



Washington, DC Convention & Tourism

The Institute for Museum and Library Services is slated for Congressional reauthorization in 2009.

If You Want  
More Money,  
Now's the Time to Ask:  
*Federal Formula  
Grants for  
Museums*

BY TERRY L. DAVIS

Museums need more money—we all know that. But did you know that the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) provided \$210.5 million to libraries in America in 2006 while museums received only \$36.5 million? Why the cavernous difference? Federal formula grants in the amount of \$163.7 million given directly to the states for libraries.

This fact was lost to AASLH Council and staff until 2003 when conversations with then-IMLS director, Bob Martin, made it clear. Martin said in passing that Senator Susan Collins from Maine asked him during IMLS reauthorization hearings why libraries received federal formula grants, but museums didn't. Martin's reply, "*Because the museum community has never asked.*" That statement fed a flurry of conversations and meetings. AASLH's Council and staff

wanted to know more as we had been talking for quite some time about the dire need of funding for history organizations across America. Martin's reply also piqued the interest of Max Evans, the new director for the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC—the granting arm of the National Archives). Evans shared Martin's opinion that the federal government works at its best when it funds programs through the states, rather than Uncle Sam making all the decisions.

In March of 2004, the American Association of Museums hosted a meeting on behalf of AASLH to discuss various ideas for getting additional federal funding to history organizations in America. Several state, regional, and national associations that service history organizations attended the meeting. Participants discussed different federal agencies that might act as a host for a new pot of money specifically designed to help history organizations. Among other things they discussed the needs of small, grassroots history organizations and how they are often not competitive for the scant amount of federal funding available.

In the end, discussions focused back on IMLS and its federal formula grant program for libraries. Participants shared concerns that combining all aspects of history under one funding umbrella would be a difficult sell to Congress,

given that no "Department of Culture" exists in America and history organizations are funded through a variety of agencies including IMLS, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the NHPRC. Participants agreed, however, that Congress might be inclined to support a program with which they are familiar, expanding the IMLS authorization to include a federal formula grant program for museums. This instantly took the focus off history and put it on museums. AASLH's Council readily agreed that if expanding the IMLS formula grant program was the most likely strategy to succeed with Congress, there is no doubt that *history* would win too since history museums make up the lion's share of museums in America.

AASLH forged ahead with the concept, holding listening meetings at its own annual meeting, at the AAM annual meeting, and at every opportunity. Sandra Clark, director of the Michigan Historical Center, chaired a special task force that continued the conversation to see if there was adequate interest and support within the history field to support a movement for museums. As the work moved forward it became clear that the best methodology was to form a coalition not of museums, but of museum service organizations that could use their reach and depth into the museum community to move the legislation along. At the writing of this article (March 2007) thirty-two other associations have joined AASLH to form the Federal Formula Grant Coalition, an ad hoc group focused on securing federal formula grants for museums when Congress reauthorizes IMLS in 2009. AASLH acts as the administrative agent for the Coalition, donating a significant amount of its CEO's time. More associations are joining every month, and the Coalition is currently working on a legislative plan that includes the hiring of a professional lobbyist to move the effort forward.

