

FY26_Getting Started with IMLS Museum Grants_v2

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Welcome to the Institute of Museum and Library Services, Office of Museum Services Informational Video: Getting started with IMLS Museum Grants.

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The goal of this video is to provide a high-level overview of our grant funding opportunities and the process of applying for them.

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This video is organized into 5 chapters:

0:25

What is IMLS?

0:26

Is my institution eligible for an IMLS Museum grant?

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Which grant program should I apply to?

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How do I apply? And what if I had more questions?

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To get the most out of this video, we recommend that you watch it in its entirety.

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This will give you an idea of the funding opportunities that best fit your organization.

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Once you have done that, we recommend reading the Notice of Funding Opportunity for the programs you are considering.

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Notices of Funding Opportunities, also known as NOFOs, are documents that detail the requirements of each of our grant programs.

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All of our NOFOs can be found at imls.gov/grants.

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Once you've selected a funding opportunity, you'll be ready to begin the application process.

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As you navigate the process, you can use this video as a reference tool.

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If you'd like to skip to a specific section, please use the time bar below, or the links in the description box, to navigate the chapters.

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Now that we understand the structure of the video, let's talk about IMLS.

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IMLS is an independent federal grant-making agency and the primary source of federal support for the nation's museums and libraries.

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The IMLS mission statement is part of the agency's current strategic plan.

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Our mission is to advance, support, and empower America's museums, libraries, and related organizations through grant making, research and policy development.

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Our full strategic plan is available at [imls.gov](https://www.imls.gov).

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OMS, or the Office of Museum Services, is a key component of IMLS.

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In our last annual grant cycle, we awarded approximately \$55 million in funding to a broad range of institutions, including art, history, and science museums, zoos, aquaria, professional associations, universities, and Native American tribes.

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We encourage you to apply for IMLS funding to support your institution's goals, or those of the museum field.

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Let's discuss some eligibility ground rules for applying to our grant programs.

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It's important to remember that each IMLS grant program has its own specific requirements.

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Those are detailed in the NOFOs, and we'll discuss them in Chapter 3 of this video.

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For now, let's go over the federally mandated requirements that all potential applicants should be aware of:

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Your organization must be located in one of the United States' 50 states, its territories, or the District of Columbia.

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Your organization must be a unit of State, local, or tribal government or a private nonprofit organization with tax exempt status.

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Three of our grant programs- Museums for America, Museums Empowered, and Inspire Grants for Small Museums are only available to individual museums.

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In order to qualify for our museum programs, your organization must: have at least one full time or equivalent professional staff person, either paid or unpaid; have a physical location that it owns or operates; have been open to the public for at least 120 days in the year prior to the application deadline; and own or use tangible objects.

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Museums may be stand-alone organizations, or they may be part of a larger institution, such as a college, university, tribe, or a state or local government.

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Here are some of the examples of types of organizations that could be considered museums.

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Please note that this list is not exhaustive.

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For five other OMS programs- 21st Century Museum Professionals, National Leadership Grants for Museums, Museum Grants for African American History and Culture, Museum Grants for American Latino History and Culture, and the Native American/Native Hawaiian Museum Services Program-

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additional eligibility requirements exist.

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We will address this in Chapter 3 of this presentation.

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Please refer to the Eligibility section of the program NOFOS for detailed guidance.

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Once you've determined whether your organization is eligible for a given grant program, you'll want to know what types of activities or projects it can fund.

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Expenses must relate to specific project activities, not the general operation of your institution.

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Some of these project related expenses may include: salaries, wages and fringe benefits; travel expenses; materials and supplies; third party costs; publication, design and printing; program evaluation; staff and volunteer training; internships and fellowships;

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equipment to improve collection storage;

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Program-specific overhead costs.

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There are also some types of expenses that are not allowed in your IMLS budget request or in your cost share. These include: general fundraising costs, such as development office staff or other staff time devoted to general fundraising; contributions to endowments; general operating support; the acquisition of collections; construction or renovation of facilities and social activities; receptions and entertainment.

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Now that we have covered the basics of our eligibility requirements and allowable versus unallowable costs, let's go into some program specific details.

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As mentioned previously, the IMLS Office of Museum Services is currently offering 8 grant programs.

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It is important to know how these programs are alike and different so that you apply to the program that best meets your needs and eligibility.

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Note that all programs share the same project date of September 1st, 2026, and all projects can be scheduled to last from one to three years.

