

National Endowment for the Arts

National Heritage Fellowships Guidelines & Instructions

Program Description

The **NEA National Heritage Fellowship** is the nation's highest honor in the folk and traditional arts. Each year since 1982, the program has recognized folk and traditional artists whose exemplary achievements contribute to our nation's distinctive cultural heritage, increasing opportunities for the public to encounter different artists, art forms, and cultural traditions. Through their folk and traditional arts practices, National Heritage Fellows demonstrate the importance of the arts to personal, cultural, and national identity.

National Heritage Fellowship nominees must be worthy of national recognition and have a record of continuing artistic accomplishment. They must be *actively participating* in their art form, either as practitioners, mentors, or as community scholars. Successful nominations demonstrate significant contributions to living traditional arts, their source communities, and/or the transmission of traditional knowledge to future generations.

Each year, one **Bess Lomax Hawes National Heritage Fellowship** will be awarded to an individual who has made major contributions to the excellence, vitality, and public appreciation of the folk and traditional arts. The nominee should be worthy of national recognition and must be *actively engaged* in perpetuating the folk and traditional arts. Named after the influential advocate, educator, and producer of the folk and traditional arts, Bess Lomax Hawes, this award recognizes:

- An artist whose contributions, primarily through teaching, advocacy, organizing, and maintaining important repertoires, have greatly benefited their artistic tradition.
- OR
- An individual, such as a producer or advocate, whose efforts have significantly increased opportunities for and public visibility of traditional arts and artists.

Individuals may be nominated specifically for the Bess Lomax Hawes Fellowship.

Nominators may submit one or more nominations per year (using a separate online form for each submission). Nominations may be submitted by an individual or group. All nominators must provide the name and contact information of the individual who will be responsible for all communication with NEA staff regarding the nomination.

Awards for the National Heritage Fellowships (including the Bess Lomax Hawes Fellowship) will be up to \$50,000, and may be received once in a lifetime.

What are the folk & traditional arts?

Rooted in and reflective of the cultural life of a community, folk and traditional arts are constantly evolving, shaped by values and standards of excellence passed from generation to generation, most often within family and community, through demonstration, conversation, and practice. Genres of artistic activity include, but are not limited to, music, dance, crafts, foodways, regalia/adornment, occupation, ceremony, and oral expression, such as stories, poetry, and language.

To date, the NEA has awarded 494 National Heritage Fellowships to individuals and groups representing more than 200 distinct art forms. Recipients include bluegrass fiddler Michael Cleveland; Japanese classical dancer Gertrude Yukie Tsutsumi; Haudenosaunee-raised beadworker Karen Ann Hoffman (Oneida Nation of Wisconsin); oud player and composer Rahim AlHaj; brass band group Excelsior Band of Mobile, Alabama; and radio producer and radio network builder Hugo N. Morales. See a [list of previously awarded fellows](#).

Nominations

Recipients will be selected from nominations made by the public. Nominations may be for an individual or a group of individuals (e.g., a duo or ensemble, but not an incorporated organization). Nominees must be citizens or permanent residents of the United States and may receive the Fellowship once in a lifetime. Self-nominations are not accepted, and no one may nominate an eligible group of which they are an active member.

Individuals who have previously received any other NEA lifetime honor award (National Heritage Fellowship, Jazz Masters Fellowship, or an Opera Honor) are not eligible. Nominations of deceased individuals will not be considered. In the event of the death of a recommended recipient, no award payment will be made to the estate or heirs of the deceased.

Make a Nomination

Nominations must be submitted online through a 2-part nomination process described below. **Materials that are emailed, mailed, or faxed will not be accepted.**

IMPORTANT DATES

Step	Date
Step 1 – Submit Online Nomination Form through NEA Website	May 26, 2026, by 11:59 p.m., Eastern Time
Step 2 – Submit Supplemental Materials to the Applicant Portal	May 29, 2026, at 9:00 a.m., Eastern Time to June 5, 2026, by 11:59 p.m., Eastern Time
Announcement of Fellowship Award	Spring of 2027

Late, ineligible, and incomplete nominations will not be reviewed.

In the event of a major emergency (e.g., a hurricane or NEA systems technological failure), the NEA Chair may adjust deadlines for affected nominations. If a deadline is extended for any reason, an announcement will be posted on our website and social media.

