

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

April 21, 2025

Mr. Michael McDonald
Acting Chairman
National Endowment for the Humanities
400 7th St. SW
Washington, DC 20506

Dear Mr. McDonald,

We write with concern over the impacts of recent cuts in staffing at the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and attempts to cancel NEH grants in Massachusetts and across the country. During the week of April 1, 2025, on the apparent recommendation of Elon Musk's so-called Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), you put the majority of the agency's staff on administrative leave and canceled hundreds of grants, actions which will have devastating impacts on our nation's cultural institutions and scholarship.¹ This shortsighted action will save the United States what amounts to "a rounding error in the U.S. budget" but will harm people, organizations, and communities throughout the country.² We write to seek answers about why you are crippling an agency that punches so far above its weight and is essential to enabling access to libraries, museums, archives, historic sites and more for Massachusetts residents and Americans in every state.

On April 1, 2025, staff members at the NEH were made aware that DOGE recommended cutting as much as 70 to 80 percent of agency staff and canceling nearly all active grants made under the Biden administration.³ One day later, state humanities councils and other grant recipients started receiving emails notifying them that their funding would be terminated immediately, and that the Trump administration would be "repurposing its funding allocations in a new direction in furtherance of the president's agenda."⁴ On April 3, 2025, you reportedly told senior leadership that up to 85 percent of NEH grants would be canceled, and that moving forward, reporting indicates that your agency plans to "focus on patriotic programming."⁵ On the same day,

¹ The New York Times, "DOGE Demands Deep Cuts at Humanities Endowment," Jennifer Schuessler, April 1, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/01/arts/trump-doge-federal-cuts-humanities.html>; The New York Times, "Trump Administration Moves to Cut Humanities Endowment," Jennifer Schuessler, April 3, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/03/arts/humanities-grants-canceled-doge.html>; National Public Radio, "National Endowment for the Humanities staff put on immediate leave," Elizabeth Blair, April 4, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/04/04/nx-s1-5352422/neh-staff-administrative-leave>.

² National Humanities Alliance, "NHA Statement on Threats to the NEH," April 1, 2025, <https://nhalliance.org/nha-statement-neh-doge-threats/>.

³ The New York Times, "DOGE Demands Deep Cuts at Humanities Endowment," Jennifer Schuessler, April 1, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/01/arts/trump-doge-federal-cuts-humanities.html>.

⁴ The New York Times, "Trump Administration Moves to Cut Humanities Endowment," Jennifer Schuessler, April 3, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/03/arts/humanities-grants-canceled-doge.html>.

⁵ *Id.*

employees began to receive notices putting them on administrative leave.⁶ According to reporting, an NEH official has “said that ‘no upcoming awards’ will be made in fiscal year 2025.”⁷

The NEH was founded by Congress in 1965 to “promote progress and scholarship in the humanities and the arts in the United States.”⁸ The humanities “explore, interpret, and preserve the diversity of human cultures, ideas, practices and experiences, past and present” and include fields such as “history, philosophy, language, ethics, archaeology, political theory, jurisprudence, comparative religion, and the humanistic social sciences.”⁹ The NEH enables work in the humanities by funding libraries, museums, archives, historic sites, media outlets, research institutions, educators and independent scholars.¹⁰ Congress appropriates NEH program funds that go directly to benefit local communities.¹¹ As the National Humanities Alliance put it, cutting these funds “directly harms communities in every state and contributes to the destruction of our shared cultural heritage.”¹²

From fiscal year 2019 through 2023, the NEH issued over \$46 million in grants to organizations and individuals that supported 311 projects in Massachusetts.¹³ These include:

- A National Park Service program to explore the impact of war on naval veterans, their families, and the country at the USS Constitution Museum in Boston, Massachusetts.¹⁴
- A project conducted by the Appalachian Mountain Club to archive and preserve trail maps, photographs, writings, log books, and scrapbooks of early journalists and outdoorspeople to document over 140 years of wilderness experience in Western Massachusetts and New England.¹⁵

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ National Public Radio, “Cultural groups across U.S. told that federal humanities grants are terminated,” Elizabeth Blair, April 3, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/04/03/nx-s1-5350994/neh-grants-cut-humanities-doge-trump>.

⁸ National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965, Public Law 89-209.

⁹ National Endowment for the Humanities, “About the National Endowment for the Humanities,” <https://www.neh.gov/about>; National Endowment for the Humanities, Fiscal Year 2024 Congressional Justification, March 2023, p. 3, <https://www.neh.gov/sites/default/files/inline-files/NEH%20FY%202024%20CJ%20%281%29.pdf>.

