

Testimony on behalf of the Federation of State Humanities Councils

Prepared for the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies by Beth Kane, Director, Norway Memorial Library in Norway, Maine, Addressing the National Endowment for the Humanities, February 6, 2020.

Madam Chair 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 Beth Kane, and I am the Director of the Norway Memorial Library in Norway, Maine. My institution has received no fewer than 24 grants from the Maine Humanities Council over the past 34 years. I am here to request **\$170 million** for the National Endowment for the Humanities for FY 2021 and **\$54 million** for the Federal/State Partnership, which provides allocations, by formula, to the 56 state humanities councils. To demonstrate why this request is so important, I would like to tell you what my library has been able to do for the Norway community with humanities council support and describe the impact that state humanities council support has had in rural communities all across the country.

Norway, Maine is a small town of around 5,000 inhabitants, situated in southern Oxford County between the Little Androscoggin River and the western foothills of the Mahoosuc Range of the White Mountains. The Norway Memorial Library has a staff of six and serves more than 40,000 visitors a year. Our most recent annual report records program attendance of 6,301. As in so many towns across rural America, the library in Norway is an anchor cultural and educational institution and plays a central role in the life of the community.

The Maine Humanities Council has been our valued partner in serving the people of Norway for more than 30 years. Whether through grant funding or program partnerships, the council has helped to shape how we understand our work and to elevate and clarify our vision for the kinds of intellectual and cultural opportunities we can make available to our community every year. In partnership with the Maine Humanities Council, the library has been home to popular book discussion programs – groups for the general public and groups specially designed for low-literacy adults, people who never dreamed they'd be part of a book group. Other regular offerings include public lectures, theatrical presentations, and community discussion programs. To give just one example, in 2013 the library was awarded a *Bridging Cultures: Muslim Journeys* Book Shelf by the American Library Association and the NEH. We turned to the Maine Humanities Council for financial support for cultural programming, including speakers, musicians, a film screening, and scholars to lead book discussions. In 2020 several Norway organizations will come together to plan events related to the state's bicentennial. The library and the Norway Historical Society will seek council support for programs as part of this series.

Time and again we have seen that in Norway there is a hunger for this kind of programming. It is no small thing when a discussion series on Race and Justice in America brings in 89 people to the library over five discussions, or 52 people attend a talk by an Iranian immigrant sharing his story of moving with his family and building a life in Maine. These are experiences that have a lasting impact on the life of the community. Maine Humanities Council programs and grants make it possible for people in my town to access cultural and lifelong learning opportunities that the library simply couldn't provide on its own. The work of our state humanities council levels the playing field so that my small-town library can offer experiences equal in intellectual depth

and breadth to those found in America's biggest cities. I am incredibly proud that the Norway Memorial Library has become such a valuable resource for the people of my community.

But I am not here today because my library is special. On the contrary, I'm here because libraries like mine serving communities like mine are working in partnership with their state humanities councils in every corner of America. What I have described in Norway can be seen as a microcosm of the impact state humanities council support has had upon individuals and neighborhoods across the country. The councils are the local face of the humanities, supporting 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 make humanities programs possible 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. The largest grant my library has received from the Maine Humanities Council during my tenure is \$1,000.

As organizations charged with serving their entire state, the councils have worked hard to stretch resources 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 community residents. Their volunteer board members give careful attention to how they disseminate their federal funds to achieve the greatest possible impact. Fortunately, councils are also expert at using those 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.

In addition to serving these local needs, the councils, along with the National Endowment for the Humanities, are looking ahead to the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, an event that offers Americans the opportunity to renew our understanding of our founding principles, to explore the ways those principles have been both challenged and reinforced, and to give voice to the stories and communities that have been hidden or marginalized. It is an anniversary that calls us to deepen the understanding among adults, children, and teens of our collective history and the structures that sustain our democratic society. The state humanities councils can help make the next five years a time when we rededicate ourselves to strengthening civics education and reinvigorating our ability to work through differences.

Previous experience in commemorating landmark events ensures that councils are skilled at grounding anniversaries in reliable history and drawing on that history to inform discussions of current circumstances. Humanities New York began early to prepare for a full and substantive examination of the 100th anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment, the evolution of the role of women in the years since that pivotal event, and the ongoing struggle for women's equality. In 2016 and 2017 the council awarded more than \$450,000 in grants to organizations for Centennial-themed programs, especially those connecting contemporary concerns to the legacy of women's suffrage, and produced five two-minute videos on suffrage history.

The state humanities councils are uniquely positioned to play a strong role in making national commemorations meaningful because of their strong ties to the local communities where the effort must begin, prompting opportunities for neighbors to talk with neighbors. Further, the councils have a track record of collaborating with diverse partners to broaden impact and extend resources well beyond the initial investment. In my remarks today, I will describe some of the

ways councils use the humanities to bring people together, to educate, to increase understanding, and to help address some of the most difficult issues we face as communities and as a society.

