

**Society of American Archivists  
Council Meeting  
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Chicago, Illinois**

**Proposal for Tragedy Response Initiative Task Force  
(Prepared by Lisa Calahan, Diverse Sexuality and Gender Section  
Steering Committee Member)**

**BACKGROUND**

Recording the historical significance of violent events is, unfortunately, part of American memory and historical experience. When a tragic event occurs—such as hate crimes, police violence, acts of terrorism, and campus or community shootings—it falls to the local and/or regional archivist to support the historical record and human experience by documenting and creating memorial collections and accepting or collecting material about the victims and sometimes the instigator(s) of the violence. Because of proximity, archivists often are participating members of the communities for which they are also professionally responsible for documenting. In these situations the archivist is essentially alone and forced to make collecting decisions based on community input rather than collecting scope, often without the guidance of formulated best practices and policies,, while also in the grip of their own grieving process.

In response to the June 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, a DSGS member asked the Section co-chairs to investigate creation of a Tragedy Response Initiative to provide professional policies and best practice guidelines for archivists responding to tragedies that result in the loss of life in their communities that also affect their professional responsibilities. The Florida-based archivist and LGBTQ community member was personally affected by the tragedy and had a very difficult time finding resources and allies to help document and preserve the tragedy while also personally grieving. **Given the wide-ranging implications and level of involvement from diverse SAA membership, DSGS leadership believe that the Initiative would be most successful and sustainable if the initiative was put forth by the Council as a task force.**

As a response to that request, in the spring of 2017, co-chair Lisa Calahan issued a call for a potential collaboration by SAA section leadership to investigate the potential of draft guidelines and resources for responding to tragic events such as hate crimes, police violence, acts of terrorism, and other acts by humans that result in the loss of lives. The call for participation in the initiative was very well received—colleagues from all over the U.S. and various levels of participation in SAA reached out to offer assistance based on their experiences and internally created documentation. In addition, there were section leaders and members who hadn't experienced tragedies in their workplaces or communities but who extended offers to help. As indicated in the DSGS annual report, the focus of our annual meeting was to further explore the Initiative with SAA and DSGS members.

Membership envisions that the Tragedy Response Initiative would focus on support for communities affected by tragedy by providing a framework for communities to preserve specific memories. The Initiative is envisioned as having two purposes: 1) Provide professional policies and best practices guidelines via a resource-based website, as it will be important that the Initiative provide guidance regarding policies, procedures, and best practices for acquisition, deaccessioning, preservation, and access of memorial collections created as a result of a tragic event(s); and 2) serve as a volunteer response force.

The Initiative will investigate the sustainability and governance of a volunteer response group to physically help collect material at an archivists' request.

## DISCUSSION

Numerous archivists have presented at the SAA Annual Meeting about their experiences collecting and managing condolence and memorial collections and about documenting tragedy in attempts to share their experiences of isolation and documentation strategies. For example, Aaron Purcell wrote an article about Virginia Tech's staff experience documenting the campus shooting in 2007<sup>1</sup>; and in 2015<sup>2</sup>, 2016<sup>3</sup>, and 2017<sup>4</sup> there were panels at SAA annual meetings dedicated to documenting memorial collections in response to mass and police-involved shootings. The recurring panel theme speaks to a larger issue for the SAA membership; there is a clear desire to share experiences and a need to share resources and documentation. Because of the unexpected nature of these horrific events, the responsible community/archivist/curator often does not have the emotional capacity, time and/or resources to conduct thorough research to find information and examples of what other institutions have done in similar situations. Historically, repositories and archivists manage documenting tragedy as individual occurrences; there is an unfortunate and growing need for the profession to provide ready guidance through the provision of best practices, examples, and volunteer support.

Active partnerships and collaboration will be key to the success of the Initiative. The Tragedy Response Initiative will work closely with archivists who have dealt with the creation and management of memorial collections created in response to tragic events in order to compile useful examples and clear guidelines that are easily accessible to the archival community. It will provide easily accessible resources to colleagues in need of guidance that meets professional standards and a framework for archivists to request physical assistance from volunteers to collect, document, and assess material. This goal of the initiative will identify and develop new standards and guidelines in order to provide documentation for colleagues who need assistance advocating for clear collecting strategies and policies at their institution, as well as educational and outreach strategies for working in collaboration with affected communities. The standards

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<sup>1</sup> Aaron Purcell, "Documenting Tragedy: The Prevail Archives at Virginia Tech," *Archival Outlook*, (July/August 2008): 9.

<sup>2</sup> SAA Diversity Committee Forum: "The Secret Life of Records." August 20, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Session 502: "A Call to Action: Archiving the Memorial Materials from Mother Emanuel AME Church." August 5, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Session 306, "Documenting Sorrow: Collecting and Archiving in Digital and Physical Formats Memorial Materials from School Shootings." July 28, 2017.

and resources envisioned are intended to strengthen bonds between communities and their archives, provide clear expectations, and to ensure communities' voice and ownership of their representation and historical experience.

