the suit includes a request for an injunction about President Trump’s actions against the labor organizing staff and programs of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS) and the Minority Business Development Agency (MBDA), which has been forced to cut its grant programs that support small business owners. A hearing is scheduled for April 18 in U.S. District Court for the District of Rhode Island (following the publication of this Issue).

On April 10, the American Library Association and the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the largest union representing museum and library staff, filed a motion for a preliminary injunction in a lawsuit represented by Democracy Forward. They requested that a federal judge intervene to prevent the Trump administration from undermining the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

At the time of writing, we do not know how Congress or the Courts will respond to these events. We call on both to help safeguard library funding and halt the dismantling of The Institute of Library and Museum Services. We cannot imagine a scenario where the Acting Director has the authority to nullify a duly enacted federal law or cancel the distribution of funds that Congress has directed to states. We call on the Congressional committees of jurisdiction, including the House Committee on Education and the Workforce and the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, along with members from both sides of the aisle, to exercise their oversight powers immediately.