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Museums for America, or MFA, is our biggest grant program, receiving the largest number of applications each year and the one through which we make the most awards.

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MFA supports museum projects focusing on exhibitions, educational/interpretive programs, digital learning resources, professional development, community debate and dialogue, audience-focused studies and/or collections management, curation, care and conservation.

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These projects should address a key component of your institution's strategic plan.

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As an applicant, you must align your project with one of IMLS's agency-level goals by choosing an objective.

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Your options are: lifelong learning; community engagement; and collections stewardship and access.

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Grant requests may range from \$5,000 to \$300,000.

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MFA requires a 1:1 cost share.

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This means that for every dollar you request from IMLS, you must plan to provide an additional dollar in cash from a non-federal source, staff or volunteer time or third-party in-kind contributions.

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Please note that MFA is only available to museums.

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Museums Empowered, or ME, is a special initiative of Museums for America.

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The program supports projects that use professional development and training to generate change and growth within museums of all types and sizes.

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The goals of this program are to support staff learning and training in one of three areas: to provide museum staff with the skills to integrate digital technology into museum operations; strengthen the ability of museum staff to use evaluation as a tool to shape museum programs and improve outcomes, and strengthen and support museum staff as the essential part of a resilient organizational culture.

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Grant requests may range from \$5,000 to \$300,000.

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Like MFA, ME requires a 1:1 cost share and is only available to museums.

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Inspire Grants for Small Museums, another special initiative of the Museums for America program, is designed specifically to help small museums address the priorities identified in their strategic plans.

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As an applicant, you must align your project with one of two objectives: lifelong learning or collection, stewardship and access.

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When applying to this program you must make a case as a small museum using attributes such as staff size, operating budget, and size relative to organizations within your discipline or geographic region.

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There are two funding levels in Inspire, and each has its own cost share requirement.

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For smaller scale projects requesting \$5,000 to \$25,000, no cost share is required.

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For larger projects requesting \$25,001 up to \$75,000, a 1:1 cost share is required.

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Just like MFA and ME,

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this opportunity is only available to museums.

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The National Leadership Grants for Museums Program, or NLG-M, supports projects that advance the museum field's ability to provide engaging learning opportunities, address community needs, and steward collections through projects that result in model tools and resources, training and professional development, research findings, and forums that explore current challenges and emerging issues.

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NLG-M is open to: museums; organizations or associations that engage in activities to design to advance the well-being of museums and the museum profession; and to institutions of higher education.

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There are two NLG project types.

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Non-research projects support efforts that result in tools and resources for the field.

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Non-research grant requests may range from \$50,000 to \$750,000 and require a 1:1 cost share.

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Research projects pose questions of importance to the field and use accepted research methodologies to collect, analyze, and share the data that answers those questions.

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Research grant requests may range from \$50,000 up to \$750,000, with no cost share required.

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The 21st Century Museum Professionals, or 21 MP, grant program supports projects that build career pathways, strengthen professional networks, and identify and share effective workforce education and training practices in the museum field.

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The goals of the program are to support the professional development of the current museum workforce and recruit and train future museum professionals.

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We expect successful 21 MP projects to involve partnerships that build career pathways and strengthen professional networks beyond a single institution.

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The 21 MP program encourages applications from museum associations, museum studies programs that institutions of higher education, and museums that serve as essential parts of the professional learning and training environment.

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The goal of the Museum Grants for African American History and Culture program, or AAHC, is to build the capacity of African American museums to serve their communities and to support the growth and development of a professional workforce at African American museums.

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There are two funding levels in AAHC, and each has its own cost share requirement.

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For smaller scale projects requesting \$5000 up to \$100,000, no cost share is required.

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For large projects requesting \$100,001 up to \$500,000, a 1:1 cost share is required.

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AAHC is open to museums whose primary purpose, as reflected in its mission, is African American life, art, history, and/or culture;

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not-for-profit museum service organizations or associations whose primary purpose, as reflected in its mission, is to support such museums; and to any federally designated Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

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The Museum Grants for American Latino History and Culture, or ALHC, program supports projects that build the capacity of American Latino history and culture museums to serve their communities and advance the growth and development of a professional workforce in American Latino cultural institutions.

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ALHC is open to any museum whose primary purpose is the presentation and interpretation of American Latino life, art, history, and/or culture; an organization or association related to American Latino museums; or an institution of higher education.

