

What Could Have Been: Surveying the Labor Impact of the 2025 Executive Orders on GLAM Workers

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ABSTRACT

What Could Have Been? is a collaborative project designed to document the labor lost as a result of federal cuts and grant terminations, especially within GLAM institutions. This survey was inspired by a sub-group of members of the 2025 Archives Leadership Institute (ALI) Cohort who came together to collect evidence of the personal and professional losses resulting from the current sociopolitical landscape. While the project seeks to document the effects on the GLAM communities, *What Could Have Been?* also acknowledges the loss of personal livelihoods and vilification of public servants in addition to amplifying the impact of the erasure of their labor. Affected GLAM workers are invited to document their experiences at https://bit.ly/wchb_survey.

Introduction

The Archives Leadership Institute (ALI), hosted by the University of Virginia (2024–2026) and supported by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), brings together mid-career archivists and other professionals engaged in archival work to reflect on leadership and the future of the profession. The twenty-five archivists, librarians, and memory workers of the 2025 ALI cohort engaged in a week-long intensive in Charlottesville that included in-person workshops, lectures, and contemplative reflection (*ALI Cohort 2025 – ALI@Virginia 2025*). After the June 8–14, 2025 in-person gathering, the entire cohort has continued to exchange ideas virtually over the remainder of the year.

As part of the program, participants will also undertake a group project to explore an issue of interest in the archival field. After brainstorming several potential topics, the cohort members self-organized into working groups and began strategizing the best way to work on the chosen project.

The working groups meet virtually on a consistent basis to produce meaningful work that allows them to couple their new professional and personal growth with contributions to the wider archival community. Our working group's eight members are Tracy S. Drake, Jina DuVernay, Alphie Garcia, Courtney Hicks, Stephanie Luke, Caitlin Rizzo, Raegan C. Stearns, and Gregory Wiedeman who represent a variety of types of information organizations. The working group rallied around its concern about the vilification of federal workers and the effects of federal funding cuts on principal investigators of grants, particularly in the

education, arts, and culture sectors. The group resolved to design a survey to document “what could have been” had grant projects not been interrupted.

This topic was top of mind due to the immediate consequences of the federal cuts to one of the group member’s institution. Two colleagues, just one and two years into their archival careers, were informed via an April 16 email that their National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Preservation Assistance Grant for Smaller Institutions (PAG) proposal would not be funded. In fact, the PAG program would not be offered at all in 2025 as the agency “assess[es] our programs in preparation for the celebration of the nation’s semi-quincentennial . . .” (NEH 2025).

This disappointing notification came just five days after the group member learned that her own NEH project had been terminated as it entered its third and final year. Awarded in 2023 under the agency’s Humanities Collections and Reference Resources, the processing and mold remediation of a large collection documenting Black Southern politics and education was abruptly halted; \$181,000 of the \$312,000 award was rescinded.

Also under consideration was an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) proposal submitted in late 2024 to the Museum Grants for African American History and Culture program. This proposal requested funds for disaster planning and recovery training. At the time of the ALI convening, Executive Order 14238 had been in effect for three months, terminating active grants and contracts (Federal Register 2025a). The staff of the IMLS was reduced in April, and it was assumed that no new awards would be funded (Navarro 2025).

These examples, along with other shared experiences from the ALI group members and their home institutions, emphasized that these were not isolated grant decisions but a coordinated policy project. The 2025 executive orders that affected federal workforce reductions and targeted “discretionary” cultural funding did not just limit program budgets but intentionally reshaped the labor conditions of GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums) workers. The section below places these individual losses within the context of a broader policy agenda before introducing *What Could Have Been?* as a tool to document that lost labor and potential.

Timeline of Federal Actions Impacts IMLS and GLAM Institutions

Since its creation, IMLS has provided important infrastructure for GLAM institutions through its grant programs, subsidizing term-limited projects.

