



Council of State Archivists Position Statement Autonomous Government Archives

Approved by the CoSA Board of Directors, February 27, 2019

Government archives have an essential statutory role in the United States that is fundamental to the effective and transparent operation and management of government. Government archival programs ensure preservation of records that document functions and actions of government; maintain public accountability and support transparency; protect and support the rights of the individuals; make possible public access to government records; and provide evidence of the past to support the work of government and the interests of its citizens into the future.

In his seminal work, ***American State Archives***, Ernst Posner laid out minimum standards to govern the status and function of archives responsible for public records:

*“In as much as the archival agency services all branches and agencies of the government, and inasmuch as it should be professionally staffed and directed on a nonpartisan basis, it is best given the status of an independent agency.” (**American State Archives**, pg. 352)*

As recently as 2018, these sentiments were reinforced by the Archivist of the United States, David Ferriero:

“It is important that we never lose sight of the trusted role that nonpartisan government archivists – at the federal, state and local level – play in ensuring the permanence of our democratic institutions.

The importance of independent archives at all levels of government is critical to the trust of the country in its history, and the ability of the archives to provide reliable trustworthy evidence of the actions of the past. Every government archivist must be allowed to do his or her job free of political pressure so that the archival record can speak freely, and so the archives can continue to function as the trusted repository of the actions of government.”

To maintain authenticity and integrity, it is critical that government archives be structured with the independence and autonomy needed to fulfill their non-partisan mission. Government agencies and the people of the United States should be able to rely on government archives as devoid of both censorship

and partisanship – a place where the public has appropriate access as permitted by law, to the significant records of government, as produced by government agencies, without censorship or filter. CoSA calls on federal, state, and local governments to enact legislation assuring the following safeguards are in place for government archives¹:

- authority to take and preserve multiple formats of records appropriate to document significant government activities and actions as authorized by retention schedules, regulations, or laws;
- authority to make records accessible according to existing laws that may govern privacy and security of information;
- properly funded programs that provide preservation of and access to permanent or long-term government records to ensure accountability and transparency of government actions;
- a structure of governance providing the necessary independence to properly administer governmental archives without political interference; and
- the authority and staffing to pursue and assure compliance with records management and archives policies, requirements, and regulations.

About CoSA

The Council of State Archivists (CoSA) is a nonprofit membership organization of the state and territorial government archives in the fifty states, five territories, and District of Columbia. Through collaborative research, education, and advocacy, CoSA provides leadership that strengthens and supports state and territorial archives in their work to preserve and provide access to government records. CoSA facilitates networking, information sharing, and project collaboration among its member organizations to help state and territorial government archives with their responsibilities for protecting the rights and historical documents of the American people.

¹ For additional information, see Council of State Archivists, National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators, and Society of American Archivists [Issue Brief: Adequate Funding of Government Archives and Archival Programs](#), 2014; and Council of State Archivists, [Developing and Maintaining a Strong State Archives](#), 2015