

**Society of American Archivists
Council Meeting
August 14, 2024
Chicago, IL
Hybrid Meeting**

**Advocacy Day, March 10-12, 2024
(Submitted by Bryan Whitley,
SAA Liaison to the National Coalition for History)**

Humanities Advocacy Day (HAD) 2024 was organized and put on by the National Humanities Alliance (NHA) from March 10-12 in Washington, DC. HAD comprises two distinct components: 1) a day of orientation, training, exchanging ideas, and networking, and 2) a day of advocacy visits to legislative offices on Capitol Hill. The goal is to prepare humanities advocates, including archives advocates, to connect with Congressional offices to advocate for the federal programs that support humanities efforts. These programs include the National Endowment for Humanities, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and Title VI and Fulbright-Hays (international education).

This report is broken down to cover the two components of HAD.

HAD Part I: Orientation and Making Connections

The first part of Humanities Advocacy Day is highlighted by training and education sessions related to uplifting humanities and preparing advocates for their Hill office visits. One of these sessions, “Advocating for the National Archives on Capitol Hill,” was a panel moderated by Alexandra Klein of NHA¹, and included Joy Banks (Executive Director of the Council of State Archivists (CoSA)), Lee White (Executive Director of the National Coalition for History (NCH)), and me (representing SAA). This was the fourth consecutive year that NHA hosted a NARA/NHPRC-specific training session that featured representatives of SAA, CoSA, and NCH.

NCHR In the lead up to HAD, the panelists and Ms. Klein requested to meet with NARA public relations staff to ask questions about the agency’s efforts as well as future opportunities and challenges NARA sees on the horizon. We gained a great deal of insight about NARA’s advances in digitization and providing access to records, particularly the mass digitization of millions of records made freely available on-line. We also learned valuable information about the agency’s successful efforts to eliminate the backlog of veterans records requests at the National Personnel

¹ Ms. Klein has been extremely supportive of archival advocacy efforts. She was instrumental in planning and executing the 2023 Archives on the Hill advocacy day that was held in conjunction with Joint Annual Meeting of CoSA and SAA.

Records Center in St. Louis, which was a major victory that we knew should be mentioned enthusiastically to congressional staff during Hill office visits.

Despite the successes, we also discussed the fact that decades of funding shortfalls have been difficult for NARA to weather, particularly in light of the massive increases in born digital records, the mandate for all federal executive branch agencies to transition to digital deposit of records (OMB Memoranda M-19-21/M-23-07), and the evolving expectations of the public to access records remotely.

In addition to continuing an ongoing and robust relationship with NARA staff, this meeting was valuable because of the information we gleaned from it. The information was crucial in crafting the messages that we would ask advocates to take with them to Congressional offices in an effort to build support for on-going robust federal funding for NARA and NHPRC. The messages had three focuses:

- The backlog of requests for veterans records at the NPRC was eliminated and NARA accomplished this without diverting funds from any other NARA efforts (i.e., NARA did not neglect other work to focus on veterans records requests).
- Due to a decades-long gap between ever-increasing archival holdings and stagnant resources, NARA is at risk of mission failure in supporting its core efforts.
- NARA needs to be right-sized with increased appropriations to hire more staff, acquire better technology to work with increasingly complex records, and expand digitization efforts that enhance the public's access to the essential evidence of our country.

The training session was attended by roughly 30 people and via informal feedback to me, attendees learned a lot and felt prepared with the information they needed to communicate about NARA with Congressional offices.

Immediately following this session was the luncheon conversation with Dr. Colleen Shogan, Archivist of the United States, which had approximately 150-200 people in attendance. NHA's choice of headline speaker is a notable demonstration of their commitment to advocating for NARA and NHPRC. During the conversation with the Paula Krebs (NHA president), Dr. Shogan mentioned many of the successes, opportunities, and challenges that our archives advocacy panel spoke about. Dr. Shogan's comments and our archives panel's insights echoed one another and gave attendees useful insights into the value of archives from the point of view of members of the archives community.

