



Museums Empowered

Sample Application ME-251700-OMS-22
Project Category: Diversity and Inclusion

Boise Art Museum

Amount awarded by IMLS:	\$191,973
Amount of cost share:	\$193,436

The Boise Art Museum will increase its ability to serve members of its community with disabilities. With an emphasis on the Deaf and hard of hearing community, the museum will facilitate a series of participatory planning processes with consultants, community members, and American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters to identify and test tools to make the museum more accessible. Project activities respond to needs that were previously identified by members of the community and include testing the use of ASL video interpretation for artwork labels, interpretive panels, and audio guides.

The museum will engage local arts leaders in discussions about, and implementation of, ways to make arts experiences more inclusive and accessible to all audiences.

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Narrative
- Schedule of Completion

When preparing an application for the next deadline, be sure to follow the instructions in the current Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program and project category to which you are applying.

1. Project Justification

Boise Art Museum (BAM) seeks IMLS Museums Empowered support for a project to build our institutional capacity in accessibility and to form communities of practice. The project addresses 1) supporting museum staff in providing an inclusive experience for visitors with disabilities with an emphasis on Deaf visitors as part of this proposed project; 2) creating training and learning opportunities for staff to increase their competency in inclusive design and implementation therein; 3) enhancing the relevancy of Museum programs to people with disabilities by including them in the planning, implementation, and testing processes; 4) sharing our information resources with other arts and cultural organizations in the community to increase opportunities for enhancing the relevancy and accessibility of collaborative programming; and 5) creating deliberate, lasting, and systemic change within our community (IMLS Museums Empowered Goal 2, Objective 2.1).

This project ties directly to the Museum's 2018-2023 Strategic Plan. The Strategic Plan guides all BAM activities and provides a timeline of goals and tasks to be accomplished each year. BAM actively collects, preserves, exhibits and interprets works of art and is the steward of a growing Permanent Collection. As an anchor of the cultural district in downtown Boise, BAM recognizes its position and responsibilities to anticipate and provide for the cultural and educational needs of its community. It is the Museum's aim to continue innovations and improvements to the visitor experience. This project addresses the following strategic plan objectives: **Focus on the Core Mission: Education, Objective 3.d.** *Provide multiple access points for learning based on diverse audience demographics, and accommodate various learning styles through educational programs, materials, partnerships, outreach, technology and research.* **3.d.iii.** *Attend to details in exhibitions and programs that speak to the needs of varying audiences such as print content and size, hands-on materials, and audio/video.* **Generate Participation, Objective C.1.** *Strengthen and deepen participation for exhibitions, programs, and membership.* **C.3.** *Ensure that the Museum experience is warm, inviting, safe, and rewarding through positive visitor experiences.* **C.3.a.** *Make visitor services a priority for store staff, security staff, front-end volunteers and all Museum staff.* The outcomes of this project will inform updates for the 2018-2023 Strategic Plan, which is reviewed annually. Additionally, BAM's value statement includes the belief that "art is an essential component of human existence and a form of communication to which everyone should have access," and "Boise Art Museum strives to be a welcoming place for all, where connecting through art can lead to personal exploration and greater understanding of the human condition." For too long in our field, visitors with disabilities have been excluded and not considered as creative beings. Our journey to creating a more welcoming space at BAM is centered around the fundamental belief that everyone belongs here and is rooted in the recognition that we have much to do and learn before that belief is fully manifested.

In 2020, BAM received an IMLS Museums Empowered grant for a two-year project to interrogate our institutional practices and services to place accessibility at the core of our decision-making processes within our museum operations. BAM engaged Prime Access Consulting (PAC), consultants specializing in inclusive design and accessibility, to help us demonstrate our commitment to making the visitor experience better for everyone through implementing an inclusive design methodology. PAC has been a wonderful collaborator by assessing our current operations, making recommendations for enhancing accessibility, providing staff training, convening user groups to test ideas and provide feedback, and identifying needs for additional outside services. With a solid base of knowledge of where we are as an institution in terms of accessibility, BAM now requests IMLS support to advance new accessibility efforts to serve people with disabilities in the ways they are telling us they want and need to be served, while centering them in the development of these efforts.

