

Public Witness Testimony
Submitted to the Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Subcommittee
Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives
Regarding FY 2020 Funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities

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Chairperson McCollum, Ranking Member Joyce, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Good morning. My name is Jessica Unger and I am the Emergency Programs Coordinator at the Foundation for Advancement in Conservation (aka the Foundation of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works). I am here today to testify on behalf of the National Humanities Alliance for the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Firearms from Civil War, covered in mud, sat on the banks of the Mississippi Gulf Coast in the days after Hurricane Katrina. Costumes, props, and programs from the famed Martha Graham Dance Company floated in their storm-surge-inundated storage room following Hurricane Sandy. Swirls of mold covered the walls—from floor to ceiling— of a Puerto Rican library in the weeks after Hurricane Maria.

The sense of loss that accompanies disasters is acute. That sense is heightened when our collective cultural heritage is imperiled as well.

We rely on objects to learn from past generations and to carry our legacy into the future. Books, letters, records, photographs, film, works of art—whether located in our nation’s great museums or the cedar chest at home, our tangible cultural heritage is found in objects that are at risk of decomposing.

It is the job of cultural heritage conservators to slow down the processes of decay, working with museums, libraries, and archives collections staff to provide the best environmental conditions possible and perform treatments on objects as needed.

Conservators are an impressive bunch. Versed in art history, studio art, and chemistry, they go through rigorous training in order to do the essential work of preserving our cultural heritage. In my role at the Foundation for Advancement in Conservation. I work with a team of conservators and collections care professionals who volunteer their time and expertise to help collections affected by emergencies and disasters. This team, known as the National Heritage Responders, have done incredible work to salvage items when it seemed that all was lost.

The team’s work has been consistently supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The agency has funded research projects that have informed response protocols and supported innovative publications. NEH has likewise supported team

deployments following major disaster events, providing these volunteers with the equipment and resources needed for success.

National Heritage Responders have a knowledge of materials on the molecular level that helps drive their decision-making processes in order to determine appropriate action. For example: while mold is a major threat for objects exposed to damp environments, some wet items can actually be frozen in order to create a hostile setting for mold growth. Those objects can later be thawed and dried. Research and development of techniques in this area have moved forward in leaps and bounds over the past several decades. NEH has played an important role in supporting this response work.

While having measures in place to effectively respond to disasters is essential, those activities don't take into account the full scope of the disaster cycle. Preparedness and mitigation require foresight, innovation, and cooperation.

The Foundation for Advancement in Conservation manages a program called Alliance for Response which aims to bring together collections professionals with emergency managers and first responders on the local level.

These communities form cooperative disaster networks that work together to achieve collective goals: the network in Seattle has a mutual aid agreement in place to support each other during the "big one"; in Salt Lake City, the network collaborated with state agencies to write an annex to the state's emergency response plan that included cultural resources; and the network in Minneapolis-St. Paul developed a guide to working with first responders.

NEH has been supporting the work of Alliance for Response networks since 2010. The agency's investment in the program has allowed for the launch of new networks across the country while providing resources for the existing networks, such as training opportunities and informational webinars.

Collaborating on the local level is essential, as each region faces their own challenges in terms of natural hazards. Increasingly extreme weather patterns are changing those hazards as well: California institutions face increased risk of wildfires, while hurricanes gather more power over warmer water, threatening those in their paths. Local networks are nimble in responding to these changing risks.

NEH has, through their history of funding, recognized the importance of supporting collecting institutions as they prepare for, respond to, and recover from emergencies and disasters. The impact of these efforts is significant.

When Hurricane Irma hit Florida in 2017, the Vizcaya Museum and Gardens in Miami—located on Biscayne Bay—suffered significant storm surge damage. However, just four months prior, the museum hosted an NEH-funded workshop on disaster response for the South Florida Alliance for Response network. After the storm, the museum's conservator knew to call the National Heritage Responders for assistance, which helped Vizcaya staff quickly stabilize the environment and minimize the impact of mold.

Conservators and collections care professionals face significant challenges in protecting our cultural heritage for future generations. There is ample evidence to show that strategic funding by the NEH has laid important groundwork, but there is still much work to be done. With increased funding, NEH can support the networking and training that are essential in protecting cultural heritage from emergencies and disasters. This important work must continue to make sure that the human story is preserved. Thank you for your time.