May 18, 2009

The Honorable Edward M. Kennedy  The Honorable Mike Enzi
Chairman  Ranking Member
Committee on Health, Education, Labor,  Committee on Health, Education, Labor,
and Pensions  and Pensions
Washington, DC  20510  Washington, DC  20510

Dear Chairman Kennedy, Ranking Member Enzi, and Members of the Committee:

We are writing to respectfully present our views on the pending reauthorization of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), which is due to be reauthorized by September 30, 2009.

As you may be aware, IMLS is the primary federal agency responsible for supporting the nation’s 17,500+ museums. The IMLS Office of Museum Services serves museums of all kinds – aquariums, arboretums, archaeological museums, art museums, botanical gardens, children’s museums, culturally specific museums, historic sites, history museums, maritime museums, military museums, natural history museums, nature centers, planetariums, science and technology centers, zoological parks, and other specialty museums.

The broad and diverse museum field – including national, regional, and state museum associations – has worked together to establish a package of proposed reforms to the IMLS statute. Several of these reforms are tied to specific increases in the annual appropriations level to ensure that existing programs can be strengthened while the types of support available to our nation’s museums can be expanded. Our proposals are:

1. Authorize $95 million for the Office of Museum Services

We support a significant new investment in our nation’s museums. Specifically, we urge Congress to build towards a reauthorization level of $95 million for the Office of Museum Services at IMLS, with a first-year (FY10) authorization level of at least $50 million.

The Office of Museum Services at IMLS has been woefully underfunded over the years, with current funding at $35 million (and current authorization at $38.6 million). Although the agency has been successful in creating and supporting advancements in areas such as technology, lifelong community learning, conservation and preservation efforts, much more needs to be done. Only a small fraction of the nation’s museums are currently being reached, and many highly rated grant applications go unfunded each year. In 2008, for example:

- Only 9 of the 40 applications received for African American History and Culture were funded (22.5%).
- Only 9 of the 50 applications received for 21st Century Museum Professionals were funded (18%).
• Only 34 of the 109 applications received for Conservation Project Support were funded (31.2%).
• Only 158 of the 415 applications received for Museums for America were funded (38.1%).

2. Strengthen National Programs
A significant new federal investment in museums would allow for enhanced investments in pivotal areas, such as technology upgrades, lifelong learning, capacity building, preservation and conservation of important collections, community engagement, data collection, and the development of the next generation of museum professionals.

The educational role of museums is at the core of their service to the public, and this new investment would help strengthen vital educational programming. Museums currently spend more than $1 billion annually on K-12 educational programming. In fact, museums offer educational programs in math, science, art, literacy, language arts, history, civics and government, economics and financial literacy, geography, and social studies, nearly always in coordination with state and local curriculum standards. And museums move beyond K-12 by serving Americans of all ages in a variety of ways.

Teachers, students, and researchers benefit from increased access to trustworthy information through online collections and exhibits, although most museums need more help in digitizing collections to meet this need. This is especially important when geographical distance prevents travel to a wide range of museums.

3. Conduct State Needs Assessments
Each state faces unique challenges in helping museums serve the public. Most states do not have an agency, commission, or department that specifically gathers information about the state’s museums or addresses their needs.

We recommend a set-aside of $2 million per year — once the appropriations level reaches $45 million — to conduct State Needs Assessments. We believe these assessments will:
• Leverage funding from both public and private sources
• Enhance data collection on museums
• Ensure museums are healthy and stable institutions that benefit the nation’s citizens
• Broaden the reach of museums into every community
• Help coordinate efforts on related statewide efforts, such as school outreach and the promotion of travel and tourism.

The needs assessments are an important step toward establishing a program to provide grants directly to each state (see #5 below).

4. Conservation, Traveling Exhibits, and Helping Smaller Museums
As the appropriations level rises from $45 million to $72 million, we recommend authorizing new IMLS grants for conservation endowment and traveling exhibitions, and we support an effort to help small museums more effectively compete for federal grants.
A greater investment in conservation is essential to preserve our nation’s precious museum collections. The 2005 Heritage Health Index concluded that immediate action is needed to prevent the loss of 190 million artifacts that are in need of conservation treatment.

