

# Humanities Organizations and COVID-19

While facing enormous challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, humanities organizations are stepping up to serve their communities during this time.

Though the CARES Act provided \$75 million for humanities organizations, both the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the state humanities councils have reported overwhelming need. The NEH was only able to fund 14 percent of applications received, while on average the state councils have only been able to fund 38 percent.

Humanities organizations such as museums, historic sites, and historical societies are facing major economic challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This will lead to significant job losses and the collapse of many organizations.

- For many organizations, canceled fundraisers and the loss of the summer tourism season could prove devastating. In Lafayette, Indiana, the Tippecanoe County Historical Association has had to cancel all school and paid programs, as well as fundraising events. In Alaska, the Talkeetna Historical Society and Museum relies on summer ticket sales to fund its work throughout the rest of the year.
- If able to re-open, these organizations will incur additional costs for the cleaning required for sterilization. Those that have furloughed and laid off employees wonder how they can afford to re-hire and provide training in new safety protocols, especially when social distancing requirements and public fear all but guarantee lower ticket sales.

If a large number of cultural organizations fail, the repercussions will extend far beyond the individual employees to the broader communities, especially low-income and rural communities.

- Humanities organizations provide jobs, boost tourism, and offer educational opportunities for all age groups. They offer school tours and host summer camps for children and lectures and discussion programs for adults.
- Without staff and institutions to protect historical collections, our cultural heritage will be at significant risk of deterioration. The vast majority of collections are not digitized in any way—especially those held by small institutions, which predominantly collect and represent the history of rural and minority communities.

The American Alliance of Museums estimates that as many as 30% of museums will not survive this crisis.

Despite pressing financial challenges, humanities organizations are rising to the needs of the present moment and serving their communities in unprecedented ways.

Humanities organizations are engaging with the present moment by helping people make sense of the current crisis and ensuring that our own history is preserved for future generations.

- In 2019, the NN Cannery History Project commemorated the 100-year anniversary of the 1918–1919 Spanish flu pandemic. Since the COVID-19 crisis began, the project has been asked to draw on this history to help local and national press better understand the current crisis and the threats it poses to Alaska.
- Many organizations are working to document the ongoing crisis. The Litchfield Historical Society is documenting the COVID-19 crisis in Litchfield, Connecticut by collecting diaries, artworks, images, and oral histories that will preserve the town’s experience for future generations. In Rabun Gap, Georgia, the Foxfire Center is collecting oral histories that document the pandemic in Appalachia.

Humanities organizations are moving their work online in order to continue serving the public.

- The Clemente Course in the Humanities, which offers credit-bearing humanities courses to low-income adults throughout the U.S., has pivoted to online courses. Doing so has necessitated purchasing hot spots for the participants who lacked internet access, many of whom are veterans and/or essential workers. Seventy-five percent of the programs are still running. One participant, who commutes two hours to work by public transit, has been dialing in from the subway.
- Nationwide, humanities organizations are creating virtual programs and materials that can be used by educators. In Columbus, Georgia, the Columbus Museum has created a virtual museum—a resource that offers online talks and exhibition tours as well as activities for children and educational materials for teachers. New York City’s Tenement Museum is offering programs for people of all ages that illuminate the history of immigration to the United States and draw ties between the Spanish Flu pandemic and our current circumstances.

Humanities organizations are going above and beyond their missions to support their communities through this crisis.

- Humanities organizations and departments have used their resources to fabricate PPE, which they have donated to local hospitals in addition to gloves and masks from their stores.
- Others are turning to care for the senior citizens who make up their volunteer force. In Holyoke, Massachusetts, the local museum is working to provide trainings and a sense of community for its many volunteers, most of whom are now homebound. In Chicago, Illinois, and Dallas, Texas, humanities organizations are delivering food to elderly and homebound members of their communities. And a museum in Phoenix, Arizona, is collecting and donating food to its tribal partners, who have been strongly impacted by the virus.

“We are one of the largest cultural institutions in our three-county area of rural Iowa.

As such, we provide professional exhibitions, educational programs, and engaging events for an under-served audience. Our ability to resume a robust programming schedule for our local and regional audience will depend on keeping our staff on payroll, and having the resources to plan and implement quality programs.”

—Tova Brandt, Executive Director,  
Museum of Danish America

