

Humanities in the Heart of Community
Christopher Kaufman Ilstrup
Testimony to the Vermont State Legislature – House Appropriations Committee

Thank you Chair Lanpher and members of the committee.

My name is Christopher Kaufman Ilstrup, I live here in Montpelier, and I am the executive director of Vermont Humanities.

We appreciate the opportunity to present to you today and would like to acknowledge especially the new members of the committee and our new budget liaison, Rep. Rebecca Holcombe. Rep. Holcombe has been very helpful as we prepared for today's testimony and for tomorrow's Creative Network Advocacy Day.

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Madam Chair, I grew up in your district on School Street in Vergennes. The cultural geography of my childhood – Commodore Macdonough's Shipyard at Otter Creek Falls, Basin Harbor, DAR State Park, Fort Ticonderoga, and Mt. Independence hold a dear and important place in my heart. The Bixby Library was a refuge and a temple for a nerdy kid who just wanted to read Shakespeare in a quiet corner. Although I left Vermont for a number of years for school, I returned as many do and have been working here in the arts and culture sector for 25 years.

As I noted in my advance materials which you have on your iPads, Vermont Humanities stands in coalition with the Vermont Arts Council in making three modest requests from the Legislature this year. While the dollar amounts are relatively small, the collective impact will be significant.

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The three proposals, the "ups," include:

- Providing \$150K in funding support to the Vermont Arts Council for the implementation of the Create VT Action Plan.
- Increasing the statutory appropriation for the Art in State Buildings section of the capital bill from \$50,000 to \$75,000. (This request is currently in House Institutions.)
- Increasing the base appropriation for Vermont Humanities to \$300,000.

We thank the members of the committee for their consideration. We are also grateful to the chair for giving us somewhat more time to speak with you this year than we have had in previous years. With this time, I would like to do a bit more than just tell you about the numbers and the budget ups and downs. Because we have a little more time, and because a number of you are likely unfamiliar with us, I'll tell you a little bit more this year about the human side of what we do.

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At Vermont Humanities, we believe that wisdom comes in many forms from many different lived experiences. We believe that everyone's voice deserves to be heard, no matter who you are or where you come from.

Our new mission, adopted in May 2022, is to use the humanities to connect with people across Vermont to create just, vibrant, and resilient communities and to inspire a lifelong love of learning.

We believe that Vermont's diverse people and cultures will thrive as they explore bold ideas and complex challenges and that together we spark creativity, connection, insight, and transformation.

At Vermont Humanities, we've been working hard over the last several years to rethink why and how we do our work, which is often called "the public humanities." Public humanities work rarely happens in formal academic settings, rather it happens in neighborhoods, parks, gardens, bars, general stores, libraries, town halls, and in our faith communities.

We often use a bit of a shorthand joke to describe our current thinking at Vermont Humanities – we are moving away from the "Sage on the Stage" model of bearded old men declaiming wisdom from the mountaintop. Rather, we are moving toward a model where all stories are valued, in spaces both formal and informal; where we all work together to make our communities stronger through a better understanding of our collective lived experiences.

As you know, our communities are living in a time of great transition. To meet the social, environmental, and public health needs of our day, cultural organizations like Vermont Humanities must devote ourselves to transformational thinking, planning, and action.

We believe that the humanities are tools for change, not a set of books on a shelf and we are re-imagining our work by making equity, accessibility, and accountability central to everything we do.

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Our work engages with many national, regional, and local conversations around the role of the humanities. Our federal partner, the National Endowment for the Humanities, has encouraged state affiliates to focus our work on "five pillars" – advancing racial equity, confronting the climate crisis, restoring America's global standing, responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, and strengthening our democracy.

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I'll take a moment here to tell you about one example of these pillars in action in Addison County – advancing racial equity. I'm deeply inspired by the work that the Sheldon Museum of Middlebury has done over the last several years under the label, "the elephant in the museum." Indeed, we were so inspired at Vermont Humanities that we helped to fund and promote the series of educational seminars that the Sheldon offered to the wider museum and historical society communities in Vermont and around New England.