Over the past year, BAM has established important connections with community organizations that had not previously been involved with the Museum, including the Idaho Council for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Idaho Assistive Technology Project Advisory Council, Idaho Center on Disabilities and Human Development, Idaho Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired, and the Idaho Access Project. BAM is ready to embark now on an entirely new project to address accessibility needs surfaced through insights gathered from these groups, and to share and disseminate knowledge gained with our peer arts organizations with whom we regularly partner for programming.

Currently, in BAM's exhibitions, object affordances (tactics or accommodations) include braille and QR codes with tactile markers on labels and beside interpretive panels to access audio guides, audio guides with cell phone and website access (including label information, artist talks, and visual descriptions of artwork), headphones with visual descriptions of films, large-print labels (on website and in binder at admissions desk), labels in Spanish (on website and in binder at admissions desk), and touchable representations of select artworks for special programs. One of the crucial insights we have garnered from our community organization members is that English is often a second language for visitors who are Deaf. While we thought providing written information in English for anything that included sound would make the information accessible, we did not realize that we were excluding a significant population of people who are Deaf. BAM's artwork labels and didactic panels are printed in English. Print as well as online versions of audio tour scripts that are available to visitors in the Museum are also on our website in English. We have learned that these materials are not as accessible as they could be. For many of our guests who are Deaf, ASL interpretation of these materials would be far more accessible than reading text in English.

BAM proposes to work with PAC and ASL interpreters to pilot a project to film at BAM and make available ASL video interpretation for artwork labels, didactic panels, and audio guides. Our goal is to make ASL interpretation videos standard practice into the future, eventually available for each artwork label, text panel, and audio guide as new exhibitions are developed, interpreted, and displayed. This is just one tangible example of a deliverable within this proposed accessibility project. Other specific deliverables will surface as a result of the participation of the community organization members and their expressed needs (e.g. exploration of diversity and representational inclusion of interpreters, best practices and specifications concerning size and distance for ASL content, feedback on cadence, velocity, and complexity of the ASL content, as well as how best to surface all of these affordances for a variety of visitors with diverse abilities).

There is a need in our community for projects such as this, as there are few local opportunities to experience visual art exhibitions with sufficient accessibility affordances for visitors with disabilities, and, as a result, people with disabilities do not participate in the arts. ASL interpretation presented as videos accessible through QR code access on each label, connecting visitors to BAM's website, will expand accessibility to works of art and educational content. This is a significant and sustainable improvement to allow for a new path for people with disabilities to engage with the Museum that will expand our relevancy to members of our community, and increase our ability to connect with and serve those we may be unintentionally excluding. This project will demonstrate the ways in which BAM places accessibility among our core values to better serve individuals with disabilities, thereby benefiting society as a whole.

Always working to stay current, BAM staff and trustees have taken note of critical conversations in our field as best practices are emerging that encourage actions beyond ADA compliance. Through review of articles, attendance at conference sessions, visiting museums in larger cities, and visitor feedback, we understand the increasing need to implement institutional practices to eliminate barriers to participation. In his 2019 Western Museums Association Annual Meeting keynote speech, inclusive design expert

Sina Bahram, founder of Prime Access Consulting, noted, “Museums have made their physical spaces accessible for decades with automatic door openers, ramps, and other affordances for those with mobility differences. Yet there seems to be a collective failure to recognize that the job is not complete just because those with disabilities can enter the building. Once inside a museum, visitors with disabilities often find that the level of effort, resources, consideration, and study dedicated to providing equal access for all visitors is disappointingly low.” In addition, he stated that one in four persons has a disability (1.9 billion people – 25% of the population). One in two people over the age of 35 will experience a disability within their lifetimes (50% of this group). This is independent of socio-economic status, gender, station, or other points of intersectionality. These numbers do not even account for temporary situations. It is also important to acknowledge that incidents of disability are higher among historically marginalized groups. Given these staggering numbers, we have a responsibility to seriously undertake inclusive design and accessibility for the benefit of our entire society.

BAM is a member of the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD), and accredited by AAM and follows their guidelines for professional practices. This proposed project addresses AAMD’s best practices¹ and AAM’s “Core Standards for Museums,”² for the accessibility of public programs, offering opportunities for diverse participation. Another impetus for taking action and making these important changes is the recent, rapid growth in our community of Boise, Idaho. The Boise metro area ranks as one of the fastest growing in the nation. Since 2010, the metro area has grown by 24%. The community is growing more diverse, representing the full diversity of experience along the human spectrum. There is more demand now than ever for accessible services.

