Institutions React to Federal Cuts to Institute of Museum and Library Services

Michelle Trauring on Apr 3, 2025

Kelly Harris has never met someone who doesn't love, or at least appreciate, their local library.

She is now holding tightly to that sentiment.

Last Monday, the entire staff of the federal Institute of Museum and Library Services, or IMLS, was placed on administrative leave as a follow up to an executive order from the Trump administration earlier this month that called for its elimination "to the maximum extent consistent with applicable law."

"For me, it feels a lot like they're picking on the kid with glasses for doing the extra credit assignment," Harris, director of the John Jermain Memorial Library in Sag Harbor, said. "Libraries have worked so hard to give — that's our entire mission. We're about access for everyone, freedom of speech. Everyone belongs here."

This executive order is just one in a series of closures, federal spending cuts and layoffs among national agencies, including the Department of Education, the National Park Service and, most recently, health agencies including the Department of Health and Human Services, the Food and Drug Administration, the National Institutes of Health, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The writing was on the wall for the IMLS, explained Jay Janoski, assistant director of the Westhampton Free Library. On the surface, the agency's $304 million budget is just 0.0046 percent of the nation's $3.6 trillion spending plan — "It's not even a rounding error," Harris said. But on a state and local level, losing this funding is terrible at best and draconian at worst, he explained.

"I'd like to say I was surprised," Janoski said. "In terms of the overall budget, in terms of federal funding, it's insignificant. It's such a tiny number. I think that maybe people thought that we would sort of fly under the radar, but with the way things are being cut in this very slapdash methodology, it's not surprising."

IMLS Under Fire

Established in 1996, the IMLS is an independent federal agency that provides grants and resources to libraries and museums, from rural to urban communities, across the country. According to the American Library Association, the IMLS awarded $266

million in grants and research funding to cultural institutions last year, which help staff, fund maintenance and create new programs.

New York State receives about $8.1 million in grant funding from IMLS, explained Kevin Verbesey, director of the Suffolk Cooperative Library System, which supports and serves a network of member libraries across the county. It largely supports the New York State Library in Albany — comprising over 80 percent of its budget, he said — that then processes state aid for libraries like those on the East End and organizations like his.

“Government doesn’t work well with chaos; stability is what we typically look for to manage governments,” Verbesey said. “The money that the feds are talking about, there’s federal law that says the states will get this money, and then the state law that explains how this money will be spent in the state. If the federal government’s not going to follow its own laws, it makes it difficult for us to plan for the future.”

Some East End libraries receive next to no direct funding from the IMLS, explained Dennis Fabiszak, executive director of the East Hampton Library. On average, the Westhampton Free Library gets about $2,000 from the IMLS annually. For Rogers Memorial Library in Southampton, it’s closer to $5,000.

John Jermain Memorial Library reported about $2,500 in state and federal aid — IMLS money that first goes to the state, then Suffolk Cooperative Library System, then to each library locally, Harris said.

“It’s not about, necessarily, the direct aid that we get,” she said. “It’s really about the unseen work that is done on the state level that helps us do our job locally.”

A Cascading Effect

The trickle-down effect of less grant funding for the New York State Library means less funding for different member systems, like Suffolk Cooperative Library System, which equals fewer dollars for local libraries, Janoski said.

Down the road, that could look like fewer programs and classes, delayed repairs and extensions, and limited offerings. It could also impact relationships with the Suffolk Cooperative Library System, which each institution pays into in order to share books and digital materials, and increased taxes.

“We don’t want to have a bare bones library like they were in the 1800s when we opened,” he said. “We will always have books; we will always have music and video. But we want to maintain the level of service that we have always maintained, that we’ve come up to over the years — and this could be very disruptive to that.

“You might not see it immediately,” he said, “but you’ll see it down the line.”

Every year, the Westhampton Free Library hosts hundreds of programs for children, adults and teens. At the Rogers Memorial Library, there are social work interns, veteran services and resources to help with passport applications. Perhaps above all, each is a safety net for some and a gathering place for all.

“We’re becoming much more than just a place for books and collections,” explained Liz Burns, director of the Rogers Memorial Library. “We just have a lot of services that are becoming really important to the community. I can’t imagine a community without a library. It’s a community center. It’s something for everybody, and sometimes it can really keep a community going. It fills a lot of holes in people’s lives — I see it every day.”

What Is the E-Rate?

A critical service that most libraries offer is free internet access for its patrons through the E-Rate program, which provides federal funds to help schools and libraries afford broadband services.

It is also on the chopping block, Verbesey said — and is a completely separate issue from the IMLS funding cuts.

“About half the cost of library internet access in the county is offset by the E-Rate program,” he said. “So if that goes away, you’re talking between a half a million to a million bucks for libraries, and you’re talking north of $25 million for school districts.”