In the afternoon, I spoke with John Hamilton, NARA's Congressional Affairs Director about what SAA and other archival organizations could do to support NARA and NHPRC. While no

concrete strategies were discussed, this is a valuable connection that will likely be fruitful in the future.

HAD Part II: Congressional Office Visits

Tuesday, March 12 was set aside for a full day of legislative advocacy. In addition to the Michigan delegation, for which I am a constituent, I was also asked to participate with groups from Arizona, Georgia, Mississippi, and Ohio. This is because each of those groups had a meeting with a representative who holds an important seat on the Financial Services and General Government Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee (the FSGG subcommittee has NARA/NHRPC as part of its purview), and I was selected to support those groups with archives-specific talking points to provide to the Congressional staffers. For each of these groups, NHA staff made it clear that I was there as a member of SAA and an experienced archives advocate.

For each of the meetings (I had nine in total), I clearly identified myself as a member of the Society of American Archivists. Most of the meetings I participated in went smoothly. In addition to talking points about the value of NEH, IMLS, and Title VI/Fulbright-Hays, our groups touched on several points about the importance of supporting the National Archives, and we connected that value to the districts and the constituencies of the legislators in meaningful ways. One key point that resonated with most offices—Democrat and Republican—was that NARA succeeded in eliminating the backlog of requests for veterans' records at the NPRC.

In addition to my NHA-arranged meetings, I scheduled a separate meeting with Emily Manna, a staff member who works with the Senate's Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs (HSGAC). Ms. Manna works for Senator Peters of Michigan (who is the chair of the HSGAC), for whom I am a constituent. Additionally, Ms. Manna is interested in reforms to the Presidential Records Act (PRA) and the Federal Records Act (FRA). She has a keen interest in archivists' work to preserve the essential evidence of our democracy and what we do to ensure that the people of the United States can hold our government accountable and gain a better understanding of our history.

My meeting with Ms. Manna, although only 15 minutes, was incredibly useful. First, it allowed me to maintain an ongoing relationship with a key staffer for the Chair of the Senate committee that has oversight over NARA. Eight months prior, Ms. Manna and I had a robust conversation during Archives on the Hill about PRA and FRA reforms, and this is a relationship that I continue to cultivate. Second, Ms. Manna informed me about a hearing re FRA reform that was going to take place the following week, which was information that any archives advocate I know were unaware of prior to that. I passed this information along to my archival advocacy colleagues and shared it with SAA membership more broadly. Third, I was able to provide Ms. Manna with some specific information about our advocacy messages and the risk of "mission failure" for

NARA without increased funding. Ms. Manna was armed with information to inform Sen. Peters' questions and prepare the witnesses in the forthcoming hearing about FRA reforms.

All-in-all, this meeting was among the most useful. HSGAC hearings about FRA and PRA reforms in the recent past have featured lawyers or other non-archives professionals as witnesses offering their assessments of federal records laws and practices. Yet, SAA and other archival organizations push for policymakers to value our members as trusted experts in the field. In corresponding and speaking with Ms. Manna, I have asserted that archivists should be included in such hearings because we can offer critical insights into the operations of federal records management. Continuing this relationship with Ms. Manna gives the archives community opportunities to assert the relevance of our profession and the value of the records we steward with influential policymakers.

Summary of Humanities Advocacy Day

HAD 2024 had many upsides that built upon previous advocacy efforts. The Society of American Archivists continues to be a trustworthy partner for the National Humanities Alliance, as demonstrated in NHA staff's programming and reliance on me as an SAA member and experienced archives advocate to accompany other advocacy groups. The talking points we crafted for this year's program were created to reflect to comments of the Archivist of the United States, thereby presenting a unified message for humanities advocates and strengthening the relationship between NARA and SAA. And, as a representative of SAA, my ongoing advocacy efforts with Emily Manna of the HSGAC have the potential to help bring archivists to the policymaking table, especially in the context of FRA and PRA reforms.