

Museums and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Request

We urge Congress to:

- We urge Congress to provide additional funds to the Small Business Administration's (SBA) Shuttered Venue Operators Grant (SVOG) program, as well as for the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), for museums ineligible for SVOG due to its requirement that museums have "fixed seating."
- In unity with the broader nonprofit sector, we support the requests in [this coalition letter](#) and urge Congress to strengthen charitable giving incentives to ensure that all nonprofits, including museums, have the resources to serve their communities. (See details in AAM's [Tax Policy issue brief](#).)

Background

The pandemic has inflicted profound damage on US museums, the vast majority of which are 501(c)(3) nonprofit charitable organizations. The museum field will take years to recover to pre-pandemic levels of staffing, revenue, and attendance. Far fewer museums than initially expected are in danger of permanent closure and tens of thousands of jobs were saved thanks to several federal relief programs. However, according to a [recent survey](#), 2021 proved to be another painful year in which operating income sank further and attendance was down nearly 40 percent for many of our nation's museums. Despite the tremendous financial and psychological stress caused by the pandemic, museum professionals are filling the gaps to meet the needs of their communities. They are demonstrating the critical role museums play in our country's infrastructure and deepening their social impact in their communities.

Talking Points

- The museum field is already facing a slow recovery that will take years to come back from due to the dire financial impacts of the pandemic. Another wave of reduced capacity and potential closures, without further federal assistance, could prove devastating for museums and museum professionals already struggling to recover.
- During the pandemic, one-third of museums were at risk of permanent closure without federal support. Because of the influx of financial assistance from federal, state, and local governments, this number reduced significantly. However, the continuing impact of the pandemic, including the dramatic surge of the Omicron variant and possible future variants, continue to threaten dire consequences.
- Recently, a number of museums across the country have announced temporary closures or reduced hours in response to the recent surge of COVID-19 cases driven by the highly contagious Omicron variant. In addition, as institutions that rely upon in-person visits, museums are struggling with the same unprecedented staff shortages that have impacted many industries. Such adaptations may continue to be necessary throughout some portion of this year as museums continue to fight the pandemic.

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- As essential community infrastructure, museums have proved crucial to their communities' resiliency during the pandemic—from supporting vaccination to hosting food distribution—and deserve this critical support to survive this precarious time.
- During the continued COVID-19 pandemic, museums across the country have continued contributing to the ongoing education of our country's children by providing lesson plans, online learning opportunities, and drop-off learning kits to teachers and families. They are using their outdoor spaces to grow and donate produce to area food banks, as well as maintaining these spaces for individuals to safely relax, enjoy nature, and recover from the mental health impacts of social isolation. They provided access to childcare and meals to families of health care workers and first responders, have donated their PPE and scientific equipment to fight COVID-19, and are serving as vaccination centers.
- Early in the pandemic, essentially all museums were closed to the public. 33 percent of directors felt their museums were at some risk of permanent closure without immediate support—a threatened loss of 12,000 museums and 124,000 jobs.
- While PPP and SVOG have provided critical lifelines, a [recent survey](#) shows attendance remains down 38 percent on average from pre-pandemic levels and 17 percent of directors still feel there is some risk of closing permanently without additional relief.
- 60 percent of museums report experiencing pandemic-related financial losses since March 2020, with the average being a little over \$791,000. 60 percent of responding museums have budgets of \$1 million or less.
- The SVOG program's eligibility requirement that a museum have at least one auditorium, theater, or performance or lecture hall with "fixed audience seating" and regular programming disqualified many museums, preventing them from benefiting from this important relief program.

Status

- Congress currently is considering additional COVID-19 economic relief.