

**Society of American Archivists  
Council Meeting  
February 1, 3, 2023  
Virtual Meeting**

**Developing Organizational Support for  
Archival Workers Labor Needs  
(Prepared by Terry Baxter)**

**BACKGROUND**

The recent pandemic revealed deep cracks in support systems available to archival workers in their work environments. By revealed, I mean that while the abrupt and severe nature of the pandemic's effect on archival labor could be seen clearly in the last few years, it was really a continuation of issues that have existed since the 2008 recession. The last fifteen years have left many archival workers, especially new and mid-career workers, vulnerable to workplace and economic precarity.

A \*CENSUS II revealed that 20% of archival workers are considering leaving the profession. While retirement is the number one reason, it is followed immediately by burnout and inadequate salaries. Lack of advancement, job instability, and lack of jobs are in the top eight reasons. In the last thirteen months at least four major library and archives systems have gone on strike<sup>1</sup> In addition, massive layoffs occurred during the peak years of the pandemic ( Mar 2020 – Apr 2022).<sup>2</sup> Some have been partially refilled, some layoffs continue.

The SAA Foundation provided seed money to and managed an SAA member created response, the Archival Workers Emergency (AWE) Fund, which was in place from mid 2020 until the end of 2021. Nearly 1000 individuals, 26 SAA Sections, and 11 organizations contributed to the fund, raising more than \$170,000 to help more than 180 archival workers in need. The AWE Fund Organizing Committee was replaced in 2022 by the Archival Workers Collective, which retained care and advocacy for archival workers but without the fundraising function which SAAF had performed.

**DISCUSSION**

Various components of SAA have provided aid to members over time. Most of that aid has been in the form of complimentary memberships, travel scholarships, SAA Foundation Grants, and component group grants. The exception to this group was the Archival Workers Emergency

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1 Hennepin County (Dec 2021), Vancouver Island Regional System (April 2022), University of Washington (Oct 2022), and University of California System (Nov 2022)

2 <https://bookriot.com/librarians-under-pandemic-duress/>

Fund (AWEF). This example of direct action was open to all archival workers, whether SAA members or not; provided funds based upon personal, not occupational or professional needs; and did not rely on overly invasive application requirements. It was a popular direct aid program that relied on archival workers' donations to assist their comrades in need. Foundation donations dropped when it sunset.

The AWEF was discontinued because of SAA and SAA Foundation concerns over several legal and tax issues related to what appeared to be the end of the pandemic. Those issues can't be discounted – no one wants to see SAA penalized for resisting existing laws. But it's also true that if an organization wants to do something enough and its members believe it is a high enough priority, creative solutions begin to appear. Of course, changes don't happen overnight, or even over years. SAA could build resilient direct-action programs that are not reactive to economic (or other disasters) but are proactive. The United States has had two major recessions in the last 15 years. It does not seem likely that we're done with them. We've also seen how our institutions can react to them.

While this is not an exhaustive list of ways SAA could build resiliency for both SAA members and for potential SAA members, it includes things that A\*CENSUS II, the SAA Strategic Plan, and the 2017 Women Archivists Section survey indicated were desirable:

- Establishment of a strike fund;
- Establishment of a layoff fund;
- Resources and support for labor organizing;
- Advocacy and support for a living wage and benefits for archival workers;
- Coordinated advocacy and mutual support with other GLAMs;
- Coordinated advocacy and mutual support with other archival associations; and
- Audit resources for employer HR practices.

If SAA wants to build long term resilient structures, they will need to invest significant effort, labor, and resources. It is organizationally reasonable to explore these issues before those resources are expended. The creation of a task force is the most efficient vehicle for this exploration. The task force membership should include a member of SAA Council, a diverse selection of members, and possibly non-member experts.

The primary charge for the task force should be:

- Identifying what labor issues SAA should assist with;
- Identifying funding sources, including SAA's relationship with the SAA Foundation;
- Determining risks associated with SAA responses and funding;
- Determining the most effective mechanisms for managing and distributing resources (including educational ones) and collaborating with other actors; and
- Assessing the impact on SAA staff.

The task force should be charged with investigating these issues, identifying actions SAA should take and prioritizing them, and reporting back to SAA Council no later than SAA's spring 2025 meeting.

## **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

- Would this work benefit SAA members and the archival worker community at large?
- If there is a benefit, is it worth the considerable effort by SAA?
- Is a task force the best mechanism for exploring this issue?
- If SAA is not positioned to do this work, is there someone else that SAA could support?