



March 18, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi, Speaker
United States House of Representatives
1236 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell, Leader
United States Senate
317 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy, Leader
United States House of Representatives
2468 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Charles Schumer, Leader
United States Senate
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

RE: Aid for Museums Impacted by Coronavirus

Dear Speaker Pelosi and Leaders McConnell, McCarthy and Schumer:

We write to urge the U.S. Congress to include at least \$4 billion for nonprofit museums in COVID-19 (coronavirus) economic relief legislation to provide emergency assistance through June. In addition, we urge Congress to adopt a temporary “universal charitable deduction” to help incentivize charitable giving which is expected to decline in the months ahead. Nationwide, our museums are losing at least \$33 million a day due to closures as a result of COVID-19 and will be in desperate need of significant federal support to maintain jobs, secure our cultural heritage, help to rebuild our nation’s tourism industry – and simply to survive the months to come.

The U.S. museum community (hereinafter referred to as “museums”) is robust and diverse, including aquariums, arboreta, art museums, botanic gardens, children’s museums, cultural museums, historic sites, history museums, maritime museums, military museums, natural history museums, planetariums, presidential libraries, public gardens, science and technology centers, and zoos. The related “museum economy” is vast and is facing an existential threat from the closures required to address the COVID-19 pandemic.

Museums are economic engines. Economic impact data compiled by the American Alliance of Museums and Oxford Economics shows that this museum economy contributes \$50 billion a year to the U.S. economy and generates \$12 billion in tax revenue to local, state, and federal governments. Museums also are vital local sources of employment, supporting 726,000 jobs annually. Museums play an essential role in the nation's educational infrastructure, spending

more than \$2 billion a year on education. The destabilizing effects of the current crisis place the future of these contributions to the U.S. economy and education system at great risk. If these businesses fail during this crisis, then there will be no jobs to which many thousands of displaced workers can return.

As we write this letter, museums of all sizes are experiencing closures, attendance free-fall, canceled events, and actual layoffs. This will escalate, day-by-day, as closures and cancellations continue. Most of these are cash-based businesses; their economic lifeblood is people visiting. Declines in international and domestic tourism, declines in local attendance, and increases in social distancing will have a devastating impact on the nonprofit museum community, which operates on thin margins of financial sustainability, without large designated operational reserve funds or access to tax-relief benefits, and is often largely dependent on earned revenue from visitors passing through their doors. We estimate as many as 30% of museums, mostly in small and rural communities, will not re-open without significant and immediate emergency financial assistance.

Initial furloughs and layoffs among museum personnel have already begun this week. There are field-wide concerns about large-scale layoffs, especially for the lowest paid and hourly staff as they will potentially be hit the hardest. As employers, museums care deeply about the welfare, health, and financial stability of hard-working staff, and are concerned that increasing unemployment among museum personnel may exacerbate broader community issues of lack of access to health care, food insecurity, and even homelessness that will make the COVID-19 response much more challenging. Any federal support that directly supports workers can offset personnel costs, which make up a significant proportion of the average museum's operating budget. We also encourage inclusion of small nonprofit businesses, including many museums, in any support programs designed to help small businesses continue paying employees.

Over and above losses in earned revenue and unremitted expenses, museums are expecting lost charitable contributions as donors reassess their capacity to give due to the stock market's volatility. Congress should ensure communities are able to support their local museums and all nonprofits during this crisis by enacting a targeted, temporary giving incentive that enables all Americans, regardless of whether they claim itemize deductions, to receive a tax incentive for giving to the work of charitable nonprofits, including museums, responding to, or suffering from, the COVID-19 pandemic.

Museums have impressive support from the public. According to a recent public opinion poll, 96% of Americans would think positively of their elected officials taking legislative action to support museums, regardless of political persuasion or community size. 97% of Americans believe that museums are educational assets, and 89% believe that museums contribute important economic benefits to their community. Museums are also the most trusted source of information in America, rated higher than local papers, nonprofit researchers, the U.S. government, or academic researchers. Museums can leverage this high level of public trust to provide education on COVID-19 and fight misinformation about its spread. By empowering the public with the information they need to make informed decisions and lower their risk of contracting or spreading disease, museums can help sustain healthy communities, maintain calm, and reduce the chances for an increase in discrimination or xenophobia often created by global diseases.

Even now, while museums are experiencing closures and significant losses in revenue, and planning for staff reductions, they are still serving an increase in demand in communities across the United States by providing lesson plans, online learning opportunities, and “drop-off” learning kits to teachers and parents in areas where schools have closed; freely sharing virtual exhibitions and content accessible to those who are otherwise isolated; maintaining their outdoor spaces to provide quiet places to relieve stress during this time of high anxiety; and supporting the families of health care workers and first responders with access to child care and meals.

Museums are community anchors, addressing challenges in times of crisis like the one we are currently experiencing. Unfortunately, we expect hardships to be faced by increasing numbers of our member organizations in communities across the country in the months ahead, underscoring the need for museums to be included in any economic stimulus relief now.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Laura Lott
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Laura Huerta Migus
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