

# History is Happening: The State of Humanities Organizations in Illinois During COVID-19 | April 2023

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From 2020 to 2022, Illinois Humanities served as a critical safety net for humanities organizations in Illinois, providing just under \$2.4 million in urgently needed relief to over 350 organizations across the state. In the most essential way, the grants succeeded in providing relief and enabled organizations to “get back to business.” However, relief funding catalyzed an even bigger return on investment in the form of public goods: well-being, social cohesion, bridge building, and civic engagement — essential building blocks of an equitable recovery.

As our state works to rebound from COVID-19, Illinois is positioned to build a thriving cultural ecosystem that can strengthen the livability of the state for all residents, especially for some of the most vulnerable in our communities.

## Background

From 2020 to 2022, Illinois Humanities awarded \$2,352,500 in 490 relief and recovery grants to 359 unique organizations in 78 of our 102 counties and every congressional district. The grants addressed the ability of the cultural sector, in the most fundamental way, to stay viable. These grants, which consisted largely of federal funding, supported jobs for more than 1,000 people in Illinois over the three-year period. However, grantee partners lost \$24,320,570 in revenue due to COVID-19 — more than ten times the total grant dollars distributed — and 4,173,432 interactions with community members because of the pandemic, deeply impacting these organizations and their public-service missions.<sup>1</sup>

## The State of Humanities Organizations During COVID-19

*History Is Happening: The State of Humanities Organizations in Illinois During COVID-19* situates grantee partners within the socioeconomic well-being of Illinois overall. Report findings illuminate a stark picture: grantee partners who received emergency relief funding were already working to mitigate prevalent social, health, and economic stresses prior to the pandemic. Deeply embedded in communities that are changing demographically and which wrestle with inequitable access to fundamental resources like broadband, these organizations are working to preserve cultures, tell new stories, and bring us together in novel ways.

**Report findings show:**

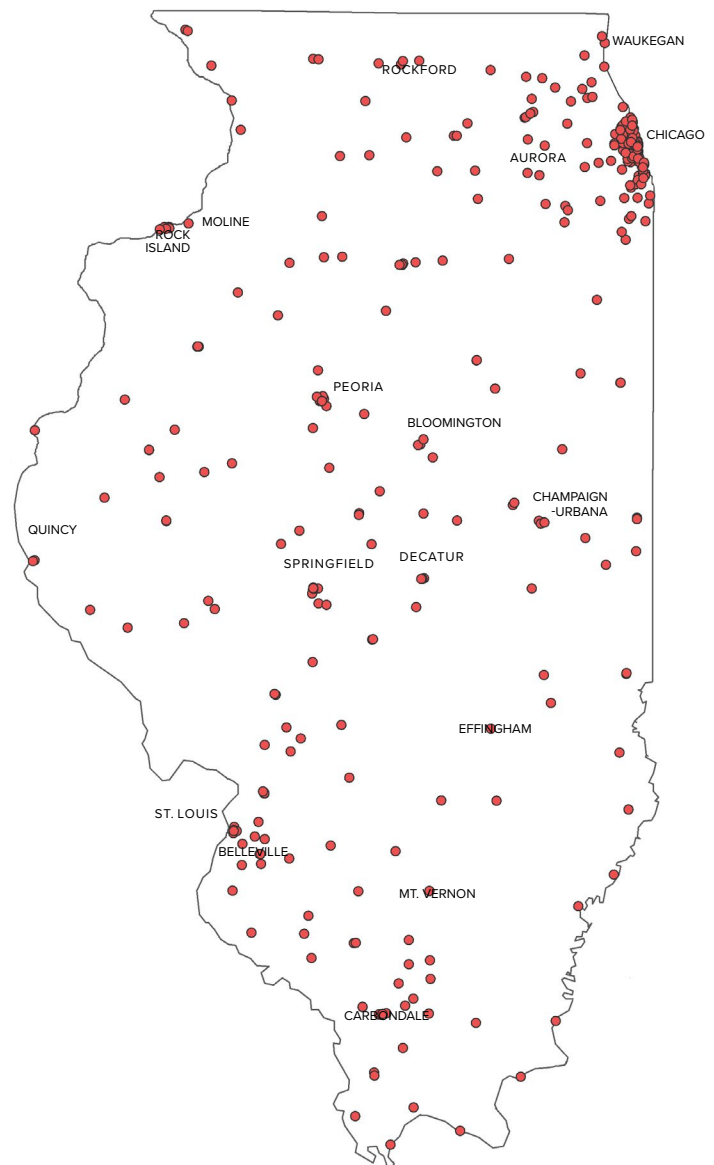
- Grantee partners serve significant numbers of low-income residents, communities of color, and rural and small towns.
- 60% of grantee partners serve communities that were under health and economic duress before the pandemic.
- Nearly half of grantee partners operate with annual budgets of less than \$100,000.
- Nearly a quarter of grantee partners provide programming in a zip code with more COVID cases than the statewide average.
- Two in three grantee partners operate in areas without sufficient access to broadband.
- Though more than 40% of grantee partners were founded in the past two decades, some have been operating for more than 100 years.

