

**Statement of Lonnie G. Bunch III, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution**  
**United States Senate**  
**Committee on Rules and Administration**  
**March 30, 2022**

Chairwoman Klobuchar, Ranking Member Blunt, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

The past two years have been challenging for the Smithsonian, as they have for people and organizations across the country and throughout the world. I am proud of the ways we have been able to continue serving Americans in this time of need while also following the guidance of the medical experts to ensure the health and safety of our visitors and staff.

The Smithsonian community has been remarkable in its ability to pivot to a more digital institution, enabling us to reach more people who could not visit us in person. Our number of online visitors rose from 153 million in FY 2019 to more than 205 million in FY 2021. And the diligence of our employees allowed us to reopen all our museums, which will soon be open seven days a week. Events necessitated becoming nimbler, more dynamic, and more creative in the ways we serve the public, and our staff rose to the challenge.

As you know, Congress passed the legislation for two new Smithsonian museums, the National Museum of the American Latino and the Smithsonian American Women's History Museum. I am excited to see what they become in the months and years ahead. They present a unique opportunity to blend tradition and innovation, use digital technology in new ways to tell the full American story, and help us serve the greater good by having a profound impact on people's lives.

When I last addressed this committee about the legislation for these new museums, I underscored the need to understand and plan for the obligations they will incur over time. They are each lifetime commitments, increasing our need to identify collections space, undertake maintenance, and address staffing in perpetuity. But I am confident that with the full support of Congress, we will be able to make these museums exemplars. I can report that things are proceeding well as we work to bring both museums to life.

The National Museum of the American Latino's 19-member board of trustees was established in summer 2021. The board held its first meeting virtually in October 2021. The founding director of the Latino museum, Jorge Zamanillo, arrives in May, and a staff of 16 experienced Smithsonian Latino Center veterans has already been assembled.

The Smithsonian American Women's History Museum's 25-member advisory council was established in fall 2021. The council held its first meeting virtually Sept. 20, 2021. It will make recommendations on the location, planning and design of the museum and assist with fundraising. It is being led by interim director Lisa Sasaki, and an executive search firm is progressing in the search for a founding director.

As someone who went through the site selection process with the National Museum of African American History and Culture, I can testify how consequential a museum's location is, both as a symbol and as a driver of success. In choosing the locations for our newest museums, we enlisted a consulting firm to help us develop a strategic approach. We are applying due diligence to all the possible sites, including those enumerated in the museum legislation, and making significant process toward determining the finalists.

Being a positive influence on our communities and on the nation means meeting the high standard we set for ourselves. That requires not just doing good work, but also fostering an environment where everyone is fully respected and welcomed. A series of incidents at our Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute that recently came to light fell far short of that standard, something that appalls me. I am personally offended, and I can assure you that I will not tolerate such behavior. I have dedicated my career to fighting for equality and fair treatment, so I am grateful to the strong and courageous women who came forward and showed us where we need to do better.

We implemented many policy and procedure changes over the past year to make the Smithsonian a model place to work and visit. That includes making significant enhancements to the Smithsonian's anti-harassment resources, reporting processes, and prevention initiatives like the SI Civil Program. We are expanding its staff and increasing its capacity to allow employees to report harassment, violence, or retaliatory behaviors in the workplace. To assess and improve our workplace culture, we need to be able to accurately measure harassment complaints and other issues. The SI Civil Program is putting those tools in place, and the Institution will be more effective and transparent as a result.

Both I and the institutional leadership are determined to create a more inclusive, respectful, and welcoming Smithsonian that lives up to our ideals and embodies our values.

Museums have also undergone a healthy re-examination of objects in our collections and how they were obtained. The National Museum of Natural History and the National Museum of the American Indian have long had robust efforts to repatriate cultural patrimony, but a growing awareness about the often-contested provenance of museum collections led us to examine our own collections more closely. The Smithsonian put together an Ethical Returns Working Group to identify ways to restore the rightful ownership of objects in our collections and increase our repatriation efforts.

When the Smithsonian works with other countries to retrieve and protect their cultural heritage, it is not only the right thing to do, but also in the nation's best interests. The international efforts of the Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative are cultural diplomacy in action. When global conflict like that in Ukraine endangers lives and threatens to erase the culture and history of a people, it is vitally important to keep open all channels of dialogue.

To be clear, even though we have continued to serve the public effectively during this difficult time, there are some long-term concerns. Among these are the impact of the new museums, declining revenue during the pandemic, and the need to modernize and secure our systems as our

digital capabilities improve. The President's FY 2023 Budget aims to address some of these challenges and your support and guidance give me great confidence in our future success.

The Smithsonian's mission of the "increase and diffusion of knowledge" is not just a slogan: for 175 years, it has been a covenant with the nation. We are obligated to lead responsibly, guided by ethics and morals, serving in a way that enriches the lives of our neighbors, the American people, and the citizens of the world. With your help, we will be able to do so for another 175 years. Thank you for holding this hearing, for your ongoing support, and for your commitment to working with us to improve our shared future as a nation. I am happy to answer any questions you have.