Advocating for COVID-19 Relief

Talking Points to Make the Case

Updated July 23, 2020

Here are a few key messages that the Association of Science and Technology Centers (ASTC) and other museum advocates have been using, which you can use to advocate for Federal, state, and local relief from the COVID-19 pandemic. Feel free to adapt these messages to fit your needs!

Current State of the Field

- The COVID-19 pandemic is having a profound impact on science and technology centers and museums, natural history museums, children’s museums, and other STEM-rich, place-based institutions, such as nature centers, aquariums, planetariums, zoos, and botanical gardens. The impacts are severe and are expected to continue for many months or longer.
- In the space of just ten days in March, essentially all members of the Association of Science and Technology Centers (ASTC) closed their doors to the public in order to comply with local regulations and model responsible social distancing guidelines to help prevent the spread of COVID-19.
  - More than four months later, the more than half of those nearly 400 U.S. institutions remain closed.
- Although many institutions received lifeline support from Federal programs like the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), that support has mostly ended.
  - Many ASTC members have not been eligible for PPP loans, including institutions affiliated with universities and governments and those that have more than 500 employees.
- Science and technology centers and museums depend on earned revenue—which includes admission revenue, education and program fees, memberships, and facilities rentals—to deliver their societal missions to advance public understanding of—and engagement with—science, technology, and our natural world.
  - ASTC members earn approximately half their annual revenue from these visits. Those revenue streams essentially dropped to zero and remain there during this extended closure.
  - The pandemic came at an especially inopportune time, as spring and summer are the most active time for many ASTC members in terms of welcoming guests and building up cash reserves to carry through slower periods of the year.
• Even as some institutions begin partial reopening, attendance—and thereby revenue—is a fraction of what it would normally be at this time of year.
  o Just over 40% of our members have partially reopened their facilities to the public (as of July 23, 2020).
  o Those institutions that reopen also face increased operating costs in their efforts to follow public health guidance from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Museums are taking on a whole set of new, required expenses to be able to welcome guests safely, such as enhanced cleaning and sanitation, securing new safety supplies, and alterations to the visitor experience.
• The hands-on nature of many science museums poses a particular challenge in restoring public confidence, regardless of the science-based protocols our community will implement to ensure their facilities are safe for visitors once again. A recent analysis suggests that science centers will take the longest to fully recover to normal levels as compared with fellow museums, zoos, aquariums, and public gardens. The ramifications of the pandemic will affect science centers for years to come.
• Even institutions that remain closed and have decreased staffing still maintain significant expenses, including core staff, maintaining their facilities (e.g., rent, utilities, insurance, security), care for living collections, and continuing service to their communities.
• Without substantial public or private-sector support, there are concerns that one out of three museums will not reopen. We have already begun to see announcements of permanent closures and fear that many more will follow in the coming months unless there is significant and rapid support from government, philanthropy, and others.

Continued Commitment to Communities

• Even while closed to the public, science and technology centers and museums have continued to serve their missions and communities by engaging people virtually, offering science activities and lessons that can be done at home, offering curbside pickup of science kits, and educating the public about COVID-19.
• They have also provided emergency childcare to the families of essential workers, hosted blood drives and food distribution centers, donated personal protective equipment and used their 3D printers to make needed supplies, and contributed computing resources to the fight against COVID-19.
Museums Are Community Anchors

- Science and technology centers and museums **play a critical role** in educating the public about science and are well-positioned to support schools, districts, and parents in weathering the current crisis in education. They are among the nation's **most trusted institutions**.
- Science and technology centers and museums help build community science literacy, which is critical in societal crises that require evidence-based decisions, such as this pandemic.
  - Increasingly, they are leading efforts to bring together community organizations, local residents, and scientists to advance community priorities through a variety of Community Science activities.
- As institutions deeply rooted in their communities, science and technology centers and museums share a common vision of **all** people participating in science and benefitting equitably from scientific contributions to society. In the wake of recent uprisings for racial justice, these institutions strive to center equity and inclusion in their work and lead community efforts that actively combat racism, bigotry, and discrimination.
- As community anchors, science centers and museums can develop innovative responses to community needs through enduring relationships with a range of partners, including school districts, youth-serving nonprofits, community-based organizations, public libraries, local businesses, and more.

Museums’ Impact on the Economy and Workforce

- Museums are economic engines—they contribute **$50 billion a year to the U.S. economy** and generate $12 billion in tax revenue to local, state, and Federal governments (state data available).
- They are also vital local sources of employment, supporting **726,000 jobs annually** (state data available). Any relief that directly supports workers can offset personnel costs, which make up a significant proportion of the average museum's operating budget.

What Science and Technology Centers and Museums Need

- Science and technology centers and museums must be included in any economic relief or stimulus package to ensure that community-based organizations like ours remain vibrant and able to resume their mission to engage, inspire, and increase public understanding of scientific issues and grow the number of students who are excited about pursuing STEM careers.
Nonprofits should continue to be included in any relief and recovery programs available to business.

Both the recovery of our nation from this emergency—and longer-term efforts to advance public health and scientific research to prevent and minimize the impact of future similar events—depend upon our nation’s ability to provide quality lifelong STEM education and learning for all Americans.

Specific Federal policy requests include:

- Extend and expand the PPP by enabling a second round of funding for all nonprofits, including nonprofit organizations with more than 500 employees.
  - Provide a mechanism for museums affiliated with universities or governments to be eligible for forgivable loans such as the PPP.
- Expand the Federal Reserve Main Street Lending Program by enabling the forgiveness of loans made under the program for mid-size and large nonprofits, similar to the provisions of the PPP.
- Provide emergency supplemental funding for museums through at least December 31, 2020. The museum community has identified a need for $6 billion, including for general operating support, assisting museums in developing and sharing distance learning content, and pandemic recovery planning and implementation, including improvements to protect employees and visitors and reduce the spread of COVID-19.
- Strengthen charitable giving incentives by expanding the above-the-line or universal charitable deduction to at least one-third of the standard deduction and extend the giving incentives in the CARES Act through 2021 and beyond.
- Increase the Federal unemployment insurance reimbursement for self-insured nonprofits to 100% of costs.
- Ensure that science and technology centers and museums are eligible to deliver new educational opportunities in concert with schools and school districts.
  - Even with reduced staff levels, they are well positioned to provide virtual teacher professional development and distance learning modules, develop resources for parents and children to learn together at home, and partner with Federal scientific agencies or local public health agencies to communicate COVID-19 science to the public.
- Any investment in U.S. research and development to aid in the response and recovery from COVID-19—both short-term and long-term—should incorporate funding for public engagement, science communication, and science learning as essential elements. The science center community has existing expertise in effective engagement and learning approaches, particularly for populations underrepresented in STEM.