History of IMLS

- *October 1, 1996* – IMLS is founded as “an independent federal agency that fosters leadership, innovation, and lifetime learning by supporting the nation’s museums and libraries” (“Resources: Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMSL),” n.d.).
- *September 25, 2003*: President George Bush signs the Museum and Library Services Act of 2003 into law, reauthorizing IMLS (Institute of Museum and Library Services n.d.).
- *December 22, 2010*: President Obama signs into law the Museum and Library Services Act of 2010, again reauthorizing IMLS (Institute of Museum and Library Services n.d.).

- *December 31, 2018*: President Trump signs into law the Museum and Library Services Act of 2018, reauthorizing IMLS (Institute of Museum and Library Services n.d.).

Precedent for the Elimination of IMLS (2017–2020)

In President Trump's first term, repeated proposals to eliminate IMLS signaled that support for GLAM labor was expendable and set the stage for the normalization of uncertainty for these grant-funded projects.

- *May 2017–February 2020* (annually): The first Trump administration's budget proposals to Congress seeks to eliminate IMLS, but Congress rejects those proposals and continues to appropriate funds (Bullard 2017; EveryLibrary 2020).

The executive orders from this period marked a shift from rhetorical threats to actual implementation. The orders framed cultural education and research labor as discretionary (and therefore disposable), meaning entire projects and the people whose jobs depended on them could be terminated with little notice.

- *January 20, 2025* – EO 14158: The second Trump Administration creates the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) as a governmental office to consolidate cost-cutting oversight (Federal Register 2025b).
- *February 11, 2025* – EO 14210: The administration issues an order aimed broadly at reducing the federal workforce and coordinating with DOGE (Federal Register 2025d; Diamond and Davies 2025).
- *February 26, 2025* – EO 14222: This order gives agencies the mandate to flag and cut contracts, grants, and loans for discretionary items (Federal Register 2025c; Bakies and Kanzawa 2025).
- *March 14, 2025* – EO 14238: This order directs that IMLS and other agencies non-statutory components and functions “shall be eliminated to the maximum extent of the law.” Since IMLS is funded almost entirely through discretionary appropriations, this effectively ends the agency (Federal Register 2025a; The White House 2025; American Library Association 2025a).

Trump Administrative Actions That Affect IMLS

Leadership and staffing changes at IMLS translated the threat of the previous executive orders into reality. The appointment of agency leadership without GLAM expertise and the placement of staff on administrative leave resulted in unclear guidance, delayed payments, and work stoppages for workers on the ground.

- *March 20, 2025*: Keith E. Sonderling is sworn in as the acting director of IMLS. He is the first director since the founding of IMLS to have no library- or museum-related leadership experience. He states after being appointed that he is “committed to steering this organization in lockstep with this Administration to enhance efficiency and foster innovation” (“Keith E. Sonderling Sworn In” 2025; EveryLibrary 2025).
- *March 31–April 1, 2025*: Nearly all IMLS staff are placed on administrative leave, disrupting grant administration and causing mass confusion (Navarro 2025; Aton 2025).

Court Challenges and Injunctions

Legal challenges from professional associations, labor unions, and states arose to provide a buffer against the most extreme downsizing efforts but only arrived after the layoffs had begun and grants had been halted, demonstrating that these remedies can only apply once the harm has been done. With an administration willing to break norms and push the boundaries with the separation of powers, political maneuvering came at a real human cost to GLAM workers.

- *April 7, 2025:* The American Library Association (ALA) files a lawsuit against the Trump administration (*ALA v. Sonderling* n.d.; American Library Association 2025b).
- *April 30, 2025:* A federal court in Washington DC issues a temporary restraining order (TRO), restricting the Trump administration's IMLS actions after the ALA files a motion for a preliminary injunction (Fisher 2025; American Library Association 2025c).
- *May–July 2025:* Multiple lawsuits from labor unions and states challenge the DOGE downsizing efforts. A federal judge presiding over one of the cases in California grants a TRO that pauses the wider workforce reduction efforts; later, on July 8, 2025, the Supreme Court allows parts of the mass layoff plan to resume (Har 2025; Palma and Chazan 2025).
- *June 16, 2025:* The Government Accountability Office (GAO) issues a decision that references EO 14238, stating that the “IMLS violated the ICA [Impoundment Control Act of 1974] when it withheld funds from obligation and expenditure” (US Government Accountability Office 2025).

