

## **Vermont Humanities Testimony for Senate Institutions – February 17, 2026**

### **Christopher Kaufman Ilstrup, Executive Director, Vermont Humanities**

Hello Senators, thank you for having me.

It's been quite a year for all of us. My name is Christopher Kaufman Ilstrup and I'm the executive director of Vermont Humanities.

I'm grateful to the chair for rescheduling my testimony – I was supposed to be here last week during Creative Sector Day festivities, but I was down with the crud and you surely did not want me to bring it here.

When we say “creative sector,” we mean all the businesses, nonprofits, and individuals whose work is rooted in creativity – studios and makerspaces, media businesses, writers and photographers, AND HUMANISTS – our sector is large and diverse, and we pack a strong economic punch. In 2023, the creative sector contributed over 10,000 jobs and \$1.2 billion to Vermont's economy. Our message last week was to share how our work is essential to a thriving Vermont – how creatives make our communities stronger, more connected, and better equipped for the future.

You are probably aware that Vermont Humanities is the sister agency to the Vermont Arts Council, as the National Endowment for the Arts is the sister agency to the National Endowment for the Humanities. All 56 states and jurisdictions have both a state arts agency and a state humanities council.

As you likely know, in April of 2025, the new federal administration terminated all funding for state humanities councils stating that this longstanding nonpartisan relationship was no longer in alignment with the administration's priorities. They also eliminated virtually all other NEH grants and fired over 60% of the civil servants working in the independent agency. The bottom line for us is that \$630,000 of lawfully appropriated funding vanished overnight.

You can find a lot of information on that in the New York Times (mostly accurate) or we can go out for coffee to discuss (where I may be somewhat more accurate.) Today, your chair asked me to speak more specifically about one of our programs which gives me an opportunity to talk about the good work, rather than focus on the challenges in DC.

### **Your chair asked me to talk about Vermont Reads**

Each year, we choose a new book to encourage all Vermonters to read AND act together, building community around the themes of the book

Early books included collections of poetry by Robert Frost and Billy Collins, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, and in 2003, the first year of the program, *Witness* by Vermonter Karen Hesse about the history of the Klan in Vermont.

The program has grown considerably in recent years especially with:

- **Gather** by Oxbow principal Ken Cadow - the number one book in 24 years – with 138 community projects across Vermont and 21 author events during our 2024 program year
- And **The Light Pirate**, by Windham County native Lily Brooks-Dalton, the current book, which is now #2 with 109 projects. Sadly, we have now run out of books and can't buy more thanks to DOGE. I had to beg to get you these copies.

We are very excited indeed to announce our 2026 book in two weeks' time – it's the first time we have commissioned a brand-new work of creative non-fiction by a Vermont author (and Laureate!) to lead off our signature program. It will be distributed internationally beginning in June of this year.

The most important thing about Vermont Reads community projects is that they often lead to real community change:

- *El Viaje mas caro* increased volunteerism in support of immigrant communities
- *March* by John Lewis inspired youth leadership initiatives in schools across Vermont
- *The Light Pirate* is engaging citizens with the environmental and flood resilience projects

### **Vermont Reads 2025: *The Light Pirate* by Lily Brooks-Dalton Program Highlights**

- *The Light Pirate* is the second-most popular book in the 24-year history of Vermont Reads
- We have distributed 4850 free copies of the book to schools, libraries, nonprofits, municipalities, state agencies, etc.
- Hosts booked 55 free Speakers Bureau talks related to the themes of the book, on topics such as:
  - 1800 and Froze to Death: The Cold Year of 1816
  - River Memories: Exploring Settlement Patterns on Waterways in Vermont
  - Thirty-Eight: The Hurricane That Transformed New England
- Hosts scheduled 28 free facilitated discussions of the book, with an estimated attendance of 500 people at these discussions

- Two discussions around *The Light Pirate* were held in Correctional Facilities in Newport and Springfield (we would very much like to do more of this!)
- Public Schools made up over 15% of Vermont Reads hosts

We created two podcast episodes for Vermont Reads 2026, featuring interviews with the author and several Vermont-based and national subject matter experts. (Please listen!)

Author Lily Brooks-Dalton will visit Vermont in early April to attend Teen Lit Mob at Woodstock Union High School. 200 high school students from across the state will attend this daylong event, and each attendee will receive a free copy of the book and will have a chance to meet the author and get their book signed – often a life-changing moment for young readers and aspiring writers.

Danielle Zimmerman from the Smokey House Center in Danby, VT wrote to us, “Vermont Reads created a powerful shared experience for our community.” Smokey House Center advances ecologically sound farming and forestry and provides work and learning that includes local youth. Copies of *The Light Pirate* were distributed to staff, including summer apprentices, and the Center hosted a three-day nature writing workshop in October led by author Kai Thomas.

