



Museum Grants for African American History and Culture

Sample Application MH-259938-OMS-26
Project Type: Small Project (\$5,000-\$100,000)

African American Civil War Museum

Amount awarded by IMLS:	\$99,860
Amount of cost share:	\$ 0

The African American Civil War Museum will develop and implement a new professional development program to recruit new volunteers, strengthen their interpretive skills, and enhance the quality and relevance of guided programs for students and the public. The project involves hiring a volunteer programs coordinator to serve as the manager for volunteer recruitment, training, and evaluation. Project activities include establishing a competency-based training framework, developing an onboarding curriculum with professional development modules, and implementing an eight-week training program for three cohorts of volunteers that includes classroom instruction, interpretation practice, and site-based experiential learning. The outcome of project activities will be a comprehensive, volunteer training and evaluation framework that strengthens interpretive consistency, instructional quality, and visitor engagement.

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.

The African American Civil War Memorial Freedom Foundation (AACWM) is requesting \$99,860 in support of the project **Advancing Interpretation and Access Through Volunteer Professional Development**. AACWM will develop and implement a new professional development program to recruit new volunteers, strengthen museum volunteers' interpretive skills, improve their ability to welcome and engage visitors, and enhance the quality and relevance of guided programs for students, adults, and the general public. Project activities include hiring a Volunteer Programs Coordinator; conducting a comprehensive review of volunteer policies, procedures, and training materials; establishing a professional resource library; implementing a flexible volunteer structure to broaden participation; strengthening recruitment strategies to expand the volunteer base; developing a structured evaluation framework; and creating a sustainable model for ongoing volunteer training and professional growth.

The project will result in a comprehensive training program that enhances volunteers' historical knowledge, communication skills, and visitor service practices. By strengthening preparation and accountability, AACWM will expand its capacity to provide accurate, engaging, and accessible interpretation to visitors from across the nation and from a wide range of communities and educational backgrounds, including individuals with disabilities.

Project Justification

The African American Civil War Memorial Museum has identified a pressing institutional need to modernize and formalize its volunteer training infrastructure to ensure consistent, high-quality public service and interpretation. The Museum serves approximately 200,000 visitors annually with a core staff of four full-time employees and relies heavily on volunteers to deliver guided tours, student programs, and visitor services. Prior to pandemic-related disruptions, more than 100 volunteers collectively contributed over 18,000 service hours in 2019¹, leading education programs, conducting daily highlight tours, assisting with collections work, and supporting visitor engagement. Today, more than 30 active volunteers continue to lead all regularly scheduled group tours for school groups and the general public. However, the Museum's existing volunteer training model—historically managed by a single staff member through a multi-week onboarding process—has not kept pace with institutional growth, expanded visitation, or evolving educational standards.

This need was identified through multiple data points. A 2019 institutional assessment documented gaps in ongoing professional development opportunities, the absence of structured evaluation tools for tour quality, and inconsistencies in instructional approaches during school programs. Observations of guided tours indicated opportunities to strengthen inquiry-based learning techniques and improve alignment between tour content and student learning objectives. Volunteer feedback further revealed that while initial onboarding was valued, there was limited access to advanced training or continuing education. Several volunteers reported reduced confidence in their mastery of exhibition content, particularly as interpretive expectations increased.

The Museum recently completed a comprehensive renovation, including the refurbishment of its flagship exhibition, *Glorious March to Liberty: Civil War to Civil Rights*, and the installation of a new exhibition. These updates significantly expanded interpretive content and public programming opportunities. However, volunteer training materials and interpretive guides have not yet been systematically revised to reflect the updated exhibitions. Without a structured framework for ongoing training and evaluation, the Museum risks inconsistent visitor experiences and uneven program quality across tours. The Museum's 2022–2027 Strategic Plan prioritizes stewardship, accessibility, quality, and intellectual curiosity, including explicit goals related to workforce development and strengthened public service delivery. This project directly advances those goals by establishing a dedicated Volunteer Programs

¹ The volunteer staff was reduced due to health concerns in 2020 and has stayed at reduced capacity since then.

