

**Society of American Archivists  
Council Meeting  
May 16-17, 2023  
Chicago, Illinois (Hybrid Meeting)**

**Developing Structural Support for  
Archival Worker Labor Needs  
(Prepared by: Terry Baxter, SAA President)**

**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 an exacerbation 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 the 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 among 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, and some layoffs continue.

The A\*Census Administrators Survey offers even more clarity. In addition to other findings, the report indicated that 43% of organizations that lost staff during the peak years of the pandemic had not filled any of those lost positions. Three-quarters of respondents reported, “lack of staff as the primary constraint on administrators’ ability to execute strategy.” Additionally, only one in ten responding managers identified burnout as a reason for potential loss of staff – significantly out of line with the All Archivists Survey.

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 over \$140,000 to help nearly 200 archival workers in need. The grassroots AWE Fund Organizing Committee morphed in 2022 into the Archival Workers Collective, which

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

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

retained care and advocacy for archival workers but without the fundraising function which SAAF had performed.

## **DISCUSSION**

SAA has 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 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. Donations to the Foundation dropped when the AWE Fund was sunsetted.

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 the 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.

SAA also created an Archival Compensation Taskforce in December 2019. While that group's charge was important, it was aimed primarily at compensation issues and not more broadly at archival worker labor issues. The Taskforce completed its work in January 2022. That work may be useful to a broader effort related to archival worker labor issues.

While this is not an exhaustive list of ways SAA could build resiliency for both SAA members and potential SAA members, it includes things that A\*Census II, the SAA Strategic Plan, and the 2017 WAR 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;
- Audit resources for employer HR practices;
- Coordinated advocacy and mutual support with other archival associations; and
- Coordinated advocacy and mutual support with other GLAMs.

If SAA wants to build long-term resilient structures, it will need to invest significant effort, labor, and resources. It is organizationally reasonable to explore these issues before those resources are expended and we are faced with another crisis. Creating a taskforce is the most efficient vehicle for this exploration.

## **RECOMMENDATION(S)**

1. That the SAA Council sunset the Taskforce on Archival Compensation immediately;
2. That the SAA Council create an Archival Worker Labor Task Force constituted as follows:

### **I. Purpose**

The Archival Worker Labor Task Force is responsible for identifying, analyzing, and prioritizing archival worker labor (including students and interns) issues that SAA can impact for the purpose of building long-term structural support among archival workers, SAA, and other organizations for secure and equitable labor conditions for all archival workers.

### **II. Selection, Size, and Length of Term**

The Task Force is charged for a three-year period beginning in August 2023, with a final report with recommendations due to the Council no later than September 2026. The Task Force will consist of nine members (one of whom will serve as chair). Of these members, one will be appointed from among the SAA Foundation Class B board members, one will be a non-member, and one will be a former member of the Task Force on Archival Compensation.

### **III. Reporting Procedures**

The Task Force will prepare an interim status report for the Council's Fall 2024 & 2025 meetings and a final written report with recommendations for the Council's Summer 2026 meeting.

### **IV. Duties and Responsibilities**

To fulfill its purpose as described above, the Taskforce is charged with:

- 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.
- Investigating compensation for volunteer work done for SAA.

The task force should investigate these issues, identify actions SAA should take and prioritize them, and report back to the SAA Council. The Taskforce should seek assistance from non-member experts as needed.

### **V. Meetings**

The task force shall meet virtually as needed to conduct its work. The task force may conduct its business by email, telephone, or virtual meeting during the year.

**Support Statement:** The creation of this Taskforce allows SAA to plan for long-term structural support for archival workers' labor needs.

**Impact on Strategic Priorities:** The creation of this committee responds to Strategies 1.2, 2.1, 2.4, 3.1, 3.4, 4.1, 4.3, and 4.4 of the 2022-2025 Strategic Plan.

**Fiscal Impact:** The estimated staff time associated with this activity is 1 staff member @ 20 hours