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Sub-Grants (1989-1990): News Article 02

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Ban Proposed on Arts and Humanities 'Re-Grants'

By CHRISTOPHER MYERS

WASHINGTON

The chairman of the House panel that oversees spending for the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities last week proposed ending the two organizations' practice of "re-granting"—making block grants to private humanities or arts groups that in turn make individual grants to artists, scholars, or museums.

The proposal came amid mounting criticism of the practice by politicians angered by two controversial arts projects that received funds through a re-grant agency. Officials of groups that support arts and humanities efforts in the United States said that despite the uproar over re-granting, their work would suffer acutely if Congress eliminated the practice.

The proposal—by Rep. Sidney R. Yates, Democrat of Illinois and a strong advocate of federal support for the arts and humanities—had not been formally drafted late last week.

One humanities representative, who asked not to be identified, said that ending re-granting would have a "devastating" effect on many programs in both the humanities and the arts.

Many arts and humanities organizations lean heavily on re-grant funds from the endowments to support programs they operate. In addition, the humanities endowment depends on certain re-grant organizations to disburse endowment money in areas of scholarship that the endowment might not reach on its own.

This year, roughly half of the 900 fellowships awarded with N.E.H.

funds were distributed by re-grant agencies.

The re-grant process is considered by humanities officials to be particularly important in such areas as international scholarship. Organizations like the International Research and Exchanges Board, which supports work in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China, receive large amounts of the endowments' re-grant money.

In interviews this month about an N.E.H. review of its policies on re-granting, the executive director of the International Research and Exchanges Board, Allen H. Kassof, said his organization "would go under" without the endowment's re-grant funds. Lynne V. Cheney, chairman of the humanities endowment, acknowledged that the exchanges board and the Committee on Scholarly Communication do work that her agency would have trouble doing on its own.

No Comment From Endowments

Both Mr. Kassof and Mrs. Cheney declined to comment last week on Representative Yates's proposal.

Mr. Yates met last week with Mrs. Cheney and Hugh Southern, acting director of the National Endowment for the Arts, to discuss ways of improving oversight at the two agencies. In an interview, Mr. Yates said he understood that in some areas, including international scholarship, re-granting might be necessary, and that the endowments probably would be allowed to continue re-granting in those areas.

Mr. Yates said the idea behind his proposal was to make sure that all applicants for endowment grants are given "fair consideration."

Mr. Southern of the arts endowment declined to comment last week. A spokesman, Joseph Slye, said that although it was difficult to comment on the amendment before it was written, probably about 200 of N.E.A.'s 4,500 annual grants would be affected. Those grants, now handled through re-grant organizations, account for about \$13-million of the \$156-million awarded annually by the arts endowment, he said.

2 Exhibits Spark Controversy

The recent controversy over re-granting was prompted by the N.E.A.'s support of two controversial art exhibits. The first, financed partially by the N.E.A. through a re-granting group, included a photograph of an image of the crucified Jesus submerged in urine.

The second was an exhibit of photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe that included homoerotic images. The exhibit was organized, with some financial support from the N.E.A., by the University of Pennsylvania's Institute of Contemporary Art.

The exhibit was scheduled to be shown at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington in July, but the gallery's administrators canceled the exhibit when they anticipated fierce criticism from Congress.

Mr. Yates denied that his proposal was a specific response to the controversy over the art exhibits. "It's something I've been looking at for years," he said.