As the series organizers noted, their goal was ultimately to question the kind of history that cultural heritage organizations perpetuate and to provide a framework for how institutions of all sizes and resources can engage in essential conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion in museum

practice. The premise of the series is based in what we would call applied humanities – that is, how do we use the tools of humanistic inquiry to build community, strive for social justice, and make change in today’s complicated moment?

The Sheldon, as a small, local, organization, is to be commended for stepping into this space and supporting the rights of all scholars and community members to learn together. Although Vermonters are arguably more open-minded than people in some other parts of our polarized nation, doing this work is, nevertheless, not entirely without risk. We have seen conflicts around the freedom to read and learn erupting here in Vermont no less than in many other states. For example, libraries and schools in Springfield, Randolph, Chester, Canaan, and many other Vermont communities are beating back challenges to humanistic inquiry and the freedom to learn.

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Across Vermont, we see families of color, LGBTQ+ families, and at this moment especially, transgender youth, struggling to make it through the day. The power of the humanities, and of the cultural sector, to help alleviate some of this pain has never been potent – if we take advantage of it.

For example, throughout 2020 and 2021, Vermont Humanities organized programming around Sarah Henstra’s important young adult novel, *We Contain Multitudes*, about LGBTQ youth living with violence in their family – a common experience, even in Vermont. The director of a remote Northeast Kingdom public library sent us a letter recently about her community’s experience with the book:

“We are in the most rural and remote part of Vermont. It is sparsely populated and there is not a lot of diversity in population. Reading *We Contain Multitudes* together showed our community, especially those who may or may not be openly LGBTQ+, that the library is an inclusive welcoming place for everyone. Our K-12 school library had a book challenge last Spring from a vocal group of parents who objected to LGBTQ+ books. The school administration, supervisory union, and school boards upheld the books unanimously through a series of appeals and the books remain in the school library today.”

She continued, “I am certain that because we read *We Contain Multitudes*, people know the library is an ally. I truly believe having these conversations is the beginning of thinking about others who may not have our lived experience in a rural place. I was so grateful for the opportunity to work with this wonderful, well written, and special book!”

Other Vermonters are using local humanities resources to uncover stories about native Vermonters’ experiences, early feminist leaders, and the beginnings of the environmental movement, researching our forebears’ interactions with our ecosystem and our climate. In just one example, farmers’ records of first frost and last snowfall are wildly useful in understanding the progression of man-made climate change from the 19th Century to today. The weather records at St. Johnsbury’s Fairbanks Museum are vital to understanding the changing climate of the Northeast Kingdom.

All of this helps us to understand why the arts, cultural studies, and the humanities are such important disciplines to continue to support in 2023 and beyond – and why we believe in partnering with our colleagues in the STEM fields. STEM, in partnership with the Arts and Humanities, emphasizes the importance of critical thinking, writing, and research skills that are taught across all disciplines.

For example, every day we talk to coders who are thinking about the ethical ramifications of our technological advancements, medical professionals who understand that empathy is at the core of their ability to advance health equity, engineers who demonstrate that the structures they build serve communities made up of real people, and that those structures must be built using universal design principles grounded in the humanities. And, of course, there are thousands of climate scientists who know that those most deeply impacted by the climate crisis will be the most marginalized human communities around the world.

Again, as we say in our Mission Statement, using the humanities, we connect with people across Vermont to create just, vibrant, and resilient communities and to inspire a lifelong love of learning.

The Humanities truly are at the heart of every community and it is imperative that we understand how our cultural sector supports community building and makes Vermont a place that we want to live in.

Vermont Humanities is a member of the steering committee for the Vermont Creative Network, which recently built the Create VT Action Plan with participation from thousands of Vermonters in every corner of the state. Indeed, this plan is such a compelling vision for arts, culture, and creativity at the heart of Vermont that it was recognized as the 2022 Plan of the Year by the Vermont Planners Association.

The recognition of the plan however, is, I would argue, a recognition by many Vermonters that culture and creativity are critical components in Vermont's efforts to rebound from the pandemic and attract new and engaged people to our state. Culture and creativity, such as that offered by the Sheldon Museum, the Paramount in Rutland, New England Youth Theater in Brattleboro, and the Old Stone House in Brownington, should be nurtured and cultivated. These institutions are economic drivers that enhance our local community in a way that big box development and suburban "sameness" never will.

