

CHIEF FOIA OFFICER'S REPORT

INSTITUTE OF MUSEUM AND LIBRARY SERVICES (IMLS)

February 2018

This report has been prepared by Nancy E. Weiss, IMLS General Counsel and Chief FOIA Officer, in compliance with the "Guidelines for 2018 Chief FOIA Officer Reports" published by the Department of Justice Office of Information Policy. Questions concerning this report can be addressed to my attention via e-mail at nweiss@imls.gov or by phone at (202) 653-4640.

IMLS's 2018 Chief FOIA Officer Report provides a narrative of the agency's FOIA activities undertaken since the filing of last year's Report in March 2017.

INTRODUCTION

The Institute of Museum and Library ("IMLS" or the "Institute") recognizes that the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) plays a fundamental role in the framework of Open Government. As a grant making, research and evaluation agency whose mission is serving the public interest and providing public service, IMLS upholds public access and openness as a core operational value. Indeed earlier this month, IMLS released its 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, which emphasizes as one of its four agency-wide strategic goals "increasing public access." As a bedrock component of its mission, IMLS administers competitive grant programs to museums and libraries for the explicit purpose of increasing public engagement and providing public access to digital content.

In carrying out its agency duties and responsibilities, IMLS is steadfast in applying a presumption of openness while administering effective FOIA processing operations. IMLS in its regular business operations continually endeavors to expand the public's access to information about the agency's programs and operations. The following narrative reports efforts IMLS has made to fulfill its obligation to ensure Open Government and fulfill FOIA's mandate during the reporting period.

AGENCY FOIA ACTIVITY

IMLS recently established the Office of Digital and Information Strategy (ODIS) with the key goal of better integrating IMLS information collection, analysis, and management activities to better support IMLS operations, external stakeholders, and the general public. The addition of ODIS as a key partner within the agency's Open Government process has inspired the entire IMLS Open Government Team to develop and implement more innovative methods by which IMLS may provide the public improved technological access to information. The following describes two concrete and valuable examples of innovations IMLS developed and implemented over the last year to improve the public's access to information about IMLS business and operations.

Approximately two-thirds of IMLS' grant making budget provides funding for formula-based Grants-To-States' libraries and library systems. In summer 2017, ODIS and the Office of Library Services launched an open portal which makes accessible via IMLS' website detailed information about the specific 1500 or so state projects funded annually by these formula grants. This portal provides public access to all "Grants-To-States" funded state projects beginning in FY 2014 through the present and allows the public to conduct tailored queries regarding every library project undertaken as a result of states' funding over that period.

IMLS also this year prioritized as an Open Government initiative the need for ODIS to develop other resources that furnish highly detailed data and information about the grant programs IMLS administers to support museums and libraries across the United States. In June 2017, IMLS made substantial data disclosures on its agency website, posting a multi-faceted "Funding Report by State" for FY 2011-2016. These proactive disclosures provide geo-mapping, statistical analysis and hyperlinks to the underlying original data, detailing by location the library and museum projects and services IMLS supports in all small and large regions across the American landscape.

In addition to partnering with ODIS to establish new ways to improve proactive disclosures and public access to agency information, IMLS prioritized efforts to assess and update its internal FOIA business processes. Specifically, IMLS staff handling FOIA processing functions established an improved streamlining process to identify and expedite simple requests. By doing so, IMLS may ensure that the great majority of simple requests receive agency FOIA responses within ten days. FOIA processing staff also continues to reevaluate the agency's FOIA request intake and processing cycle (from incoming FOIA request to final agency resolution) to determine whether additional aspects of the IMLS FOIA process may be further improved, updated or automated. And the IMLS Open Government Team remains engaged in its process of business operations assessments about whether there are new and more innovative ways to further bolster the agency's proactive public disclosures.

In terms of training and skills building this reporting period, IMLS General Counsel Nancy Weiss and Associate General Counsel Susan Gerson attended the Chief FOIA Officers' Council Meeting at the National Archives in June 2017. In September 2017, IMLS' FOIA Keyworker and FOIA Administrative Staff attended a three-day ASAP FOIA training which conducted a comprehensive review of all aspects of the FOIA administrative process, including best practices in processing, public customer service, and regulatory updates. Additionally, IMLS provided FOIA training to all new staff during its New Employee Orientation in February 2017.

Finally, as a small agency whose staff handles its FOIA duties among a broader array of other, unrelated work responsibilities, IMLS includes among its key priorities adherence to FOIA's mandates requiring the mitigation of unnecessary backlogs, emphasizing proactive customer service, and remedying issues related to timeliness in processing agency FOIA requests. IMLS remains steadfast in its efforts to make strides and demonstrate its commitment to all tenets of Open Government and FOIA best practices principles.