

Testimony on behalf of the Federation of State Humanities Councils

Prepared for the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies by Karen Munro, Member of the Board of Directors, Humanities Washington; Addressing the National Endowment for the Humanities, March 13, 2008.

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to present testimony on behalf of the state humanities councils, the state affiliates of the National Endowment for the Humanities. I am here to support the humanities community request of \$177 million for the National Endowment for the Humanities and to request an increase in federal funding for the NEH Federal-State Partnership of \$15 million, to \$47 million, for FY 2009. Because of the councils' outstanding record of leveraging matching funds, we can confidently say that this federal investment will be at least doubled if not tripled through other sources.

The National Endowment for the Humanities was founded in 1965 in part because "democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens." The state humanities councils enable people throughout the nation to expand their vision, learning from the human experience across time and around the world. Individuals gain wisdom through council programs, coming together for actions essential to a robust civic life: discussing ideas, applying critical perspectives, and seeking common ground.

The state humanities councils were created in the early 1970s to provide local access to the humanities through public programs offered in communities throughout the state. The councils are full partners of the NEH, receiving their core funding through the Federal-State Partnership line of the NEH budget and using that funding to leverage additional funds from state government, foundations, corporations, and private individuals. The councils have also received approximately a third of the NEH We the People funds and have used these funds to extend the reach of the We the People initiative to communities throughout the nation. Unlike the other programs in the Endowment, the councils operate as independent nonprofit organizations charged with conducting a statewide program supported entirely by their federal funding and the other funds they leverage through those federal dollars. As NEH partners but nonprofit organizations, councils attract contributions from countless volunteers, and generate funds from state government and private sources to match their federal funds.

We greatly appreciate the support Congress has provided to state humanities councils over the years, allowing us to work in partnership with the NEH and provide responsive, innovative programs at the local level. But today's needs far outdistance the funding available. The Federation of State Humanities Councils, the membership association of the state humanities councils, has identified unmet needs in community humanities programming amounting to more than \$50 million. To provide the vital programs that address these needs, the state humanities councils require an increase of \$30 million in federal funds over the next two years (\$15 million per year), which will enable them to leverage the additional funds from other sources.

Additional funding will be critical to meet citizens and community needs such as these:

- * Opportunities to build community through civic conversations. Discussion can be

launched through dynamic speakers, exhibits, films, books, dramatic presentations, or other formats that provide a historical or cultural context for looking at basic human questions.

- * Expanded reading and literacy programs that bring community members together to discuss books and ideas with their neighbors and that create lifelong readers, among both native and new English speakers. Such programs often blend reading training with participation in the vital civic experience of community discussion.
- * New media and technology resources that offer millions of Americans access to historical and cultural knowledge through web-based technologies, documentary films, radio programs, and electronic state encyclopedias. Councils use these and other technologies to attract new audiences and offer new ways of exploring our history and communicating with each other about common concerns.

The diversity and reach of council programs, tailored to the needs of each state and territory, can be seen in the “California Stories” initiative, through which citizens learn about the rich culture of their communities; the “Mass Moments” radio and web project that educates residents of Massachusetts about their history; and the “Justice Talking” program through which Illinois young people use readings to consider questions underlying civic service.

State councils have become the neighborhood face for important national initiatives such as “We the People,” which is revitalizing the understanding of American history. Last year, through a “We the People” grant in our state of Washington, seven ethnic and tribal organizations created a traveling exhibit representing the variety of stories of who we are as Washingtonians. One of the sponsoring groups, the Black Historical Society of Kitsap County, documented the history of the black shipyard workers who came to Bremerton from other parts of the country during World War II, and who, incidentally, worked with Congressman Dicks’ father and my husband’s father there.

Often, those who have taken part in our programs write to tell us how an experience enriched their own lives and their communities. A Marysville woman, reacting to the Inquiring Minds presentation “I’m No Hero: Journeys of a Holocaust Survivor,” said, “He is an excellent speaker, and he inspired our family to visit Dachau in Germany to learn more.” The director of the Museum and Arts Center in Sequim told us about the success of an exhibit and presentation on the history of American music for school children, “We were able to reach the largest audience to date in the history of the Sequim School District, and by far the largest in the Museum and Arts Center’s history.”

A recent Federation of State Humanities Council brochure declares that state humanities council programs “Transform Lives, Connect Communities, and Enrich the Nation.” It would not be overstating the case to claim that state humanities council programs strengthen our democracy. Indeed, in the array of humanities council programs presented across the country, we see evidence of this every day.

One of the key indicators of a vital democratic society—and also one of the most reliable ways of sustaining it—is the deceptively simple practice of civic conversation. As Humanities Montana Executive Director Mark Sherouse puts it, “Talk is cheap. Informed civic discourse is not. With change relentless and accelerating, we as a people need to talk together in the informed and dispassionate ways that the public humanities enrich and champion.” By bringing together citizens and scholars, drawing on the perspectives of history, literature, and philosophy, councils promote this reasoned dialogue in ways that truly do transform lives, connect communities and enrich the nation.

