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Museum Services Act (1984): Speech 01

Susan E. Phillips

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*Statement by
Susan Phillips*

addressing Rowena

*Stewart's objections
to rejected application
by L. Black Heritage
Society (1985)*

I want to thank the Committee for the opportunity to include my remarks in the record of this hearing. I have never written a letter to the editor nor participated in a debate; but neither have I seen more inaccuracies in one paragraph of text and I feel compelled to respond to the misleading statements contained in the testimony of Rowena Stewart concerning the Institute of Museum Services.

Let me address Ms. Stewart's claims.

1. "In this last review cycle, only one proposal, from a minority museum out of 14 submitted, received a grant."

This is not true statement. Many minority museums received funds from IMS. Only 1 Black museum was funded this year. Furthermore, Ms. Stewart, though she had the information freely and cooperatively provided by this agency, fails to state that two of the 14 institutions to which she refers were rejected for cause. One institution received an adverse opinion from its auditors concerning the financial management of the institution. Should taxpayer funds be dispersed to an institution with a record of fiscal mismanagement? IMS final report requirements in the General Operating Support program are among the least onerous in government, and yet an additional institution was disqualified because it failed, despite numerous telephone calls and letters, to submit a final report on a prior year's grant. Further, this institution failed to provide any financial information with its application, making the application incomplete. An additional institution, while reviewed and ranked at nearly the bottom of the slate (1201 out of 1260 reviewed), is not clearly a museum as the "collection" is located in the home of the "Director" who holds down a full time job away from the "museum".

2. "In my opinion, the Institute's requirements and the process of applying represent a burden to any small institution, black or white."

IMS consistently makes more awards to small museums than to any other category of institution. For fiscal year 1985, 18.5% of the General Operating Support awards were made to institutions with budgets of less than \$100,000 per year. 39% were made to those with budgets of less than \$200,000 per year. At the other end of the scale in the highest budget category, only 13% of institutions with budgets in excess of \$2,000,000 were funded.

3. "Moreover, the Institute's unwritten emphases often work to the detriment of black museums. To note just one example, the Institute's grant questions and assessments seem to weight heavily collection care and management issues."

Ms. Stewart's criticism of the IMS GOS application questions is surprising as she served on the panel which wrote the application criteria questions for 1985. Additionally, as Ms. Stewart also served on the GOS panel which reviewed the processing and award of 1985 grants and raised none of the above concerns, her ex post facto criticism of that process sounds a bit like sour grapes from an unsuccessful applicant.

4. "The IMS in particular has not addressed why its grant-making process is so prohibitive to black museums."

The IMS process, while admittedly requires thought, time and energy, is no more prohibitive to black museums than it is to any other category of institution. IMS has at all times during my tenure as director been open to any request for counseling or assistance made of us from individual museums or from the Afro-American Museum Association.

In early 1984, I met in my offices with the Director of the Association, Joy Austin. In June of 1984, I met with Mrs. Austin and several members of the Board. At that time I encouraged those present to urge their membership to apply for Museum Assessment Program grants which are awarded on a non-competitive, first come, first served basis as a review of that program revealed that black museums were not taking advantage of this valuable program of technical assistance. Some present expressed a desire to have their own "special" program. While I disagreed with the need for such a program, I indicated that I would keep an open mind to any proposal which they submitted. To date, no such proposal for a special program has been submitted, and only one black museum has applied to participate in the existing MAP program since the date of our meeting. Two MAP grants were made to black museums in fiscal year 1984, one of which declined the grant.

In addition, because the concern was expressed that these ethnic museums were not able to compete with more traditional institutions, a new category of review (self-selected by the applicant) was created of "specialized" museum. Ethnic museums which elected to be reviewed in this category were grouped so that black museums, along with other ethnic or minority museums, might be reviewed together. Only six of the fourteen black museums that applied this year elected to be reviewed in this specialized category.

In the fall of 1984 IMS sent a representative to the annual meeting of the Afro-American Museum Association. This year no invitation was proffered to IMS to participate in the

annual meeting so we took it upon ourselves to request time on the agenda to explain IMS programs and procedures and to provide individual or group counseling.

IMS makes available upon request sample narratives of previously funded applications in a similar budget size and discipline. IMS staff, on request, provides copies of the peer review sheets of applications and will on the phone or in person discuss with an unsuccessful applicant the deficiencies of his application.

I firmly believe that IMS has exercised a most responsible and responsive position concerning not just black museums, but all institutions with whom we deal. I think that the institutions must examine their own behavior and determine whether or not they have taken advantage of the opportunities IMS has made available to them.

I thank the Committee for its time.