Effective nominations frame the artist's work through quality work samples, as well as letters of support from persons such as community members, mentors and/or mentees, scholars of the nominee's artistic genre or cultural tradition, and the nominee's artistic peers. It is the responsibility of the nominator to frame the nominee's work, cultural background, and lifetime achievements in the Nomination Statement. While nominations will be reviewed by a panel of experts in the field of folk and traditional arts, nominators should not assume panelists will have pre-existing familiarity with the nominee or their specific cultural tradition.

Individuals who need assistance accessing these instructions or the associated webform may contact accessibility@arts.gov to request an accommodation or an alternate format of the instructions at least 2 weeks prior to the nomination deadline.

Review of Nominations

The selection criteria are artistic excellence and artistic merit, including significance within the particular artistic tradition and contributions to living cultural heritage.

Nominations are reviewed by an advisory panel of folk and traditional arts experts and at least one knowledgeable layperson. Panel recommendations are forwarded to the National Council on the Arts, which then makes recommendations to the Chair of the NEA. The Chair reviews the Council's recommendations and makes the final decision on all award recipients.

Beginning in calendar year 2026, nominations are active for **one** year. Nominations must be resubmitted each year to remain active. **Nominations made in the previous four calendar years also must be resubmitted to remain active.**

Submission Instructions

A complete nomination package consists of two parts: the online nomination form submitted through the NEA website, and the Nomination Statement, Bio, Support letters, and Work Samples submitted through the Applicant Portal. A nomination will be considered incomplete and will not be reviewed unless both parts are submitted. **Work samples are required for all nominations** unless the nomination is specifically for a Bess Lomax Hawes Fellowship. At the top of the Nomination Statement, you must indicate if the nominee is to be considered specifically for the Bess Lomax Hawes Fellowship.

The work samples should include both recent and archival high-quality examples of the nominee's work. Nominations in both the performing and non-performing arts are encouraged to include high-quality photos or videos that effectively show the quality of the artist's work.

Step 1 – Submit Nomination Form

Submit the [Online Nomination Form](#) through the NEA Website

Step 2 – Submit Nomination Statement, Bio, Letters of Support, and Work Samples

The [Applicant Portal](#) will open on **May 29, 2026**, at 10:00 a.m., Eastern Time. The Application Portal will close at **11:59 p.m., Eastern Time, on June 5, 2026**. You must upload, preview/check, and submit the Nomination Statement, Bio, Work Samples, and Support Letters during the time the Application Portal is open. You will not have the opportunity to update the nomination package after June 5, 2026 at 11:59 p.m.

NOTE: Your credentials (user ID and password) for access to the Applicant Portal will be created for you by NEA staff. Staff will send your Applicant Portal registration information by email on the morning of May 29, 2026.

Items to Upload through the Applicant Portal

Please upload items in the following order:

- **Nomination Statement** (Required): A PDF document *not to exceed one (1) page* detailing the reasons the nominee(s) should receive a National Heritage Fellowship. Describe the nominee's contributions to their cultural tradition and explain why this individual or group deserves national recognition. At the top of the Nomination Statement, you must indicate if the nominee is to be considered specifically for the Bess Lomax Hawes Fellowship.
- **Bio (Required)**: A PDF document *not to exceed one (1) page* profiling the life and career of the nominee(s), including major public appearances or exhibitions by the nominee(s), and the titles of published works, if any.
- **Letters of Support**: A PDF document combining *up to three (3) letters*, each *not to exceed two (2) pages* (for a total maximum page count of 6 pages for all letters combined). The letters may be authored by persons such as community members, mentors and/or mentees, scholars of the nominee's artistic genre or cultural tradition, and the nominee's artistic peers.
- **Work Samples** (Required): Follow the instructions on the work sample limits below for the nomination material. The maximum number of allowable work samples is all that will be reviewed, and no more than 20 minutes of combined work samples will be reviewed. A nomination package without work samples is considered incomplete and will not be reviewed, unless the nomination is specifically identified as a Bess Lomax Hawes National Heritage Fellowship.

