

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On Wisdom and Vision:

Humanities Organizations in Illinois during COVID-19



MARCH 2021



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Overview

The 177 nonprofit public humanities grantee partners featured in *On Wisdom and Vision: Humanities Organizations in Illinois During COVID-19*, have been profoundly impacted by COVID-19 operationally and programmatically. This group lost an estimated \$9,742,000 in revenue in 2020 and 14% report fearing permanent closure. These organizations suffered significant audience loss, reaching 1,700,000 fewer people than they originally anticipated serving during 2020.

At this historic moment – when Illinois is reeling from the impacts of the pandemic, a racial reckoning, and economic devastation – the role of public humanities organizations is both urgent and profound.

Analysis of Illinois Humanities’

COVID-19 relief grantmaking of \$710,000, funded primarily by the National Endowment for the Humanities through the federal CARES Act, to 177 nonprofit public humanities organizations across the state, provides a snapshot of the impacts of COVID-19 and a window onto the ways in which organizations are mitigating the effects of the pandemic within their communities and across the state.

Report findings describe a public humanities ecosystem populated by diverse organizations working locally in ways that have heightened relevance during – and post – pandemic. Many grantee partners are operating in areas in which households struggle to make ends meet, and in which COVID-19 has had a devastating (and disproportionate) impact. Given the role these organizations are playing – and in some

cases have played for more than a century – there is a clear need to better support this sector, bring more visibility to its work and impact, and to invest in these organizations as community anchors which foster economic opportunity and build community resilience.

About public humanities organizations in Illinois

Humanities are necessary for democracy and for enabling us to imagine what we want in our society. Research shows public humanities organizations provide the kinds of experiences which enable participants to be “more likely to engage in civic life, and more likely to hold aspirations for improving the common good.”¹ Furthermore, public humanities organizations drive significant revenue, particularly in Illinois.

Nearly every county in Illinois

has a humanities organization and cultural assets; many are invisible to the funding and policy community. Rural communities, in particular, have historically received less visibility and funding in relation to their metro peers².

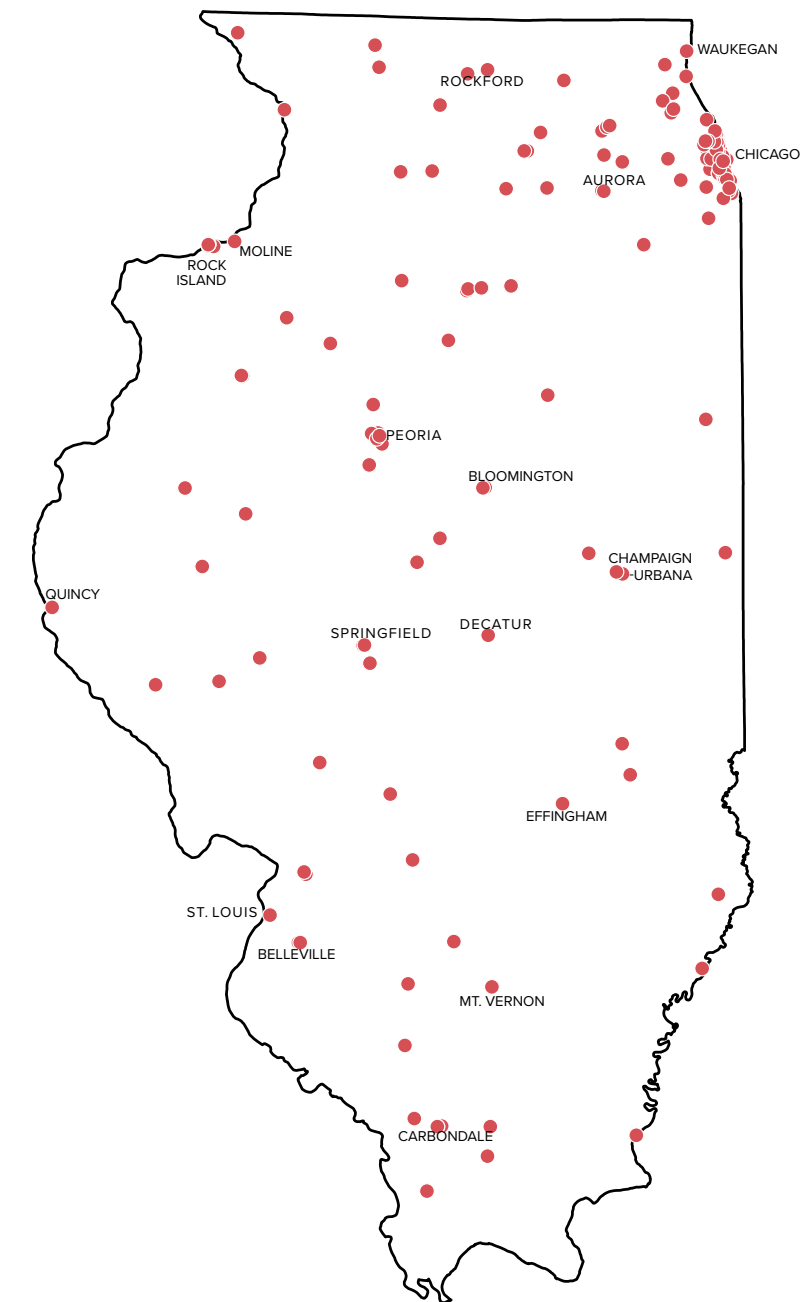
COVID-19 relief funding for the humanities in Illinois

