

Testimony on behalf of the Federation of State Humanities Councils

Prepared for the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies by Marc Johnson, President, Gallatin Public Affairs; Former Chair, Idaho Humanities Council and Federation of State Humanities Councils; Addressing the National Endowment for the Humanities, March 26, 2009.

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 \$230 million for the National Endowment for the Humanities for FY 2010 and to request an increase in federal funding for the NEH Federal-State Partnership of \$25 million, which would bring that line to \$60 million and provide each council, on average, roughly \$500,000 in additional funding. Because of the councils' outstanding record of leveraging matching funds, we can confidently say that this federal investment will be at least doubled at the state and local levels through other sources.

We live in challenging and uncertain times, and it is at such times that state humanities council programs are especially important in helping people throughout the nation gain wisdom by understanding the lessons found in the history of human experience, seeing the connections between the world of ideas and our daily lives, and sharing stories that help us understand ourselves and appreciate other cultures. I have been involved with the Idaho Humanities Council for twelve years, and my experience has shown me that our council and the 55 others truly are the neighborhood face of the humanities. Our council activities are deeply woven into the cultural and educational fabric of our communities. This is where we come together to study our past and share our ideas to better understand our current circumstances and prepare for the future. Councils understand that communities are not built by bricks and mortar alone but also by the history, literature, and common values we share. Through such statewide programs as our annual lectures, which attract hundreds of people, to our Museum on Main Street exhibits and programs that involve entire communities, the Idaho Humanities Council makes a difference in the lives of Idahoans.

The state humanities councils were created in the early 1970s as independent nonprofit organizations 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 such sources as state government, foundations, corporations, and private individuals. Unlike the other programs in the Endowment, the councils operate as independent nonprofit organizations charged with conducting statewide programs supported by their federal funding and the other funds they leverage through those federal dollars. Particularly in difficult economic times, councils, as both grantmakers and program providers, can help fill the gap for organizations struggling to cope with cutbacks in state and other sources of funding.

We greatly appreciate the support Congress has provided to state humanities councils over the years, but today's needs far outdistance available funding, which has not even kept pace with inflation. Studies conducted by the Federation of State Humanities Councils, the membership

association of the state humanities councils, have indicated that to truly address programming needs and capacities in their states, councils would need an additional \$150 million. Our modest request for an increase of \$25 million in federal funds for the coming year would be a step toward meeting these needs.

Additional funds would provide much-needed resources in the following areas:

1) Local cultural and educational institutions. As a result of years of level funding or very small increases, coupled with steadily increasing costs, many councils have had to scale back their grantmaking to local entities, robbing those groups of the ability to offer what are often the only humanities programs available. Most councils are able to fund fewer than half the proposals they receive, and even that number is deceptive, because councils stop inviting proposals when they see that their grant funds are becoming depleted. Further, these grants will be even more important during these times of economic hardship, when so many libraries, museums, and local cultural organizations have lost state, municipal, and private funding. A relatively small investment today can maintain or even enhance the programmatic capacity of local institutions and avoid the need to spend much larger sums later to rebuild a devastated infrastructure.

Nationally, councils report that they could expend an additional \$50 million in grants to fund programs proposed by local institutions and organizations. In 2008 Humanities Washington awarded grants totalling \$175,000 to organizations in 20 Washington counties. However, their goal for the next two years, based on assessment of need, is to at least double the amount they award annually in grants and increase their reach to 26 counties. The Ohio Humanities Council's Community History Grant program, just one portion of their overall grant program, provides grants in amounts up to \$5,000 to support research salaries, scholar honorarium, and other expenses for programs to inform the public about local history. Because of scarce funds, the council is currently able to award no more than 10 to 15 of these grants annually, a dramatic drop from the number awarded five years ago. An additional \$200,000 would allow them to triple that number. The story of the decline in this one category of grants at this one council is repeated throughout the nation, weakening the local cultural infrastructure as well as diminishing important community programming.

2) Students and teachers. With school systems cutting budgets and with professional development opportunities for teachers disappearing, state humanities councils provide an essential service with their support for curriculum development, teacher workshops and summer institutes, and online resources for teachers, as well as an array of classroom resources. In 2008, 35 teachers from all corners of the state participated in the Idaho Humanities Council's week-long summer institute, "'A Word for Nature': Exploring Environmental Literature." This year's institute will explore the history of the Supreme Court. One former participant described this engagement with scholars and fellow teachers as "a life-changing experience," and offered just one suggestion – "do MORE of these!" The council would happily take that advice if funding were available: An additional \$75,000 would allow the council to triple the number of institutes offered each year. In North Carolina, the humanities council has planned four weekend workshops and a week-long institute for teachers in 2009, which would engage 150 teachers for a total cost of \$250,000. Doubling these funds would benefit twice as many teachers. One former participant said the experience offered "an oasis in the demanding field of education,"

and another described it as “the number one professional development experience I have had in 31 years of teaching.” The impact on the thousands of students in classrooms led by these re-inspired teachers is incalculable.

