

August 11, 2011

The Honorable Susan Hildreth
Director
Institute of Museum and Library Services
1800 M Street, NW
Washington, DC

Dear Director Hildreth,

I am writing to provide AAM's perspectives and suggestions related to the development of a five-year Strategic Plan for the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). I commend the work thus far and appreciate the ways in which IMLS has solicited input from the entire museum field.

As you know, the American Association of Museums (AAM) is proud to represent the full range of our nation's more than 17,500 museums – including aquariums, arboretums, archaeological museums, art museums, botanical gardens, children's museums, culturally specific museums, historic sites, history museums, maritime museums, military museums, natural history museums, nature centers, planetariums, presidential libraries, science and technology centers, zoological parks, and other specialty museums – along with the 400,000 professional staff and countless volunteers who work for and with museums.

We have given thoughtful consideration to the questions posed to the public as part of the Strategic Planning process, and offer the following recommendations:

1. How can IMLS leverage its resources, position, reputation and relationships to promote effective public access to physical and digital content?

- **Accessibility.** Making museum collections available to the public is essential to the mission of nearly all museums. The need is two-fold, focusing on providing access to the general public as well the importance of helping museums reach audiences with specific needs. Given the changing demographics of our society, we recommend that IMLS continue to help museums address accessibility, including services for those with a range of physical and cognitive disabilities and those from other countries, who may speak other languages and have different cultural norms. Furthermore, it is integral that museums provide access to their information in new ways to reach multiple generations. IMLS can provide museums with additional training and assistance to reach these various but important audiences, thus enhancing access to museums and their important content.

- **Community Partnerships.** At a time when resources are increasingly limited and IMLS is only able to fund a small percentage of all grant applications, we wonder if there are ways to connect grant-supported projects within communities, or otherwise encourage communities to pool resources to promote local museums to the public. This may include providing incentives or prioritizing proposals that emphasize developing stronger communities through partnerships with other museums, local non-profits, government service organizations, schools, libraries, and/or other important community anchors. By working together, we believe that museums will become more sustainable, as will the communities they serve.
- **Public-Private Partnerships.** IMLS could promote public-private partnerships, helping museums establish and maintain such relationships on their own as a way to stretch the dollars that support museums and to change public perceptions about the role museums play in their communities.
- **Traveling Exhibits.** While budgetary restrictions have prevented some on-site visits to museums – by school groups and the public alike – IMLS is ideally positioned to foster more traveling exhibits and other community outreach. This should include both physical and digital exhibitions that can reach audiences in a multitude of ways.
- **Digitization.** At a time when many museums are working to digitize and open their collections to new uses, IMLS can play a significant leadership role in identifying common, open-source standards for digitization.
- **Collaborations within the Federal Government.** Because the public has limited and often incorrect perceptions about what museums do – and because museum services touch upon so many aspects of our national life – we urge IMLS to maximize its collaborations with other federal agencies, as called for in the recently enacted reauthorization of the agency.
- **Diversity.** The groundbreaking report from AAM's Center for the Future of Museums, *Demographic Transformation and the Future of Museums*, notes the challenges of engaging a diverse public. It also offers suggestions and perspectives on reaching audiences from different ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. We recommend this report as a contribution to a field-wide discussion that IMLS can do much to advance.
- **Community Engagement.** It is important to continue to support programs such as the Museum Assessment Program (MAP) and StEPs, which help museums operate more effectively, develop more productive relationships with their communities, and create greater access for the general public.

2. How can IMLS leverage its resources, position, reputation and relationships to promote policy that sustains information access for the American public?

- **Emergency Assistance.** At a time when many museums have been forced to shut their doors, either temporarily or permanently, IMLS could help these museums protect their collections in such emergencies. IMLS makes some resources available during natural disasters; it could likewise help museums during economic disasters to help find new homes for collections that would otherwise be vulnerable to damage or destruction or withdrawn from the public trust.
- **Orphan Works.** We urge IMLS to consider how it might use its position to help museums with "orphan works" in their collections. These letters, photographs, and other cultural artifacts – which may be protected by copyright, but whose rights-holders cannot be found – are unlikely to be exhibited or even used for scholarly purposes because of concerns about potential liability and adverse publicity. Legislation to address this issue is pending, and IMLS's support would be helpful in addressing this issue, especially in capturing the impact of this issue on the museum, library, and archives fields.
- **Indemnity.** While the National Endowment for the Arts currently operates a successful program to provide indemnity coverage for works of art and artifacts while they are on loan and view in museums, IMLS might consider how this program could be expanded to include additional types of collections that may not be covered by the Arts and Artifacts Indemnity Act. This type of insurance would be invaluable to museums struggling to bring their collections to a wider audience.