¹⁰ National Public Radio, “Cultural groups across U.S. told that federal humanities grants are terminated,” Elizabeth Blair, April 3, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/04/03/nx-s1-5350994/neh-grants-cut-humanities-doge-trump>; National Endowment for the Humanities, “About the National Endowment for the Humanities,” <https://www.neh.gov/about>.

¹¹ *Id.*; The New York Times, “DOGE Demands Deep Cuts at Humanities Endowment,” Jennifer Schuessler, April 1, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/01/arts/trump-doge-federal-cuts-humanities.html>; National Endowment for the Humanities, “State and Jurisdictional Humanities Councils,” <https://www.neh.gov/about/state-humanities-councils>.

¹² National Humanities Alliance, “NHA Statement on Threats to the NEH,” April 1, 2025, <https://nhalliance.org/nha-statement-neh-doge-threats/>.

¹³ National Endowment for the Humanities, “Impact by the Numbers for Massachusetts,” August 2024, <https://www.neh.gov/sites/default/files/2024-08/Massachusetts.pdf>.

¹⁴ National Park Service, “Sailor’s Speak: Conversations with the Military Community,” <https://www.nps.gov/planyourvisit/event-details.htm?id=316B1C79-FF7D-220E-EEB28321EAF49B1>; National Endowment for the Humanities, “National Endowment for the Humanities Grant Awards and Offers, April 2021,” p. 16, <https://www.neh.gov/sites/default/files/inline-files/NEH%20grant%20awards%20April%202021%20state%20by%20state.pdf>.

¹⁵ Western Massachusetts Appalachian Mountain Club, “AMC Timeline of Significant Events,” <https://www.amc-wma.org/timeline.cgi>; National Endowment for the Humanities, “August 2020 Awards in Preservation & Access,” Division of Preservation and Access Staff, July 30, 2020, <https://www.neh.gov/blog/august-2020-awards->

- A preservation assistance grant at the Old Sturbridge Village Museum to prevent the loss of papers, business accounts, town records, and diaries related to daily life in rural New England from the eighteenth through twentieth centuries.¹⁶
- A feature length documentary exploring the role of Jewish women’s slave labor during the Holocaust, including writings from a historical diary and interviews with dozens of women survivors produced by the Center for Independent Documentary in Newton, Massachusetts.¹⁷
- A training program for teachers focused on the American industrial revolution through hands-on learning and field investigations in the historic textile mills at the Lowell, Massachusetts National Historic Park.¹⁸
- A grant to collect, clean, and standardize descriptions of over 120,000 cultural resources like drawings, prints, furniture, needlework, textiles, ceramics and more, stewarded by the Massachusetts Five Colleges Consortium and neighboring Historic Deerfield Museum Consortium.¹⁹

During the week of April 1, grants were suddenly terminated without warning. One Massachusetts researcher who received a termination notice contacted our offices, saying *“it’s devastating to see [the funding] revoked so cavalierly and callously,”* adding that this sudden termination *“constitutes a significant financial burden for me, as I have to continue to support my family and pay our bills, including a mortgage.”*²⁰ Another Massachusetts faculty researcher explained that *“The loss of this funding has disrupted the final stages of my project and placed serious strain on my ability to meet professional milestones, especially as a minority junior scholar who is in the process of trying to obtain tenure.”*²¹ The effects are widely-felt, with one of our constituents saying, *“this so-called effort in the name of efficiency has squandered the time, effort, energies, and futures of teachers, researchers, and students.”*²²

NEH-funded projects in Massachusetts—from funding research projects to better understand the history of Massachusetts and its role in the American Revolution to supporting museums’ efforts

preservation-access.

¹⁶ Old Sturbridge Village, <https://www.osv.org/>; National Endowment for the Humanities, “National Endowment for the Humanities Grant Awards and Offers, August 2019,” press release, p. 20, <https://www.neh.gov/sites/default/files/inline-files/NEH-Grant-Awards-August-2019-PDF.pdf>.

¹⁷ Center for Independent Documentary, “My Underground Mother,” <https://www.documentaries.org/films/my-underground-mother/>; My Underground Mother, “A Mighty Band of Sisters,” <https://myundergroundmother.com/our-subjects>; National Endowment for the Humanities, “National Endowment for the Humanities Grant Awards and Offers, August 2023,” p. 22, <https://www.neh.gov/sites/default/files/inline-files/NEH%20grant%20awards%20August%202023.pdf>.