Coordinator and implementing a comprehensive, competency-based training and evaluation model. Project outcomes will include the development of standardized training curricula, implementation of performance assessment tools, expanded continuing education opportunities, and measurable increases in volunteer preparedness and program quality. By strengthening the skills, knowledge, and accountability of its volunteer workforce, the Museum will improve the consistency and effectiveness of interpretation delivered to thousands of visitors annually, enhance educational outcomes for school groups, and build sustainable institutional capacity aligned with national museum standards. This project addresses a clearly documented operational gap and positions the Museum to better fulfill its mission of preserving and interpreting Civil War history for a national audience.

Many volunteers became inactive during the COVID-19 pandemic for health reasons, a period that coincided with the Museum's multi-year renovation project. As a result, the current volunteer corps is smaller and less diverse in experience than in previous years, with many active volunteers primarily affiliated with the Museum's reenactment corps. While these volunteers bring strong historical knowledge, the overall volunteer base has not yet been rebuilt to pre-pandemic levels, nor has it been systematically retrained to reflect updated exhibitions and evolving educational standards.

Following the completion of renovations, the Director of Education has worked to strengthen and modernize student programming. However, volunteer-led tours have not yet undergone a comprehensive revision. Guided tours for students, adult groups, and the general public remain one of the Museum's most popular visitor engagement offerings. The Museum collects feedback from teachers and organized groups, although there is currently no formalized evaluation system for daily volunteer-led highlight tours, creating an accountability gap in one of the Museum's most visible public-facing programs. The most recent evaluation data for educational programs (2023) illustrates both strengths and areas for improvement. During the last school year, 70% of teacher survey respondents rated the overall quality of the program as "excellent," and 92% indicated that the content was highly relevant to curriculum standards. However, qualitative feedback from highlight tours conducted in 2022² identified concerns specifically related to volunteer-led highlight tours. Comments from general visitors indicated variability in delivery, with some noting that tours occasionally exceeded scheduled timeframes or focused heavily on factual detail at the expense of interactive engagement. These findings suggest that previous training models prioritized historical content mastery without equal emphasis on instructional technique, audience awareness, and visitor-centered practices.

Taken together, volunteer attrition during the pandemic, institutional growth following renovation, documented feedback from educators and visitors, and the absence of a standardized evaluation framework point to a clear institutional challenge. While volunteers remain deeply committed and knowledgeable, the Museum requires a structured, competency-based training and assessment model to ensure consistent, high-quality visitor experiences across all tour formats. Addressing these documented gaps will strengthen program delivery, improve visitor satisfaction, and build sustainable workforce capacity aligned with professional museum standards.

Who is the primary audience for your project and how have they been involved in the planning?
"Primary audience" refers to those who will be most immediately and positively affected by your project. Identify the number of individuals in the primary audience or in each primary audience, if you identify more than one.

² The Museum dismantled its exhibits in 2022 and ceased highlights tours at that time. The exhibit was refabricated in 2025 and early 2026 and reopened to the public in the spring of 2026.

The primary audience for this project is the Museum's volunteer corps, who serve in essential interpretive and visitor service roles. Currently, the Museum has more than 30 active volunteers, the majority of whom lead guided tours for school groups and the general public. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 100 volunteers collectively contributed over 18,000 service hours annually. This project is designed to rebuild and strengthen the corps to at least 100 active volunteers over the year-long grant period through expanded recruitment, structured onboarding, and ongoing professional development. Our current volunteers have been directly involved in identifying the need for this project. A 2019 institutional assessment included structured feedback from volunteers, who expressed interest in additional continuing education opportunities beyond initial onboarding. Volunteers noted a desire for advanced content sessions, updated exhibition training, and stronger preparation in instructional techniques. Informal discussions following the Museum's renovation further reinforced the need for updated tour materials and structured professional development aligned with revised exhibitions. In addition, feedback from teachers and visitors regarding tour delivery has been shared with volunteers and has informed planning for a more structured training and evaluation framework. By focusing on volunteers as the primary audience, the project directly strengthens the skills, confidence, and effectiveness of the individuals most responsible for delivering the Museum's public-facing programs.

Who are the ultimate beneficiaries for this project? "Beneficiaries" refers to those who are likely to be aided in the long-term by your project. They may or may not be the same as your "primary audience."