When the legislature supports the Vermont Arts Council, Vermont Symphony, Vermont Historical Society, and Vermont Humanities, you are actually supporting critical local organizations in each of your districts through our grantmaking and programmatic outreach.

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As the plan says "Creativity and innovation are the heart of Vermont's strength. When we invest in our creative sector, it can pave the way to a thriving, equitable future. At 9.3%, Vermont has a greater share of creative sector jobs than the U.S. average. The majority of those jobs are in design, specialty foods, and visual arts and crafts. Nearly 50% of Vermont's creatives are self-employed or freelance (compared to 40% nationwide). From Bennington to Barton, creative people, projects, and enterprises are everywhere."

The plan continues, "Our state's reputation for innovation is a vital part of the Vermont "brand," attracting tourists and entrepreneurs, driving economic growth, and anchoring vibrant communities. Creative people, businesses and ideas are key to helping Vermont recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and address major challenges like racism, climate change and affordability. Just like roads and bridges, creativity and innovation are essential infrastructure for Vermont's future."

At 9.3% of Vermont's jobs, 41,000 Vermonters are employed in cultural or creative sector enterprises – including libraries, museums, arts organizations, single proprietor artists and creative shops, specialty

food producers, and more. These people are truly at the core of everything that we currently think of as Vermont's humanities infrastructure. These workers live in each and every one of our communities.

The plan states unequivocally that culture and creativity is essential to the ECONOMIC VITALITY of Vermont.

Advance Slide

Vermont Humanities is supporting the plan in myriad ways – through funding individual cultural institutions like the Sheldon, the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum, and the Clemmons Family Farm, but also through building the capacity of Vermonters to be leaders in their community.

In the last two years we have offered significant support to our partners at the Vermont Council on Rural Development for a Covid recovery leadership summit, to the Vermont Creative Network to support local leadership development, to the Snelling Center for Government's Vermont Leadership Institute and Vermont School Leadership Institute, and to the Center for Cartoon Studies for their [Freedom and Unity Comic Book](#), on the practice of democracy in Vermont (produced in partnership with Vermont Humanities and the Vermont Secretary of State). We have also been supporting the Women's Justice and Freedom Initiative for their literacy work with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Vermonters. All of this intentionally brings the humanities into the heart of communities and serves as a guiding principle of community development.

I want to close out this presentation by telling you just a little bit about our current Vermont Reads book, and I swear that we didn't highlight Addison County this year because we had insider knowledge that Rep. Lanpher would be the new chair of House Appropriations.

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Centered in Addison County, the anthology *El Viaje mas caro, or The Most Costly Journey*, is an excellent example of the humanities in action. I have brought copies of the book for each committee member.

El Viaje marks the 20th year of Vermont Reads, an award-winning program, where we encourage Vermonters of all ages to read one book together and take action in their community around the themes of the book. In 2020, *Vermont Reads: March* by Congressman John Lewis won national recognition for outstanding public humanities programming in state and jurisdictional humanities councils, but we are not resting on our laurels. Some of you may have been at the Flynn Center when Congressman Lewis and his co-writer Andrew Aydin visited Vermont in October 2019. Many of your colleagues were at Farmers Night last Wednesday, when Andrew returned to Vermont for a moving talk about his work with the congressman and his new projects since John Lewis' passing.

While our experience with *March* was great, we can see that *Vermont Reads 2022: The Most Costly Journey* will be even more impactful in Vermont communities.

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The Most Costly Journey (El Viaje mas caro) sprang from a collaboration between six Vermont organizations, including the Open Door Clinic, a federally qualified health care center in Middlebury, and the Vermont Folklife Center. It is the first bilingual Vermont Reads book and tells the stories of 19 Vermont farm workers from Latin America in their own words. Illustrated by New England cartoonists,

each short chapter describes aspects of life as a migrant farm worker in Vermont. We are partnering with Inclusive Arts Vermont to produce an audio book of many of the stories to improve accessibility.