The anticipated timeframe for the task force is 2 years for completion of the two goals. There are currently 13 individuals (consisting of museum curatorial staff, archivists, and community members) who have volunteered to work toward completing the goals of the Initiative. The outcome of goal one will include the creation of a website documenting professional policies and best practices for collecting strategies, management, preservation, and provision of access to memorial collections with template forms. The outcome to support goal two will be a formal recommendation, estimated budget and funding options, and action items for the permanent adoption of a tragedy response volunteer team.

The recommendation will be made in response to the research of the Task Force on an administratively and financially sustainable model for a national, regional, and state based model(s) in collaboration with related national, regional, and state level professional organizations. Task Force members will collaborate with partnered associations to ensure that policies and practices reflect broad strategies for cooperation and shared resources with allied museums and cultural heritage institutions. Members will also conduct interviews and gather resources from similar successful programs such as the Disaster Planning and Recovery Subcommittee<sup>5</sup> and the AIC National Heritage Responders program<sup>6</sup> to make a formal recommendation for long-term support of the program.

**Support Statement:**

The formation of a SAA Tragedy Response Initiative Task Force will benefit SAA membership and allied colleagues who have professional obligations to document and preserve collections related to tragic events in their communities and workplaces by, 1. providing guidance regarding policies, procedures, and best practices for acquisition, deaccessioning, preservation, and access of memorial collections created as a result of a tragic event(s); and 2. the creation of a volunteer response team to physically help collect material at the archivists' request.

**Impact on Strategic Priorities:** The work of the proposed task force would assist in achieving the following outcomes for SAA's strategic goals and strategies: 1.1 and 1.4, 2.1 and 2.2, 3.1 and 3.3, and 4.2 and 4.3.

**Fiscal Impact:** Members of the task force may be affected financially by individual work associated with the task force as well as attendance necessary for teleconference and in-person (at Annual Meetings) meetings. It is anticipated that work conducted as part of the task force will not exceed 5-8 hours per week.

If the volunteer response team is adopted by the task force and the SAA Council as a sustainable model for assisting our colleagues, there will be future expenses associated with training and establishment of a volunteer team and responders, which could be investigated as an opportunity

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<sup>5</sup> Regional Archival Association Consortium, Disaster Planning and Recovery Subcommittee.

<sup>6</sup> American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, Heritage Emergency Programs.

for continuing education through the SAA Education Department. We would advise further exploration of the cost of the development of the volunteer team after the opportunity to further investigate a sustainable model.

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

- What are the benefits to SAA members of creating a Tragedy Response Initiative Task Force?
- Do these benefits outweigh the potential future costs?
- How would this action affect future actions?
- Would creation of a task force duplicate other efforts or be an opportunity for collaboration?

## **DRAFT CHARGE**

### **SAA Tragedy Response Initiative Task Force**

#### **I. Purpose**

The Tragedy Response Initiative Task Force is responsible for 1) creating and/or compiling material for ready accessibility by archivists who are facing a sudden tragedy and 2) exploring the feasibility of creating a standing body within SAA that would update documentation as needed and serve as a volunteer tragedy response team.

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

The Task Force is charged for a two-year period that begins in January 2018, with a final report and recommendations for the Council no later than January 2020.

The Task Force will comprise eight SAA members, one of whom will serve as chair. Task Force members will be appointed by the vice president/president-elect.

#### **III. Reporting Procedures**

The Task Force chair will prepare a written status report for each of the Council's spring and fall meetings, and will prepare for Council consideration at its fall/winter 2020 meeting a final written report with recommendations. Should the Task Force recommend that a standing group be created, it should include in its final report a draft charge/description for that group.

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

To fulfill its purpose as described above, the Task Force is specifically charged to:

- Research current best practices and resources for archival tragedy response, including interviewing similar, successful programs (i.e., Disaster Planning and Recovery Subcommittee, AID National Heritage Responders).
- Collaborate with allied organizations to ensure that policies and practices reflect varied needs and strategies for cooperation among various archival institutions.
- Create and/or compile material for the SAA website documenting professional policies and best practices for collecting strategies, management, preservation, and provision of access to memorial collections, including templated forms that are easily adapted.
- Determine whether sufficient need exists to justify the effort and costs associated with establishing a standing body to serve as a Tragedy Response Volunteer Team.
- Determine how such a standing body might be structured, staffed, and governed, with administratively and financially sustainable models for national-, regional-, and state-based structures.
- Determine how such a standing body might be financed and supported.
- Propose how such a standing body might interact with other SAA groups and with external groups.

#### **V. Meetings**

The Task Force will carry out its charge primarily via electronic mail, conference calls, online meetings, and face-to-face meetings held in conjunction with the SAA Annual Meeting. Should the Task Force determine that an additional face-to-face meeting would be beneficial, it must apply to the Council (through the Executive Office) for funding.