Written Materials Guidance

For written materials: Use a 12 point font size. Leave a margin of at least one inch at the top, bottom, and sides of all pages. Use only 8.5 x 11-inch size pages.

Do not:

- Exceed the limits above for written materials (Nomination Statement, Bio, and Letters of Support). Excess pages will be removed or otherwise not reviewed by the advisory panel.
- Embed hyperlinks in any of the PDF documents *except* for the PDF containing work samples.
- Enable any document security settings for or password protect any PDF file you submit.
- Submit files in a format other than PDF (e.g., Word, Excel, PowerPoint, aac, avi, mov, mp3, mp4, mpa, mpeg, wav, wma, wmv).
- Submit links to sites that require work samples to be downloaded (e.g., Dropbox, Google Drive), or sites that require a user account.
- Submit items that we do not request.

Work Sample Guidance

Upload *separate* PDFs based on work sample type:

1. **AUDIO, VIDEO, & WEBSITE Links:** Upload **one PDF** with clickable links to ALL audio clips, video clips, and/or website work samples on an external hosting site (e.g., Vimeo, YouTube, etc.). Do not submit links on separate PDFs.
2. **IMAGES:** Upload **one PDF** with images, separate from your links. Images may be on separate pages, but should not be uploaded as multiple PDFs.
3. **DOCUMENTS:** Upload each document as an individual PDF.

Type	Guidance
AUDIO & VIDEO SAMPLES Up to 5 audio samples; Up to 3 video samples Up to 5 minutes per sample	If the sample exceeds five minutes, indicate which five-minute segment you would like to be reviewed. If not indicated, panelists will be directed to review the first five minutes of the selection. We recommend that videos be closed or open captioned . <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Resources for YouTube ○ Resources for Vimeo
WEBSITES Up to 5 links	Do not use this work sample type to submit additional audio clips, video clips, images, or documents in excess of the stated limits.
DIGITAL IMAGES Up to 20 Images	Each image counts toward the 20 image maximum, regardless of how many images are included per page.
DOCUMENTS Up to 2 documents, 12 pages each.	Examples of documents may include literary samples, publications, periodicals, catalogues

TECHNICAL GUIDANCE: AP FILE UPLOAD & DESCRIPTIONS

File Naming: Files may fail to upload if the file name:

- Exceeds 100 characters.
- Begins with a space, period, hyphen, or underline.
- Contains these characters: #%&{} \<>*?/\$!'"':+`=|"@

There can be a delay between the upload of your items and seeing them in the AP. Do not immediately assume that your upload failed; wait and try again. Close to the deadline, upload time may be longer due to high traffic, don't wait until the night of the deadline to begin uploading. The total space available is 250MB.

AP Upload Box: For each item, provide the following information:

TITLE:

- For **letters/statements of support**, state the type of item and the name(s) of the supporter(s). (Ex: Letters of Support from John Doe, Jane Doe, and James Doe).
- For **work samples**, state the title of the work and/or name of the nominee represented by the work sample (Ex: This Little Light of Mine or Jane Doe).

FILE TYPE: Select "PDF" file type.

DESCRIPTION: 500-character limit, including spaces

- For **statements of support**, simply enter "statements of support".
- For work samples:
 - Name of the nominee(s) featured. Describe what the nominee is doing or wearing, if it is unclear which person in the work sample is the nominee (e.g., Jane Doe is wearing a red shirt).
 - Title or description of the nominee's work or activity.
 - Date the work was created/performed.
 - Brief description including how the work sample relates to the proposed nomination.
 - For audio and video samples, length of the sample.

Privacy Act

The following notice is furnished in accordance with the Privacy Act of 1974, 5 U.S.C. 552a. This information is solicited under the authority of the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act, 20 U.S.C. 951 et seq. and is primarily used for the purpose of application review. Personal data, such as home address or personal cell phone number may not be released, either in entirety or in part, as exempt from disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act. Failure to provide the requested information could result in rejection of your application.

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement

The public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated at an average of 1 hour per response including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. We welcome any suggestions that you might have on improving the guidelines and making them as easy to use as possible. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to: webmgr@arts.gov, attention: Reporting Burden. Note: Applicants are not required to respond to the collection of information unless it displays a currently valid U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) control number.

OMB No. 3135-0112 Expires TBD