

## **Testimony on Behalf of the Federation of State Humanities Councils**

*Prepared for the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies by Caleb Cage, Governor's Appointee to the Nevada Humanities Board of Trustees, Nevada Humanities, Addressing the National Endowment for the Humanities, March 25, 2021.*

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 Caleb Cage, and I serve as a Governor's Appointee to the Nevada Humanities Board of Trustees — Nevada's nonprofit state council affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. I have volunteered for the Nevada Humanities Board since 2016 and have seen first-hand the vital importance and impact of the work of the state humanities councils.

I also currently serve as the COVID-19 Response Director for the State of Nevada. On the surface, you might not see that these two roles are complimentary, but, in fact, the state humanities councils have critical roles to play in nurturing resilient communities and in supporting a robust recovery in Nevada and across the nation.

The current public health emergency facing our nation and our planet has disrupted our lives in unimaginable ways. This disruption has been profound. It has caused uncertainty, both in how we care for our vulnerable loved ones and how we participate in our economy. It has robbed millions of people of their livelihood and created a national mental health crisis. It has kept our kids from attending schools, from playing sports, from cultivating healthy social networks, and otherwise living their normal lives. It has affected the most vulnerable members of our society, and in the worst cases, it has taken our loved ones from us as well.

My job is to help the State of Nevada and Nevadans navigate this crisis. Since March of last year, I have worked to implement Nevada Governor Sisolak's vision to protect Nevada's public health, to maintain our economy, and to ensure our ability to provide services to the public in the future. These factors, and others, amount to our best efforts to ensure we are resilient even in these challenging times.

While we are facing and experiencing the disruption caused by COVID-19, we also have to more deeply understand the pandemic and make meaning of it. At Nevada Humanities our emphasis is on the public humanities, and we understand the humanities to be how people process, document, express, comprehend, and live the human experience, and that through the wide breadth of human learning, as well as civic, social, and cultural activities, everyone participates in and has access to the humanities. These values and perspectives have informed everything we do and contribute to our reframing of the humanities as utilized and accessed by all people. We understand the humanities as lived.

The humanities provide us the essential and necessary tools of reflection and understanding. Using these tools, we interpret the pandemic through our worldviews and values to determine how we will handle and respond to the challenges this crisis represents. This is the act of assessing our current situation in terms of what we have experienced throughout our history and having the vision and wisdom to both look forward to and create a different future. As we find meaning in crises our nation is experiencing today, we determine how we can persevere as individuals, and also collectively as members of a society, of a culture, and of our local communities. This is the work of the humanities, and without the perspective that the humanities brings us we would be stranded without hope.

This is also the work of Nevada Humanities as Nevada's leading cultural organization collaborating with libraries, historical societies, museums, folklife centers, literary and literacy organizations, education institutions, heritage groups, and cultural organizations of many kinds. Through the many programs that Nevada Humanities and its partners produce, Nevadans are encouraged to explore local culture and Nevada's unique landscapes, share Nevada's diverse heritage, and participate in, and contribute to, their communities through civic engagement and beyond. Nevada Humanities also has the crucial role of regranteeing federal and state funds to Nevada nonprofit organizations.

I would like to share with you a handful of examples that illustrate how people have made meaning of the challenges and disruption of the pandemic over the last year and how Nevada Humanities - and the nation's other state humanities councils - have had a role in cultivating resilient communities.

On behalf of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the state humanities councils I would like to thank you for the 2020 CARES Act COVID-19 relief funding that has provided necessary funds to keep local humanities organizations open during the pandemic. Thank you as well for the new American Rescue Plan Act funding that will continue to provide hope for the future in Nevada and across the nation. This funding, combined with the annual budgetary allocation to the National Endowment for the Humanities and the operating grants made to the state humanities councils, has been key to the sustenance and survival of our nation's humanities-based cultural institutions.

On a national scale, the American Alliance of Museums estimates that one third of museums in the U.S. will permanently close as a result of COVID-19, while over 52 percent of museums have six months or less of operating reserves, and 53 percent have had to furlough or lay off staff. As state and local budgets are gutted because of the decline of sales taxes, libraries, museums, historic sites, and community centers in rural communities and small towns face particularly dire financial futures. Small and midsize organizations are especially in need of additional operational and programmatic support.

These challenges have also been felt acutely by humanities organizations in Nevada, and our organizations mirror the national crisis. Nevada organizations have also been struggling with the audience restrictions, the cancellation of programs, and the steep learning curve needed to shift operations to accommodate online programming. They have been through the uncertainty brought on by surges in cases, by mitigation measures intended to reduce the burden of this virus, and by limited access to vaccines. CARES Act funding offered a burst of resources to help organizations retain their vitality and to continue to deliver important educational services.

The National Endowment for the Humanities received \$75 million dollars in CARES Act funds, which became a lifeline for cultural and educational organizations. The state humanities councils received 40% of those funds to distribute at the local level. The National Endowment for the Humanities distributed 317 direct grants to humanities organizations nationwide while the state and jurisdictional humanities councils made more than 4,500 grants to humanities organizations through their CARES Act grant programs. The magnitude of these local grants helps to illustrate the boots-on-the-ground nature of the state councils' work.