Reporting on the impact to grants

Policy reports quickly showed who these cuts would affect: small, rural, Tribal, and low-income communities that rely on GLAM institutions for access to collections, exhibitions, local employment, youth programming, and other community-based projects.

- *July 7, 2025:* The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities issues a report warning that the IMLS program cuts jeopardized the statutory functions of the agency and would harm libraries, museums, and non-profits; it also notes that the cuts would disproportionately affect services to small, rural, and low-income communities (Dorgelo 2025).

Congressional Budget and the Fate of IMLS

The Executive Branch's push to eliminate IMLS and Congress's ongoing appropriations deliberations created a whiplash effect for GLAM workers. Even as the House and Senate budget proposals signaled funding support, the failure to pass a continuing resolution resulted in the longest shutdown in US history, effectively fulfilling the Executive Branch's intent.

- *May 2, 2025:* The Trump administration issues a FY2026 budget request that again calls for eliminating funding from IMLS entirely (Vought 2025).
- *June 26, 2025:* IMLS, under the stewardship of acting director Keith E. Sonderling, issues a three-page request for \$5,500,000 to “properly” sunset the agency. In

the previous year, IMLS issued a forty-eight-page request of \$280,000,000 (*IMLS Congressional Budget Justification* 2025; Kemper 2023).

- *August to July 2025*: The Republican-controlled House and Senate Appropriations Committees release their FY2026 budget, which includes \$291,800,000 in funds for IMLS (Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies 2025; US Senate Committee on Appropriations 2025).
- *October 1, 2025*: The US enters the 2026 federal fiscal year without an agreement between Congress and the Executive Branch, triggering a government shutdown. Following the guidance of the Office of Personal Management, IMLS is closed, with the agency stating it will not engage in any “grant-making or other agency activities” and that “no payments will be made to by IMLS until the agency is reopened” (“Special Instructions for Agencies” n.d.; “Institute of Museum and Library Services” 2025).
- *November 12, 2025*: President Trump signs a compromise deal to end the forty-three-day shutdown, the longest shutdown in US history. The deal guarantees funding of the federal government until January 30, 2026 (Morgan et al. 2025).

Although the shutdown has ended, the long-term fate of IMLS remains in question. Congress will still need to determine whether the institution receives full appropriations, be reduced to the \$5.5 million as requested by Acting Director Sonderling, or be eliminated altogether. Any outcome that falls short of a full restoration effectively dismantles the institution, and the consequences as outlined by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities will devastate libraries, museums, and non-profits around the country and the communities they serve.

Designing *What Could Have Been?*

The impulse to document the new sociopolitical environment’s effect on the GLAM fields was shared by several professional organizations and advocacy groups that quickly circulated surveys to their communities. A non-exhaustive list includes the American Alliance of Museums (n.d.); the Association of African American Museums (n.d.); the American Association for State and Local History (n.d.); the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums (2025); and the American Library Association. Some common information collected by the surveys include the type of GLAM institution affected, the amount of the funds rescinded, and how the services it provides will be impacted. Some surveys offer additional direction on how to advocate to members of Congress and local policymakers on behalf of the endangered federal agency. Others indicate that the data gathered could be used to support litigation efforts.

Some surveys also worked to document the personal experiences of impacted individuals. For example, the Archival Workers Collective launched a storytelling initiative on May 5 meant to “gather and amplify the stories of archives and archival workers on our blog to spread the word on how these actions are impacting our field” (2025). Similarly, the Organization of American Historians is developing the “Federal Employees and Oral History Project” with the Oral History Association to “serve as a vital resource for historians and the public, offering insight into the lives and contributions of our nation’s federal workers, and documenting these stories for future generations” (Organization of American Historians 2025).

