

**Society of American Archivists  
Council Meeting  
May 12-13, 2020  
Virtual Meeting**

**Committee on Public Policy: Revise Legislative Agenda  
(Prepared by the Committee on Public Policy)**

**BACKGROUND**

Given the recent public health crisis, we want to raise with the SAA Council the possibility of considering whether or how to shift's SAA legislative agenda and advocacy focus because of the financial precarity being experienced by many archivists and archival institutions.

**DISCUSSION**

To address the immediate crisis, and the potential that it may have longer-term impact that we cannot yet project, we raise the following questions for consideration by the Council:

- 1. Should SAA shift its advocacy and legislative focus for at least the next 3-6 months relating to the first stated public policy priority for 2019-2020, which is:**

**Public Policy Priority:**

**Ensure robust federal funding for archives.**

**Public Policy Action:** Advocate for robust federal funding for grant programs that benefit archival projects, including electronic records preservation initiatives and cultural heritage disaster recovery efforts. Support legislation reauthorizing the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS).

Advocate for adequate funding for the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). Adequate funding ensures that NARA has the capacity to accomplish its mandated functions to guarantee the transfer and management of the permanently valuable records of the presidency and federal government.

Further, funding is essential to support effective management of and access to federal electronic records.

With the current uncertain status of work and professional activity for many of our members, proceeding with our existing legislative agenda action on federal funding does not address the most immediate issues now facing archives and archivists. Although funding for NARA is important and federal grant funding is always a concern, the survival of many of our institutions

may be at risk, and ensuring archives can qualify for and be considered in current and future stimulus legislation could be critical to provide resources needed for sheer survival.

**We suggest that the Council consider revising this priority to focus on how SAA can be involved in ensuring that archives are included in the stimulus and funding aid packages being considered and passed by Congress.** Some of these, for example, have included relief funding managed through IMLS—but the language does not include archives explicitly. Further, the archival community was not involved in, or for the most part even aware of, the efforts underway to address this need.

**2. What resources and capacity does SAA have to deploy in supporting advocacy at the federal level, particularly if the focus shifts to working to include archives and archivists in future stimulus/funding efforts by Congress?**

To lead advocacy efforts involves substantial work in monitoring legislative developments; this is challenging to do from outside Washington, DC, and requires direct contacts with critical Congressional committees and member offices where relevant legislation is being developed. This responsibility should include developing template messages and issuing action alerts that require close monitoring of developments in Congress and more. Does SAA have the capacity to do this proactively given our resources? Many members of SAA are struggling with immediate employment issues and financial pressure, both personally and in their employing institutions. It may be overreaching under current conditions to assume that SAA committees, sections, and leadership can invest considerable time to follow developments in Congress in order to identify potential opportunities for advocating for archival needs.

Although COPP's own mandate includes tracking legislation and providing information and recommendations on positions and actions, its role is advisory; it is not charged specifically to lead or initiate advocacy efforts at the federal level. COPP relies on volunteer time from its members, and many have given considerable time to that work. However, that has happened during "normal" employment when those members were not dealing with the challenges of at home work, layoffs, diminishing resource threats, and personal health and family pressures associated with the Covid 19 epidemic. The amount of work involved is similarly challenging for other groups in SAA, as well as for the Council and leadership themselves.

Other options to consider for undertaking all or portions of this work may bear consideration, including:

- How or can SAA use its membership in the National Coalition for History to obtain the information we need on developing efforts and initiatives to which archives might link? Can NCH's executive director be enlisted to step forward specifically on our profession's behalf? To date this membership has been helpful on some Congressional issues, but predominantly when it addresses interests and needs of historians.
- Are there partnerships or relationships we have or can develop with other cultural advocacy organizations that will help us become aware of efforts or work in collaboration to get the archival need on the federal agenda? AAM, ALA and NHA all have paid, full-time legislative liaisons on site in Washington, DC, that also have professional advocacy

experience. Is there potential for connecting our interests with theirs? NEH and IMLS have both been provided funding to address the needs of humanities organizations, libraries, and museums, but only by implication might this be used with archival collections and organizations.

- The idea of creating a task force to focus on this advocacy has been suggested, but again this would require assembling a group of volunteers and asking them to take on what is considerable work in addition to the concerns they are already balancing in their work and professional life. It is also worth considering whether the immediacy and pressure of federal advocacy is best addressed using a committee-style structure with 6-8 individuals of varying experience levels trying to do research and gather information in a quickly changing environment where existing contacts are critical to learning and acting on information and situations as they emerge, then prepare materials for review/approval by leadership.

For the future, if SAA is to assemble a task force, it might be worth considering one that is charged to thoroughly and frankly assess the following:

- The approaches SAA has used to federal legislative advocacy to date and the success of and lessons from those efforts;
- How other professions and professional organizations manage federal advocacy; benchmark with those of comparable size and focus;
- Consider potential partnerships with other professional organizations to address federal legislative advocacy;
- Assess the use and options in how NCH is involved in advocating for archivists, whether changes could be made to increase the usefulness of this relationship to SAA;
- Set forth realistic practical approaches that can be implemented so in the future the archival profession is “at the table” or at least well informed of issues/legislation at the time they emerge and approaches are being developed so that SAA has a voice at the outset of the process rather than to often operating in response mode.

In the common parlance of the current pandemic, SAA may be well-served by assessing how it can define a “new normal” for its federal legislative advocacy.

There are some very real, and potentially disturbing issues and conditions that will dominate the coming three to six months, and likely well beyond. An in-depth discussion needs to be held by leadership, by a number of groups within SAA, and with our other professional organization colleagues. We suggest that the Council initiate consideration of this issue by considering the two very basic questions provided here as a starting point for that discussion of federal legislative advocacy in our archival future.