The ultimate beneficiaries of this project are the Museum's visitors, including students, educators, adult learning groups, families, tourists, scholars, and community members who engage with the Museum's exhibitions and programs. Prior to its recent renovation, the Museum served approximately 200,000 visitors annually within a 5,000-square-foot facility. Following a major capital expansion, the Museum's physical footprint has increased to 16,000 square feet, more than tripling its exhibition and program space. With 2026 marking the first year of fully reopened, fully accessible exhibitions after two years, annual visitation is projected to increase significantly.

Guided tours are among the Museum's most requested engagement formats, particularly for school groups. Recent evaluation data shows that 92% of surveyed teachers found Museum programs highly relevant to curriculum standards, demonstrating strong demand and educational value. As visitation increases within the expanded facility, the need for consistent, high-quality tour delivery becomes even more critical. A larger footprint and renewed public interest will result in greater reliance on volunteers to interpret expanded exhibitions and serve a growing and more varied audience.

By strengthening volunteer training, implementing performance evaluation tools, and aligning interpretation with updated exhibitions, this project will improve visitor satisfaction, enhance educational outcomes for thousands of students annually, and ensure consistent engagement across a significantly expanded museum environment. In the long term, visitors will benefit from clearer interpretation, stronger instructional approaches, and more visitor-centered experiences that match the scale and ambition of the newly renovated Museum.

Project Work Plan

This one-year project will establish a structured, competency-based volunteer training and evaluation framework to strengthen interpretive quality, visitor engagement, and institutional capacity. Activities will occur in four sequential phases: assessment and planning; curriculum development; implementation and professional development; and evaluation and sustainability.

Project Phases and Timeline (12 Months)

Phase 1: Planning and Program Preparation (Months 1–2)

The project will begin with the hiring of a Volunteer Programs Coordinator, who will serve as the primary manager for volunteer recruitment, training, and evaluation. The project team — consisting of the Executive Director, Director of Education, and Volunteer Programs Coordinator — will conduct a comprehensive review of existing volunteer policies, training materials, and tour scripts.

The team will analyze evaluation data collected between 2019 and 2023 alongside new volunteer surveys and focus groups to identify priority areas for improvement in volunteer instruction, visitor engagement, and content delivery. Based on this review, the team will establish measurable program benchmarks and develop a competency framework outlining expectations for content knowledge, instructional techniques, and visitor engagement practices. This phase will also include recruitment and onboarding preparation for the first volunteer training cohort.

Phase 2: Curriculum Development and Infrastructure (Months 3–4)

During this phase, the Museum will develop a standardized volunteer onboarding curriculum and supporting professional development materials. Tour scripts will be revised to align with the renovated exhibitions, including *Glorious March to Liberty: Civil War to Civil Rights*.

The project team will create a structured evaluation toolkit that includes observation rubrics, volunteer self-assessments, and updated visitor feedback instruments. The Museum will also establish a professional resource library for volunteers and formalize procedures for background checks for volunteers working with youth and school groups. By the end of this phase, the Museum will have produced a comprehensive written Volunteer Training Manual and implemented a documented volunteer evaluation and feedback system.

Phase 3: Volunteer Training Cohorts and Experiential Learning (Months 5–11)

The new volunteer training model will be implemented through three structured cohorts, each completing an eight-week training program combining classroom instruction, interpretation practice, and site-based experiential learning.

Cohort Training Schedule

- Cohort 1: Months 5–6
- Cohort 2: Months 7–8
- Cohort 3: Months 9–10

Each cohort will complete training in Civil War history, African American military service, museum interpretation techniques, visitor engagement strategies, and target training based on their volunteer role(s) at the Museum. Volunteers will also participate in structured experiential learning visits to strengthen historical interpretation and peer learning. These visits may include:

- President Lincoln's Cottage
- Frederick Douglass National Historic Site
- Appomattox Court House National Historical Park

Following training, volunteers will begin leading tours and assisting with educational programs. Formal tour observations will be conducted using the new evaluation rubric, with the goal that at least 75% of active volunteers receive structured feedback during the grant year. All volunteers working directly with student groups will complete required background checks.