The ALI working group did not want to duplicate these efforts and felt compelled to create a resource that could instead supplement them. The *What Could Have Been?* survey aims to expound on the labor represented in the projects disrupted by the recent federal actions. Using the NEH cancelled project described previously as an example, while \$181,000 has been withheld, the true cost in terms of expended time and labor is much more. The hours spent planning and writing the proposal, the time reviewers spent appraising the project's potential for success, and the amount of time that project partners and workers contributed for two years has a value as well.

The *What Could Have Been?* project posits that grant writing is an example of the invisible labor that GLAM workers often undertake. Arlene Kaplan Daniels defined invisible labor as the devalued activities characterized as “nurturing, comforting, encouraging, or facilitating” that women provided both in the home and in the workplace (1987). This concept has evolved to be associated with service-oriented professions with majority female workers, such as librarianship. As described by Fobazi Ettarh, it is often expected that services must be provided and public needs met “through the labor of librarians who only reap the immaterial benefits of having ‘done good work’” (2018). Faced with ever-decreasing institutional budgets, GLAM workers are tasked with obtaining external funds, which is often an unpaid added responsibility. The *What Could Have Been?* survey attempts to provide an opportunity for impacted GLAM workers to quantify the time invested in their projects in terms of both hours and dollars.

In 2021, a team of Syracuse University School of Information Studies researchers launched the “True Value Calculator,” an interactive website based on their August 2020 survey (Syracuse University 2025). The site is meant to “surface the previously invisible yet important work of librarians by quantifying the cost of expert labor and including it in these value calculations in a highly visible way.” The calculator quantifies the invisible labor of library workers for such services as using a meeting room, reading a magazine, or downloading an audiobook. The “True Value” survey did not explicitly include a question about the number of hours library workers spent writing proposals or administering grant projects. The two broader categories that these activities may have fallen under were advancement, which included “fundraising,” or professional development, which included “research” (Clarke et al. 2022). By asking respondents how many hours they spent on disrupted grant projects, including their planning, researching, and writing, the *What Might Have Been?* survey presents an opportunity to add to the conversation of librarian’s invisible labor.

In her 2016 article “Implications of Archival Labor,” Stacie Williams lists several instances of archival work of which users may be unaware of the time and financial resources invested, such as the processing of collections or digitizing of material. They most likely are also unaware of the invisible labor of drafting proposals that make these activities possible. She challenges archives workers to make visible the labor of all who contribute to projects. Williams also challenges archives workers to “. . . build more equitable salaries into our grant proposals that bridge gender, racial and living wage gaps” (2016). The archivist-grant writer is at once the laborer whose efforts are vulnerable to erasure and someone with the ability to prevent additional labor precarity in the profession.

The design of the *What Could Have Been?* survey was inspired by the “SAA19 Archivist Salary Transparency Spreadsheet,” which was developed during the 2019 Society of American Archivists Conference held in Austin, Texas (2021). Like the “Salary Transparency” survey, *What Could Have Been?* respondents are invited to anonymously submit information via a Google form (https://bit.ly/wchb_survey) that will then populate a publicly shared Google sheet.

GLAM Labor, Equity, and the Cost of Disruption

This survey of GLAM workers is essential for gaining a truer and clearer picture of the current conditions shaping labor and equity in these fields. GLAM institutions often speak publicly about their commitments to diversity, inclusion, and community service. Thomas F.R. Clareson notes that federal grants, provided through institutions like IMLS, form a crucial safety net for these very same cultural organizations, sheltering them during times of “social and economic upheaval” (2021). Those projections, however, considered relatively ordinary cycles of disruption and not a wholesale dismantling of federal support.

