

Testimony on behalf of the Federation of State Humanities Councils

Prepared for the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies by Alexander Tittle, Board Member, Minnesota Humanities Center, Addressing the National Endowment for the Humanities, February 20, 2019.

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, I thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on behalf of the state humanities councils, the state affiliates of the National Endowment for the Humanities. My name is Alex Tittle, and I am a member of the board of the Minnesota Humanities Center, the Minnesota affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. I am here to request **\$167.5 million** for the National Endowment for the Humanities and **\$53 million** for the Federal/State Partnership for FY 2020.

I am the Disparity Reduction Director for Hennepin County in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area. Prior to that, I was the Vice President of Business Connect and Corporate Affairs for the Minnesota 2018 Super Bowl Host Committee, under the direction of the Minnesota Sports Facilities Authority (MSFA). Before that, I was Equity Director for MSFA, the agency responsible for the design, construction and operation of the U.S. Bank Stadium. I cite my business and government background because I believe it helps illustrate the wide variety of individuals who believe so strongly in the role the humanities play in communities across our nation that they are willing to volunteer their time to helping these programs thrive.

As a proud member of the Minnesota Humanities Center Board of Directors since 2015, I have seen the impact of state humanities councils work upon individuals, neighborhoods, states, and regions. The state councils are the local face of the humanities, developing and delivering the programs that address the issues of greatest concern to their communities, helping them explore their history and culture, and sharing the stories of our many diverse populations. The councils are also a major source of grants to local educational, cultural, and historical organizations for public programming in places where a small grant of several hundred to a few thousand dollars can make an enormous difference in the life of a community.

I am also an Army veteran, and in that capacity have been a direct beneficiary of the Minnesota Humanities Center programs. I participated in the Center's Veterans' Voices program, which draws on the humanities to call attention to veterans' contributions and stories, allowing veterans to express themselves through storytelling, literature, theater, discussion groups, and other activities. This program helps us veterans give voice to our experiences and to promote a better understanding between the military and civilians.

It is to continue and expand programs with such impact on our communities and nation that I am asking for funding at the levels of \$165.7 million for the NEH and \$53 million for the councils. The councils are stretched thin in their ability to meet local needs and support and collaborate with local businesses, cultural organizations, schools, libraries, museums, and many other groups seeking to better the lives of those in their communities. I have sat in MHC board meetings in which we have deliberated over how to allocate scarce resources among the many legitimate demands presented to us from a wide range of deserving populations. Fortunately, councils are also expert at using our federal funds to attract other funding. On average over the past few years, councils have leveraged \$4.00 at the local level for every federal dollar granted.

It is not just current demands that drive this request. The state councils see a plethora of new program possibilities, including a special opportunity to explore our country's history and system of government. In 2026, the nation will commemorate the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, which offers an opportunity to reexamine the many diverse voices and forces that shaped our nation and to engage in an expanded civics education program for Americans of all ages. We have all lamented the dismal state of civics education in our nation's schools, the surveys that reveal a shocking ignorance of history and a lack of awareness of the structure and processes of government and the ideals and philosophies that underlie them. The next five years can be a time when we rededicate ourselves toward improving our collective understanding and reinvigorating the ability to work through differences.

The state humanities councils are uniquely positioned to pursue activities that offer education about our founding principles while speaking to the interests and concerns of individual communities throughout the nation. Further, the councils have a track record of collaborating with diverse partners to broaden impact and extend resources well beyond the initial investment. The councils also have a unique ability to reach all corners of their states. This has been effectively demonstrated in the 25-year council collaboration with the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES) in the program known as Museum on Main Street and in the recent national initiative commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Pulitzer Prizes. We must begin now to build the community relationships and develop the programs that will make commemoration of the 2026 anniversary a meaningful national event.

Throughout their history, state humanities councils have shown themselves to be innovative, collaborative, efficient, and resourceful organizations, strongly connected to the communities in their states and highly responsive to their needs. I would like to highlight a few areas where councils have a particularly strong record of service:

Serving Veterans. As noted earlier, I am the recipient of a Veterans' Voices Award from the Minnesota Humanities Center, and I am proud to represent the power of that program. But the Veterans' Voices Award is not the first nor the only veterans program offered by our council. Over almost a decade, MHC has delivered programs to bring together veterans, their families and the community at large. We have provided support for Minnesota Remembers Vietnam, the St. Paul Capital Mall Memorials educator guides, and the War and Memory Discussion Series. The latter featured a conversation with Pulitzer Prize-winning author Viet Thanh Nguyen, who has insightfully noted, "All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory." Our council prides itself on helping to educate the public about the consequences of war, while also helping our veterans reintegrate into their communities in the aftermath of their service.

Other state humanities councils have also engaged in projects involving veterans. The Maine Humanities Council, which developed a program called Literature and Medicine more than 20 years ago, began working with employees at the Veterans Administration in 2005. In 2014 the council developed a Veterans Book Group, as one of several projects created under that NEH Standing Together initiative. The council piloted the program in 12 states from Alaska and Arizona to Mississippi and Maine. The Florida Humanities Council, Illinois Humanities, and the

Michigan Humanities Council all engage veterans in a program called Talking Service, which uses literature from Homer to Hemingway to allow veterans to reflect on their own experiences.

