

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

FISCAL YEAR 2025 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, DC 20510

Dear Mr. Chairman:

The National Coalition for History (NCH) supports the Biden administration's recommended funding level of \$456.3 million for the National Archives and Records Administration's (NARA) Operating Expenses (OE) budget in fiscal year (FY) 2025, which is an increase of \$29.1 million from the FY 24 level of \$ 427.2 million.

NCH opposes the Administration's proposed base funding level of \$5 million in FY 25 for the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) grants program. This would cut the NHPRC's budget in half, a reduction of \$5 million from the FY 24 base level of \$10 million. We urge the subcommittee, at a minimum, to return the NHPRC to its FY 2023 funding level of \$12 million.

The National Coalition for History (NCH) is a consortium of 42 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.

It is regrettable that both have been neglected and underfunded for decades. NARA plays an indispensable role in ensuring government transparency and the public's right to know—foundations of democratic governance. Public officials, teachers, students, veterans,

genealogists, historians, journalists, and scores of other individuals and institutions rely on NARA’s holdings because all of us require insight into the past. If we cannot adequately support NARA—its staff and the tools they need to preserve our nation's records—we will make it even more difficult for these constituencies, both within the government and beyond, to do their work.

The transition to a digital information culture has created enormous challenges for NARA. First, digitizing paper records takes time and money; NARA has made impressive progress with this part of the work, especially considering the absence of requisite funding from Congress. Second, exponential increases in the quantity of born-digital material that NARA is required to conserve are rapidly outstripping the agency’s ability to manage its current workload, let alone keep pace with projected outputs. Congress should close this gap with funding that reflects actual need.

But NARA’s work is not only about preserving documents, photographs, media, and artifacts. If the agency lacks requisite funding to manage core responsibilities the quality of public services is likely to deteriorate further. As a coalition of organizations whose collective knowledge of NARA procedures and practices is uniquely comprehensive and deep, the National Coalition for History affirms our confidence in the agency’s management. This is not a problem of leadership; it is a problem of funding.

NARA’s operating expenses budget has remained stagnant for decades despite the pronounced rise in operating costs that born-digital recordkeeping requires in infrastructure, technical expertise, and personnel. This leaves less money available for educational functions and research assistance. Investment in human capital, including professional archivists and a robust corps of subject matter experts, is vital for sustaining the outward-facing side of NARA’s responsibilities. For too long Congress and the administrations of both major parties have, unfortunately, viewed NARA as a mere housekeeping entity, rather than as a critical agency that ensures transparency and historical records management for the nation. This chart provides a summary of the NARA Operating Expenses (OE) and NHPRC budgets over the past decade.

NARA (OE) and NHPRC Appropriations, FY 2014 to Present (in millions of dollars)

| | FY 14 | FY 15 | FY 16 | FY 17 | FY 18 | FY 19 | FY 20 | FY 21 | FY 22 | FY 23 | FY 24 |
|------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| NARA (OE) | \$370 | \$365 | \$372 | \$381 | \$385 | \$373 | \$359 | \$377 | \$388 | \$427 | \$427 |
| NHPRC | \$4.5 | \$5 | \$5 | \$5 | \$6 | \$6 | \$6.5 | \$6.5 | \$7 | \$12 | \$10 |

[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. For example, NARA has had to reduce hours at its public research rooms.

We appreciate the additional funds Congress provided to eliminate the tremendous backlog of requests for veterans' records that accumulated at the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) during the pandemic. Other backlogs persist, however. Delays in the processing of records and responses to queries at presidential libraries have also increased. Millions of pages of classified agency records—both paper and digital—continue to accumulate. NARA has a huge backlog of requests (some of them 20 years old) for declassification of specific records. There are backlogs (estimated at 30,000) in responding to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and Mandatory Declassification Review (MDR) requests. If accountability of government is to have any meaning, NARA, and the agencies NARA relies upon in the declassification process, must address these roadblocks. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) mandate to transition from paper-based to born-digital records preservation and storage is especially worrisome. It has exponentially increased the number of records that NARA must process and catalog even as the agency grapples with existing large volumes of textual records.

The new digitization facility at NARA's Archives II in College Park, MD is the result of \$30 million in directed funding from Congress. NARA can now digitize up to 10 times as many records per year as before. However, more investment is needed if NARA is to meet its strategic goal to digitize and make available to the public 500 million pages of records by September 30, 2026. The pandemic increased the public's expectation that the federal government's records should be easily accessible on the internet. Proactively funding NARA's records management programs ensures that agencies operate efficiently, and permanent records are preserved.

RECOMMENDATIONS

NARA has legally mandated responsibilities that cannot be neglected or ignored. The National Coalition for History recommends the following steps that Congress, the White House, federal agencies, and NARA's leadership can take to ensure that the agency is properly funded and supported to fulfill its mission.

Funding for programs, staff, technology, and infrastructure: NARA's budget has stagnated in real terms over the past decades, even as the agency has been given new responsibilities and an avalanche of additional materials to manage. Congress wisely appropriated a ten percent budget increase for operating expenses in FY 23 but provided no additional funding in FY 24. Given continued inflation, NARA is treading water. Every aspect of NARA's work requires substantial investments in staff, technology, and infrastructure.

NCH supports the Biden administration’s proposed \$29.1 million increase in NARA’s operating expenses budget in FY 25. Critical needs include:

- Staff and technology to declassify federal records as legally mandated.
- Additional funding to ensure a seamless transition to all digital recordkeeping in the coming years and to digitize existing textual records.
- Funds to train and hire Subject Matter Experts on topics of broad public concern.

Declassification: NARA’s National Declassification Center faces a backlog of over 9,000 declassification review requests, with anticipated wait times as long as 12 years.

- Congress should appropriate funds to enable NARA to reduce wait times to 2 years, and to initiate a systematic review of all classified presidential records from the Truman Administration forward.

Presidential Libraries:

- NARA should provide the funding and staffing required to review, restore, restructure, and revitalize the presidential library system and ensure that appropriate infrastructure is in place for accepting and providing access to electronic presidential records.

Cooperation from the executive branch:

- NARA has for decades encountered a lack of cooperation from executive-branch entities that are legally mandated to preserve, transfer, and declassify documents. NARA cannot fulfill its mission if the entities that create federal records do not abide by federal records-management laws, regulations, and policies. This is not a partisan issue; it is a systemic problem that requires persistent Congressional oversight.

National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC): The NHPRC is the grant-making arm of NARA. It leverages private funding to support preservation and dissemination of archival content, promote public engagement with historical materials, and assist states with disaster preparedness for especially vulnerable resources. Grants provide for the creation of documentary collections of nationally significant groups and individuals. For example, 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, the documentary legacy of America’s story should be a priority for Congressional investment in US Semiquincentennial celebrations and programming. The NHPRC should be an important priority area for Congress’s investment in America250.

NCH opposes the Administration’s proposed base funding level of \$5 million in FY 25 for the NHPRC. That represents a decrease of \$5 million from the FY 24 base level of \$10 million. Cutting its budget in half will gut the NHPRC. The NHPRC’s budget in FY 90 was \$5 million, which translates to \$12 million in FY 25 funding.

Thank you for the opportunity to present our views on NARA and the NHPRC FY 25 budgets.