

Ohio Humanities

Ohio General Assembly - House Finance Subcommittee on
Higher Education



Witness Testimony: Patricia N. Williamsen, Executive Director

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March 2021

Chairman Cross, Ranking Member Howse, members of the subcommittee, thank you for making time to learn about the Ohio Humanities Council and to entertain our testimony this afternoon. I am Pat Williamsen, Executive Director of the Ohio Humanities Council and I come before you today representing not only this agency, but also representing more than 2,000 museums, cultural sites, and community organizations who are the primary constituents of the Council.

The Request

We are requesting that Ohio Humanities be included in House Bill 110, the state's operating budget for Fiscal Years 2022 and 2023. Our request is specific, that the state of Ohio allocate \$1,000,000 to Ohio Humanities for the purpose of expanding our service to those organizations that contribute vital services to their communities. An appropriation of \$1,000,000 – or \$500,000 each year would enable the Council to expand its grant-making program, provide a partial match to the funds we receive from the federal government, and strengthen Ohio's cultural sector by ensuring that public humanities organizations can survive the effects of the pandemic and continue to provide educational programming in their communities.

Ohio Humanities is the state-based partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Created in 1972 as an independent nonprofit organization incorporated in the State of Ohio, for nearly 50 years, Ohio Humanities has provided grants, programs, and other services to Ohioans, helping individuals explore the past, reflect on present-day concerns, and envision vibrant futures for individuals, families, and partner organizations. We accomplish this work by re-granting the federal appropriation from the National Endowment and by sponsoring programs managed by our staff.

In its authorizing legislation for the National Endowment for the Humanities and its state partners, written and passed in 1965, Congress stated that "Democracy demands Wisdom" and that the humanities – history, literature, philosophy, jurisprudence, art history and other humanities disciplines – will lead Americans to the wisdom that enables them to fully participate in the endeavors of a democratic nation.

Those words – Democracy demands Wisdom -- are the guiding principles behind our endeavors to support the cultural sector in Ohio. Ohio Humanities is committed to creating vibrant communities throughout the state and helping Ohioans interpret the past, understand the present, and imagine the future. We do so by heeding the original charge from Congress to use federal money to make grants and conduct programs to help Ohioans connect what they learn with the way they live.

Ohio Humanities serves more than 2000 cultural organizations across the state of Ohio. Our constituents include organizations that haven't been included in other state relief efforts – non-arts organizations such as historical societies, house museums, natural history sites, ethnic groups, and other heritage partners that traditionally have been under-funded.

Our grants support community discussions, local history research, exhibits, and digital collections. Professional development for teachers so they can be more effective in their classrooms. Radio shows and documentary films. These projects are vital to lifelong learning for all ages, and add to the quality of life and economic stability in the communities where they take place.

Impact of Ohio Humanities Grants

A grant to the Ohio University Heritage College of Osteopathic Medicine supported Not Far From Me: Stories of Opioids and Ohio, a series of community conversations using literature to discuss the toll of opioid addiction.

A program at Fort Meigs, a significant site during America's second War for Independence, paired the artwork crafted by veterans of contemporary wars with artifacts from the War of 1812. By looking at old and new, and comparing stories told by recent veterans and those of soldiers who fought two hundred years ago, participants learned of the common themes of war zone experience.

An oral history project conducted by the Highland County Historical Society in Hillsboro brought to light a forgotten chapter in the story of desegregation.

A grant to the Hancock County Historical Society paired historians from the University of Findley with local farmers to explore hereditary ties to the land.

Documentary films about the Goodyear Blimp, the 9 to 5 office workers union movement, and hoboes riding the rails during the Great Depression have brought Ohio stories to national audiences, thus reaching millions of public television viewers.

Were it not for Ohio Humanities Council funding, the 100th Anniversary of Women's Suffrage might have been overlooked by pandemic concerns. Yet grants for exhibitions, virtual experiences, and reading programs ensured Ohioans remembered when certain groups of people could not vote.

Our partners rely on us for the financial support necessary to create programs to engage their constituents with lifelong learning about topics of local importance and which are equally important in national conversations about what makes us unique and what we hold in common.

What Ohio Humanities Funding Accomplishes

In 2020, 2.6 million Ohioans engaged with Ohio Humanities-supported programs. The grants we awarded were matched by partners, leveraging an additional \$864,000 in local investment.

One of our signature programs supports heritage tourism throughout the state. According to studies conducted by Longwoods International, we know that heritage travelers will stay in a town 2 days longer to visit a house museum or natural history site. While there, they will spend three times as much as other travelers. And so we support projects that help communities tell their stories in a more fulsome manner to encourage those longer visits. A grant to Conneaut Arts Center will help interpret the history of Finnish migration to Northeast Ohio socially safe interpretive signage and QR Codes. That project will bring visitors to Conneaut – and give them reasons to stay in town longer and spend more money while they visit.

Yet, for every grant Ohio Humanities makes with its federal appropriation, we must turn down two or more worthy projects for lack of funds. Our federal appropriation equals less than 10-cents per Ohio resident.

The Need: Why state funding for public humanities organizations is important

At this moment, it is difficult to talk about why funding for the humanities is important without also bringing up the economic consequences of the pandemic.

Pre-pandemic, the cultural sector in Ohio employed more than 26,000 people and generated more than \$1.5 billion to the state's economy.

The American Alliance for Museums and the American Association for State and Local History project that one in three cultural sites will close forever before the pandemic is over. What is lost when one museum closes? Jobs, priceless artifacts, tax revenues. Cultural amenities and educational opportunities that make our communities, particularly second and third tier towns, attractive to businesses looking to relocate and grow in Ohio.

AAM and AASLH also project that this part of the creative economy – historical societies, museums, cultural sites – will be the last portion of the creative economy to fully recover from pandemic losses.

Ohio Humanities is turning all its available resources to help our constituents survive this period of uncertainty. In the March 2020 CARES Act, Congress awarded funds to the 56 state humanities Councils for emergency grants. Those grants preserved jobs, secured collections, and in many cases literally kept the electricity and the heat turned on. When we announced these grants, we heard from 120 organizations that projected revenue losses of \$37,000,000 from having to cease operations during the pandemic.

That was almost a year ago, and while we might be able to see the end of this pandemic, for many of Ohio's cultural organizations, the struggle to survive will continue through 2021 and beyond.

Small humanities organizations tend to be quiet during periods of economic uncertainty. In true American fashion, these organizations dig in, roll up their sleeves, and make do with less. These

organizations are vital to their communities. They are now an endangered part of Ohio's creative economy.

Today, I am speaking for this quiet community – the 2000 museums and cultural sites across the state who are Ohio Humanities constituents. By including the Ohio Humanities Council in HB 110, the state's operating budget for FY2022 and 2023, together we can help Ohio's cultural sector not only survive this pandemic moment, but thrive in the years to come.

Thank you for your consideration of the Ohio Humanities request.