Phase 4: Program Evaluation and Sustainability (Month 12)

During the final phase, the project staff will analyze volunteer performance data, visitor feedback, and teacher surveys collected throughout the project year. Pre-project and post-project data will be compared to measure improvements in instructional consistency, visitor satisfaction, and volunteer confidence. Findings from the evaluation will inform final revisions to the training curriculum and the development of a long-term volunteer development plan, ensuring the training program and evaluation framework continue to support volunteer engagement and high-quality visitor experiences beyond the grant period.

Timeline Overview

Phase	Key Activities	Months
Phase 1	Hire Coordinator, audit materials, define benchmarks	1–2
Phase 2	Develop curriculum, revise tours, build evaluation tools	3-4
Phase 3	Launch training, site visits, and formal observations	5-11
Phase 4	Analyze data, finalize the evaluation report, and sustainability planning	12

Risks and Mitigation

The Museum has identified several potential risks and developed mitigation strategies to ensure successful project implementation.

Risk	Mitigation Strategy
Delay in hiring Volunteer Programs Coordinator	Begin recruitment immediately upon award notification; utilize professional networks and national job boards to maximize job exposure.
Volunteer attrition or inconsistent participation	Offer flexible training formats, modular sessions, foster supportive volunteer community, and detailed mission aligned roles. Leverage former volunteers that wish to return.
Increased visitation exceeding volunteer capacity	Implement structured onboarding twice per year to rebuild corps to at least 100 active volunteers. Utilize centralized scheduling tools to help manage visitors and volunteers on schedule.
Budget pressure from transportation costs	Secure contracts early and explore institutional group rates. Explore alternate transportation means for local sites such as metro or individual meet up instead of bus.
Limited participation in evaluation surveys	Use short digital tools and integrate feedback collection into existing tour processes with some verbal collection methods.

Project Leadership and Management

The Volunteer Programs Coordinator will serve as the day-to-day lead for the volunteers, responsible for volunteer recruitment, onboarding, scheduling, training delivery, evaluation tracking, and reporting. The Director of Education will lead curriculum design and ensure alignment with educational standards and exhibition content and serve as the project manager for this grant project. The Executive Director will provide strategic oversight, monitor budget performance, and ensure compliance with grant requirements. The project team will meet monthly to review progress and quarterly to assess performance metrics against benchmarks. This project requires coordinated personnel, financial, and institutional resources. The Museum will invest \$165,000 in matching funds, including the partial salary and fringe benefits of the Volunteer Programs Coordinator and leadership oversight time. Grant funds will support curriculum development, professional services, training materials, site visits, evaluation, the partial salary of the Volunteer Programs Coordinator and required grant convening travel. The Museum's expanded 16,000-square-foot facility provides adequate space for training sessions, workshops, and volunteer gatherings. Administrative infrastructure, financial management systems, and existing evaluation data systems will support project implementation.

Tracking and Performance Measurement

Progress will be monitored through both output and outcome measures. Output measures will include the number of volunteers recruited (target: increase from 30 to 100 active volunteers), number completing training modules (100% of active volunteers), number of professional development sessions delivered (minimum three over one year), and number of tours formally observed (75% annually).

Outcome measures will include increasing teacher “excellent” program ratings from 70% to 85%, maintaining or exceeding 92% curriculum relevance ratings, increasing volunteer self-reported confidence by 25%, improving highlight tour visitor satisfaction ratings by 15%, and increasing volunteer retention by 25%. Quarterly internal reviews and annual evaluator reports will ensure accountability and allow for mid-course adjustments.

By combining quantitative data (participation rates, survey scores, retention figures) with qualitative feedback (teacher comments, visitor observations, volunteer reflections), the Museum will ensure that progress toward intended results is measurable, documented, and directly tied to improvements in interpretive quality and visitor experience.

Intended Results and Project Impact

This project will result in a comprehensive, competency-based volunteer training and evaluation framework that strengthens interpretive consistency, instructional quality, and visitor engagement. By addressing gaps identified through institutional assessment, volunteer feedback, and visitor evaluations, the project will modernize the Museum’s volunteer infrastructure and align it with current exhibition content and professional standards.

