

Advocating for COVID-19 Relief

Talking Points to Make the Case

Updated December 20, 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 national, 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 continues to have 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 Association of Science and Technology Centers (ASTC) estimates that ASTC museum members around the world have **lost more than \$600 million** in revenue in just the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- In March, almost overnight, **every ASTC-member science and technology center and museum 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.
- Most ASTC members have been forced to **reduce the size of their staff**—sometimes by 75 percent or more—due to tightly constrained budgets and the dramatic decline in revenue.
- **All ASTC members have continued to engage their communities** through various programs and partnerships—often leveraging digital tools—even when their doors have been closed to the public.



**\$600 million
lost revenue**

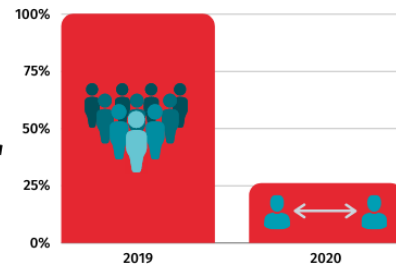
Estimated revenue loss for ASTC-member science and technology centers and museums March–August 2020, as compared to typical prior year

- Just over half nearly 400 U.S. institutions have at least partially reopened to the public, although recent surges in COVID-19 have prompted some of those to subsequently reclose.

- For those institutions that have reopened, visitor attendance is down about 74 percent, compared with the same time period in 2019.

Attendance down 74% from last year

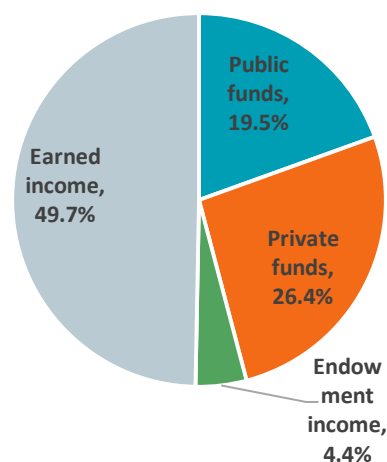
Average weekly attendance for ASTC-member science and technology centers and museums which have reopened to the public, as compared to same period in 2019



- Further, they face **increased operating costs** in their efforts to follow public health guidance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and local public health departments. Museums have taken on a whole set of new, required expenses to be able to welcome guests safely, such as enhanced cleaning and sanitation, improved airflow, securing new safety supplies, and alterations to the visitor experience.
- Even institutions that remain closed still **maintain significant expenses** including core staff, maintaining their facilities (e.g., rent, utilities, insurance, security), care for living collections, digital engagement, and continuing service to their communities.

- 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 earned income**. Those revenue streams essentially dropped to zero and remain there during this extended closure.
- Spring and summer—when pandemic closures were most widespread in the northern hemisphere—are the most active times for many ASTC members when they welcome the most guests and build up cash reserve to carry through slower periods of the year.



Data from ASTC's 2018 science center statistics for U.S. member institutions.

- Although many science and technology centers and museums received lifeline support from Federal programs like the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), that support generally only included eight weeks of payroll, rent, and utilities—for a pandemic that has already extended for more than nine months.
 - In addition, 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.
- The hands-on nature of many science museums poses a particular challenge in restoring public confidence, regardless of the science-based protocols our community is implementing to ensure their facilities are safe for visitors once again. [One 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.
- Without substantial public or private-sector support, there are concerns that [one-third of museums](#) may be forced to close permanently. We have already begun to see announcements of 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 with greatly diminished financial resources and smaller staffs, science and technology centers and museums have continued to serve their missions and their communities.
- For example, ASTC-member institutions are [engaging their communities in STEM learning](#) with a range of virtual programs, science-at-home kits, and socially-distant activities. They have supported local schools in developing curricula and producing virtual learning.
- They have also offered their physical facilities, their computing resources, and their equipment to serve local needs—from hosting schools and state legislatures, [using their 3D printers](#) to make needed supplies, donating personal protective equipment and to [contributing computing resources to the fight against COVID-19](#) to [keeping essential workers safe](#).
- They have supported communities by [hosting blood drives](#) and food distribution centers, [serving as voting locations](#), [providing healthy food to their community](#), and [offering free childcare to the families of essential workers](#).

Museums Are Community Anchors

- The extended closures and significant loss of revenue are having cascading impacts beyond the science centers and museums themselves, affecting their local communities as well. **ASTC-member institutions typically welcome approximately 110 million visitors each year, including more than 75 million annual visitors in the United States.** These numbers include both individual visits by students, families, and individuals—as well as school field trips, camps, teacher professional development, and off-site events and programs such as school outreach and community festivals. The pandemic caused nearly all of these events to be halted, prompting a significant loss of in-person science, technology, engineering, math and other (STEM) learning and engagement for people of all ages in communities around the world.
- **Science and technology centers and museums are the [most trusted source](#) for news about science** and [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.
- 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.
- 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

- **Science centers add significant value to their local economy**, employing tens of thousands of staff and engaging a range of local business in providing services and support. In normal years, approximately half of every operating dollar comes from “earned income,” including ticket sales, program fees, and facility rentals—all sources which essentially disappeared during pandemic closures. The loss of revenue has led many science centers to make sometimes deep cuts in operating budgets, including the tough decisions to furlough or permanently eliminate staff positions.

- [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.
- They are also vital local sources of employment, supporting **726,000 jobs annually**. 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.
 - Nonprofit organizations including science and technology centers and museums 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 the end of the pandemic. The museum community has identified a need for \$6 billion to provide general operating support, assist 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, science and technology centers and museums 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.