Even in the best of times, research has shown how tenuous GLAM labor and DEI commitments can be. The *Collective Responsibility Project* found that grant-funded projects can “create and reproduce” the issue of precarity, particularly for workers in marginalized communities (Rodriguez et al. 2019). A recent *American Archivist* article entitled “The Career Does Not Love You Back” summarized the results of the 2021 New England Archivists Contingent Employment Survey. Although many respondents identified some benefits of temporary, project-based archival employment such as gaining practical experience and networking opportunities, sobering statistics were also reported. Many contingent archival colleagues divulged having experienced financial and professional instability, feeling less valued at work, and 35 percent of respondents had been contingently employed for over five years (Bredbenner et al. 2024). Understanding how these pressures are experienced by the workers themselves is important. Using this survey to collect insights from workers provides meaningful data that can inform more highlighted labor practices and support DEI frameworks that are grounded in actualities and realities rather than institutional expression.

Call to Action

The *What Could Have Been?* survey (https://bit.ly/wchb_survey) is open-ended, and the resulting data is meant to document in real time the impact that the federal actions have had on GLAM projects. It is an avenue for commiseration and combines aspects of information-gathering and storytelling. The created dataset will be freely available for use and interpretation. This survey attempts to account for the planning, collaboration, and intellectual labor involved in the disrupted projects, with the goal of lifting up the voices of those whose work sits unfinished. We believe that documenting this lost labor and lost potential is itself an act of resistance.

Appendix

Respondents are invited to answer the following questions:

Q1. Within the broader GLAM (Galleries/Libraries/Archives/Museums) community, how would you identify your institution?

- Gallery
- Library
- Archives
- Museum
- Other:

Q2. What types of institutions collaborated on this grant? Choose all that apply.

- Academic Institution (e.g., public, private, or for-profit college or university)
- Community Archive
- For-profit Organization (e.g., corporate or business, excluding academic institutions)
- Government Agency (e.g., local, state, federal, or Tribal organization)
- Nonprofit Organization (e.g., 501[c][3] or other nonprofit/not-for profit tax designation, excluding academic institutions)
- Religious
- Self-employed
- Don't know/Unsure
- Other:

Q3. My role in the grant is/was:

- Applicant/Principal Investigator
- Contributor
- Reviewer
- Contractor
- Other:

Q4. To correlate this data with local voting information, can you provide the congressional district where your institution and/or main body of constituents are located?

Q5. Which federal agency or department(s) have had funding cuts that impacted your project?

- Advisory Council on Historic Preservation
- Economic Development Administration (EDA)
- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
- Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)
- National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)
- National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH)
- National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC)
- National Park Service Historic Preservation Fund (HPF)
- Small Business Administration (SBA)
- US Department of Agriculture (USDA)
- US Department of Commerce
- US Department of Education
- US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)
- US Department of the Interior
- US Department of Transportation
- Other:

Q6. What stage of the process was interrupted? Choose all that apply.

Stages are listed in approximate order of project planning.

- Considering an application
- Building connections/relationships
- Planning
- Drafting an application
- Submitted a preliminary application
- Passed preliminary review
- Revising application
- Submitted an application
- Awarded, project not started
- Awarded, project started
- Awarded, project completed
- Other:

Q7. What was the full dollar amount of the grant that was lost? (e.g., 18520 for \$18,520)

Q8. Approximately how much time did you or your team spend on this effort? (e.g., research, writing, etc.)

Q9. Please quantify an approximate dollar amount for that labor. (e.g., 18520 for \$18,520)

Q10. What outcomes or deliverables were not realized as a result of federal cuts?

Q11. Approximately how many hours have you spent either modifying your project due to the federal actions or bringing your project to a close?

Q12. Have you been able to secure funds from another source to complete your project?

- Yes
- No
- Other – My federal grant/project has been reinstated.

Q13. As a result of your experience, do you plan to pursue federal funding for future projects?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Q14. Are there any more details that you would like to tell us about what work was disrupted or how it was disrupted?

Q15. Do you consent to this information being shared publicly without any identifying information via Google Sheet?

- Yes, you can share my submission within the field.
- No, please do not share any part of my submission. I only want to inform the cohort.

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