

**Society of American Archivists
Council Meeting
May 28 – 30, 2015
Chicago, Illinois**

**Proposal for Supporting Advocacy Work
on the Regional Level**

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BACKGROUND

Recent advocacy campaigns to maintain the independence of New York City's Department of Records and to prevent the closure of the Georgia Archives have proven that some of our nation's most significant archives-related advocacy is led at the regional level. Our regional archival organizations serve as tireless champions of archival collections and the archivists who manage them. Often serving as the first line of defense when it comes to local issues, they regularly lead political advocacy work, build relationships with local communities, and maintain long-lasting ties with other professional groups, including librarians, records managers, historians, and genealogists.

However, response to local issues such as those mentioned above often requires quick action, a large number of individuals speaking out, expert opinion and support, and the activation of networks that may exceed those already available to a single community. The need for increased collaboration around advocacy issues was one of the primary reasons for establishing the Regional Archival Associations Consortium (RAAC), which represents 43 regional archival organizations in the United States, in 2013.

RAAC has formulated two goals that it would like the SAA Council to discuss:

1. To establish formal communication lines through which regional organizations can ask for advocacy assistance and report local advocacy issues to SAA, and
2. To establish a formal procedure that will enable the regional organizations to learn about issues on which SAA has released a statement so that they can follow suit.

These goals were developed by RAAC and endorsed by the 43 regional organizations it represents. They have been formulated to address a communications gap that we believe exists between the regional groups and SAA. It is our hope that formalization of

communication around local advocacy issues will enhance advocacy work around the nation, allowing all of us to draw upon a greater cohort and to share knowledge and expertise. The SAA Issues and Advocacy Roundtable also supports these efforts and would like to help RAAC work toward establishing these goals.

DISCUSSION

RAAC was established in 2013 to provide an official venue for information exchange and collaboration among the leadership of regional archival organizations, and between regional organizations and the Society of American Archivists. One of the primary focus areas identified in RAAC's three-year plan is advocacy. To this end, RAAC has established a subcommittee on advocacy, and seven representatives of regionals from across the nation are currently working toward advocacy-related initiatives.

As previously noted, RAAC members believe that formal communication lines should be established for requesting help regarding local advocacy issues and so that regional organizations can be made aware of issues for which SAA has released a statement. The members and leaders of our nation's regional archival organizations are not all SAA members and, even when they are, they do not always have familiarity with how SAA works in order to go about seeking advocacy assistance. Establishing a procedure whereby a regional could ask for advocacy assistance, even if this is as simple as designating one person on Council or at the SAA office to field requests, would be a major first step towards collaborative efforts.

During the campaign to save the Georgia Archives in 2012–2013, there was a struggle to keep the profession at large apprised of developments and ways to contribute. The campaign was largely over by the time RAAC was formed, but a group like that or SAA itself could have been useful as a central clearing house for information sharing. At the beginning of the campaign, it was necessary to emphasize how seriously the profession took the possibility of a repository being closed, and letters of support were needed, not only from groups like SAA and the Council of State Archivists (CoSA), but also from the regionals. Because there was no formal mechanism to request help or disseminate information, compiling the contact information for each regional leader fell to one individual who was unaffiliated with the Society of Georgia Archivists.

Similarly, when archivists in New York City led an advocacy campaign in 2011 to maintain the independence of the City's Department of Records and Information Services, it was unclear who at SAA might have been able to offer guidance or support. The Archivists Round Table of Metropolitan New York, Inc., led a rigorous advocacy campaign, receiving support from thousands of archivists, historians, genealogists, and records managers throughout New York City and the nation. The Issues and Advocacy Roundtable wrote a letter to the New York City Council about the issue, as well as to SAA Council asking for additional help. However, despite New York City Council's suggestion that national input would make a difference, communication lines with SAA

were not well established and the Issues and Advocacy Roundtable and the Archivists Round Table struggled to effectively work with SAA. Ultimately the SAA Council never received the letter or discussed the issue, and consequently, national support for the issue from SAA was never provided.

As we write this, a potential advocacy issue is brewing in Iowa. Despite the fact that the State Historical Society has been facing cutbacks for years, many of us are hearing about the issue for the first time. A bill to increase funding for the Iowa State Historical is making its way through the Iowa legislature, and our colleagues may again need to mobilize the regionals and SAA to issue statements and show support for the budget.

While SAA is largely comprised of professional archivists, the membership of most regional organizations is more diverse, including “accidental” archivists, volunteer archivists, and those who cannot afford SAA memberships. When SAA releases a statement on an issue, it reaches a large number of archivists. However, if RAAC was also able to forward statements to each of the regionals, a much larger segment of the population could potentially be reached. We believe that there are significant advantages in developing a formalized mechanism to disseminate information. The infrastructure for this to happen is already in place through the RAAC listserv.

Furthermore, a simple, flexible mechanism for SAA to communicate its own advocacy needs on both the regional and national levels will ensure that the regionals hear about problems and potential issues more expediently. While some regionals have prioritized political advocacy work, such as communicating with government officials, sustaining letter writing campaigns, and informing a regional’s membership of issues, others have not. While RAAC hopes to inspire these regionals to delve into activities in this area, it’s worth noting that a simple request to regionals—such as the SAA-CoSA-NAGARA Joint Task Force on Advocacy’s 2012 plea for testimony in support of restoring funding to NHPRC—might be all that is needed to inspire action. We can envision SAA continuing to perform requests such as this.

Improving communication will enable SAA sections and roundtables with overlapping missions to provide consistent information, instructions, and advice to their members. It will also enable SAA constituent groups to present a unified and coordinated effort in times of crisis by preventing groups from working at cross purposes. Analogously, for the regionals, formalizing communication will also take away some of the pressure from the front-line advocates and is a relatively small undertaking that could have a big impact. If the local leaders only have to contact one group or person and could be confident that their message would be disseminated, valuable time could be freed up for other advocacy work.

But, perhaps most importantly, SAA and the regionals working together can unite archivists from among diverse professional organizations, regions, and backgrounds around advocacy issues. This cooperation might take the form of a regional asking SAA and other regionals for support, or it might be SAA asking the regionals to lend their

collective voice to an issue; regardless, our profession will only be strengthened as we find new ways to work together, broaden our communities, and leverage existing groups, networks, frameworks, and partnerships. Our goal is to create a procedure that simplifies the process through which regionals communicate with SAA, regardless of the direction that information flows.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How has SAA handled advocacy questions and requests for support from regionals in the past? What has worked well?
2. Has SAA sent advocacy questions or requests for support to the regionals in the past? If so, how was this communicated and what was the result?
3. Does the Council agree that formalized communication channels are needed to help the regionals obtain advocacy support and for SAA to obtain advocacy support?
4. Does the Council see value in a Council member working with RAAC and the Issues and Advocacy Roundtable to help develop formalized communication channels?
5. What are the minimum expectations that SAA would need to meet and what are minimum expectations that regionals would need to meet to ensure proper communications flow (point person, what information is necessary to craft most suitable response/course of action, etc.)?
6. Establishing and publicizing formal lines of communication for advocacy issues could potentially result in an increased number of advocacy questions or requests for support to and from SAA. Do the benefits of providing a clear communication path for these issues outweigh the potential costs of implementing and maintaining them (the primary costs at present being time by volunteers and limited SAA staff spent forwarding and reviewing requests, and deciding on a course of action)?
7. What role would the Council prefer that RAAC assume in order to ensure that communications flow in both directions?