

Open Letter from Directors of Arts and Cultural Institutions Across Montana

Across Montana, an extraordinary thing occurs daily—people of all ages, backgrounds, and political affiliations visit museums, galleries, and art centers, discovering inspiration, connection, awe, and joy through arts and culture.

We have the privilege of welcoming classes of kids and watching their eyes grow wide with wonder. When we put sculpture in public spaces, people stop to ask about the artist and take pictures to share with their friends. Visitors to Montana are amazed to find vibrant local artists and exhibitions.

These powerful moments are not just stories — they are the soul of our cultural institutions throughout the state. Unfortunately, right now, our cultural institutions are threatened.

Museums across the country recently received letters canceling grants already received from the National Endowment of Arts (NEA), National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), and Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). These granting institutions are the bedrock of cultural funding nationwide.

The administration has recommended zero funding for the three Federally authorized cultural agencies for FGY26, which would have a strong, significant impact on arts and cultural institutions in Montana.

What's at stake is not just programs or places, it is the shared experiences that connect us, the histories that define us, and the spaces that invite us to dream, reflect, and belong.

The elimination of critical federal funding and entire cultural agencies jeopardize more than budgets. Programs that amplify unsung voices, foster understanding, create cohesion and cooperation between organizations, and bring vital learning to communities in Montana and across the country would be endangered.

The arts are not luxuries. They are a sacred part of being human, are essential to civic life and public well-being, and fuel our economy. Montana's artists and arts organizations add approximately \$2.4 billion dollars in value to Montana, along with 20,269 jobs, representing nearly 3.3% of the state's GDP (National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, Creative Economy Profiles, https://nasaa-arts.org/nasaa_research/creative-economy-state-profiles). Montana museums, galleries, and art centers foster tourism, bolster education, and contribute to the health and wellbeing of our communities. Research shows that students benefit from improved academic outcomes through museum programs, and cultural engagement reduces social isolation and improves mental health.

Beyond the numbers, the state's museums, galleries, and art centers offer vital spaces for gathering, education, healing, and community. Just as importantly, museums are among the few

places of common ground in a polarized world. People of all backgrounds come together to explore ideas, reckon with history, and experience beauty. At their best, museums, galleries, and art centers embody democratic ideals: openness, inclusion, truth, and the belief that progress comes through knowledge and empathy. Arts institutions create space for dialogue, discovery, and a shared vision for a better future. This work is essential, especially when it challenges us and sparks debate.

The arts are non-Partisan. Historically, leaders from all political backgrounds have recognized that a thriving cultural sector strengthens democracy and national identity. From the founding of the Smithsonian to the creation of the NEA, IMLS, and NEH, our government has long supported—not controlled—cultural expression.

This is a crucial moment—the artists and art we support, as well as the connections our communities make through the arts, are by the people, for the people, and reflect the complicated, messy, and multifaceted ideals of democracy, and should not be a political football. As arts and museum professionals, we will not retreat. We consider defunding of cultural institutions across our county an attack on our collective memory and democratic ideals. We urge people to come together and collectively uplift and support all our institutions in this time of uncertainty and need.

The cultural work we do reminds us that we are all Montanans. Though our work is complex and difficult, it expresses our sense of worth, stewards our historical artifacts, tells our stories, drives tourism, and builds community. The importance of cultural work is exemplified when we elevate the voices of the youth in our community.

But we cannot do it alone. Contact your representatives and speak out about grant cancellations and lobby for reinstatement of the NEA, NEH and IMLS in the FY26 budget. Meanwhile, visit your local museums, galleries, and art centers. Support institutions through donations, memberships or time.

What's at stake is more than funding. It's our shared history and our empathy, and our right to tell the American story.

From the Undersigned,

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Nicole Maria Evans, Interim Executive Director & Chief Curator, Paris Gibson Square Museum of Art, Great Falls

David Hiltner, Executive Director, Red Lodge Clay Center

Sarah Justice, Executive Director, Zootown Arts Community Center, Missoula

Alissa Kost, Executive Director, Montana Art Gallery Directors Association

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