The Arizona Humanities Council, to take one striking example, launched a statewide initiative for 2008 entitled “Project Civil Discourse.” The basis for this initiative was the council’s belief that “Our democracy is dependent upon a responsible citizenry that can, and will, wrestle with tough issues, without partisanship, while maintaining respect for the need to hear, understand and take into account different viewpoints.” With support from the NEH We the People funds, the council invited citizens throughout Arizona to apply for funds to conduct conversations around issues of concern to their communities and their state. The council itself collaborated with other organizations around the state to offer training in facilitated conversation, conduct forums and town meetings on such topics as land use, immigration, and urban growth. They developed a website that provides information about trainings, public forums, speaker presentations, and book discussions.

The Utah Humanities Council, through their Public Square program, offers speaker and discussion programs that allow groups to talk about a variety of contemporary issues from a humanities perspective. Topics include “The Past, Present and Future of the Middle East,” “Religion and the Environment: Finding Common Ground in Utah,” and “Lifeline of the West: Deciding the Future of the Colorado River.”

Such discussions need not always center around specific contemporary issues to get citizens thinking about the future of their communities and the issues that divide and unite them. A number of councils promote citizen awareness and involvement through discussions of the rich and diverse histories of their communities. The Kansas Humanities Council provides an outstanding example with their We the People-supported “Kansans Tell Their Stories” initiative. Launched in 2004, this initiative has funded dozens of high quality grassroots projects that illuminate the history and culture of the many groups who make their homes in Kansas. Projects exploring the history of Germans and Mexicans in Kansas take place alongside such projects as “A Trolley Tour of Atchison’s African American Historic Sites” and “Starting Over, Staying On: Southeast Asian Citizens in Garden City.”

Councils also play a key role in promoting books and reading, believing that literate citizens are more likely to be engaged citizens. Many councils now support family reading programs that promote reading proficiency among both adults and children while also strengthening relationships between parents and children, through discussion of high quality children’s literature. The Missouri Humanities Council’s Read From the Start program is based on the conviction that parents are children’s first and most influential teachers, and that early exposure to books and reading will promote a lifelong love of words and learning. The structure of group

meetings with parents and other caregivers fosters mutual support among the participants. In 2008 the Kentucky Humanities Council, in partnership with the Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives, will bring the award-winning Prime Time Family Reading Time program, originated by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, to twenty Kentucky libraries. The project, says Kentucky council director Virginia Smith, changes lives “because it focuses on families, the most basic of institutions,” and allows newly trained parents to find meaning in the stories they read. “They look for layers of meaning, and they develop ways of talking about what they find or expect to find. They share this experience with their children with a new sense of confidence and purpose.”

In my own state of Washington, an instructor in our Motherread/Fatheread literacy program, for low income parents of young children, summed up her experiences this way, “Motherread/Fatheread definitely holds true to its philosophy, ‘The power of story, the power of heart.’ Thanks to this program, our culturally diverse group was given an opportunity to learn so much by sharing children’s literature, as well as family values, traditions, and legends. We share a common goal, which is to enhance reading and communication skills within the family unit.”

A child of a class participant, whose family probably did not have children’s books in their home until the mother received a small paperback book at each session, wrote to us, “Thank you for giving my mom books. I read all the books that you gave to her. I like the books so much. My brother reads and likes the books too. Today is my birthday, I’m 10.”

Although councils vigorously promote the value of books and reading, they are also steadily expanding their use of digital technology to make their programs more widely available. The Pennsylvania Humanities Council is working with WHYY-TV in Philadelphia to produce “Humanities Live,” a project that films the council’s “Commonwealth Speaker” programs before a live participatory audience for broadcast on WHYY’s digital channel. The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities has produced an “African American Heritage” online database that enables users to search the information stored there by geographical region, theme, and historic period. Other councils offer podcasts, interactive cultural heritage websites, and other innovative web-based formats to democratize their programs and involve new audiences.

The programs I have described have an impact far beyond the funding invested, but those funds do not begin to cover the needs that are revealed to councils each day. The additional \$30 million we are requesting over the next two years would allow councils to more than double the funds they currently award to community groups wishing to explore their history or discuss community issues. It would allow them to multiply the number of family literacy discussion leaders they train, the number of reading and discussion groups they offer to libraries, and the number of community forums they support. It will allow councils to further expand the web-based technologies they employ for reaching larger and more dispersed audiences.

On behalf of the millions of citizens whose horizons have been expanded through programs of the state humanities councils, I thank the members of Congress and respectfully ask for your continuing support of our work. Thank you.