

Senate Bill 1348 as introduced
First Analysis (12-5-00)

Sponsor: Sen. Thaddeus G. McCotter
House Committee: House Oversight and
Operations
Senate Committee: Government
Operations

THE APPARENT PROBLEM:

The U.S. Congress established the post of "Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry" in 1985 with the passage of P.L. 99-194. There have been 10 U.S. Poets Laureate, with the tenth and current Poet Laureate being Stanley Kunitz, who at the age of 95 has been appointed to serve from 2000 to 2001. (See BACKGROUND INFORMATION.) Reportedly, Michigan is one of only 13 states that does not have a state poet laureate, and legislation has been introduced to establish such an official post.

THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:

The bill would create a new act to establish the office of state poet laureate in the Department of State. The governor could appoint the state poet laureate for a term not to exceed the governor's term in office. The state poet laureate would serve at the pleasure of the governor and would be exempt from the classified state civil service. The state poet laureate would have to be a resident of the state and would serve without compensation, though he or she could be reimbursed for his or her actual and necessary expenses incurred in the performance of his or her duties as assigned by the governor.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

According to the Library of Congress, "The Poet Laureate is appointed annually by the Librarian of Congress and serves from October to May. In making the appointment, the Librarian consults with former appointees, the current Laureate and distinguished poetry critics. The position has existed under two separate titles: from 1937 to 1986 as "Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress" and from 1986 forward as "Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry." The name was changed by an act of Congress in 1985. The Laureate receives a \$35,000 annual stipend funded by a gift from Archer M. Huntington. The Library keeps

to a minimum the specific duties in order to afford incumbents maximum freedom to work on their own projects while at the Library. The Laureate gives an annual lecture and reading of his or her poetry and usually introduces poets in the Library's annual poetry series, the oldest in the Washington area, and among the oldest in the United States. This annual series of public poetry and fiction readings, lectures, symposia, and occasional dramatic performances began in the 1940s. Collectively the Laureates have brought more than 2,000 poets and authors to the Library to read for the Archive of Recorded Poetry and Literature. Each Laureate brings a different emphasis to the position. Joseph Brodsky initiated the idea of providing poetry in airports, supermarkets and hotel rooms. Maxine Kumin started a popular series of poetry workshops for women at the Library of Congress. Gwendolyn Brooks met with elementary school students to encourage them to write poetry. Rita Dove brought together writers to explore the African diaspora through the eyes of its artists. She also championed children's poetry and jazz with poetry events. Robert Hass organized the "Watershed" conference that brought together noted novelists, poets and storytellers to talk about writing, nature, and community." In addition, former U.S. Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky was interested in making poetry accessible through digital technology on the Internet.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:

According to the House Fiscal Agency, the bill would result in minimal costs to the state to reimburse the poet laureate for his or her actual and necessary expenses in the performance of his or her duties, and would have no fiscal implications for local units of government. (12-5-00)

ARGUMENTS:

For:

The bill would establish the office of state poet laureate, which would not be a salaried office and therefore would cost the taxpayers very little (the bill would reimburse the poet laureate for his or her actual and necessary expenses). The governor would appoint individuals to the office and assign his or her duties. Reportedly, Michigan is only one of 13 states that does not have a state poet laureate, and the bill would remedy this situation. Although the bill does not specify the duties of the proposed office (this would be left up to the governor), as the range of activities of the various U.S. Poet Laureates illustrate (see BACKGROUND INFORMATION), the proposal could contribute substantially to the well-being of the citizens of the state in a number of possible ways, including community building and promotion of literacy and the arts. This would be especially important in light of the defunding, on the national level, of the arts in general. As a poem by William Carlos Williams says, “It is difficult/to get the news from poems/yet men die miserably every day/ for lack/ of what is found there.”

POSITIONS:

There are no positions on the bill.

Analyst: S. Ekstrom

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