3. How can IMLS leverage its resources, position, reputation and relationships to support lifelong learning for a competitive workforce and engaged public?

- **21st Century Museum Professionals.** IMLS has made great progress in educating museum professionals as a way to maximize engagement with the public and enhance the quality of museum services offered to the public. AAM would like to see more investment in this grant program, especially with an eye toward the use of technology in museums.
- **21st Century Skills.** We applaud IMLS's efforts to promote 21st Century Skills, and urge your continued support of this initiative. We share your commitment that museums have a role in preparing current and future generations for participation in a competitive workforce; they do this by engaging the public. IMLS should continue to providing information and training on 21st Century Skills to a large pool of museums.

- **Teacher Training.** We recommend working with other federal agencies – such as the Department of Education – to support programs that enhance teacher training in all subject areas. Whenever possible, IMLS should promote the use of museums in professional development, curriculum development and student instruction, recognizing that museums have a vital role to play in both formal and informal education, and that museums contribute to the development of 21st Century Skills which are so desperately needed to maintain a highly competitive workforce.
- **STEM education.** We also recommend collaborations with scientific agencies (such as NSF, NOAA, and NIH) and other research-driven organizations (such as universities and private firms) to promote scientific collaborations with museums of all types.

4. How can IMLS leverage its resources, position, reputation and relationships to promote museums and libraries as community anchor institutions?

- **Community Partnerships.** We recommend developing partnerships with a national network of Convention and Visitors Bureaus, Tourism Boards, Chambers of Commerce, and other community leaders. This would maximize opportunities to promote museums as the economic engines and community anchors they truly are.
- **Encouraging Civic Engagement.** AAM will soon be working in collaboration with the museum field to update its 2002 publication, Mastering Civic Engagement, which challenged museums to fully pursue their potential as active community partners. We welcome the opportunity to partner with IMLS to ensure that we maximize the impact of this renewed publication.
- **Mapping Software.** Through a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Association of Art Museum Directors has adapted mapping software that highlights all of a museum's economic and educational partnerships in the community. Making such a tool available to the entire museum field would help museums urge business leaders to incorporate museums into their community revitalization plans.
- **Economic Impact Research.** We urge IMLS to conduct and/or promote accurate and appropriate research on the economic impact and importance of America's museums.

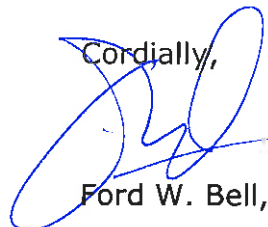
5. How can IMLS leverage its resources, position, reputation and relationships to achieve excellence in public management?

- **Excellence Programs.** Museums are, at the same time, highly valued by the public and often misunderstood by them. We believe that the best way

to maintain the public's trust and ensure excellence in public management is to encourage and support museums as they participate in excellence and standards programs such as MAP, the Conservation Assessment Program (CAP), and StEPs. MAP, CAP, and StEPs are important programs that help museums improve their operations, engage with their communities, and strengthen their understanding of standards and best practices. These programs have far-reaching impacts as they guide hundreds of museums annually, which in turn support the field and their respective communities. MAP also provides training and networking opportunities for their reviewers, which creates an even wider impact as they bring their knowledge base back to their home museums and communities.

- **Accreditation as the Rule, not the Exception.** Currently just a small percentage of museums have achieved accreditation, although accredited museums have a tremendous advantage as they compete for public and private funding and serve as leaders in their communities and field. We strongly recommend that IMLS work with AAM and other organizations to strengthen and expand the range of excellence programs, especially as AAM works to reinvent the accreditation process to help more museums achieve this goal.
- **Data Collection.** Being able to make a public case for museums requires the availability of comprehensive data about museums, including the return on investment from public funding. We support IMLS's ongoing efforts to collect, analyze and disseminate data about museums and to enhance the agency's capacity for research and analysis – and we encourage you to intensify these efforts in the future.
- **Professional Development.** IMLS can help the museum field in this area by providing more on-site and virtual training opportunities for museums, so they can better understand their own resources, leverage their roles and reputations in their communities, construct closer relationships with the people they serve, and become stronger institutions and more vital public centers.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to provide AAM's views to help inform the agency's strategic planning process. I welcome the opportunity to work with you on fulfilling the agency's mission and supporting the entire museum field in its vital work. Please don't hesitate to contact me if I can be of assistance in any way.

Cordially,

Ford W. Bell, DVM