February 27, 2019

Appropriations CO-Chairs and Committee
Co Chair, Senator Catherin Osten
Co-Chair, Representative Toni Walker

Dear Committee Members:

Thank you for allowing me to come before you to submit testimony relating to the support of CT Humanities on behalf of Westport Historical Society, of which I am the Executive Director.

Westport Historical Society is a history center and museum located in Westport in lower Fairfield County. As with many similar organizations, the new millennia revealed a Society struggling to stay relevant and provide services to a diverse community.

In order to rectify this and stay true to WHS’ mission, the Board of Directors undertook a strategic planning initiative under the state’s Standards and Excellence Program (StEPs) for History Organizations. The program, based on national curricula and administered by CT Humanities provided invaluable guidance from identifying a modern mission and goals, action items and a timeline to effect these actions. Over the course of the two-year process, beginning in 2015, WHS created a clear strategic plan to begin the transformation into a community oriented, service-based educational institution.

I was hired as Executive Director as part of the strategic plan created out of the StEPs program. Using the plan as a map, I have worked over the last 14 months to implement core initiatives. As part of this plan, WHS sought to produce a higher level of exhibits and programs based in deeper scholarship, best-practices for interactivity and community engagement and access to all individuals. We could not have furthered these goals without additional funding support from CT Humanities.

Most notable is our award-winning exhibit Remembered: The History of African Americans in Westport which we were able to produce with a Quick
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Grant from CT Humanities as well as related program series which we have also been able to produce with CT Humanities funding.

The exhibit which explores the vital contributions of African Americans to Westport, Fairfield County, the State of Connecticut and the nation from earliest settlement through today could not have been built to its highly interactive level without state support. Remembered has won a Merit award from the Connecticut League of History Organizations; nomination for the national medal from the Institute of Museum and Library Services; New England Museum Association Award for Excellence in the Field for curator/ED Ramin Ganeshram; and a nomination for an excellence award from American Association for State and Local History.

Thanks to the support of CT Humanities in pursing our work, WHS has become a vital forum for the exploration and understanding of race, identity and belonging. Thanks to CT Humanities support during 2018 we have achieved the following:

- Provided free programming for the public to learn about the 200th anniversary of the State Constitution, including programming to contextualize that historic event to modern society
- Offered 600 free tickets to our award-winning exhibit Remembered to those attending Westport Country Playhouse/TEAM Westport/Westport Library’s annual Martin Luther King Day celebration.
- Provided our exhibit as a backdrop to help fundraise for colleague institutions such as Bridgeport’s Freeman Center
- Provided enhanced learning opportunities for Westport Public Schools as related to race, identity and civil liberties.
- Provided enhanced learning opportunities for Westport Public Schools relating to mandates around research, writing, and observation.

In 2019 and 2020, we plan even more ambitious projects that will allow us to continue to reveal truths and shed light on hidden facts of history in order to foster greater understanding without our communities. Our goal is to make this programming available to the widest variety of people regardless of income. We cannot do this without the financial support, planning advice and encouragement of CT Humanities and funding from the state of Connecticut.

Your commitment to education and exploration is what keeps us viable and vibrant.

Respectfully Submitted

Ramin Ganeshram  
Executive Director