The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) received \$75 million in supplemental funding to assist cultural institutions and humanists affected by COVID-19 as part of the \$2.2 trillion CARES Act economic stabilization plan; 40% of the appropriation (\$30 million) was directed to the 56 state and jurisdictional councils, based upon NEH’s standard population formula. As the state affiliate for the NEH, Illinois Humanities was tasked with distributing CARES Act relief funds and supplemented these dollars with money repurposed from general operations and dollars raised from private donors specifically for COVID-19 relief.

Illinois Humanities COVID-19 Emergency Relief Grants were available in three rounds between April and June, 2020. Organizations with budgets of up to \$1.5 million were eligible to apply for multiple grants.

- General Operating Grants awarded \$520,000 to 154 organizations for general operations including rent, payroll, utilities, etc;
- Program Innovation and Adaptation Grants totaling \$100,000 enabled twenty organizations to innovate, adapt, and increase access to their programming;
- Community Resilience grants awarded \$90,000 to fifteen organizations to make

Figure 1: Map of 177 Illinois Humanities grantee partners



The 177 grant organizations are located throughout Illinois. Many are found in population centers such as Chicago, Rockford, and Peoria. Others are in small and rural communities such as Shawneetown, Greenup, Rushville, Ipava, Utica, Bishop Hill, and Savanna.

community experiences during the pandemic visible and highlight local resiliency.

Relief grants served as singular opportunities for many organizations that were unable or ineligible to apply for other sources of federal, state or private philanthropic support due to size, location, or capacity.

“In the middle of April, we were notified we received the COVID-19 Emergency Relief Grant,” said Erin Eveland, executive director of The HUB - Arts and Cultural Center, in Rushville.

“The knowledge that we had some relief funds coming gave us the ability to move out of survival mode and become creative again.”

“Because of the funds... we were able to focus on what our community needed and how we could best serve them.”

Distribution of grant funds

Illinois Humanities COVID-19 relief grant funding patterns

follow the state’s population distribution. Grantee partners from Cook County received the largest proportion of grant dollars. However, when analyzed against funding-per-resident, counties with the largest dollars-per-resident figures tended to be less-densely populated counties (i.e. counties with fewer than 10,000 residents) such as Scott, Gallatin, Stark, Putnam, and Schuyler counties.

The vast majority of grantee partners have budgets well under the eligibility requirements of the Illinois Humanities COVID-19 relief funds: half of the grantee partners have annual budgets of less than \$100,000 and 82% have annual budgets of less than a half a million dollars. Given that COVID-19 relief grants ranged from \$2,500 to \$7,500, it is notable that for two out of three recipients, grant awards represented more than 5% of their annual budgets; thirty two organizations received total grant dollars representing more than 10% of their annual budgets and ten organizations received grants representing more than a quarter of their entire annual budget. These relatively “small” dollars had a significant impact.

Grantee partner contexts

Report analysis found that

when public humanities organizations in Illinois are mapped against demographic, geographic, and pandemic contexts, it becomes clear that humanities organizations are situated in communities that were under significant economic duress *prior* to the pandemic, and more than a third of grantees are located in places that have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19. Two thirds of the 177 grantees are located in zip codes where more than 35% of households struggle to afford basic needs and 29% are located in communities where the majority of households are experiencing poverty. Given the preponderance of grantee partners located in zip codes experiencing high levels of poverty, it may not be surprising that 38% of grantees are located in zip codes with more COVID-19 cases than the statewide average.

Grantee partner experiences

Grantee partners undertook activities that support stronger and more equitable communities including hiring humanists and artists, creating jobs, offering trainings, documenting and amplifying cultural identity and community narratives, reframing their roles in terms of why their missions matter, engaging communities in making, storytelling, and

creative expression, and using spaces in new ways.

By being extremely flexible, adaptable, and promoting inclusivity, grantees pivoted in-person programs to new media and modes of service, relieved isolation and enlivened communities, and resisted layoffs and staff reductions. They documented and amplified cultural identity and community narratives, engaged communities in creating, storytelling and creative expression and, in some cases, found new ways to understand why their work – and their missions – matter.

“We believe that these are historic times, our museum has a responsibility in helping our community members heal from the social disruption and stay connected to one another.”

said Sue Scott, director of the Western Illinois Museum, located in Macomb.

