

Inside Philanthropy: Museums Are Fighting to Survive. Here's One Funder Backing Smaller, Struggling Institutions

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THE JAMES A MICHENER ART MUSEUM IN DOYLESTOWN, PENN. IS ONE OF THE INSTITUTIONS RECEIVING FUNDING FROM THE BRIDGE AHEAD INITIATIVE.

As an archetypal small arts institution reliant on admissions and retail revenue, Manhattan's [Tenement Museum](#) checked off all of the boxes on the COVID-19 survival to-do list.

Its leadership laid off some workers, but mostly furloughed staff temporarily. They canceled its annual gala and asked supporters to contribute anyway; the Zegar Family Foundation made a \$250,000 challenge grant to encourage donations. They raised over \$430,000 on Give Lively, plus two Facebook fundraisers raising over \$30,000 and \$4,000. The museum received a \$250,000 emergency grant from the New York Community Trust's [Covid-19 Response & Impact Fund](#), and a \$1.4 million Paycheck Protection Program loan.

Nevertheless, last month, the museum [permanently laid off](#) 76 furloughed staff. "We had hoped to avoid this drastic step," said President Morris J. Vogel, who is being paid about \$25 a month so he can retain his healthcare coverage. Officials hope the worst is over—they have tentative plans to restart outdoor walking tours in mid-August. Back in May, as the coronavirus was wreaking havoc across the arts world, we posed the question of [which museums would be able to survive with the help of wealthy donors](#). The consensus was that affluent institutions with large endowments would weather the storm, while museums like the Tenement, whose \$2.7 million endowment is too small to generate significant operating income, would be less fortunate.

Three months later, the theory seems to hold. A recent American Alliance of Museums (AAM) survey of museum directors found that 33% of respondents "were not confident they would be able to survive 16 months without additional financial relief." Sixteen percent felt their organizations were "at significant risk of permanent closure." Meanwhile, billionaire donors have been relatively quiet—at least publicly. One exception is [Alice Walton](#). In mid-May, her Art Bridges Foundation announced the \$5 million Bridge Ahead Initiative to support small and midsize partner museums affected by COVID-19. I'll unpack how this money is starting to flow to far-flung locales like Traverse City, Michigan and Doylestown, Pennsylvania in a moment. But first, let's take a closer look at the precarious state of the museum world.

Staring into the Abyss

[The AAM survey](#) found that 87% of museums have only 12 months or less of financial operating reserves remaining, with 56% having less than six months left to cover

operations. Forty-four percent had furloughed or laid off some portion of their staff, and 41% anticipated reopening with reduced staff.

During the pandemic, 75% of museums ramped up virtual educational programs, experiences and curricula to students, parents and teachers. However, these activities may not last. Sixty-four percent of directors predicted cuts in education, programming or other public services.

“There's a large public perception that museums rely on government support, when the reality is they get only a quarter of their funding from the government,” said AAM President and CEO Laura Lott. Like the Tenement Museum, institutions’ primary sources of funding are ticket and gift shop sales, “most of which [went to zero overnight](#) when they were all shuttered,” Lott said.

On the bright side, Lott told NPR that a majority of museums that took part in the AAM survey will have reopened by the end of July. But if the coronavirus has taught us anything, it’s that the best-laid plans are always subject to change.

Some Los Angeles museums opened in mid-June, only to close again after Gov. Gavin Newsroom ordered them to do so after a surge in cases. In late July, a few days before New York City entered Phase 4 of its reopening, Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced that museums [would remain closed](#). Many of the city’s institutions have announced reopening dates in recent weeks, including the Museum of Jewish Heritage, the American Museum of Natural History, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met).

The Met represents the kind of affluent museum that should be able to ride out the crisis. Officials recently said they changed the formula for spending the museum’s distributions from its \$3 billion endowment, allocating \$25 million in previously restricted funds toward operating expenses. Still, in early August, it announced another [round of layoffs and furloughs](#). Officials said the museum may push back its planned August 29 reopening date.

Partnering with Small and Midsize Museums

In 2017, Walton established the [Art Bridges Foundation](#) to focus on “sharing American art across the country through collaborations with museums and institutions,” including her own Crystal Bridges of American Art. “We want to support partner institutions in expanding and deepening their connection with audiences,” Walton [said](#). “This is about engaging communities through providing access and learning opportunities.”

Terra Foundation for American Art CEO Elizabeth Glassman says that by making “works of art accessible to audiences in museums that might not have access,” Art Bridges’ charter is “paradigm shifting.”

A year later, Art Bridges announced a \$15 million nationwide initiative with Terra to support multi-year exhibition partnerships among a group of cohorts. Inaugural grantees were the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Art Bridges has two kinds of partners: Lending partners, who are interested in sharing their collections with broader audiences, and borrowing partners, comprising rural or regional venues with annual budgets under \$7 million that seek to engage their community with American art. (To put this number in context, the Tenement Museum has an annual operating budget just north of \$11 million.) Art Bridges is always on the lookout for new partners and encourages museums to [reach out through its site](#).

After the global pandemic hit, Art Bridges launched Bridge Ahead to help partner museums “remain in touch with their audiences during this period and to prepare for reopening in the months ahead.” Starting on May 11, partners with annual operating budgets of under \$30 million filled out a short application outlining their “needs and goals as they transition to create distanced, yet meaningful, connections and thoughtful spaces in this time of COVID-19.” Applications are currently closed.

The initiative [distributes funding in two phases](#). The first supported partner museums as they developed engagement opportunities and programs to connect with their communities remotely. The second phase provides support as museums prepare to reopen.

Where Bridge Ahead Funding is Flowing

Earlier this summer, outlets across the country started to report on local museums receiving Bridge Ahead funding. Here are a few examples.

- In mid-July, the Dennon Museum Center in Traverse City, Michigan, received a \$20,000 Phase I grant to support virtual programming, collections care and reopening efforts. “For museums, this is really critical funding that supports programming, but then also staffing, as well,” Executive Director Craig Hadley told the [local news](#). “And it enables us to do digital programming even while we’ve been partially closed.” A couple of weeks later, Bridge Ahead awarded the museum a \$20,000 Phase II grant to support enhanced museum store operations, marketing initiatives, and reopening. The museum reopened on July 23 with limited hours.
- On July 20, the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, launched a [Bridge Ahead-funded](#) outdoor exhibit featuring work from its permanent collection. The museum reopened to the general public three days later. “When we first came up with the idea, we did not know when our doors would reopen. We were fortunate to get a grant through Art Bridges and they loved the idea,” said Amy Ferracci, director of marketing and public relations.
- On August 6, the George Eastman Museum in Rochester, New York, announced it received \$70,000 from Art Bridges to create more online content for its “Eastman

Museum at Home” program and to enhance COVID-19 protocols, including a contactless museum admission system.

As noted, Art Bridges earmarked \$5 million for the Bridges Ahead initiative, so these examples represent just a fraction of what’s on tap. Don’t be surprised if the foundation announces a second round later this year, especially if a second wave of cases grips the country.

All of which brings me back to the Tenement Museum. Soon after it laid off 76 workers, the Tenement Museum Union filed a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board, accusing the museum’s leadership of unfair labor practices and [demanding officials rescind layoffs](#). Union members also launched a fund to support out-of-work staff, raising over \$28,000 on GoFundMe. While the Tenement Museum declined to comment on the legal aspects in an Artnet News article, a representative did speak to the “human element,” saying, “We can understand the pain and anger of these former employees. However, we took these steps to put us in the best position to maintain the long-term viability of the institution.”