Harris estimates that John Jermain receives about $6,000 in funding through the E-Rate program. If that money were to disappear, it could mean the difference between having internet and children’s programs.

“We reduce the number of children’s programs we have, or we don’t put as much money into e-books, or we don’t buy as many physical books,” she said. “Those are the decisions that are going to come down the pike sooner rather than later.”

“It’s ‘Save IMLS,’ but it’s bigger than that,” she added, “because IMLS isn’t the only thing getting cut on a federal level.”

Museums Prepare for the Worst

While much of the conversation on the East End has centered on libraries, some local museums are bracing for impact in the wake of the IMLS executive order. Institutions such as the Southampton Arts Center do not receive federal funding, but others — including the Parrish Art Museum and the Children’s Museum of the East End — significantly do.

“We’re lucky in that CMEE does not rely on IMLS funding to keep our doors open, so we will still be here open, six days a week,” explained Lara Sweeney, co-president of CMEE in Bridgehampton. “But IMLS has funded a lot of critical outreach programming.”

Over the past seven years, CMEE has received over $300,000 from IMLS, which the institution has used to serve “hard-to-reach communities,” Sweeney said, by way of a pop-up museum in Riverside, a bilingual STEM tutoring program and more. When building its 2025 budget, the CMEE administrative team did not include IMLS grant money in its revenue stream, she said.

“IMLS has been a really strong partner of CMEE over the years and definitely it will impact our future outreach programming,” she said. “It’s hard to say how exactly that will play out. But we anticipated this, as you can imagine. We saw the writing on the wall.”

At the Parrish Art Museum, Executive Director Mónica Ramírez-Montagut is already anticipating having to eliminate its ACCESS program, which provides connections to caregivers and visitors with cognitive and physical disabilities, people with Parkinson’s, Alzheimer’s, learning disabilities, Down Syndrome and others who are neurodiverse, as well as cancer patients and survivors.

It is entirely funded by IMLS — where Ramírez-Montagut is a board member, previously appointed by President Joe Biden. The ripple effect of “harm and loss of connection to our most vulnerable visitors will be deep and wide,” she said.

“While the threat of budget cuts to arts and cultural institutions has been a concern for some time, the potential elimination of the IMLS is deeply troubling,” she said. “It underscores a broader trend of diminishing federal support for museums and libraries, which play a crucial role in our community.”

Over a three-year period, the Parrish received $200,000 for its ACCESS programming, Ramírez-Montagut reported. But since 1992, IMLS funding for the institution exceeds $920,000.

“Now more than ever, we are going to depend on our community’s support to keep our space alive and our good work going,” she said. “We will need to ensure that cultural institutions that are the lifeblood of our communities aren’t wiped out. We must remain vibrant, relevant and open to all.”

The same is true for CMEE, Sweeney said.

“As with a lot of these orders, it seems like they make their way to the courts and then it becomes a wait-and-see situation,” she said. “We are just continuing to do our good work every day, one foot in front of the other, and we’re not going to stop

doing any of our outreach work because of this. We will find a way."

An Uncertain Road Ahead

In a statement, the American Alliance of Museums said it is currently exploring its legal options, as is the American Library Association. But the word of the hour remains "uncertainty," Burns said. It is a refrain, repeated again and again, to inspire action, to reassure and to, perhaps, help administrators and patrons alike hold out hope.

"We see it every day in the news," Fabiszak said. "Things are proposed by the federal government and then people push back against it and then they say, 'Maybe we moved too quickly on this,' and they make an adjustment. I think it's certainly still in a position where it could change and reaching out to our elected officials, especially the Republican elected officials, makes the most sense right now."

Library administrators are urging residents to contact both their state and federal representatives — a representative for U.S. Representative Nick LaLota did not respond to a request for comment — as well as the governor's office, Fabiszak said.

"When we heard that the federal government might cut $8 million from libraries in New York State, we would assume that the state would be able to step in and help us, and the governor would stand up and step in and help libraries because of how important they are to the residents of the state," he said. "But we don't have good experience with the governor supporting libraries, for whatever reason — and that's what makes this fear worse."

It is a strange time to be a librarian, explained Harris, as challenges and book bans soar and, in some cases, her peers are sued and even jailed.

But still, she remains hopeful. A library is the poster child for how to work collectively, collaboratively and cooperatively. They are places for community, where patrons of all ages can gather, learn and socialize. They are havens of acceptance and free speech.

And, most importantly, they are open to all.

“Libraries are nonpartisan,” Harris said. “We have something to offend everyone. We try to have a very balanced collection. Our hope is that individuals will reach out to Nick LaLota, who’s our rep — we have one of the few Long Island Republican congressmen — to just say, ‘Hey, please don’t cut IMLS. Long Island’s libraries are important.’”