

Submitted by the National Coalition for History to the Senate Appropriations Committee's Subcommittee on Financial Services and General Government

FISCAL YEAR 2024 BUDGETS FOR THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION AND THE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PUBLICATIONS AND RECORDS COMMISSION

Submitted by:

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The Honorable Chris Van Hollen

Chairman

Subcommittee on Financial Services

and General Government

US Senate Committee on Appropriations

Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Mr. Chairman:

The National Coalition for History (NCH) supports the Biden administration's recommended funding level of \$443.2 million for the National Archives and Records Administration's (NARA) Operating Expenses (OE) budget in fiscal year (FY) 2024, which is an increase of \$15.7 million from the FY 23 level of \$ 427.5 million.

NCH opposes the Administration's proposed base funding level of \$10 million in FY 24 for the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) grants program. That represents a reduction of \$2 million from the FY 23 base level of \$12 million. We urge the subcommittee, at a minimum, to fund the NHPRC at the FY 23 level of \$12 million.

The National Coalition for History (NCH) is a consortium of 43 organizations that advocates and educates on federal legislative and regulatory issues affecting historians, archivists, political scientists, documentary editors, teachers, students, genealogists, and other stakeholders. As researchers, teachers, and conservators of American history and culture, we care deeply about the programs and activities of NARA and the NHPRC.

NARA has reached an inflection point. David S. Ferriero retired a year ago after twelve years as Archivist of the United States (AOTUS). Since then the agency has been awaiting confirmation

of his successor, Dr. Colleen Shogan, who President Biden nominated last summer. We urge the Senate to act on her nomination.

Assuming her confirmation, Dr. Shogan will face tremendous challenges in both the short and long term. For far too long, NARA has been neglected and underfunded. NARA has made progress but continues to struggle with the transition from paper to electronic records. As the quantity of material increases exponentially, NARA will have difficulty keeping up with federal records generated each year, let alone tackling the massive backlog of older, historically important paper records that should be digitized. Perhaps most importantly, the quality and quantity of services provided to our citizens will further deteriorate if not addressed in this budget cycle. There are indications that NARA may be challenged to manage these important responsibilities, a trend that has only been exacerbated by the pandemic, the ensuing shutdown and delayed restoration of on-site services. This limitation owes less to management issues than to inadequate funding.

Increased federal spending for the National Archives is necessary to manage, preserve, and make accessible the federal government's records. Prior to last year's significant increase in funding, NARA's operating expenses (OE) budget had remained stagnant for more than a decade at a time when the transition to use of electronic records by federal agencies is well underway. Investment in human capital, including professional archivists, is vital for providing an elevated level of service to the public. For too long Congress and the administrations of both parties have, unfortunately, viewed NARA as a mere housekeeping entity, rather than as a vital agency that ensures transparency and historical documentation for the nation.

NARA's FY 23 operating expenses budget is \$427.5 million, which represents the first significant funding increase the agency has received in recent memory. Nonetheless, the increase barely made a dent in the underfunding the agency has experienced over the past decade. NARA requires a level of appropriations commensurate with its vastly expanded responsibilities. This chart provides a summary of the NARA OE and NHPRC budgets over the past decade.

NARA and NHPRC Appropriations, FY 2013 to Present (in millions of dollars)

	FY 13	FY 14	FY 15	FY 16	FY 17	FY 18	FY19	FY 20	FY 21	FY 22	FY 23
NARA	\$353	\$370	\$365	\$372	\$381	\$385	\$373	\$359	\$377	\$388	\$427
NHPRC	\$4.75	\$4.5	\$5	\$5	\$5	\$6	\$6	\$6.5	\$6.5	\$7	\$12

[In inflation-adjusted dollars](#), NARA's OE budget has declined for more than a decade. No federal agency can absorb such significant reduction in funding without concomitant decreases in public services. Forced to do more with less funding, NARA has had to reduce hours at its research rooms and limit the number of materials individuals can access at one time. For example, NARA is still requiring the public to make appointments in advance to use its facilities.

