

Testimony on behalf of the Federation of State Humanities Councils

Prepared for the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies by Ann Thompson, Executive Director, Oklahoma Humanities Council, and board member, Federation of State Humanities Councils; Addressing the National Endowment for the Humanities, April 16, 2013.

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 the Executive Director of the Oklahoma 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, including Federal/State Partnership and special initiative funding in the NEH budget for FY 2014.

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 2012, every federal dollar the councils awarded through grants to local institutions leveraged, on average, \$4.00 in local contributions. Councils further extended their resources by forming programming partnerships with more than 10,000 organizations throughout their states.

Since FY 2010, NEH funding for the state councils has been cut by nearly 19 percent, a loss of about \$8.5 million or an average of \$150,000 per council. The consequences have been devastating for the councils and the communities they serve. In my own state of Oklahoma, we have been forced to cut our grants funding by 27 percent, seriously reducing our support for organizations in our state. We have also had to cut our council-led programs by 38 percent. This severely limits our ability to offer programs like our reading and discussion series that serve so many of our smaller communities. Because of drastic cuts in state funding for social services, many of our fellow nonprofits are now our direct competitors for private dollars. Despite our intensified efforts, obtaining private funds to replace lost federal funds continues to be a challenge.

This is occurring at a time when requests for council funding have increased dramatically because of both demand for the programs and the loss of other funding sources. Further, the reductions have led to fewer dollars leveraged and therefore even less funding for local organizations and communities. This story is told in some form by nearly every state council. A recent survey by the Federation of State Humanities Councils shows that most councils have had to cut both the number of grants awarded and the dollar amount per grant. For example, the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities had to slash their grants to community organizations from \$300,000 in FY 2009 to \$110,000 in FY 2012, a 63 percent decrease. In Virginia as elsewhere, the hardest hit are the smallest, most rural communities, as well as the most vulnerable populations. In Maine, the New Books New Readers program, which provides a lifeline for adults learning to read, has seen a reduction in the program's budget from nearly \$118,000 in 2010-11 to less than \$33,000 in 2012-13, a decrease of 72 percent.

Even under these severe funding constraints, however, the reach and impact of council programs is impressive and crucial. The Federation's survey revealed that in 2012 councils served nearly

6,000 communities, many of them many miles from any urban center. To stretch resources and strengthen the cultural and educational networks in these communities, councils worked with more than 10,000 partners, ranging from libraries and museums to social service agencies, chambers of commerce, medical institutions, religious groups, community colleges, and many others. In Oklahoma, as in other largely rural states, our programs often provide the only opportunity available for citizens to come together in their communities to discuss great books and current affairs, to learn of their neighbors' ethnic or religious beliefs, or to be inspired by the history of the human experience. The Museum on Main Street program, offered through a partnership state councils enjoy with the Smithsonian Institution, provides an outstanding example of the benefits councils provide to small towns. With the Smithsonian touring exhibit as a focal point, community organizations collaborate to create supplemental programming that builds community pride and increases economic activity. Last year in Waynoka, Oklahoma, for example, the local historical society museum that hosted the exhibit realized a 100 percent increase in attendance during the six-week tour, as well as a 200 percent increase in gift store purchases and a 400 percent increase in donations.

Council programs change lives for hundreds of thousands of citizens in their states—immigrants improve their English and their employability through humanities council reading programs; children increase their chances of success in school through family literacy programs; teachers decide to stay in their profession after attending council-supported summer institutes; immigrant youths portray their world through documentary films funded by the councils; veterans work their way back from confusion and even despair to re-find their place in the civilian world after participating in council writing programs; low income adults decide to enroll in college after completing college-level humanities courses offered by the councils; residents of rural communities reap the benefits of lifelong learning by taking part in council programs that are often the only cultural opportunities in their area.

The benefits of council programs begin with the youngest children. Over the past two decades, a growing number of humanities councils have linked early childhood education to family literacy, offering programs for low income families in particular to come together with scholars and storytellers to read and discuss high quality children's literature. In many cases, the parents in these families are improving their own reading skills and ultimately their employment prospects as they read with their children. They use the stories to talk about values and ethical issues. The families add the books to their home libraries, and over time reading becomes a habit, along with the willingness to discuss issues that arise from the reading. Humanities Washington, which has supported family literacy programs since 1996, cites a 2004 report that states that every dollar invested in quality early care and education saves taxpayers up to \$13,000 in future costs by increasing children's chances of academic and economic success.

Over the past few years more and more councils have supported family reading programs among the immigrant groups that have found a home in their states. Councils in Florida, Nebraska, and others offer English and Spanish-language series, and the Minnesota council has produced two children's books addressing the experience of Asian Pacific Islanders in Minnesota. The Colorado council, through a family literacy program called Motherread, offers books in four different languages spoken in Colorado--English, Hmong, Somali and Spanish. These programs not only give children a tremendous boost in school readiness but also help to integrate

immigrant populations into their chosen communities. As integration proceeds, both immigrants and long-term residents increase their understanding of each other. Thus, a comparatively small federal investment in the humanities blossoms into a multitude of benefits.