The intended results include:

- A structured onboarding curriculum and advanced professional development modules
- A standardized tour evaluation and feedback system
- A strengthened and expanded volunteer corps (increasing from 30 to at least 100 active volunteers)
- Measurable improvements in visitor satisfaction and teacher program ratings

These outcomes directly address the identified challenge that the Museum’s previous training model emphasized historical content without equal emphasis on instructional technique, visitor-centered practices, and ongoing evaluation. By formalizing training and accountability systems, the project ensures more consistent, high-quality experiences for the Museum’s growing audience within its expanded 16,000-square-foot facility.

Changes in Knowledge, Skills, and Behaviors

As a result of this project, volunteers will demonstrate measurable growth in four areas:

1. **Content Mastery:** Improved familiarity with renovated exhibitions and updated interpretive materials.
2. **Instructional Technique:** Increased use of inquiry-based engagement strategies and improved pacing and audience awareness.
3. **Visitor Service Practices:** Greater consistency in welcoming, responsive, and professional tour delivery.
4. **Confidence and Preparedness:** A projected 25% increase in self-reported confidence based on pre- and post-training assessments.

Structured tour observations and evaluation rubrics will document changes in volunteer behavior, including clearer learning objectives, stronger time management, and more interactive visitor engagement. These changes will directly improve teacher ratings and visitor satisfaction scores.

Models, Tools, and Resources Produced

The project will produce several sustainable tools and resources:

- An updated Volunteer Training Manual aligned with professional museum standards
- A competency framework outlining expectations for tour delivery
- Standardized onboarding curriculum and advanced training modules
- Observation rubrics and evaluation instruments
- A curated professional resource library

These materials will be housed digitally and in print within the Museum and integrated into all future volunteer onboarding and professional development sessions. Volunteers will have ongoing access to training materials through shared digital platforms and in-person workshops.

Sustainability Beyond the Grant Period

The Museum will sustain the benefits of this project by institutionalizing the Volunteer Programs Coordinator position, whose salary and fringe are supported by the Museum as cost share during the grant period. At the conclusion of the grant, the position will be supported through the Museum's regular operating revenue streams, including income earned from the Museum Store, rental event income, and individual donations. These revenue pathways will have time to adjust and grow over the life of the grant, allowing the Museum to incorporate the position into its annual operating budget.

The training curriculum, competency framework, and evaluation tools developed through this project will become permanent components of the Museum's volunteer management system. Museum staff will schedule regular reviews of volunteer training materials to ensure that content remains current with exhibitions, educational standards, and visitor engagement practices. These periodic reviews will allow the Museum to update training modules as exhibitions evolve and as new best practices in museum education and interpretation emerge.

Quarterly training sessions and annual volunteer performance reviews will continue beyond the grant period as part of standard operations. By embedding these tools, staffing structures, and review processes into the Museum's ongoing programs, the project will create a sustainable framework that supports long-term improvements in volunteer effectiveness and visitor experience.

Project Work Plan Schedule (September 2026 – August 2027)

Activity	Sep 2026	Oct 2026	Nov 2026	Dec 2026	Jan 2027	Feb 2027	Mar 2027	Apr 2027	May 2027	Jun 2027	Jul 2027	Aug 2027
Hire Volunteer Programs Coordinator	■	■										
Audit volunteer policies, surveys, focus groups	■	■										
Define competency framework and benchmarks		■										
Develop training curriculum			■	■								
Revise tour scripts for renovated exhibitions			■	■								
Create volunteer training manual & evaluation tools				■								
Volunteer Training Cohort 1 (8 weeks)					■	■						
Volunteer Training Cohort 2 (8 weeks)							■	■				
Volunteer Training Cohort 3 (8 weeks)									■	■		
Experiential learning site visits					■			■		■		
Tour observations & volunteer evaluations						■	■	■	■	■	■	
Volunteer background checks					■	■	■	■	■	■		
Analyze evaluation data											■	
Final evaluation report & sustainability planning												■

Color Key:

Blue – Phase 1: Planning and Program Preparation

Green – Phase 2: Curriculum Development and Infrastructure

Yellow – Phase 3: Volunteer Training Cohorts and Experiential Learning

Orange – Phase 4: Program Evaluation and Sustainability