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Museum Services Act (1984): Correspondence 08

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The Rhode Island Historical Society

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May 24, 1989

Honorable Claiborne Pell
United States Senate
335 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

No doubt you are aware that the Rhode Island Historical Society was again unsuccessful in the recent round of IMS General Operating Support Grants. It has now become an annual disappointment to us. We have almost reached the point of despair and wonder frankly if it is worth the effort. The last grant we received was in 1985. Out of the dozen years of awards, we have been successful only on four occasions. We estimate about \$2500 worth of staff time goes into the application and suspect we might have been better advised in recent years to buy Rhode Island lottery tickets.

As you well know, our history with the program goes back to the beginning. If it were not for my stubborn Dutch ancestry, I might have already joined my colleagues in other state historical societies who do not even apply anymore.

This letter is not just a complaint from a disappointed customer. Here are some considered observations and recommendations.

1. There are simply too few grants given. I do not know who persuaded the current Museum Services Board that 400 grants was a good number, but when I was on the Board we were told by staff and outside analysts that if 550 to 600 grants were awarded nearly all the truly qualified institutions would be supported. It is somewhat mystifying that the Board was able to make nearly that number of grants ten years ago with half the budget.
2. There is simply no quality control over reviewers. Junior members of museum staffs with little experience and expertise and only an ambition to add a line to a resume can become part of a jury of peers. Reviewers can be unduly harsh or easy.
3. There is also no real control over the accuracy of the presentation by the applicant. I do not believe our fellow museums would lie about their situations, but the temptation to exaggerate and color the facts is certainly present, and I do not doubt that they do it! The one corrective available to the Board, for both objections number two and three, which has never been applied is the standard of Museum accreditation. The process of accreditation as administered by AAM requires a detailed analysis of the museum and an on-site verification by a team of museum professionals. The telling point here is that year after year museums with accreditation fail to get IMS grants while

those without it are winners. I believe this is evidence of flaws in the IMS award process. A simple solution would be to award quality points to an accredited applicant, the same way the Federal government recognizes veterans who apply for Federal jobs or minority contractors who bid on contracts.

4. I think the size of awards is a source of skewed results. I would much rather have competed for \$25,000 to \$50,000 a year and been successful more frequently, than to hope to capture the big prize of \$75,000 once every five years. The larger museums successfully lobbied for the \$75,000 ceiling a few years ago and argued that even that amount was barely worth their effort. I think that is the worst kind of arrogance. There is not a museum director in the country who finds it easy to raise even \$5,000 from a private donor and would turn down \$30,000 or \$40,000 as too insignificant to bother with. With smaller grants, more could be given.
5. I think IMS has lost sight of its mission to give general operating support. As recently as this past year, a meeting was held with people from the field to think up new categories of project support. As more project support grants are created the General Operating Support pool shrinks and the agency gets into more and more competition and overlap with NEH, and NEA.

Thanks, as always for your concern and interest. I hope some of the above may be useful to you as you hold hearings and reflect upon this "almost" helpful agency.

Sincerely,



Albert T. Klyberg
Director

ATK/cah