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Grant request may range from \$5,000 to \$500,000.

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The goal of the Native American/Native Hawaiian Museum Services program, or NANH for short, is to build the capacity of Native American tribes and Native Hawaiian organizations to provide museum services to their communities.

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Museum Services is defined broadly for this program, but is meant to support projects that sustain heritage, culture, and knowledge.

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Some of the ways NANH grantees do this is through exhibitions, educational programs, language preservation, training and professional development, organizational capacity, community engagement, and collection stewardship.

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Grant requests may range from \$5,000 up to \$250,000, and no cost share is required for this program.

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Applicants to the NANH program must be either a federally recognized tribe, including Alaskan Native villages and corporations, or an organization that primarily serves and represents Native Hawaiians.

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Other types of organizations-such as museums or universities-may partner on NANH projects but not serve as the legal applicant.

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NANH applicants are not required to have a physical museum in order to be eligible for the program.

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Keep in mind that there is no limit to the number of programs that you can apply to, but if an organization submits multiple applications, they must be for separate and distinct projects.

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Please note that you must meet the eligibility requirements for each program.

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For further details on each program, please check their full Notice of Funding Opportunity at [IMLS.gov/grants](https://www.imls.gov/grants) or feel free to contact one of our program officers listed on the web page associated with the applicable grant program.

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Once you have determined which opportunities you are interested in, it's time to apply.

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We'll be accepting applications for these programs until 11:59 PM Eastern Time on March 13th, 2026.

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We recommend starting your application as soon as you can.

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Unexpected delays may arise, and we cannot accept late applications.

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And, again, all projects across all grant programs must begin on September 1st, 2026.

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The first step in applying is to register for sam.gov.

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SAM stands for System for Award Management.

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SAM is a federal repository that centralizes information about grant applicants and recipients and is free to all users.

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Applicants must be registered with SAM before registering with grants.gov.

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All grant payments will be made to the bank account that is associated with the organization's SAM registration.

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Your registrations must be complete and up to date for you to submit an application to IMLS or to receive an award.

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If this is your first time applying to IMLS funding, it's important to know that you must complete the SAM.gov registration before moving on to any other steps in the application process.

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If you have registered with SAM in the past, you must renew your account before moving on to any other steps in the process.

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An expired registration will prevent an organization from submitting applications via grants.gov and receiving awards or payments.

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We strongly recommend that you begin or update these registrations immediately.

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Doing so is completely free.

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To begin, visit SAM.gov and use the FAQs to answer questions.

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If you need further assistance, call the Federal Service Desk at 866-606-8220, Monday through Friday, 8:00 AM to 8:00 PM Eastern Time.

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The second place you need to register is with grants.gov.

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It is the portal through which all federal grant applications must be submitted.

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Once your SAM registration is active, you can log into your SAM record to locate your unique entity Identifier, or UEI.

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You need this active UEI to register in grants.gov.

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Grants.gov is a website owned and operated by the federal government and is also free to all users.

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Please allow several weeks to complete the grants.gov registration.

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The grants.gov website is extensive, and its help capabilities are numerous and well-staffed.

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Begin with the website and its FAQs, but if you need additional help, you may call their helpline at 800-518-4726, which is available 24/7 except on federal holidays.

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Visit their support page at the website listed here or e-mail them at support@grants.gov.

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If we haven't answered all of your questions in this video, don't fear.

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There are plenty of ways to learn more about our programs.

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Our website, www.imls.gov, has a wealth of information.

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There you can find our strategic plan, information about each grant program, and contact information of IMLS staff.

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If you'd like to ask individualized questions, we recommend one-on-one counseling sessions with the Office of Museum Services staff.

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These are short video meetings between program staff and potential applicants.

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To sign up for a counseling session, visit imls.gov/grants, and navigate to the program you are interested in.

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Thank you for your interest in IMLS's Museum funding opportunities.

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Before you go, I'd like to leave you with some final reminders.

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Each of our grant opportunities have different requirements and goals.

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Please view <https://www.imls.gov/grants> to learn more.

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It is very important to register early with SAM.gov and grants.gov. If you have registered previously,

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remember that these registrations expire, and be sure you know the usernames and passwords you'll need well in advance of the day you submit your application.

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Applications to all IMLS Museum grant programs are due March 13th, 2026, but don't wait until the last minute to submit.

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Thank you and good luck.