

**Testimony of Shelly C. Lowe**  
**Former Chair, National Endowment for the Humanities**  
**For the California Joint Committee on the Arts and**  
**The Assembly Committee on Arts, Entertainment, Sports, and Tourism**  
**May 14, 2025 - Sacramento, CA**

Dear Senator Allen, Chair of the Joint Committee on the Arts, members of the Joint Committee on the Arts, and members of the Assembly Committee on Arts, Entertainment, Sports, and Tourism,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony in support of humanities initiatives across the state of California. My name is Shelly Lowe and from February 14, 2022 to March 10, 2025, I served as Chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

2025 marks sixty years since Congress and the White House established the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) as independent federal agencies to provide access to the arts and humanities to all Americans. In the founding legislation for NEH and the NEA, Congress recognized that “an advanced civilization must not limit its efforts to science and technology alone, but must give full value and support to the other great branches of scholarly and cultural activity in order to achieve a better understanding of the past, a better analysis of the present, and a better view of the future.”<sup>i</sup>

NEH is the nation’s largest federal funder of the humanities, which includes history, philosophy, literature, language, ethics, law, archaeology, political theory, comparative religion, anthropology, sociology, and media and cultural studies. Since its founding in 1965, NEH has awarded nearly \$6 billion in grants to support museums, historic sites, colleges, universities, K-12 teachers, libraries, public television and radio stations, research institutions, independent scholars, and state and jurisdictional humanities councils nationwide.

Under 20 U.S. Code § 956 for the National Endowment for the Humanities, as Chair I was authorized to establish and carry out grant programs to public agencies and private nonprofit organizations across the US for the purpose of:

- (a) enabling cultural organizations and institutions to increase the levels of continuing support and to increase the range of contributors to the program of such organizations or institutions;
- (b) providing administrative and management improvements for cultural organizations and institutions, particularly in the field of long-range financial planning;
- (c) enabling cultural organizations and institutions to increase audience participation in, and appreciation of, programs sponsored by such organizations and institutions;
- (d) stimulating greater cooperation among cultural organizations and institutions especially designed to better serve the communities in which such organizations or institutions are located;

- (e) fostering greater citizen involvement in planning the cultural development of a community; and
- (f) for semiquincentennial programs, assessing where our society and Government stand in relation to the founding principles of the Republic, primarily focused on projects which will bring together the public and private citizen sectors in an effort to find new processes for solving problems facing our Nation.

### ***Expanding Access to the Humanities in All 56 States and Jurisdictions***

I was also authorized to carry out a program of grants-in-aid through the NEH Office of State and Federal Partnerships to each of the 56 established and approved State Humanities Council partners across the country. This funding supports the cost of existing activities in the humanities that furnish adequate programs in the humanities in each of the US states and jurisdictions. Approximately 40% of NEH's annual appropriation is distributed to the state and jurisdictional humanities councils to help the councils sponsor thousands of family reading programs, K-12 education projects, documentary films, book festivals, symposia, and state and local history projects. These projects reach millions of Americans in rural areas, urban neighborhoods, and suburban communities.

NEH's yearly appropriations reflects the resources needed to continue NEH's support for American civil society, helping us to advance research and development in the humanities, examine the human condition, understand our cultural heritage, foster mutual respect for diverse beliefs and cultures, develop media and information literacy, and promote civics education. The agency's most recent yearly budget included \$60 million for NEH's state affiliates, the state and jurisdictional humanities councils, to support humanities programming at the grassroots level in all 50 states; the District of Columbia; Puerto Rico; the U.S. Virgin Islands; Guam; the Northern Mariana Islands; and American Samoa. In 2024, California Humanities received \$3.5M in funding to support humanities programming across the state.

NEH's 56 state and jurisdictional humanities councils are essential partners in ensuring the Agency reaches audiences of all ages and in every community across the nation. One example is through NEH's longstanding partnership with National History Day, which engages more than half a million middle and high school students annually in a national historical research competition. Under my tenure, NEH launched a program with the humanities councils to extend National History Day's reach to underserved communities. The state humanities councils are ideal partners for this work, extending the reach and impact of our funding to communities often underserved by federal funding.

### ***NEH and the State of California***

The impact of NEH funding to the state of California cannot be understated. Between 2021 and 2024, California received 786 awards totaling \$64.8M, which was the second highest number of awards, only after New York state. Included in this total was funding awarded to California Humanities, which used funding for both operational costs and for providing direct grants to

state entities for humanities programming. All but one California congressional district, District 25, benefitted from NEH funding during this period and funding to rural areas of the state totaled \$1.7M. In addition to direct funding received from NEH, California also received \$9.35M in matching gifts and third-party funding in support of these humanities initiatives.