In Nevada, Nevada Humanities distributed \$368,873 in CARES grants to 46 organizations across the state, providing rapid-response, short-term operating support for Nevada nonprofit humanities and cultural organizations facing financial hardship and duress resulting from the COVID-19 health emergency. The grants administered by Nevada Humanities had an enormous impact in Nevada. At a time when nonprofit organizations were suffering dramatic losses of income and struggling to operate

as best that they could and retain their employees, this funding helped pay rent, cover basic operating costs, retain 213 cultural sector jobs in Nevada, and also create 19 new jobs. This funding also helped organizations reimagine their programs and find creative ways to serve the needs of the state.

Marilyn Gillespie, Executive Director of the Las Vegas Natural History Museum, which has served as a critical educational resource for millions of people in southern Nevada since the 1990s, told us that Nevada Humanities support has been crucial to their success over the years, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when the museum temporarily closed to the public on March 17, 2020, and re-opened on May 31, 2020, at reduced capacity in compliance with Nevada's COVID-19 guidelines. With the Nevada Humanities funding the museum received, the museum was able to develop more than 50 humanities-focused, online education presentations available at no-cost to public school children in need of educational enhancements that could be accessed from home. In Marilyn Gillespie's own words:

*"Through these programs, Southern Nevada children and their families could remain connected with humanities-focused programs and high-quality educational resources despite the numerous changes in their daily lives because of COVID-19."*

In northern Nevada, the David J. Drakulich Art Foundation is a small nonprofit organization founded by the family of fallen U.S. Army Sgt. David J. Drakulich. As a veteran of the Iraq War and former director of veterans services for the state of Nevada, I have worked closely with the Drakulich family and their foundation for years. To put it simply, the David J. Drakulich Art Foundation is exactly the kind of organization that uses the humanities to make meaning of adversity.

This unique organization produces innovative arts and humanities programs specifically for veterans and military families, focusing on reintegration and healing. These opportunities result in therapeutic, creative self-expression and generate community-wide support for veterans as they reintegrate with the civilian population. Faced with COVID-19 challenges, the Drakulich Art Foundation has had to think creatively. As their Executive Director Tina Drakulich shared with us:

*"The Nevada Humanities CARES grant came at a time of great uncertainty. It helped the David J. Drakulich Art Foundation employ veterans to sew masks for their community using donated supplies and military uniforms at the time when PPE was unavailable to individuals scrambling to protect themselves from COVID-19. Veterans displaced from their jobs because of the pandemic were employed by the Foundation providing sustenance and hope to them while providing a crucial service to their community. In granting CARES Act funding to the Foundation, Nevada Humanities not only gave us a lifeline and the ability to maintain course through uncertain times, but supported veterans who needed immediate help. This resulted in the distribution of over 2,000 handsewn masks to a community in need."*

Tina went on to say:

*"The David J. Drakulich Art Foundation operates on the premise that successful reintegration occurs when veterans receive the gift of humanity. That means that they may be more in demand of such humanities as literature, community discourse, storytelling, poetry, theater, dance, visual art, and the like. The Foundation knows, as do Nevada Humanities and the National Endowment for the Humanities, that the arts and humanities enrich communities and raise our quality of life."*

In rural Nevada, the small town of Elko is home to the world-renown National Cowboy Poetry Gathering, known to most people as “The Gathering.” The Gathering is produced annually by the Western Folklife Center, and it draws visitors from all over the nation and the world to Elko for one very cold week every January. The Gathering has become an annual ritual for thousands of people who value and practice the cultural traditions of the American West and are concerned about the future of those traditions. Kristin Windbigler is the Executive Director of the Western Folklife Center, and she shared this with us:

*“The National Cowboy Poetry Gathering normally injects several million dollars into the local economy at a time of year when it is needed most, but this year, the pandemic prohibited us from holding an in-person event, resulting in a 60% loss in operating income for our organization while also having a deep impact on other local businesses. Funding we received from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Nevada Humanities, and other CARES Act grant funding allowed us to continue offering programming online, keep our gallery and gift shop open, as well avoid laying off staff, which will help ensure we are able to return to normal operations more quickly when conditions allow us to gather in Elko again. The restorative power of cultural expression and creativity in such a difficult and isolating time should not be underestimated.”*

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, with the right support, I envision a bright future for cultural and educational organizations in Nevada and across the nation. These are essential institutions, and we rely on them to help vitalize our communities, cultivate our humanity, and give our lives meaning. I do believe that we will eventually regain the robust momentum that we were experiencing before the pandemic. Even so, we are still in the midst of this crisis, and we have a lot of work to do to stabilize these organizations and help them thrive. I feel confident that this is possible with sustained and increased support for Nevada Humanities and the state humanities councils around the nation. Our state humanities councils have a critical role to play in pandemic recovery, the health of our communities, and the restoration of our nation.

Thank you for the opportunity to share the work of Nevada Humanities, the state humanities councils, and the National Endowment for the Humanities with you today, and for the support you have provided over the years for this important work.