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New England Botanic Garden hit by federal grant termination

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New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill. (Photo/Laura Hayes)

BOYLSTON – On April 15, New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill (NEBG) was notified that its \$250,000 Museums for America grant awarded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) had been canceled. The grant, issued in 2024 by the independent federal agency, was intended as a three-year grant allowing the botanic garden to expand essential curatorial practices. This includes hiring full-time staff responsible for inventorying NEBG’s scientifically significant plant collections and making important records available online to a global audience, while also enhancing the visitor experience for those on site.

“The loss of this grant is devastating,” said Grace Elton, CEO of New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill. The Boylston, Massachusetts botanic garden welcomes more than 200,000 visitors each year. It has held AAM Accreditation for over 20 years, indicating that the organization operates at the highest standard of museum best practice. The IMLS funds awarded to the Garden were granted after a rigorous application process. “We will appeal the grant termination and call on our community and our elected officials for support. We are concerned not only for our garden but for cultural institutions across the state and country that face similar grant terminations. Vital arts and culture programs that provide public education, engage youth in creative ways, protect the environment, and enrich all of our lives are threatened,” Elton said.

NEBG’s grant was part of IMLS’s Museums for America program, a portfolio that in FY24 included grants totaling over \$22 million distributed to more than 100 museums of diverse sizes, disciplines, and geographies. In Massachusetts alone, 24 different organizations benefited from nearly \$8.5 million in IMLS funding. While no official accounting of canceled grants has been made public, it appears that many institutions locally and nationally have had their grants terminated. NEBG received little information on next steps moving forward. With the entire staff of IMLS put on leave after a March 14 executive order slashing the agency’s funding, getting answers to questions has been virtually impossible. The American Alliance of Museums reports that IMLS represents just 0.0046% of the federal budget. In addition to the vast community services museums provide, the museum sector generates more than \$50 billion in economic benefits to the American economy and supports more than 726,000 jobs.

“It’s extremely frustrating to have this critical funding cut,” said Elton. “We urge our elected officials to defend IMLS and reinstate the legally granted resources that our region’s cherished cultural institutions rely on. We are fortunate to have incredible support in the community, and are grateful to the staff, volunteers, and community members who are working hard to figure out what comes next.”