

Issue Brief: Adequate Funding of Government Archives and Archival Programs

This Issue Brief was drafted by appointed representatives of SAA, the Council of State Archivists, and the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators and was approved by the governing bodies of the three organizations.

SUMMARY

Government archives are responsible to both preserve and make accessible the permanent records of government. By any reasonable comparison the legally required records of government, as well as valuable historical documents found in government archives, receive too little funding. Even when compared with other “cultural agencies” that receive federal funding, such as the Smithsonian Institution and the Library of Congress, federal archives receive less support. State and local government archives also function with minimal funding as many local governments across the nation have no archives funding.

Neither the federal government nor any state or local governmental agency has systematically studied the cost of maintaining the archival record required by a democratic nation to preserve the legally required and culturally valuable records created by public institutions. In an era in which the public increasingly realizes the need to allocate vital resources rationally, government has failed to ascertain the true cost of maintaining an adequate documentary record of our democracy.

To resolve this problem:

In the short run, the Council of State Archivists, the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators, and the Society of American Archivists believe that:

- Increased federal spending for archives is necessary to manage, preserve and make accessible the federal government’s records. Total funding for the National Archives and Records Administration should be increased to approximately \$600 million.
- Grant support from the federal government for state and local archival work should be expanded significantly to equal the level of support already given to the library and museum communities nationwide.
- State governments should appropriate, on a per capita basis, at least as much for the care of archival records as is spent by the federal government.

Systematic federal and state studies should be undertaken to determine the true cost of maintaining – in archives – public records that are legally required to assure individual rights, document government actions, provide government transparency and accountability, and document historical actions taken by government. Additionally, state archives should recruit local city and county governments to participate in conducting studies. Ensuring that all levels of government records are included, beginning with local government, is important in estimating the true cost of archival preservation.

THE ISSUE

In the United States the funding made available to public archives is not adequate to serve the public’s legitimate right for access to and preservation of documents that must, by law, be maintained and through which public accountability and historical interpretation are made possible.

Using federal spending as a bellwether for public spending on archives:

- In Fiscal Year 2012 the National Archives and Records Administration's budget was \$391.5 million, of a total federal budget of \$3.7 trillion. This represented an expenditure of about \$1.24 per resident at that time.

The National Archives is significantly underfunded when compared to similar organizations supported by the federal government. In FY12, for example:

- Congress appropriated \$635,511,552 in operating funds for the Smithsonian Institution, about \$2.00 per resident.
- The Library of Congress appropriation was \$587 million, about \$1.85 per resident.

The federal government has not invested grant funds in state and local records at the rate at which it has supported similar state and local cultural activities:

- The National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) received funding of \$5 million in FY12, half of which was expended to support archival activity at the state and local level, or about .015cents per resident.
- The Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) in FY12 granted \$189,035,000 in funding to libraries nationwide (about 60 cents per person) and \$30,140,000 to support museums nationwide (about 9 cents per resident).

Thus the federal government underfunds archives, when compared with similar organizations, both in terms of budgets allocated to somewhat comparable organizations and in grant support for archival activity throughout the nation.

THE SOLUTION

The Council of State Archivists, the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators, and the Society of American Archivists believe that three steps should be taken to ensure the protection of America's public records:

- Archival programs at the federal level of government should, at a minimum, remain at their current level of approximately \$1.24 per resident (adjusted annually for population and inflation), lest unanticipated and irreparable damage occur to the nation's documentary heritage. More appropriately, funding should be increased to \$600 million – approximately equivalent to the amounts received by the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian.
- Federal grant funding for archival programs made available through the NHPRC should increase immediately to a minimum of \$30 million, approximately the level of grant support offered to museums nationwide. Over a longer period, new legislation should be introduced to create equity of federal grant opportunities among state and local archives, museums, and libraries. Such equity could be established by adoption of the Preserving the American Historical Record Act (PAHR), which proposes a minimum funding level of \$50 million for this critical area, or 16 cents per resident.
- State governments must fund state archives and records programs at no less than the current level established by the federal government of \$1.24 per resident. In 2012, on average, state governments devoted just 43 cents per resident to the care of archival records.

In the longer term, governments at the federal, state, and local levels should initiate studies to determine the amount of funding needed to ensure the necessary and required preservation of America's public records.