Humanities councils also build understanding between immigrants and long-time residents by helping immigrants tell their stories. In 2011 and 2012, Cal Humanities (formerly the California Council for the Humanities) provided support for many of the state's immigrant groups to record their stories as part of the council's "Searching for Democracy" initiative. Council grants have funded such projects as "Growing a Community: Pioneers of the Japanese American Floral Industry," "Little Kabul: Afghan American Stories," "Stockton Cambodian Oral History Project," and "Iranian Americans in Silicon Valley: Evolution of a Community."

Immigrants are just one of many groups that councils work with in their states. A number of councils offer programs that engage children, teens, and young adults. The New York Council for the Humanities, through their "Together: Book Talk for Kids and Parents" program, offers parents and their 9-11-year-old children a rare opportunity to talk about books and ideas in a library setting. One child in the program said, "I had already read some of the books but when we came to Together, it was like discussing a whole new book. I went in with one idea and came out thinking about something completely different." The council also sponsors a Spanish language version of the program, "Unidos," facilitated in English and Spanish by a librarian and a humanities scholar. The Pennsylvania Humanities Council supports Teen Reading Lounge, a hands-on arts and literature program for teens that the council believes is "a first step in building a community of well-informed, highly engaged adults with the literacy, civic and social skills needed for work and life in the 21st century."

Humanities councils typically offer the only high-quality, cost-effective professional development opportunities for K-12 teachers in their states. The Idaho Humanities Council provides a variety of resources for K-12 teachers, including summer workshops, teacher incentive grants for enhancing humanities curriculum, outstanding teacher awards, and a variety of online resources. This summer the council will offer four two-day regional workshops for teachers on Idaho territorial history. Unfortunately, councils have had to turn away hundreds of worthy applications each year for lack of funds. The Florida council reports that last year they received applications from twice as many teachers as they could accept. The number of teachers the New Jersey council could accommodate in their summer institutes dropped from 150 in 2010 to 50 in 2011 and 2012, a 66 percent drop.

Providing programs for returning veterans is an emerging area of concern for councils. Many veterans struggle with issues of reintegration and understanding when they return from high stress combat situations. Recognizing this, the Missouri Humanities Council created the Missouri Warrior Writers Program, developed in collaboration with the Missouri Writers' Guild, the Veterans Affairs office, and the U.S. Army in Missouri. The program consists of writing workshops in which veterans share their experiences and perspectives through poetry, journaling, fiction, and nonfiction. This year the council published a collection of these writings, which they sell to support further programming. The Maine Humanities Council addresses veterans' caregivers, tailoring its highly respected Literature and Medicine program – now offered by 26 councils across the nation – to issues that medical personnel confront in veterans' hospitals and

other facilities. Cal Humanities has created a special initiative, to be launched in 2014, highlighting the role of veterans in our society and posing the question, What obligations do we have to those who serve in the name of our national defense and are willing to give what Lincoln so eloquently described as “the last full measure of devotion”?

Above all, councils help to build and support communities. Council programs help citizens come together to think and talk about the issues of greatest importance to them. They provide resources that allow citizens to put their own concerns into a larger perspective, understand the history of their community and state, and shape a more promising future. A recent program supported by Humanities Washington, entitled “Recognition” and held at the Washington State University-Vancouver, involved students, Native Americans, and members of the general public in discussion of issues related to tribal recognition. Over the past few years the Georgia Humanities Council, through its “From Civil War to Civil Rights” initiative, has led the state’s citizens through a consideration of questions related to race, rights, responsibilities, and what it means to be an American. In Warren, Ohio, the council brought together three diverse entities—the public library, the local newspaper, and a community development organization—to establish the town as a permanent residence for the Ohio Chautauqua summer program, bringing the community together and helping citizens understand the role played by key figures in their state’s history.

Council programs not only offer many educational and cultural benefits but also bolster the economies of the communities they serve. The humanities improve the quality of life in communities, which in turn draws new residents and businesses. The Indiana council reports that a council-sponsored Community Conversation program in one community led to the merger of competing downtown groups and a more focused, energized effort to revitalize the city. This in turn prompted new streetscape projects, development of a historic preservation district, restoration of buildings, and the opening of new businesses.

The Ohio Humanities Council has recently recorded a series of driving tours drawn from *The New Ohio Guide*, a 1940 publication of the Federal Writers Project. Funded in part by the Ohio Department of Transportation, these tours provide humanities-rich content for the traveling public while also supporting local cultural nonprofits and businesses through increased visitation to local heritage attractions. The Georgia council has extended the impact of its “From Civil War to Civil Rights” project by partnering with a local television station and the Georgia Department of Economic Development to host a calendar, with the aim of increasing traffic for local and state cultural events. Council programs help improve and revitalize such institutions as libraries, museums, and schools, which are so important to potential investors. Councils cultivate an interest in lifelong learning, which contributes to workforce development.

The \$44 million we are asking you to provide to councils is the best investment you can possibly make in strengthening the nation’s communities. These funds will enable councils to build a richer civic life and a more civil, thoughtful, enlightened, and active citizenry.

We thank you for your consideration of this request and your support for the humanities.