In the last 20 months, museums have experienced a complete disruption to their day-to-day practices and how they satisfy their missions and engage with the public. There has been an enormous uptick in digital literacy among museum professionals and audiences, and museums have had to turn a focus on engaging remote audiences. This is something many persons with disabilities have been requesting for years. While the dynamic shift has been reactionary, due to the pandemic, it surfaces an opportunity for museums to reconsider their new normal when engaging increasingly diverse audiences, who have continually evolving expectations. Considering how to offer blended programming that is offered concurrently on-site and to remote audiences, while welcoming the widest possible audience, is an endeavor worthy of our attention and efforts. Especially as many of the tools and tactics commonly used by museums over the past 20 months are not widely accessible. As a small Museum with limited staff, BAM’s intention with this grant is to facilitate the Museum’s ability to strategically increase capacity in engaging audiences with diverse needs and expectations, who may not be able to visit the Museum easily in person – for events, public and educational programming, and exhibition experiences – and therefore do not consider themselves invited because of the lack of accessible affordances for them.

BAM is the only collecting, AAM accredited art museum in Idaho. As such, we constantly strive to exceed expectations for standards of excellence in all areas. As a small museum serving a large region, we have a responsibility to model institution-wide accessibility practices. Although we are geographically isolated in our region, we want to be on par with other museums in our industry and set a priority that aligns with our core values and the growth in our community to take steps that proactively foster accessibility and inclusivity. With this project, we plan to move BAM forward in our approach to accessibility and inclusion, with deliberate intention.

¹ Association of Art Museum Directors, “Professional Practices in Art Museums,” Association of Art Museum Directors, June 2011, <https://aamd.org/standards-and-practices>.

² American Alliance of Museums, “Core Standards for Museums,” American Alliance of Museums, January 18, 2018, <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/ethics-standards-and-professional-practices/core-standards-for-museums/>.

Listening to and involving user groups in the process is a crucial component to ensure that we are meeting the needs of our audiences for this project. In 2021, BAM worked with PAC to form an Inclusive Design Advisory Group (IDAG), made up of community members interested in providing critical observations about the Museum's current accessibility, identifying areas for improvement, and testing inclusive affordances piloted in the 2020-2022 grant project. The group meets quarterly, and includes the Executive Director of the Idaho Council for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ICDHH), the Chair of the Idaho Assistive Technology Project Advisory Council, and a representative of the Idaho Access Project. They have committed to sustained involvement with BAM to recommend resources and test various approaches to enhance inclusivity within the Museum. Additionally, they serve as direct connection points to the disability communities we want to engage further. Recruiting through these connections, we will hold four design charettes with an emphasis on the Deaf and hard of hearing communities in Boise as facilitated by the Executive Director of the ICDHH. In these design charettes, we will collaborate on the development and implementation of accessible tools to be created for the Museum. This work will culminate in a larger conversation in which we invite additional members, recommended by the community organization members and arts organizations with whom we partner, and ask for their thoughts on the inclusive design efforts at BAM.

The direct beneficiaries of this project are our visitors with disabilities, general visitors, community partners, and BAM staff. Visitors benefiting from the project may include people who are Deaf or are hard of hearing, and those learning ASL. This project is transformative. It will help us take important steps in implementing our mission- and vision-driven plans for inclusion at the Museum, which touch every aspect of the organization, including the internal culture, programmatic development, visitor services, communications, and the building. At the completion of this project, the Museum will have solid experience on which we can continue to build, with the persistent goal of improving the visitor experience for all through the lens of inclusive design.