¹⁸ UMass Lowell, “Lowell’s Place in U.S. History the Focus of Teacher Professional Development Workshops: K-12 Educators Across the Country May Apply for Programs,” press release, February 8, 2021, <https://www.uml.edu/news/press-releases/2021/tihcworkshops020821.aspx>; National Endowment for the Humanities, “National Endowment for the Humanities Grant Awards and Offers, August 2019,” p. 19, <https://www.neh.gov/sites/default/files/inline-files/NEH-Grant-Awards-August-2019-PDF.pdf>.

¹⁹ Historic Deerfield, “Collections,” <https://www.historic-deerfield.org/collections/>; Five College Consortium, “Museums10,” <https://www.fivecolleges.edu/museums10>; National Endowment for the Humanities, “National Endowment for the Humanities Grant Awards and Offers, April 2023,” p. 16, <https://www.neh.gov/sites/default/files/inline-files/NEH%20grant%20awards%20April%202023%20state%20by%20state%20list.pdf>.

²⁰ On file with the office of Senator Elizabeth Warren.

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.*

to digitize, archive, and modernize the products of Massachusetts art and culture—have enriched our state’s ability to capture and preserve history and culture, promote new knowledge and learning, and make the humanities more accessible. But the attacks on NEH will destroy this work: as one of our constituents who had her project in historical research and preservation terminated expressed, actions that hobble ***“all the libraries, museums, and scholarly projects that have long been supported...[by] NEH are not just doing immediate harm, they are impacting access to full, nuanced, and truthful information about the complexities of America’s past and present, long into the future.”***²³

Your actions do not only take away support from researchers, but also make it harder for this valuable research to reach the public. NEH funding helps researchers publish their research once it is complete. As one Massachusetts research institution explained, NEH ***helps researchers have a far-reaching impact once their work published and without NEH funding, there’s not a lot of other avenues for people to seek this support.***²⁴ The NEH cuts are putting tremendous financial strain on researchers, universities, and institutions. According to one institution in Massachusetts, the termination notices sent to individual recipients of NEH grants included language that the individuals will remain “subject to audit”—and recipients are now scared that they will ***have to repay \$60,000 to NEH in some indefinite future.***²⁵ Constituents expressed concern to our offices that the administration would request that they *repay* the NEH for grants that have been active since the beginning of 2025—and have already been paid out. ***“There’s no pot of money for that to come from... that leads to us having to let people go,”***²⁶ said one Massachusetts institution.

In addition to funding grants directly, the NEH provides 31 percent of the operating budget for Mass Humanities, the local Massachusetts humanities council.²⁷ In 2023, Mass Humanities provided more than \$2.3 million in funding to 125 non-profit organizations in the Commonwealth.²⁸ These included a Springfield, Massachusetts non-profit capturing stories, photographs, and videos of caregivers and people living with dementia; a non-profit based out of Boston’s Chinatown creating a public art exhibit from the neighborhood’s community heritage archive; a New Bedford, Massachusetts non-profit curating stories from the local immigrant fishing communities; and grants in dozens of communities all over the Commonwealth.²⁹ In the first week of April 2025, Mass Humanities—just like every one of the 56 state and jurisdictional humanities councils—received a letter notifying them that their funding had been terminated.³⁰

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ Mass Humanities, <https://masshumanities.org/>; Mass Humanities, “2023 Annual Report,” p. 19, <https://masshumanities.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/MH-2023-annual-report.pdf>.

²⁸ Mass Humanities, “2023 Annual Report,” p. 2, <https://masshumanities.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/MH-2023-annual-report.pdf>.

²⁹ Mass Humanities, “Latest Round of Stories Grants Announced,” press release, October 5, 2023, <https://masshumanities.org/support-for-42-new-narratives-about-massachusetts-communities/>.

³⁰ USA Today, “States scramble after Trump’s ‘devastating’ cuts to humanities grants,” Sarah D. Wire, April 5, 2025, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2025/04/05/trump-administration-cancels-humanities-grants/82865816007/>.