**Why Humanities Organizations Matter in Illinois**

Behind every point on the map is a community of people whose lives have been positively impacted by public humanities organizations. Regardless of the mode of engagement, the outcomes were the same: Human interaction. Connection. Creativity. Encouragement. Being seen. Being known — and getting to know others, too.

Illinois’ humanities organizations are on the cutting edge of what Americans believe about — and want from — home-town cultural organizations right now. Most Americans think arts and culture organizations can and should play a critical role in helping their communities by serving as an emotional outlet (83%), providing connection and learning (77%), and giving practical help (54%).<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 1: Illinois Humanities Grantee Partners**



*Across three years, Illinois Humanities distributed 490 grants to 359 unique organizations.*

*Source: Illinois Humanities data.*

By connecting across nonprofit, private, philanthropic, and government sectors, we can ensure that all of our state’s residents benefit from the ways in which humanities organizations keep us creative, connected, and in community.

Together we can fortify our cultural infrastructure in ways that make Illinois more livable, just, and resilient.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Refer to “Data and Methodology” on pages 43-58.

<sup>2</sup> Benoit-Bryan, Jennifer, Madeline Smith, and Peter Linnet, *Rethinking Relevance, Rebuilding Engagement* (Chicago, IL: Slover Linett Audience Research, LaPlaca Cohen, and Yancey Consulting, 2022), 5. <https://sloverlinett.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Rethinking-Relevance-Rebuilding-Engagement-CCTT-Wave-2-Survey-Full-Report.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>4</sup> “Illinois State Arts and Cultural Production in 2021,” U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis and the National Endowment for the Arts, accessed March 16, 2023. [https://nasaa-arts.org/nasaa\\_research/creative-economy-state-profiles/](https://nasaa-arts.org/nasaa_research/creative-economy-state-profiles/).

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The full report is available at [ILHumanities.org/COVID-19](https://ILHumanities.org/COVID-19).



## 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](https://ILhumanities.org) and on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), and [LinkedIn](#) @ILHumanities.

They want organizations to undertake four actions to become more relevant and inclusive:

1. increase accessibility and new works,
2. embrace equity and inclusion,
3. foster community rootedness,
4. become places of belonging and welcoming.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, in addition to strengthening civic fabric, humanities organizations in Illinois generate revenue and help fuel our economy. Decades of economic data at the local, state, and national level show that the arts and culture sector is a major contributor to the economy.

The U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis reports that the arts and cultural production contributed \$31.1 billion to Illinois' economy in 2021, representing 3.3% of the state's GDP and 196,769 jobs. This means that in 2021 the Illinois arts and cultural sector was larger than both the utilities industry and the agriculture and forestry industry combined.<sup>4</sup>

### What Comes Next?

When viewed in aggregate as a collective of organizations working in unique ways to strengthen social fabric and bridge divides, Illinois' public humanities organizations emerge as a relevant, precious, and critical ecosystem than may previously have been appreciated.

***Neglecting the positive impact of humanities organizations is a significant oversight for anyone concerned about equitable pandemic recovery, community livability, or economic vibrancy.***



Our rich humanities landscape deserves an ambitious vision. *History is Happening: The State of Humanities Organizations in Illinois During COVID-19* calls on partners, funders, and policymakers to invest in the following:

- Ensure sustainable, predictable funding for humanities organizations.
- Create and support humanities programs that enable residents to come together to share stories and experiences, and form new ways of being together.
- Support community- and capacity-building efforts that strengthen organizations' relationships with each other and the communities they serve.
- Ensure that humanities organizations are at the table when investments in economic development, energy, and infrastructure are being shaped.