In order to disseminate the lessons we have learned, and draw others in the community into the conversation, one of the target groups for this project is the network of arts organization leaders in Boise. Early in the pandemic, BAM's Executive Director established the Directors Network as a forum for discussion, collaboration, and creative solutions to current issues. The group meets once each month (virtually or in person depending upon the pandemic). Participating organizations include Ballet Idaho, Basque Museum and Cultural Center, Boise Art Museum, Boise Contemporary Theater, Boise Philharmonic, Boise State University, The Cabin (literary center), Idaho Botanical Garden, Idaho Shakespeare Festival, Idaho State Historical Society, Opera Idaho, and Velma V. Morrison Center for the Performing Arts. During the proposed grant period, PAC will facilitate one workshop per year, on topics of inclusive design and affordances that arts organizations, regardless of discipline, can implement in order to be more accessible and welcoming to everyone. We will learn from one another, iterate on the work being done at each of our institutions, and build a community of practice. Intentionally engaging Directors Network members in this way will expand resources among our arts and cultural community, thus ensuring that the conversations continue beyond the grant period and beyond the Museum's walls.

2. Project Work Plan

Guiding Timeline

Year one

- Quarterly meetings with IDAG
- One facilitated workshop with the Directors Network

- Charette one: Present early-stage prototypes for ASL videos of artwork labels and didactic panels to five members of the Deaf and hard of hearing community, and three members of IDAG, while inviting them to join ideation phases to enhance the offering. We will implement a pre/post-evaluation and record feedback.
- Charette two: User group session to test incorporated ideas in preparation for implementation in galleries.
- Continuous: Engaging with local arts leaders and artists with an emphasis on connecting with artists with disabilities.
- Mid-point: Compile and review data and responses.

Second Year

- Quarterly meetings with IDAG
- BAM exhibition with piloted materials in ASL as well as other suggested accessibility tools.
- Charette three: One user group session in gallery to test accessibility tools with a post evaluation.
- Compile and review data and responses.
- Charette four: Categorize learning for future approach and expanding on ASL interpretation for artwork labels, didactic panels, and audio guides for BAM's Permanent Collection.
- One facilitated workshop with the Directors Network.
- Culmination of engagement in public conversation with invitees of disabled community and arts community.

Prime Access Consulting will assist BAM with this project. **Sina Bahram** is an accessibility consultant, researcher, speaker, and entrepreneur, with extensive experience working with museums. He is the founder of PAC, an inclusive design firm located in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, whose clients include technology startups, research labs, Fortune-500 companies, and both private and nationally-funded museums. He has a strong background in computer science, holding undergraduate and graduate degrees in that field. As a recognized expert in accessibility, Bahram enjoys collaborating with individuals of diverse professions to devise innovative and user-centered solutions to meaningful real-world problems. Understanding that inclusion is only sustainable when adopted as a culture, not just a policy, he works with middle and executive management, policy makers, and other stakeholders within institutions to promulgate accessibility and inclusive design throughout the fabric of an organization. In 2012, he was recognized as a White House Champion of Change by President Barack Obama for his work enabling users with disabilities to succeed in STEM fields. In 2015, the international accessibility community recognized him as an Emerging Leader in Digital Accessibility at the annual Knowbility Community Heroes of Accessibility Awards. In 2017, Bahram served as co-chair of the Museums and the Web conference. His passion for his field originally stems from the fact that he is mostly blind and uses assistive technologies such as a screen reader to navigate computer systems and technological devices.

Corey Timpson, as part of the PAC team, is an active collaborator and thought leader in experience design and digital media discourse within the museum and cultural industries. As Vice President, Exhibition, Research, and Design, at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR) he was responsible for the direction and oversight of exhibition programs, research and curation, design and production across media, digital platforms, and collections-based initiatives (library, archives, museum collections, and art commissioning). As the project director for the design-build of the CMHR, his focus was on interpreting difficult knowledge and presenting it through a multi-sensory, transmedia storytelling approach. He also championed the creation of, and directed, the museum's internationally recognized inclusive design and accessibility practices. Whether working for museums and culture, sports and entertainment, healthcare, or commercial clients, Timpson places strict attention on rich

experience design, built upon sustainable and inclusive interaction and data models. His design leadership has accounted for over 30 international awards in the fields of environmental, exhibition, and graphic design, digital and interactive media, digital systems, film and linear media, and universal design.

