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On the chopping block in Baltimore-area libraries: adult literacy programs, seed swaps



Carroll County's popular "Exploration Commons" commercial kitchen and making space was launched with funds provided by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, which was shut down this week.



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Maryland is among 21 states that has filed suit against President Donald Trump's administration to block cuts to cultural organizations that Baltimore-area librarians say could force them "to make difficult decisions about resources and opportunities we provide to our communities."

The lawsuit filed Friday by a group of attorneys general that includes Maryland's Anthony G. Brown, aims to stop the dismantling of three independent federal agencies: the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the Minority Business Development Agency, and the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service.

If funds that have been pledged aren't released, at risk are programs such as the Howard County Library System's Project Literacy, which helps adults learn English as a second language and qualify for high school diplomas, as well as cutting-edge workshops teaching computer skills and demystify artificial intelligence at an online program offered to residents of Westminster and Eldersburg.

"Institute funds directly support our ability to serve the public," said Andrea Berstler, executive director of the Carroll County Public Library. "At a time when local budgets are strained and families are turning to libraries more than ever, the suspension of the nation's only source of dedicated federal library funding is both harmful and ill-timed."

State Rep. Kathy Szeliga, a Republican from Baltimore County, said she is “a big supporter of libraries” but added that she thinks the funding cuts are painful but necessary.

“President Trump is doing exactly what the state is doing by shifting costs down from the federal government to local governments,” Szeliga said. “Frankly, that is where those costs belong. Everybody has gotten to tighten their belts. Everybody.”

The federal Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) was effectively shuttered last week after President Trump’s administration placed 80% of the institute’s 75-member staff on [immediate administrative leave](#) as part of his initiative to shrink the size of the government by eliminating perceived wasteful spending.

Employees were required to turn in all government property before exiting the building and email accounts were disabled. As a result, the fate of nearly \$4.2 million in federal funding pledged for Maryland library programs is up in the air.

Libraries receive most of their operating budgets from the counties where they are located, with some state money thrown in for capital projects. The institute, an independent federal agency founded in 1996, provides supplemental funding for libraries and museums, often as grants for staff development or technical support.

While some of the pledged federal grants have already made it into the library systems’ bank accounts, much of the money is still owed. (It’s also unclear whether Maryland museums will receive the additional \$1.9 million earmarked for them this year.)

For example, the Maryland State Library Agency, which disburses funds to the state’s 190 library branches, received just \$1.42 million of the \$3.33 million it has been promised in IMLS funds for the federal fiscal year ending Sept. 30 — an outcome that John Chrastka, executive director of the advocacy group EveryLibrary, described as “a punch in the face.”

And the funds that the state library doesn’t have, it can’t redistribute.

So far, Berstler said, Carroll County’s library has received just \$14,579 of the \$61,200 it has been allocated: funds set aside for continuing education programs for librarians mandated by state law. Berstler said that if the remaining \$47,621 never arrives, she might be forced to pull money slated for programming or new equipment.

“We are still assessing how we can mitigate the impact of this,” she said.

Szeliga said she and Ryan Nawrocki, her fellow Republican delegate from Baltimore County, are working to open a new library branch in Middle River — a project they are attempting to mostly finance with private money.

“We have found a donor willing to pay a big cost to get it set up,” Szeliga said, and added that she thinks other philanthropists might be willing to help state libraries scrambling to replace prized programs in the wake of the funding cuts.

According to Tamar Sarnoff, director of public libraries for the Maryland State Library Agency, several libraries have been promised institute funds this year:

- The Anne Arundel County Public Library has received \$25,000 this year for staff development and training, according to Christine Feldmann, the system’s director of marketing and communications. In the past, these federal funds were used to train librarians on artificial intelligence technologies.
- The Baltimore-based Maryland State Library for the Blind and Print Disabled received a grant to develop Braille and audio textbooks for 74 blind and low-vision college students, said Tim Pratt, the state library system’s communications manager.
- The Baltimore County Public Library System has created a Long-Term Device Lending Library that lends Chromebooks to low-income households for up to six months, according to a Library Agency [fact sheet](#).
- The Carroll County Public Library received federal funds this year to develop a strategic plan for future growth, Berstler said. In the past, IMLS funds were instrumental in developing the system’s Exploration Commons, its maker space and commercial teaching kitchen.
- The Harford County Public Library used an IMLS grant for staff development, and to develop strategic and master plans for the library system, CEO Mary Hastler said.
- The Howard County Library System, in addition to its artificial intelligence literacy classes also offers a Seed Library. The program “provides patrons with opportunities to develop their own at-home gardens and encourages healthy, sustainable lifestyles by offering seeds for free and hosting educational presentations and events,” according to the fact sheet.
- The Maryland Digital Library (Maryland Overdrive), comprises the state’s shared catalog of eBooks, audiobooks and magazines. Berstler said the digital library is managed by the Carroll County Library System.

- IMLS said [on its website](#) that it also provides funding for One Maryland, One Book, a statewide book club and author tour operated by the Baltimore-based nonprofit, Maryland Humanities.

The lawsuit argues that Trump's March 14 executive order shutting down seven independent federal agencies violates the U.S. Constitution by overriding Congress' authority to decide how federal funds are spent.

"Dismantling these agencies will have devastating effects on communities throughout Maryland and the nation that rely on them to provide important services to the public," the attorney generals said in a news release, "including funding their libraries, promoting minority-owned businesses and protecting workers' rights."

While library officials are worried about the looming loss of funds, several said they are not panicking. Some, such as the Enoch Pratt Free Library's CEO Chad Helton and Harford County's Hastler, expect a minor impact on the services they provide patrons.

"Fortunately, we live in a state and city with strong support for libraries, so we have historically been less dependent on federal dollars than some," Helton wrote in an email. "We are currently working with the Maryland State Library Agency to keep abreast of the changes and how they might impact our customers."

As Friday's lawsuit indicates, it is not clear whether the funds will be frozen indefinitely. A previous lawsuit challenging an executive order signed by Trump withholding funding for diversity initiatives has met with [some preliminary legal victories](#). But the librarians say that if worse comes to worst, it could be difficult to make up their lost institute grants with private donations, as Szeliga suggests. In Maryland, some librarians say, competition among nonprofits is fierce for a limited pool of deep-pocketed donors willing to pay for cultural programs.

"It's not going to be easy to replace those federal funds," Sarnoff said. "I was just on the phone with our friends at the Maryland Humanities Council, and we're all going to be looking to the same organizations for support."

"If we can't find a source of alternate funding, all these programs will go away."

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