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I'm going to pause here to play you a short video and bring the voices of some of the farm workers into this room:

<https://youtu.be/usnZYcmn-4>

There are already 85 community projects in progress all across the state and we expect many more communities will take part before the program year ends on June 30, 2023. Almost 5,000 copies of the book have already been distributed across Vermont. And while most projects are at the local community level, I'd like to call out some larger initiatives that are having a system wide impact:

- The UVM School of Nursing is using the book with all of their incoming first year students.
- The Vermont Department of Libraries ran a reading and discussion program for any interested state employee.
- Vermont's Americorp/Vista Volunteers are using the book in their anti-poverty programs around the state.
- Governor Scott's Office of Racial Equity used the book as part of their IDEAL program for municipal leaders working on equity at the local level.

We are proud that so many Vermonters are taking advantage of this opportunity to learn about and support their neighbors working on farms across the state. It's a tremendous opportunity to build awareness of the need for systemic change for farmers and farmworkers and to build a greater understanding of the effort it takes to maintain the Vermont landscape that we all know and love.

But I don't want to lose sight of the fact that this project started at the Open Door Clinic as a health equity project. Medical professionals understand the power of the humanities to build health equity and offer real opportunities for individuals to live a better life.

Nurse Practitioner Julia Grand Doucet, whom you saw in the video, will testify to this in the House Health Care Committee tomorrow as part of our advocacy day.

Today, with the stories translated into English and anthologized as a collection, Vermonters of all stripes have the opportunity to engage with these voices – hopefully creating more empathy for our neighbors and a greater sense of urgency around immigration reform and support for Vermont's struggling dairy industry. The story tellers and comic book artists of El Viaje mas Caro, along with the health care providers at the Open Door Clinic, have truly created a magical tool to make change possible in the heart of our communities. And that is the power of the humanities.

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Thank you for listening.

I would be delighted to answer questions about anything we do and how we use the legislature's annual appropriation to support this work. A more complete list of our many programs, as well as our CY2023 budget is included in your package of materials that you received yesterday.

Outline Version

1. Introduce yourself
 - a. I am...
 - b. Acknowledge Rebecca and New Members
2. Vergennes
3. The “ups”
 - a. VCN
 - b. Art in State Buildings
 - c. Vermont Humanities
4. Who we are/What we do
 - a. New Mission
 - b. New Vision
 - c. What is “public humanities”
 - d. Sage on the Stage
 - e. Tools for change
5. Pillars of the NEH
6. Racial Equity/Sheldon Museum
 - a. Grant Support
 - b. What kind of history do we perpetuate?
 - c. Framework for new understanding/essential conversation
 - d. Another new concept “Applied Humanities”
 - e. Commendation for the Sheldon and other small organizations
7. Social change in Vermont
 - a. POC, LGBTQ+, Trans Youth under pressure in Vermont and elsewhere
 - b. Taking advantage of the moment – We Contain Multitudes
 - i. Quote from NEK Librarian
 - c. Other examples – climate resilience, Fairbanks Museum
 - d. Partnership with Stem Fields
 - i. Critical Thinking, Writing, and Research Skills
 - ii. Coders (ethics), Medical Professionals (empathy, equity), Engineers (Universal Design), Climate Scientists (international development)
 - iii. UVM Larner College of Medicine Partnership
 - e. VCN Steering Committee
 - i. Winner of the VPA Plan of the Year for 2022

- ii. Rebounding from the pandemic
 - iii. Engage new Vermonters
 - iv. Economic Drivers in every county and district
- 8. Create VT Action Plan – Quote from Plan
- 9. How we support the Plan
 - a. Grantmaking to traditional humanities institutions – LCMM, CFF, Sheldon
 - b. Community Leadership and Civics – VCRD, VCN, Snelling Center (VLI and VSLP), CCS – Freedom and Unity
 - c. Professional Development – Early Literacy, VELI, NTE, Hum Camps
- 10. Closing – El Viaje mas caro
 - a. Addison County (again)
 - b. 20th Anniversary – March (Schwartz Prize)
- 11. Partnership and Collaboration – bringing some voices into the room
- 12. Video
- 13. Close out
 - a. UVM School of Nursing
 - b. Department of Libraries
 - c. Americorp/Vista
 - d. Governor Scott’s Office of Racial Equity, IDEAL Program for Municipal Leaders
 - e. Began as a health equity project – showing the value of the humanities
- 14. Thank you and Contact Information - Questions