Robin Marquis, an additional member of the PAC team, is part of a national network of thought-leaders shaping the conversation about accessibility in arts and culture, while contributing to local efforts that combine creativity, education and activism to achieve positive social change. They have over a decade of experience leading community-based initiatives and programming that centers diversity, equity, accessibility and inclusion. As an artist with a disability and Accessibility and Organizational Manager at The Peale Center, they provide education and support to organizations that are committed to making spaces accessible for, and inclusive of, people with disabilities. Marquis previously served as the Community Outreach Coordinator for Access Smithsonian, the central accessibility office for the Smithsonian Institution, and holds an MFA in Community Arts from the Maryland Institute College of Art.

PAC is an excellent fit for BAM's needs. Having expert consultants and a facilitator who understands from a first-hand perspective the experiences of the disabled community is crucial to the validity of the project. PAC brings a breadth of experience with museums and will be able to apply their expertise and build upon their research to help BAM move forward with inclusion and accessibility efforts through this project. PAC is available during the proposed project timeline. BAM will use IMLS funds to contract with Prime Access Consulting. The two-year project will include remote and in-person facilitation of convenings of the Inclusive Design Advisory Group, user groups, Directors Network workshops, as well as off-site and on-site collaborative work with staff during regularly scheduled virtual and in-person meetings.

Evaluation delivery formats will include pre- and post-visit surveys of user groups; observations and feedback captured during user group meetings and workshops; and recorded observations from user-group sessions to test BAM's new accessibility tool. Data and responses will be compiled and reviewed by BAM staff and the consultants to ensure the project is tracking to the intended results.

The roles and responsibilities taken on by BAM staff during this project will be in addition to their regular duties. Ample time has been built into the project timeline along with periodic check-ins with the consultants, to allow for mid-project adjustments and multiple staff schedules.

This project will be implemented under the direction of BAM's Executive Director, **Melanie Fales**. She will be the primary contact for the consultants. She will serve to communicate this project as a priority in the larger scope of the Museum, will participate in discussions and workshops with advisory members, staff and PAC to ensure that the parameters are clear, communicate progress to the board, and lead the decision-making process. Her role in spearheading the project is necessary in order for sustainable institutional change to be successful.

BAM's Marketing and Creative Services Coordinator, **Hana Van Huffel**, will be responsible for the design and production of the accessible materials that have been developed for exhibitions and will place accessible materials, including the ASL videos, on BAM's website for access. She will attend training and advisory meetings, and will be responsible for coordinating the filming of ASL videos with the interpreter(s). Curator of Education, **Kelly Cook**, and Program Assistant, **Lianna Hamby**, will attend training and advisory meetings, and participate in the development of accessible interpretive materials and educational programming in relation to the exhibition selected to pilot materials with ASL interpretation.

BAM requests \$191,973 from IMLS for this project. The project will begin September 1, 2022 and end on August 31, 2024. The key staff required for this project are three consultants from PAC, BAM's Executive Director, Curator of Education, Marketing and Creative Services Coordinator, and Program Assistant.

3. Project Results

The measures for the success of this project will be 1) positively impacting the knowledge of BAM staff related to ASL interpretation and interacting with visitors who are Deaf and visitors with hearing difficulties, thereby building understanding and sustained capacity; 2) successfully piloting accessibility tools, beginning with ASL interpretation of artwork labels, didactic panels, and audio guides; 3) engaging user groups in the process of assessing and making recommendations for new interpretive tools; and 4) engaging local arts leaders in discussions about, and implementation of, ways to make arts experiences more inclusive and accessible to all audiences.

This project addresses a need for equitable opportunity and access at BAM, and will remove barriers to interacting with BAM as a welcoming and approachable place for art appreciation, arts education, and community engagement. This project speaks to BAM's institutional values and is integral to achieving our mission and vision, fulfilling our promise to be accessible to all audiences. The tangible result of this project will be a growing library of ASL interpretation videos for exhibitions at BAM. A full report will be submitted to the IMLS and shared with the Museum's Board of Trustees as well as in proposed sessions to take place at our regional and local museum conferences as well as at AAM conferences and for AAMD professional development to extend learning in the museum field. Because the staff who will be trained will include those who are responsible for this work on a day-to-day basis as well as the Executive Director, accountability will be infused throughout the organization to ensure long-term sustainability. By including the organizations within the Directors Network, we will also be part of a group of cultural organizations that is holding our peers accountable and supporting one another in the important work of inclusion and accessibility.

