

Testimony on behalf of the Federation of State Humanities Councils

Prepared for the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies by Paul Ulrich, Board member, Wyoming Humanities Council; Addressing the National Endowment for the Humanities, March 22, 2012.

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to present testimony on behalf of the state humanities councils, the state affiliates of the National Endowment for the Humanities. I am a member of the board of the Wyoming Humanities Council. I am here to request **\$154.255 million** for the National Endowment for the Humanities and **\$44 million** for the state humanities councils for FY 2013.

As full partners of the NEH, councils receive their core funding through the Federal/State Partnership line of the NEH budget and use that funding to leverage additional funds from foundations, corporations, private individuals, and state governments. In 2011, every federal dollar the councils awarded through grants to local institutions leveraged, on average, \$5.00 in local contributions. Councils further extend their resources by forming programming partnerships with organizations and institutions throughout their states.

We are requesting a funding increase for FY 2013 for the councils because cuts over the past two years have had serious consequences for the communities and institutions the councils serve. A recent survey by the Federation of State Humanities Councils revealed that councils have had to shrink their grants program significantly, even though requests for council funding have increased due to the troubled economy. These reductions in turn have led to fewer dollars leveraged and therefore even less funding for local organizations and communities.

Cuts in the number and size of council grants to local organizations have especially hurt rural communities, where humanities council programs are often the only cultural resources available. Although councils have worked hard over the past few years to diversify their funding, most major funders are in larger cities and prefer to support work in their own communities, and the cuts in federal funding therefore affect rural areas disproportionately.

But I come before you today not to dwell on losses. My real purpose is to talk about gains—how our communities and our nation as a whole will benefit from increased funding to the state councils. I first want to emphasize that **state humanities council programs serve critical needs**. Dozens of councils, for example, support family literacy programs, which make a significant difference in the lives of participants—low-income families, immigrant families, or simply families that need help to engage with words and ideas. Last year more than 200 families participated in the Florida Humanities Council's six-week Prime Time reading programs, which included English-Spanish bilingual programs in several farmworker communities. Connecticut's Family Read program, operating primarily in the state's urban areas, fosters a culture of literacy in many public schools and community-based agencies where it is most needed, helping to address an achievement gap that is among the largest in the nation. The New York Council for the Humanities partners with local libraries to offer Unidos, a program in which parents and their 9- to 11-year old children have bilingual discussions about personal and historical issues based on books they have read together.

Council programs also serve other critical needs. The Literature and Medicine program, created by the Maine Humanities councils and now offered by 26 other councils, improves patient care and enables overtaxed medical personnel to find the renewed energy and inspiration to continue in the profession. By expanding into VA hospitals, the program provides invaluable resources for caregivers of returning veterans. The Missouri council has gone directly to the veterans themselves with a program that offers creative writing workshops and mentoring for veterans.

Thirty-one organizations in the state of New York can attest that councils serve critical needs. After Hurricanes Irene and Lee hit last year, the New York Council for the Humanities swiftly distributed funds from an NEH Chairman's Discretionary Grant to provide relief to small cultural organizations in the affected area, prompting a director at one museum to observe, "The council's response reflects an understanding of how best to serve the urgent needs of cultural institutions."

Council funding ensures that humanities programming is widely available to the general public. Councils reached 5,700 communities across the nation in 2011, including rural towns, suburban communities, and urban neighborhoods. Councils supported programs in every congressional district and served hundreds of thousands of students, teachers, health care professionals, seniors, veterans, and many more.

Council programs help communities and institutions not adequately served through other means. In rural communities council programs are often the only cultural resources available. For more than 25 years the Idaho Humanities Council has offered the "Let's Talk About It" reading and discussion program, which now totals 75 scholar-led programs annually and is especially popular with small libraries lacking the resources to plan and seek funds for their own programs. The program's outreach to small communities is so powerful that it attracted the attention of a corporate sponsor that has provided about one-third of the program's cost for the past decade. "Montana Conversations" provides up to 200 programs annually for communities with populations of 2000 or less. The South Dakota council reports that in their sparsely populated state, "libraries, cultural centers, and museums often serve entire communities that stretch for miles, and these are the very institutions in need of the programming support that the South Dakota council can provide."

But it is not just rural states that face these issues. In California, where libraries have had to cut many services, the council joined forces with the California Center for the Book to create California Reads, a reading and discussion program. The council awarded more than \$400,000 to 52 library jurisdictions serving 65 percent of the state. The project not only encouraged civic conversation throughout the state, but also offered a much-needed boost to libraries. In state after state, where cuts in state budgets are slowly starving both government and private institutions, councils have been compelled to step in and try to help fill the gap.

Council programs also serve communities whose stories and issues have too long been overlooked. The Oklahoma Humanities Council supported "Carry the Fire," a Native Humanities forum hosted by the Chickasaw Nation Division of Arts and Humanities to create a dialogue among tribal members, students, and the general public. The Forum explored issues important to the tribal community but unknown to many members of the public, such as

comparisons of indigenous humanities to the humanities in general, the importance of the study of the humanities to Native people and others, and indigenous thinking and learning styles.