- 59% have collections damaged by light.
- 56% have insufficient security to protect their collections.
- 80% do not have an emergency plan that includes collections.
- 71% need additional training and expertise for staff caring for collections.
- Only 13% have access to endowment funds for preservation.

Especially in these challenging economic times, when museums across the nation are facing cutbacks, layoffs, and reductions in programming and community services, traveling exhibitions provides a terrific opportunity to bring museum-quality educational programming to all communities.

Smaller museums face difficulties in applying for and then administering complex grants. Both processes can take significant amounts of time and are a demand on limited resources. This is compounded by the fact that insufficient funding is available each year for IMLS to distribute, even to highly rated applicants.

We therefore recommend that IMLS develop an easier, more accessible process for smaller museums to apply for grant funding. This might include streamlined paperwork requirements or even, in certain circumstances, reducing the match requirement.

5. Authorize a State Grant Program to Support Museums

Museums of all sizes, disciplines, and geographic locations have varying needs, and not every state currently has a statewide entity to address its needs.

Once the annual appropriations level exceeds $72 million, we support giving the IMLS Director the authority to provide up to $20 million of any annual appropriation in excess of $72 million to create a state grant program. Such a program would include states that have completed their needs assessments and have an IMLS-approved five-year plan on how the funds would be used. Once the appropriations level exceeds $92 million, the IMLS Director would have discretion to provide up to 50% of any additional funds toward the state grant program.

As stated above in #3, a coordinated state-wide approach to supporting museums would make important museum programming and services more widely available, regardless of geographic location or the size of an institution. A recent study by the IMLS, *Exhibiting Public Value: Government Funding for Museums in the United States*, found a complex patchwork of support for our nation’s museums. The study also exposed gaps in the network of support at the local, state, and national levels.

We believe that authorizing this new program would address these issues and help museums to better serve the public. We also support evaluating the state grant program after it has been in existence for two years to evaluate its progress and viability.
We look forward to working with you to ensure the reauthorization of IMLS, and urge your strong consideration of our shared vision for the future of museums in our nation. If you would like any additional information about this issue, please contact AAM’s Government Relations team at 202-289-1818.

Sincerely,

**National Museum Organizations:**
American Association of Museums
American Association of Museum Volunteers
American Association for State and Local History
American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works
American Public Gardens Association
Association of African American Museums
Association of Art Museum Directors
Association of Children’s Museums
Association of College and University Museums and Galleries
Association of Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums
Association of Railway Museums
Association of Science Museum Directors
Association of Science-Technology Centers
Association of Zoos and Aquariums
Council of American Jewish Museums
Council of American Maritime Museums
International Museum Theater Alliance
Museum Computer Network
Museum Trustee Association

**Regional Museum Associations:**
Association of Midwest Museums
Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums
Mountain-Plains Museums Association
New England Museum Association
Southeastern Museums Conference
Mid-America Arts Alliance

**State Museum Associations:**
Alabama Museums Association
Museums Alaska
Museum Association of Arizona
Arkansas Museums Association
California Association of Museums
Colorado-Wyoming Association of Museums
Delaware Museum Association
Florida Association of Museums
Hawai‘i Museums Association
Association of Indiana Museums
Kansas Museums Association
Kentucky Historical Society Foundation
Kentucky Museum and Heritage Alliance
Louisiana Association of Museums
Michigan Museums Association
Minnesota Association of Museums
Mississippi Museums Association
Missouri Museums Association
Museums Association of Montana
Nevada Museums Association
New Mexico Association of Museums
Museum Association of New York
North Carolina Museums Council
Museums in North Dakota
Ohio Museums Association
Ohio Historical Society
Oklahoma Museums Association
Oregon Museums Association
Pennsylvania Federation of Museums and Historical Organizations
South Carolina Federation of Museums
Texas Association of Museums
Utah Museums Association
Vermont Museum and Gallery Alliance
Virginia Association of Museums
West Virginia Association of Museums