

Testimony on Behalf of California Humanities

Prepared for the State of California Joint Committee on the Arts by Phoebe Stein, President, Federation of State Humanities Councils, for May 13, 2025.

Dear Senator Ben Allen and Members of the Joint Committee on the Arts,

I am Phoebe Stein, President of the Federation of State Humanities Councils, the membership organization for the nation's 56 state and jurisdictional humanities councils, which includes California Humanities.

I am submitting testimony on behalf of California Humanities regarding the impact of federal policies on humanities councils nationwide.

The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) on April 2 notified the state humanities councils and approximately 1,400 other NEH grantees that current grants were being terminated. All humanities councils, including California Humanities, had their five-year operating grants terminated in their entirety, effective immediately, with no ability to draw down reimbursements for funds already spent and allocated. This resulted in a loss of \$65 million of appropriated funds from Congress for humanities councils for FY 2025, including \$3.5 million for California Humanities. These are federal taxpayer dollars that will not come to California. We challenge the legality of this action as well as its wisdom. In the recent budget proposal released by the White House, the administration proposed completely defunding NEH, along with the National Endowment for the Arts and the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

Congress created the state and jurisdictional humanities councils more than 50 years ago to ensure that local programming and activities would be available in each and every state and jurisdiction and their communities and that such programming and activities should be guided by locally based and locally directed organizations. Today, these 56 state and jurisdictional councils proudly and effectively deliver history, education, literacy, civics, and other public programming for teachers, students, veterans, and the public at large in almost every Congressional district in the country.

The state and jurisdictional humanities councils, like California Humanities, are 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations with voluntary boards that exist in every state and six jurisdictions. Councils reach nearly 43 million residents annually through programs and grantmaking and operate everywhere in the nation. They were specifically authorized by Congress, which spelled out detailed structural and budgetary requirements for the councils. Like California Humanities, they receive annual funding through the Federal/State Partnership (F/SP) line in the NEH budget. They leverage their NEH funding to raise millions of additional dollars to invest in local projects and grassroots organizations—at an average rate of \$2 leveraged for every \$1 in federal funding. In California, it is a 4:1 ratio.

Humanities councils such as California Humanities are exemplary of the strongest public/private partnership. Funds distributed to the councils by NEH are locally controlled and used by councils to create locally tailored programs and support American institutions like historical societies, museums, schools, and heritage sites.

While councils' funding comes from a variety of sources, federal support is critical, especially for on-going operations. The loss of NEH funding to humanities councils will decimate the ability of these nonprofits to serve communities in their states, eliminating programs that are essential to each state's cultural infrastructure. Without federal funds, many humanities councils have already suspended programs, halted local-grantmaking, and in some cases risk closing their doors altogether. California Humanities is facing a similar fate without federal funding, which has been there for fifty years. The NEH budget for humanities councils is small, but the losses to everyday Americans will be devastating, and the ripple effects of these cuts will be felt in every state and territory.

It is important to remember that the state councils like California Humanities, are long-standing institutions that understand the cultural infrastructure in their states and Congressional districts. They are run by local residents, citizens of the communities they serve, and their priorities are set at the local level. They partner with more than 6,500 local organizations across the country—an average of 123 partners annually per state. Some councils focus on grant-making to local entities; others concentrate on developing and presenting programs; still others provide both. In any event, these funds are the principal NEH investment in many states and are the most evenly distributed federal source of humanities funding within a state.

Each year, councils make thousands of grants to local organizations (more than 3,700 grants in 2024 alone)—schools, libraries, museums, historical societies, preservation groups, service-providing nonprofits—to develop and/or present programs, exhibits, lectures, and discussions free to their communities. Every council has far more requests for funding than it can accommodate, illustrating the need and desire to access this funding. For California Humanities, less than 10% of grant applications received funding. These activities contribute to quality of life in communities, support a shared American culture, strengthen community cohesion, expand educational opportunities, help with community development and redevelopment plans, and support a variety of economic activities.

Without federal funding for humanities councils, California will lose access to humanities grants and programs that educate, inspire, and bring communities together.