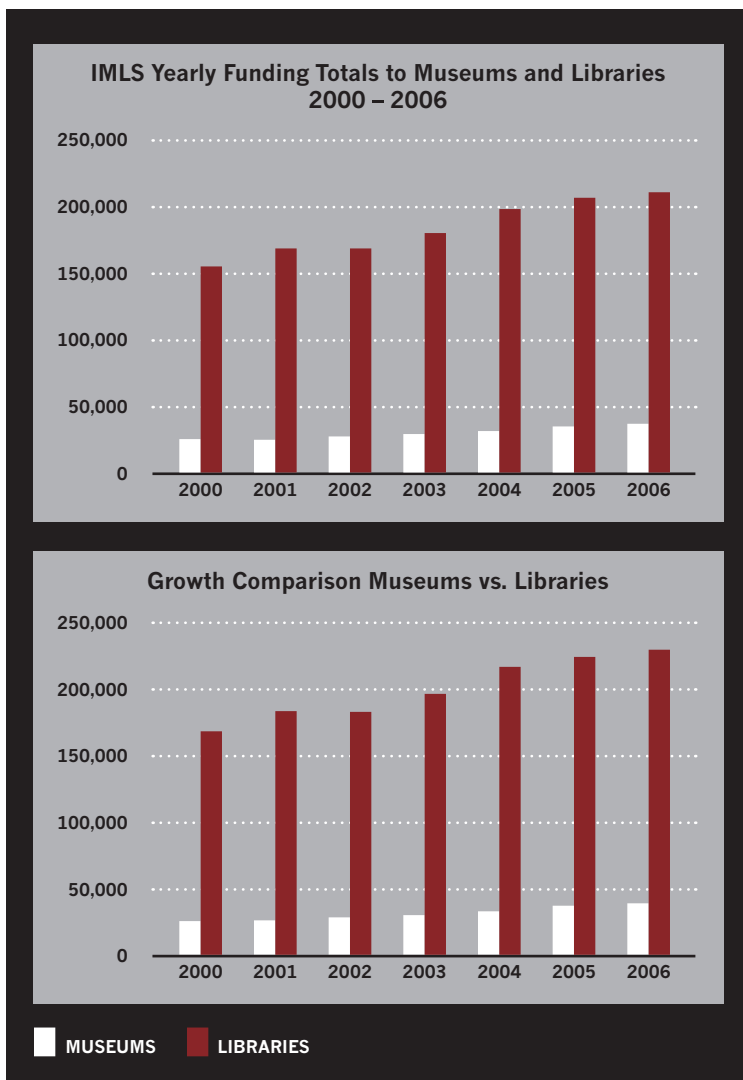
The Coalition has some hard issues to work through, but this is an idea whose time has come. Below is a very quick summary of some of the issues under discussion and current thinking on the issues:

### *What exactly is a federal formula grant and how does it work?*

Under this program, funds go directly from the federal government to each state government for distribution. A formula determines how much each state receives, using a base amount for each state plus a variable amount based on population. This is the process by which IMLS distributes its formula grants for libraries.

### *Who gets the money at the state level and what are the requirements for receiving it?*

Federal law mandates that formula grant funds be awarded to a state agency—existing or newly developed. Each state will name an Advisory Board for Museums and, if the museum legislation mirrors the library legislation, states will conduct a needs assessment and five-year plan with broad stakeholder participation and recommend how the funds will be spent to address those needs. States are required to match federal funds, but money already being provided to museums (i.e., state history museums, art museums, science centers, etc.) can be used as that match.



*If money goes directly to states, how can we be sure it will get down to the museums that need it and not be entangled with other political agendas?*

Federal agencies are first authorized to spend funds, then the agencies must request the funds through an appropriation process. The Coalition has the opportunity to write first-ever authorizing language for the museum side of the IMLS federal formula grant program. That language can include directives to the states, including the makeup of advisory boards in each state to determine the policies for the distribution of funds. Coalition members will consult with their individual association members and be sure the legislative requirements include the appropriate representatives to ensure museums are in the driver's seat when states make decisions about how to spend federal formula grant funds.

*Will federal formula grants for museums take away from the current IMLS funding for museums?*

No. Federal formula grant funds will be new funds for IMLS. On the library side, IMLS provides not only federal formula grants to the states, but also National Leadership Grants, Native American Library Services funds, and funds for its Laura Bush 21<sup>st</sup> Century Librarian program. Current IMLS categories for museum funding will not be affected just as these line items have not been affected by formula grants for libraries.

*There are 122,000 libraries in America, compared to AAM's estimate of 17,500 museums. How does federal funding parity make sense?*

The Coalition understands that full parity will probably not be achieved right off the bat. However, in 1956 when libraries first received federal formula grants there were only 12,478 libraries in the U.S. The first formula program was for library services only and had an appropriation of \$2 million in 1957, which rose to \$7.5 million by 1964. In 1965 funds jumped to \$25 million with an additional \$30 million for construction. The case for legislators is that museums have some *very* unique aspects to their work that make expenses far exceed those of most nonprofits, particularly the care and feeding of collections and mounting of exhibitions. According to the publication *A Public Trust at Risk: The Heritage Health Index Report on the State of America's Collections* (Heritage Preservation, 2005), American cultural institutions are taking care of over 4.8 billion artifacts held in the public trust, and America's collections are at risk due to inadequate environmental controls, storage areas,



**Because history museums make up the largest share of museums in America, they stand to benefit greatly from an expansion of the IMLS formula grant program.**

security, funding, and staffing. In addition, museums must develop exhibitions to interpret the collections they hold. Although federal formula grants will not be restricted to collections care or exhibitions, these two tasks make museums stand out from libraries.