Illinois Humanities' COVID-19 relief grantee partners' experiences align with what we know about how humanities organizations respond during times of crisis. Grantee partners are serving as community anchors for trusted information, for mitigating social isolation, for enabling people to make and create objects and narratives that help them to process loss, trauma, and joy. They are also – while under significant duress – finding ways to incorporate new technologies and new modes for delivering on their missions.

Experiences described by grantee partners strongly align with national and international

research about the role and experiences of public humanities organizations during COVID-19 specifically, and in times of severe crises in general.³ Illinois public humanities organizations – like their national peers:

- Are looking for ways to work differently and in less isolation;
- Are excited about, and anticipate, opportunities for organizational transformation – particularly in terms of new modes of engagement and new audiences;
- Expect and want to give more attention to equity and inclusion;
- Have a strong desire to network and connect with peers through meet ups, trainings, and peer-skill-shares;
- Believe there is real value in developing a shared language and understanding of the overall landscape of humanities organizations.

Recommendations

Illinois Humanities is working to understand and learn from the intensive experience of this past year. The recommendations that follow are rooted in the reported experiences of grantee partners, research about the role of public humanities organizations in fostering social cohesion, well-being and community resilience, and analysis of grantee partners’ geographic, demographic, and pandemic contexts.

For Illinois Humanities

Our recommendations for ourselves at this time include:

- Increase our capacity to support peer-to-peer learning, technical assistance, and partnership infrastructure statewide;
- Look at the ways in which an equity lens, paired with data, can help inform grant making priorities;
- Evaluate the possibility of creating and maintaining a public directory of Illinois humanities organizations to bolster a community of practice and to help cross-sector stakeholders connect with local and statewide organizations.

For funders

- Increase capacity to support peer-to-peer learning, technical assistance, and support partnership infrastructure across our grantee partners and statewide partners;
- Look at the ways in which an equity lens, paired with data, can help inform grantmaking priorities;
- Invest in strengthening organizations' abilities to reflect to local interests and identities and to participate in communities of practice and professional networks;
- Invest in organizations' ability to create, curate, and leverage digital and virtual content;
- Consider what proportion of dollars support organizations serving rural communities;
- Of special note: relatively small grants (\$2,500-\$7,500) can have transformative impacts for small organizations, especially when they are in areas overlooked or underfunded by philanthropy traditionally.

For policy makers

- Include representatives from public humanities organizations in the development and implementation of public health and community development strategies;
- Promote, deploy, network, and hire humanists in recovery planning at the local, regional, and statewide level;
- Quantify and communicate regularly about the economic impact of public humanities organizations, particularly from rural areas;
- Integrate and include humanities organizations in public/private partnerships involving philanthropy and private investors.

Conclusion

Recipients of COVID-19 relief grants are providing space, structure, and programming necessary to foster social cohesion. They enable people to become closer to one another, develop a better understanding of the places in which they live, and to create and share narratives about their experiences. Public humanities organizations have something substantial to offer during this pandemic and, as well, throughout the course of our recovery.

Overlooking this sector runs the risk of both losing community anchors most committed to preserving the artifacts, ephemera, and memory of Illinois' history and identity, as well as failing to capitalize on an ecosystem ripe to contribute to the state's ability to repair and heal the triple pandemics of COVID-19, racial reckoning, and disinvestment across rural and urban communities.

Attempts to “build back better” without these organizations at the table may leave Illinois bereft of the critical elements we need required to carry us into our post-COVID-19 state.

Illinois Humanities' COVID-19 relief grants

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- 1 Helicon Collaborative, “Creative Placemaking Field Scan #4: Environment and Energy; Farther, Faster, Together: How Arts and Culture Can Accelerate Environmental Progress” ArtPlace America, (February 2018), <https://heliconcollab.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Farther-Faster-Together-1.pdf>.
 - 2 Robert Atkins, Sarah Allred & Daniel Hart, “Philanthropy’s Rural Blind Spot,” Stanford Social Innovation Review (Spring 2021), https://ssir.org/articles/entry/philanthropys_rural_blind_spot?utm_source=Enews&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=SSIR_Now.
 - 3 See AEA Consulting, “Arts Organizations’ Early Response to COVID-19 Uncertainty: Insights from the Field,” Wallace Foundation, (October 2020).

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Full report is available at illhumanities.org/covid19report



About Illinois Humanities

Illinois Humanities, the Illinois affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, is a statewide nonprofit organization that activates the humanities through free public programs, grants, and educational opportunities that foster reflection, spark conversation, build community, and strengthen civic engagement. We provide free, high-quality humanities experiences throughout Illinois, particularly for communities of color, individuals living on low incomes, counties and towns in rural areas, small arts and cultural organizations, and communities highly impacted by mass incarceration. Learn more at ilhumanities.org and on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#) and [LinkedIn](#) @ILHumanities.

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