These actions at NEH mark another instance of overreach by the Trump administration, causing more destruction and devastation to research institutions and scholars across the country, but providing little in savings. We have already expressed serious concerns with the Trump administration's attempts to terminate research grants and claw back congressionally appropriated funding at other agencies.³¹ Federal judges previously have blocked Trump administration attempts to cut or freeze congressionally-appropriated funds, stating that such actions "potentially run roughshod over a 'bulwark of the Constitution' by interfering with Congress's appropriation of federal funds."³² Numerous legal challenges to potentially illegal funding cuts and firings by the Trump administration continue to work their way through the courts.³³

We are deeply concerned about the impacts of the NEH's grant cuts on our communities, and demand an explanation for your recent actions. Therefore, we ask that you answer the following questions by May 12, 2025:

1. Please describe the process for issuing directives at your agency related to disbursement of funds. Who is involved in these decisions and what considerations are taken into account when processes around disbursement of funds are changed?
2. Please describe the process for issuing directives related to the termination of existing grants. Who is involved in these decisions and what considerations are taken into account when determining which existing grants and open solicitations are implicated? Will any opportunities be given to appeal termination decisions?
3. Regarding grants that have been terminated but remain "subject to audit":
 - a. Does the administration plan to seek repayment of funds that have already been disbursed?
 - b. Please provide the timetable on which this audit is expected to conclude.
4. In the termination letters received by grant recipients, you stated that grant terminations were a necessary step in "the furtherance of the President's agenda."³⁴ Please describe which elements of President Trump's agenda the terminations would further and how, and please include relevant Executive Orders.
5. How many termination letters were sent to grantees that have completed scheduled work and received reimbursement for 100% of this work?
6. Please describe whether and how organizations will be subject to audit.

³¹ Letter from Senators Elizabeth Warren and Ed Markey to NIH Acting Director Matthew Memoli and NSF Director Sethuraman Panchanathan, February 12, 2025, https://www.warren.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/warren_markey_letter_to_nih_nsf_on_funding_cuts.pdf; Letter from Senator Elizabeth Warren to NIH Acting Director Matthew Memoli and NIH Director Nominee Jay Bhattacharya on March 19, 2025, https://www.warren.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/follow-up_letter_from_senator_warren_to_nih_on_funding_cuts_and_freezes.pdf.

³² The New York Times, "Judge Further Blocks White House Spending Freeze," Charles Savage, February 3, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/03/us/politics/white-house-spending-freeze-omb-judge.html>; National Council of Nonprofits, et al., v. Office of Management and Budget, et al., Civil Action No. 25 - 239 (LLA), p. 26, https://storage.courtlistener.com/recap/gov.uscourts.dcd.276842/gov.uscourts.dcd.276842.30.0_3.pdf.

³³ Just Security, "Litigation Tracker: Legal Challenges to Trump Administration Actions," April 18, 2025, <https://www.justsecurity.org/107087/tracker-litigation-legal-challenges-trump-administration/>.

³⁴ The New Republic, "Here's What One of Trump's Grantee Termination Letters Looks Like," Natalia Mehlman Petrzela, April 8, 2025, <https://newrepublic.com/article/193628/trump-grantee-termination-letters-education>.

7. Reporting indicates that your agency stated that “no upcoming awards” will be made in fiscal year 2025.³⁵
 - a. Is this accurate?
 - b. If this reporting is accurate, please describe the process leading to this decision, including what considerations are taken into account when determining which existing grant programs and open solicitations are implicated.
8. Reporting has indicated that, moving forward, the NEH agency “would focus on patriotic programming.”³⁶
 - a. Is this reporting accurate?
 - b. If this reporting is accurate, please describe how you plan to determine whether future grant proposals are patriotic or not patriotic.
 - c. Please provide a description and examples of “patriotic programming.”
9. If a court orders NEH to reinstate staff, do you commit to fully reinstating the staff on administrative leave?
10. Going forward, what sort of relationship does the NEH intend to have with the state and jurisdictional humanities councils? What sort of funding opportunities does the NEH plan to offer the humanities councils going forward?

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Ayanna Pressley
Member of Congress



Seth Moulton
Member of Congress



Stephen F. Lynch
Member of Congress



James P. McGovern
Member of Congress



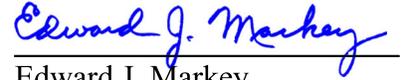
Richard E. Neal
Member of Congress

³⁵ National Public Radio, “Cultural groups across U.S. told that federal humanities grants are terminated,” Elizabeth Blair, April 3, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/04/03/nx-s1-5350994/neh-grants-cut-humanities-doge-trump>.

³⁶ The New York Times, “Trump Administration Moves to Cut Humanities Endowment,” Jennifer Schuessler, April 3, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/03/arts/humanities-grants-canceled-doge.html>.



Lori Trahan
Member of Congress



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



William R. Keating
Member of Congress



Jake Auchincloss
Member of Congress