*How much money are we talking about?*

Obviously, the Coalition wants as much money for museums as possible. Libraries currently receive \$163.7 million in federal formula grants, with each state receiving a baseline amount of \$595,281 and then a distribution based on population. If successful in receiving an authorization for even \$100 million, here is a look at how museums in just a few states will benefit (assuming the same distribution formula as libraries): Alabama \$1.7 million, Illinois \$3.7 million, Nevada \$1.2 million, New Jersey \$2.7 million, Oklahoma \$1.4 million, and Oregon \$1.5 million. Remember that states will have to match the federal outlay, which increases the pot even more. States that already give to museums in one way or another can use those current contributions as match, but they will need to beef up their state contributions to at least equal the federal share. It's important to note that no state has ever refused its federal money because of the match requirement. That is true for other formula grant programs as well.

*Is this really a good time to be asking Congress for money?*

It remains to be seen if there will *ever* again be a good time to ask Congress for money. The point is there is a firm case for the federal government to increase funding for museums. Whether or not the Coalition is successful in its 2009 goal, we will have set the stage for another strike on Congress at a later date.

As if a significant increase in federal funding for museums isn't enough, there are a variety of other benefits the federal formula grant program will bring to the museum field. Here are but a few that the Coalition has identified:

- The museum community is not a cohesive national community working together as a force for any purpose; libraries are. For example, federal formula grants to libraries can be credited with libraries dramatically increasing their techno-

logical capabilities and working together on the issue. Once museums are working toward federal formula grants as a community, they will be able to do so on other issues as well.

- There is precious little information about museums, what they "look" like, how many people run them, how much they contribute to economic development, etc. But when money flows down from the feds, data flows up. We will, for the first time, be able to take a snapshot of the field as a whole.

- There has never been a federally-mandated needs analysis for museums. The program has the potential to require a state-by-state needs assessment. We can then contemplate the needs of the entire field and how to address them.

- Service organizations for museums will be strengthened since museums will have more money to pay for professional development and other services.

All this begs the question, "What can I do to help secure significantly more money for history museums in America?" Speak up!!! Ask questions!!! Make it personal!!! Be an advocate for the federal formula grant program for museums!!!

In the not-too-distant future, the Coalition will begin asking museum representatives from key states to contact members of Congress. It's too early now, but with the direction of a paid lobbyist, we will ask you to do your part as an advocate for the federal formula grant initiative. In the meantime, talk about the initiative with your colleagues. Be sure the museum professionals in your city and state know about and understand the initiative; send them to [www.aaslh.org](http://www.aaslh.org) to learn more.

AASLH will soon host on its website an Information and Comments board on the federal formula grant initiative. On it, the Coalition will post legislative issues for your comment. When that happens, please be among the many who respond. We need your help to develop the best federal formula grant program possible. Finally, if you are part of a museum service organization that has not signed up in support of the effort, ask why. Associations care what their members and prospective members think. We exist to serve the field, and we need to hear directly from you to know what you want and need.

This is an extremely ambitious initiative, no doubt. However, maintaining adequate funding for the museum field is a hugely important issue that deserves an effort of this magnitude. The Coalition understands there will be rocky starts in some of the state agencies. This was the case when libraries first formed state advisory boards. But we believe that just because it's hard doesn't mean you don't do it. If we wait until it's the "right time" to ask Congress for money, or the "right time" for states to all begin on an equal footing, we will simply never get started. If you ask fundraising professionals the number one reason donors don't give, they will tell you it is because they haven't been asked. AASLH is playing a leadership role in making sure Congress is asked to fund museums in a significant way. When the time is right, be sure to ask too! ☺

**Terry L. Davis is President and CEO of the American Association for State and Local History. She can be reached at [davis@aaslh.org](mailto:davis@aaslh.org).**

The following data excerpted from, *A Public Trust at Risk: The Heritage Health Index Report on the State of America's Collections* (Heritage Preservation, 2005), confirms the need for federal formula grants.

*Note: The data includes all collecting institutions, not just history museums.*



**The expense for the care of collections and mounting of exhibitions, make museums unique among nonprofit organizations.**

Orange County Regional History Center

## U.S. Collections Are Exposed to Hazards

Collections are at risk of damage because of improper environmental conditions and storage. An improper environment can cause irreparable damage.