The role of NEH in directly supporting humanities institutions in the state during COVID-19 should be noted. NEH worked diligently to stabilize and support colleges and universities, museums, libraries, historic sites, public television and radio stations, independent researchers, and documentary filmmakers struggling to cope with the economic fallout of the pandemic. The organizations funded all experienced severe declines in revenue while being closed to visitors or affected by declines in student enrollment; many were compelled to furlough or lay off staff and curtail public and educational programs. Thanks to special funding allocated by Congress to NEH by the CARES Act of 2020, and the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, our agency has been able to quickly distribute economic recovery funding in California to help cultural and educational organizations retain staff, maintain programs, facilities, and operations, and convert physical programs into digital offerings to increase access, even from a distance.

And we learned from this experience how to better respond to humanities organizations in times of need. During my tenure as Chair, NEH established a Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) for humanities organizations in need of support after nature disasters - such as hurricanes, floods, and fires - or after devastating community events such as mass shootings. This NOFO allowed humanities organizations and state humanities councils to apply for NEH funding to assist with the assessment of damage and repair costs, provide direct care for damaged humanities collections and storage sites, the rehousing of collections, the repair or replacement of key informational items such as roadside markers and signs, and community gatherings and convenings to address needs and next steps as related to humanities activities and programs. This important funding for communities was often received in a timely manner, allowing for quick assessment and action on the ground. Had the agency's work not been halted after January 20<sup>th</sup>, NEH support for communities affected by the January fires in California would have commenced with the assistance of California Humanities.

### ***Impacts from the Loss of NEH Funding***

The loss of disaster relief funding for cultural organizations is just one example of how a lack of NEH funding will affect the American people. As the largest and most prestigious funder of advanced humanities research in the United States, NEH invests in scholarship and complex research projects by individual scholars, collaborative research teams, and institutions in all disciplines of the humanities and humanistic social sciences. While this work may sometimes seem distant from everyday life, humanities research and development, or R&D, is foundational to American life. For example, NEH's support for humanities R&D has resulted in the publication of more than 16,000 books and academic monographs since NEH's founding in 1965, including 20 Pulitzer Prize-winning books. This includes *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin, the sweeping biography that inspired the Academy Award-winning film *OPPENHEIMER*.

NEH also supports the building blocks of humanities R&D by ensuring the public can more easily find and make use of cultural heritage collections at libraries, archives, museums, and historical organizations across the country; and by fortifying under-resourced collecting organizations, such as small and mid-sized libraries, archives, and museums. One example is NEH's support for the National Digital Newspaper Program, which produces *Chronicling America*, a digital repository of more than 21 million pages of historical American newspapers from 1690 to the present in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico.

Another core aspect of NEH's work is its support for the teaching and study of the humanities at K-12 schools and colleges and universities around the nation, including Native American and Indigenous institutions; Historically Black Colleges and Universities, or HBCUs; Hispanic Serving Institutions, or HSIs; community colleges; rural colleges and universities; schools with a majority-minority undergraduate enrollment; and schools with significant numbers of first-generation students.

In each of these examples, California has played a role in offering humanities initiatives that have impacted Americans across the country. From documentary movies, museum exhibitions, in depth research, course offerings, and teacher training programs led by faculty in California universities and colleges, NEH funding has propelled California as a humanities leader. Much of this work is done in tandem with the efforts of California Humanities, who ensures humanities programming is offered in all communities for all Californians. The humanities are essential to American life and non-profits like California Humanities ensure national support for the humanities is reaching the state population in the most effective way. Having worked three years with the California Humanities staff and visiting California cultural organizations whose work is supported by NEH either directly or through California Humanities, I saw first-hand the impacts federal funding in the humanities has on the state. I am deeply saddened and concerned with the current decision to terminate NEH awards to California entities, including California Humanities, and the potential loss of all NEH funding in the next fiscal year. The nation's work in the humanities requires support in each state and as a leader in this realm, I hope California continues to be a model through support of California Humanities.

Senator Allen, Chair of the Joint Committee on the Arts, distinguished Members of the Joint Committee on the Arts and members of the Assembly Committee on Arts, Entertainment, Sports, and Tourism, thank you again for allowing me to provide this testimony on the importance of NEH and California Humanities.

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<sup>i</sup> The National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965, Pub. L. 89-209, sec. 2(4), codified at 20 U.S.C. § 951(4).