We appreciate the additional funds you provided to address the lingering backlog of 300,000 requests for veterans' records at the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC). However, these are not the only category of NARA's holdings that are experiencing delays. Millions of pages of classified agency and presidential records continue to accumulate at NARA in both paper and digital form. Moreover, NARA has a huge backlog of requests (some of them 20 years old) for declassification of specific records in its holdings. For example, there are backlogs (estimated at 30,000) in responding to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and Mandatory Declassification Review (MDR) requests. Delays in the processing of records and responses to record requests at presidential libraries have also increased. If accountability of government is to have any meaning, NARA, and the agencies NARA relies upon in the declassification process, must find better ways to address this problem.

In recent years Congress and the executive branch have placed additional responsibilities on the agency without providing the funding necessary to assume these functions. These include transitioning from the preservation and storage of paper records to the preservation and storage of electronic records. NARA also faces the continued addition of presidential libraries. Each new presidential library created and placed under NARA's care adds additional costs for staff, maintenance, and records management.

The federal government's transition to electronic records, including email, has exponentially increased the number of records that NARA must process and catalog. In 2019, NARA and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) announced that the agency would no longer accept paper records from federal agencies as of December 31, 2022. Just prior to the deadline, OMB and NARA issued a new directive extending the compliance date to June 30, 2024. We appreciate NARA listening to, and addressing, the concerns of their major stakeholders. Despite this extension, we remain concerned that NARA and federal records managers will not be prepared to continue this transition without serious disruptions. We doubt that this deadline can be met without additional resources, both human and technological.

Despite the additional appropriations in FY 23, NARA lacks the funding needed to meet the imperative for digitization and accessibility. This need was made even more obvious during the pandemic which showed the public's expectation that the federal government's records can be easily found on the internet. In addition, the need to manage large volumes of textual records is not diminishing. Proactively funding NARA's records management programs ensures that agencies operate more efficiently and that permanent records are preserved. We urge you to

provide NARA with the additional funding necessary to ensure a seamless transition to all digital recordkeeping in the coming years.

While not an issue that can be addressed in the appropriations process, we urge you to press the authorizers on the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee to pass legislation strengthening and clarifying the Presidential Records Act (PRA). Events of the past year have shown how woefully inadequate the statute has proven in ensuring that the complete historical record of an administration is preserved. Increased accountability and oversight are necessary.

National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC)

The National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) is the grant-making arm of NARA. It enables the National Archives to activate resources that connect the American people with archival and historical materials of deep significance to the present. Archive-specific work includes the preservation and access of electronic records and disaster preparedness for vulnerable collections. Historical grants provide for the creation of documentary collections (websites, podcasts, books, databases, transcripts, and audio resources) of nationally significant groups and individuals. Some examples include the documentary histories of people like George Washington, Willa Cather, Thomas Edison, Frederick Douglass, Walt Whitman, Albert Einstein, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Eleanor Roosevelt. NHPRC grants also fund the curation of content pertaining to noteworthy institutions like the early Supreme Court, the First Federal Congress, and the Freedmen's Bureau. In addition, the NHPRC has funded an ongoing project to make the papers of the Founding Fathers available for free online. As we approach the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, we know that documentary evidence of America's story is more important than ever.

NCH opposes the Administration's proposed base funding level of \$10 million in FY 24 for the NHPRC. That represents a decrease of \$2 million from the FY 23 base level of \$12 million. In FY 23, the NHPRC received an additional \$23,772,500 in congressionally earmarked projects, bringing the total up to \$35,772,500. However, that congressionally directed pass-thru funding level may not continue if earmarks are once again eliminated. \$12 million would enable continued support of ongoing programs and modest investment in new ones.

Thank you for the opportunity to present our views on the FY 24 budgets of NARA and the NHPRC.