- 26% of collecting institutions have no environmental controls to protect their collections from the damaging effects of temperature, humidity, and light.
- 59% of collecting institutions have had their collections damaged by light.
- 53% of collecting institutions have had their collections damaged by moisture.

## Perilous Conditions Plague Storage Spaces

- 59% of institutions have the majority of their collections stored in areas too small to accommodate them safely and appropriately.
- 65% of our nation's collecting institutions have experienced damage to collections due to improper storage.

## Other important findings on collecting institutions

- 26% report having no, or inadequate, security.
- 80% have no emergency plan that includes collections, which translates into 2.6 billion items left unprotected.
- 44% of conservation and preservation staffing is manned by volunteers.

## Organizational Members of the Federal Formula Grant Coalition

As of 3/12/07

### National Organizations

#### American Association for State and Local History

Terry Davis  
davis@aaslh.org

#### American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works

Eryl Wentworth  
ewentworth@aic-faic.org

#### American Public Gardens Association

Dan Stark  
dstark@publicgardens.org

#### Association of Children's Museums

Janet Elman  
jelman@childrensmuseums.org

#### Association of African American Museums

William Billingsley  
wbillingsley@ohiohistory.org

#### Association of Railway Museums

Stephen Patrick  
spatrick@cityofbowie.org

#### Council of American Jewish Museums

Joanne Marks Kauvar  
jkauvar@aol.com

#### Council of State Archivists

Kathleen Roe  
kroe@mail.nysed.gov

#### National Coalition for History

Lee White  
lwhite@historycoalition.org

#### National Council for Public History

John Dichtl  
ncph@iupui.edu

#### Small Museums Association

Ken Hickman  
krh132@psu.edu

### Regional Organizations

#### Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums

Anita Blackaby  
ablackaby@state.pa.us

#### Mountain Plains Museum Association

Lorne Render  
lrender@ksu.edu

### State Organizations

#### Association of Indiana Museums

Kat Burkhart  
burkhartgirl@yahoo.com

#### Association of South Dakota Museums

Kevin Bailey, director@cchsmuseum.org

#### California Association of Museums

Celeste DeWald  
cam@calmuseums.org

#### Delaware Museum Association

Claudia Leister  
claudia.leister@state.de.us

#### Georgia Association of Museums and Galleries

Bruce Smith  
director@portcolumbus.org

#### Historical Confederation of Kentucky

Chris Goodlett  
chris.goodlett@ky.gov

#### Illinois Association of Museums

Mary Turner  
mary.turner@illinois.gov

#### Kentucky Association of Museums

Chris Goodlett  
chris.goodlett@ky.gov

#### Maryland Association of History Museums

Lisa Mason-Chaney  
lmchaney@hammondhardwoodhouse.org

#### Michigan Museums Association

Teresa Goforth  
gofortht@michiganmuseums.org

#### Museums Alaska

Michael Hawfield  
hawfield@alaska.net

#### Museums Association of Arizona

Roger Lidman  
roger.lidman@phoenix.gov

#### Museums Association of Montana

Paul Shea  
pshea@yellowstonehistoriccenter.org

#### Museum Association of New York

Anne Ackerson  
info@manyonline.org

#### New Mexico Association of Museums

Louise Stiver  
louise.stiver@state.nm.us

#### Ohio Museums Association

Christine Hurtubise  
churtubise@mail.cosi.org

#### Oklahoma Museums Association

Brenda Granger  
bgranger@okmuseums.org

#### Pennsylvania Federation of Museums and Historical Organizations

Deborah Filipi  
dfilipi@pamuseums.org

#### South Carolina Museums Association

John Sherrer  
jsherrer@historiccolumbia.org

#### Tennessee Association of Museums

John Lancaster  
jsl2d@comcast.net

#### Texas Association of Museums

Jack Nokes  
jack@texasmuseums.org

#### Utah Museums Association

Brian Crockett  
brian\_crockett@msn.com

#### Virginia Association of Museums

Margo Carlock  
mcarlock@vamuseums.org

#### Washington Museum Association

Pamela Kruse-Buckingham  
pamaluv33@yahoo.com

#### Western Pennsylvania Museum Council

Chrisoula Randas Perdziola  
museumcouncil@comcast.net



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