Exploring Native American History and Culture. In May 2017, members of the Interior subcommittee heard testimony from Valorie Walters, executive officer for the Division of the Chickasaw Cultural Center of the Chickasaw Nation, and board member of Oklahoma Humanities. Her testimony not only reflected on the Native American story that is “so fundamental to understanding the history of the nation as a whole,” but also demonstrated the scope of programs, including a symposium, an exhibit, a language festival, a documentary film, and several other educational programs, in Oklahoma.

A number of councils, including my own council in Minnesota, are committed to working with American Indian populations to increase public awareness and appreciation of their enduring part of our history, to forge stronger bonds between native and non-native populations, and to support language preservation initiatives. MHC’s “Why Treaties Matter,” a nationally recognized, award-winning traveling exhibit, explores relations between the Dakota and Ojibwe Indian Nations and the U.S. government, looking at the effect of these treaties on all indigenous peoples of Minnesota and why these binding agreements between nations still matter.

Humanities Washington, through the Center for Washington Cultural Traditions, a joint project with the Washington State Arts Commission, offers an apprenticeship program which helps cultural traditions be transmitted from one generation to another. Currently the program involves a senior member of the Skokomish Nation, Denise Emerson, teaching the tradition of beadwork to a young Nation member. Denise says she teaches “from a shared historical context,” conveying an art “that reaches out to reclaim images and tell a deeper story of our world in constant flux, family-centered and always seeking self-expression.”

Engaging Rural America. From the beginning, state humanities councils have been dedicated to ensuring that rural areas have access to public humanities programs. One means of accomplishing this has been through the long-standing Museum on Main Street program, specifically designed to serve small rural communities. Through this program, Smithsonian exhibits are refabricated as lightweight, portable traveling exhibits, suitable for display in small settings such as local libraries, museums, and community centers. Participating councils select six communities of less than 20,000 in their states to host the exhibit. Councils and scholars work with a local planning group in each community to develop a wide variety of humanities programs around the theme of the exhibit.

These exhibits cover a wide range of issues important to the communities, including, in recent years, work in America, hometown sports, foodways, and migration stories, among others. In 2019-2020, the New Jersey Council on the Humanities and Humanities New York are hosting Water/Ways, which explores how water shapes our ways of life. The Minnesota council’s expanded “We Are Water MN” program developed out of the “Water/Ways” exhibit. Illinois Humanities and the Michigan Humanities Council will host “Crossroads: Change in Rural America,” offering small towns a chance to examine their own paths and to highlight the changes that affected their fortunes over the past century.

Promoting Literacy and Reading. The humanities are all about reading, exploring ideas, and strengthening our connections to one another, and this is nowhere more important than within our families. Family literacy and reading programs have been signature offerings by councils for decades, arising from the belief that parents and children not only gain knowledge and improve reading skills but also build stronger bonds with each other when given opportunities to discuss ideas together. Humanities Washington and other councils offer the Prime Time program, developed more than two decades ago by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities to engage low-income families in discussion of high-quality children’s literature to improve the reading skills of parents and increase school readiness for at-risk children. During a six-week period, children and parents in this program gather in schools and libraries to hear stories from a skilled storyteller and then discuss the book’s ethical and cultural themes with the help of a scholar. The program is also available in a bilingual format.

Council reading programs also engage adults with writers and ideas they may not encounter in other settings. Humanities New York’s extensive Reading and Discussion program offerings encourage deep reflection on such themes as “Votes for Women!,” “American Politics & Community Today,” “Growing and Aging,” and “James Baldwin’s America.”

Supporting the Cultural Infrastructure. One of the hallmarks of the state humanities councils is their connection to and support for the communities in their states. They work hard to strengthen the resources that make these communities vital places to live. This includes supporting activities, such as book festivals and local commemorations, which bring people and resources into a community. Cultural tourism has benefitted from the creation of state encyclopedias, audio tours, and other materials designed to draw visitors to a specific area. Sometimes visitors even have an opportunity to converse with figures from a different era entirely. Every summer, Ohio Humanities’ Chautauqua programs bring communities together under a tent to hear from historical figures such as Teddy Roosevelt, Marie Curie, Mary Shelley, Cornstalk, and Dian Fossey. This year residents in four additional communities will hear from more recent figures, including Erma Bombeck, Julia Child, Benjamin O. Davis, Cesar Chavez, and Bobby Kennedy.

The programs I have talked about in this brief space are merely illustrative. They represent hundreds of programs in communities large and small in every corner of this nation where residents are talking with each other—sometimes across what initially seemed to be insurmountable differences—about issues that matter. They gather to learn about the history of their communities and their nation; to hear previously untold stories; to read and discuss books that expand their empathy and understanding; to examine difficult ethical issues; to inform themselves in ways that make them more responsible citizens. There is much to do, and I believe the state councils, focused on local needs and aspirations, are at the forefront of exciting endeavors to enrich our communities through the use of the humanities. The state councils are well positioned to effectively put to use the \$53 million we are requesting through the Federal/State Partnership.

Thank you for the opportunity you have given me to testify and for the support you have provided over the years for the important work of the state humanities councils and the NEH.