“Reading the same book together opened up meaningful conversations among staff and students, encouraging everyone to reflect deeply, listen generously, and engage with one another’s perspectives,” said Zimmerman.

Joy Worland of the Vermont Department of Libraries recently wrote to us to let us know that Vermont Reads: *The Light Pirate* is also seeing some national recognition. Here is some of what she told us:

“The last few years our department has been collaborating on a project called the [Northeast Summit on Climate Adaptation for Library Facilities](#). This comprises a webinar series on a range of topics related to libraries responding to climate events, preparedness, and community engagement and education that places libraries as key community organizations in local climate action.

The most recent session, *Climate Resilience: Climate Action through Arts Programming*, was held in January. Its theme was how arts programming can build resiliency against climate change. One of the projects highlighted was the repair café Brownell Library in Essex hosted as part of programming related to *The Light Pirate*.”

Joy continued, “I heard about this program at Brownell while we were brainstorming on the January topic and immediately wanted to share this beyond Vermont. I was so delighted by the creativity of integrating the book into a program that taught people how to keep things

out of landfills and fend for themselves when things break, whether that's machines or the entire infrastructure as in the book! Fortunately, Brownell staff members Ariana Hausmann and River West were game to present about it.

The Summit group loved hosting something about climate action that was creative and proactive and full of positive energy -- a good complement to previous sessions on flood cleanup and adapting to heat emergencies even in northern regions. Which of course are important topics and in their own way inspiring, but there was a joyfulness to the arts-focused session that left people from multiple states smiling and excited to go try similar things at their libraries, including one person who wrote on their evaluation, "I love the idea of tying a book theme into an actionable project."

Finally, we were delighted to see that the Rutland Herald/Barre Time-Argus featured our work on *The Light Pirate* at Otter Valley Union High School just last week.

OVUHS educator and Foothills Program lead Nicole Vachon-Hanlon said the events were part of a larger initiative to incorporate the Vermont Humanities Council's Vermont Reads program into her curriculum.

"Last year, we did Vermont Reads ... and I had taught it as a cross-curricular teacher. I utilize English, social studies and everything together. So, (Vermont Reads) worked pretty well for me," Vachon-Hanlon said. "We were working to try and find something that would really connect our students, our teachers and our community, because there are lots of opportunities."

"Our whole theme of this (Vermont Reads) project and all the different things we did was: how do we help our community not just survive, but thrive?"

One of the Speakers told guests that the answer to the question of why Vermont towns are vulnerable to flooding is, in large part, due to the state's topography.

"You add that topography to severe rain events, and it's a recipe for rivers to overflow their banks," he said. "There are two stories I'm going to tell. One is about changing settlement patterns from early years through the 19th century, and the other is about deforestation. The state is beginning to undertake statewide flood mitigation planning that's going to be a long and arduous process, and some towns are starting to grapple with it at the local level, too," he concluded.

### **Conclusion:**

Last year, Vermont Humanities had \$630,000 in appropriated federal funding clawed back and we are anticipating no federal funding in this current fiscal year. This is our first year ever without any budgeted federal funding – after 51 years of support. Our colleagues in the

field, who also receive annual state appropriations, have also been affected. Vermont Symphony Orchestra had a grant cancelled by the National Endowment for the Arts. And Vermont Historical Society, who has routinely received funding from the Institute for Museum and Library Services, is moving forward assuming that funding from that agency will no longer be available. Although the Vermont Arts Council did not see a direct cut in their federal funding, they are working hard to backfill for the many arts organizations in Vermont who used to receive direct funding from the NEA and now, no longer do.

Although my testimony today has focused on the positive impact of one specific program at Vermont Humanities for Vermonters, I think it's important that you also hear what the four cultural organizations are asking for from your appropriations committee. Bottom line – we know that you cannot replace lost federal funding, but we hope that you will take a small symbolic stand against the attack on the cultural and creative sectors. Our four cultural organizations are requesting an additional 10% in funding this year.

This 10% increase will nowhere near close the gap we are facing, nor is that the intent. Instead, we hope that supporting this request will signify to Vermont communities that the state has our back, that you believe in the work that we do, and that you value what our sector brings to communities statewide.

In my written testimony, I have laid out what this looks like for the four organizations small part of the overall budget. For Vermont Humanities, it's a modest increase indeed – a mere \$32,782 for a total FY27 appropriation of \$360,600. Thank you for your support, I'm happy to take any questions.

	FY27 Gov Budget	Additional 10%	FY27 Total
Vermont Arts Council	\$1,033,155	\$103,316	\$1,136,471
Vermont Symphony	\$158,795	\$15,880	\$174,675
Vermont Historical Society	\$1,245,583	\$124,558	\$1,370,141
Vermont Humanities	\$327,818	\$32,782	\$360,600