From the beginning, state humanities councils have been dedicated to ensuring that **rural communities** have access to public humanities programs. I have already talked about the impact of these programs on my small Maine community, but there are many other ways that councils partner with communities like mine. The long-standing Museum on Main Street program, for example, is a partnership with the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service 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. The very structure of the program guarantees local involvement, as councils and scholars work with a planning group in each community to develop a variety of humanities programs around the theme of the exhibit.

Bringing the resources of the Smithsonian to small rural towns prompts excitement, but it also triggers a variety of programs and conversations that allow for serious exploration of the exhibit topics. The New Jersey Council for the Humanities has deepened the impact of their tour of the “Water Ways” exhibit by creating a series of hour-long public discussions in every county in the state, focusing on reflections about the ways water matters to New Jerseyans. The Idaho Humanities Council is using their tour of “Crossroads: Change in Rural America” to look at the challenges and opportunities rural residents see in the changes taking place in their communities.

For more than a decade, councils have supported and promoted activities for returning **veterans**, as well as veterans of earlier wars. In 2014 the Maine Humanities Council developed a Veterans Book Group, as one of several projects created under the NEH Standing Together initiative, which was adopted by a dozen other councils. Illinois Humanities’ Talking Service program uses literature from Homer to Hemingway to allow veterans to reflect on their own experiences. The Minnesota Humanities Center’s Veterans’ Voices program gives veterans an opportunity to speak through plays, discussions, and literature.

The Minnesota Humanities Center also educates Minnesotans about the history and culture of the state’s **indigenous people** through such programs as the award-winning traveling exhibit, “Why Treaties Matter: Self Government in the Dakota and Ojibwe Nations,” and the Bdote Memory Map, a resource for teaching about the Dakota people’s relationship to the people of Minnesota. Virginia Humanities’ Virginia Indian Programs offers opportunities for Virginians and visitors to learn about the culture and history of the state’s Indian people and communities. Among their resources is the Virginia Indian Archive, a collection of images, documents, and audiovisual resources documenting Virginia Indian history since colonial times.

In recent years, many councils have realized that the humanities have a special role to play in addressing some of the most challenging and divisive issues we face as a society and have created **community conversations**, which provide facilitated discussions, in a neutral setting, of topics important to individual communities and states.

Few issues are more troubling or more difficult to address than the devastating **opioid crisis**, which has affected areas throughout the country. Because their state had been one of the hardest hit, Ohio Humanities was compelled to take action to help residents understand this terrible epidemic. They awarded a grant to support *Not Far From Me: Stories of Opioids and Ohio*, an anthology of first-person accounts of addicts, their families, and others impacted by opioids. The anthology provided the text for discussion sessions the council supported in 11 Ohio communities, allowing participants the opportunity to share their own stories and to learn how other individuals and organizations were confronting the crisis.

The many issues related to **water** and its impact on cultures and communities have been of increasing public interest and in some cases concern. Water has been the source of both intense conflict and healing tranquility. It has also been a source of serious health risks, as was demonstrated so starkly in Flint, Michigan. With that terrible episode in their state's recent history all too fresh in their minds, Michigan Humanities chose as the book for their annual Great Michigan Read program *What the Eyes Don't See*, which will serve as the text for statewide discussions, many of them including the book's author, Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha. The discussions will take place in libraries, schools, and other settings, providing an opportunity for participants to discuss the origins and implications of this unthinkable occurrence.

Technology is a ubiquitous and necessary part of our contemporary lives, but many fear that its implications are inadequately understood. Humanities Washington intends to look at some of these implications through their Think & Drink program, "Is the Internet Making us Miserable?" Presented in partnership with the University of Washington iSchool, conversations taking place at several locations in the state will explore what the research says about how the use of technology affects our mental state and the way we focus, socialize, and experience emotion.

Another concern councils hear from their constituents is that we are an increasingly divided nation, not just politically but across barriers of race, education, income, ethnicity, and even location. Among the many programs councils have developed to allow **discussion across divides** is a year-long initiative launched by Illinois Humanities called "The City and the Country: Common Ground in the Prairie State." Noting that the rural-urban dynamic has influenced public policy in the state throughout its 200-year history, the council set out to explore the question, "To what extent can rural and urban Illinoisans find common ground on issues that affect both the country and the city?" The conversations alternated between rural and urban settings, featuring in each location a discussion based in humanities texts and led by three panelists who could comment on the themes of the text from a rural perspective and three from an urban perspective. The aim is for all participants to emerge from the discussions with a better understanding of each other's viewpoints.

The small sampling of council programs I have described 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. The state councils are well positioned to effectively put to use the \$54 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 National Endowment for the Humanities.