In my own state of Wyoming, the council has made a special effort to engage those who have been left out of the mainstream conversations. Our program “Giving Voice: A Wyoming Listening Project” launched a dialogue series last summer called “Government, God, Google, and Guns.” We sent a traveling tent to summer festivals and interviewed Wyomingites about issues that matter to them. The staff used YouTube and online film and book discussions to extend the conversation. The project will continue this year, targeting partnerships that will foster listening to the voices of youth, individuals and families below the poverty line, and those struggling with mental health issues.

Council programs improve the quality of K-12 education. One of the many casualties of the poor economy has been the reduction in state support for the educational structure. Councils have significantly lessened the impact of these cuts on teachers and students. The Teacher Enrichment Program in Texas addresses the dual, interconnected problems of teacher training and teacher retention. Heeding studies that suggest that many teachers abandoned the profession in part because they feel ill prepared to teach their subjects, and recognizing the high cost of teacher turnover, the council created teacher institutes designed to provide intensive, deep-content enrichment using top-quality faculty. The council pays particular attention to early-career teachers working in low-performing schools—another example of councils stepping in where the need is greatest and no one else is providing help.

Many councils offer teacher institutes, providing what is typically the only professional development in the humanities offered in their states. But councils also improve K-12 education in other ways. Several councils sponsor National History Day, which was recently awarded a National Humanities Medal by the President. Councils involve students in Chautauqua programs, student writing programs, and civics education. They conduct teacher award programs and provide such teacher resources as exhibits and curriculum materials, often expanding accessibility by making both available online. And they do all this at a lower cost than anyone else, without any sacrifice of quality.

Council programs contribute to the civic health of their communities. Using texts and discussion techniques steeped in the humanities, councils allow community members to engage in dialogue with each other around issues that are both local and global. Council-supported community conversations from Maryland to Indiana to Nebraska to Washington bring a humanities perspective to discussions of community problems that allow for respectful airing of diverse viewpoints and movement toward possible solutions. Councils also engage citizens in the civic life of their communities by supporting thousands of reading and discussion groups; Chautauquas; discussions around exhibits, films, and lectures; Museum on Main Street tours and programs, conducted in partnership with the Smithsonian, and much more.

Councils extend resources through partnerships. Councils worked with an estimated 9,800 organizations in 2011. These included museums, libraries, schools, universities, senior centers, veterans’ hospitals, churches, social service agencies, corporations and local businesses, chambers of commerce, state tourism offices, radio and television stations, and many more.

Councils also fostered lasting partnerships among the groups with whom they worked. The Minnesota Humanities Center's traveling exhibit, "Why Treaties Matter," which explores relationships between Dakota and Ojibwe Indian Nations and the U.S. Government, demonstrates collaboration in many directions. The council developed the exhibit in consultation with the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council and the National Museum of the American Indian, and they have worked with dozens of agencies in Minnesota to create programming around this important topic. One host institution said that "Partnering with the Minnesota Humanities Center on 'Why Treaties Matter' isn't just about putting an exhibit up for a month. It's about working with local organizations to increase our capacity to engage audiences and provide multiple interpretive experiences and opportunities. Getting the exhibit is great, but it's this interaction and education that continues to shape our institutions well after the month is over."

And finally, funding allocated to councils makes good economic sense. As we know, councils protect local economies through their support for struggling organizations that have seen other funding sources decline or disappear. In addition, every federal dollar that councils award leverages, on average, more than \$5 for programs carried out by local organizations. Even when grants are modest, council support has helped small organizations save programs, staff positions, and even organizations themselves.

Council funding and programming yield other economic benefits. The many council-sponsored book festivals that take place throughout the country are an undeniable economic boon for their host cities. The annual Virginia Festival of the Book, created more than a decade ago by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, has seen increases in audience, partners, participating authors, and programs each year. The Director of Economic Development of the City of Charlottesville estimates the economic impact of the Festival at more than \$1 million.

The Museum on Main Street tours enliven small-town economies by attracting audiences for the exhibits and accompanying programs that are sometimes larger than the populations of the towns themselves. Councils provide support for cultural heritage tourism efforts to draw additional visitors—and their dollars—to local economies. In Ohio, where increased tourism is one of the state's three economic development initiatives, the council has played a key role in helping organizations develop their tourism capacity. In the small town of Somerset, grants from the council have funded speakers to help the town understand the unique value of their local architecture. This has led to a public archeology project, also partly funded by the council, and a variety of increased services to attract visitors. The growth in visitors has in turn prompted the development of new businesses in the town—a town which, in the words of the council, "is well on its way...to becoming a heritage travel destination unlike any other in the state." Small beginnings, large economic payoff.

The state humanities councils invigorate their state's cultural institutions, K-12 education, civic health, and local economies. By partnering with over 9,800 local organizations, the councils achieve a five-fold return on their federal funding. The councils ensure that this federal investment benefits the public as a whole—citizens in every congressional district and 5,700 communities in 2011. In ways both intangible and concrete, the humanities programs made possible by the federal funding to the councils simply make our states better places to live.