3) Reading programs for families. Last year more than 100,000 American parents and children participated in council-supported reading programs, improving skills, deepening family bonds, and providing important opportunities to discuss ideas and values. The New York Council for the Humanities was able to provide support for just ten “Together - Book Talk for Kids and Parents” programs around the state to take place this spring, though they received 18 applications. With an additional \$250,000, the council could triple the number of pre-teen kids and their caregivers who participate in these programs. The Kentucky Humanities Council provided Prime Time Family Reading programs for nearly 350 families last year, at a cost of approximately \$100,000. Demand is such that with adequate funding, the council could immediately double the number of families served. Councils also provide adult literacy programs that improve the prospects for parents to develop a stronger reading climate for their children. The Oklahoma Humanities Council’s “Oklahoma Connections” program brings together scholars, librarians, literacy coordinators, adult new readers and tutors in a comfortable setting to explore books and ideas. The program, which includes many at-risk teenagers and ESL students, offers many of its participants the first opportunity they have ever had to discuss books and ideas in a group setting. Last year the Oklahoma council served 310 participants in these programs, a number that could be doubled with a mere \$12,000 in additional funds.

4) Community conversations. Councils across the country make it possible for citizens to come together to address issues related to the economy, health care, demographics, energy, and our schools, through discussions informed by history and literature. Such in-depth explorations of critical and potentially divisive issues serve purposes far beyond just creating more thoughtful and better-informed citizens. They also increase citizen engagement in public life and bring citizens together to work toward common goals in shaping the future of their community and nation. The Arizona Humanities Council believes this is so important that in 2008 they launched Project Civil Discourse, “a statewide effort to create respectful dialogue and discourse on public issues.” Working with a broad array of partners, including the Arizona School Boards Association, Arizona Town Hall, and the Arizona State University Center for Civic Education and Leadership, among many others, the council offers training, forums on specific topics, speaker presentations, book discussions and special events that model and provide insight into collaborative problem-solving techniques.

To ensure depth and seriousness of reflection, some councils have selected topics of specific concern to citizens of their states and shaped year-long events to explore each topic. The Illinois Humanities Council conducted such an initiative on the meaning of the genetics revolution, involving 34 partner organizations in presenting 19 programs across the state at a cost of \$245,000, more than a third of which was raised from private sources. The evaluation of the project noted that “given our goal to get attendees thinking, talking, and learning more about genetics, we are very pleased that 86% said they talked to family, friends or colleagues about genetics since attending a program and 74% said attending a program led them to read a book or article about genetics.” The council is following up this year with a one-year series of programs entitled “All Consuming: Conversations on Oil and Water,” which invites citizens of the state to

join the council in using the humanities “to ask how access to, control and consumption of oil and water play out in the past, current, and future geopolitical environment.” The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities uses electronic media to initiate discussions through their “Backstory” radio call-in show, which features three prominent historians to provide perspective on “events happening around us every day.” Recent programs have featured discussions of the history of presidential transitions and the history of financial crisis.

5) New citizens and youth. The future success of our nation obviously rests on educating our youth to become engaged and informed citizens, but it also depends on engaging new citizens. Councils provide invaluable programs for these citizens to learn about their new culture and form of government and for the long-time residents to learn about the cultures of their new neighbors. The Nebraska Humanities Council, as part of a multi-year initiative looking at the changing demographics of their state, devoted a full year to the exploration of the opportunities and barriers that today’s immigrants face, particularly as compared with earlier generations of immigrants; appreciation of new immigrant cultures and histories; and developing partnerships between new ethnic organizations and established institutions within communities. The council established a board of scholars to help potential grantees, organized a bureau of speakers on pertinent topics, established online resources, and awarded grants for conferences, exhibits, reading and discussion groups, and films. The program has reached more than 25,000 teachers, students, and members of the public to date and could easily involve twice that number with adequate funding.

Several councils have shaped programs for teens and young adults, helping to give them a voice in the future direction of their communities. The California council’s “How I See It” initiative encourages youth to share, in their own words and through a variety of media, what their lives are like, what they care about, and what it is like growing up in today’s California. The project enables youth to begin to express themselves and shape their observations about their world through documentary film and internet resources. The Humanities Council of Washington DC explicitly challenges young people to get involved in public life with its five-year-old youth leadership program known as “The Soul of the City,” which targets DC public school students from economically depressed areas of the city. The 15-to-18-year-old students are encouraged to define key political, social, and community challenges and propose methods of resolution and change. This year 59 DC students are enrolled in the program, a number that could be doubled with an additional \$70,000.

This is just a sampling of the countless ways in which programs supported and conducted by the state humanities councils transform lives, connect communities, and enrich the nation. 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.