



Organization Name: Archival Researchers Association (ARA)

Topic area: Restore Critical Access to Public Records and Transparency at all National Archives and Records Administration Research Facilities

Name of appropriations bill: FY2022 Financial Services and General Government Appropriations Bill

Agency: National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)

Program, office, or center:

(Dollars in thousands)			
Program	FY20 Enacted	FY21 Enacted	FY22 Recommendation
Restoration of Public Access to Critical Government Records	359,000 <i>(non-add 0)</i>	367,000 <i>(non-add 0)</i>	397,000 <i>(add 30,000)</i>

Funding recommendation: Appropriate \$30 million for FY2022, an 8% increase over FY2021 enacted budget, as a **Set-Aside Funding Program** for the National Archives and Records Administration's (NARA's) Office of Research Services to enable NARA to increase access and services in the public research rooms, at all NARA facilities, approaching the level of service of FY2011 through FY2013.

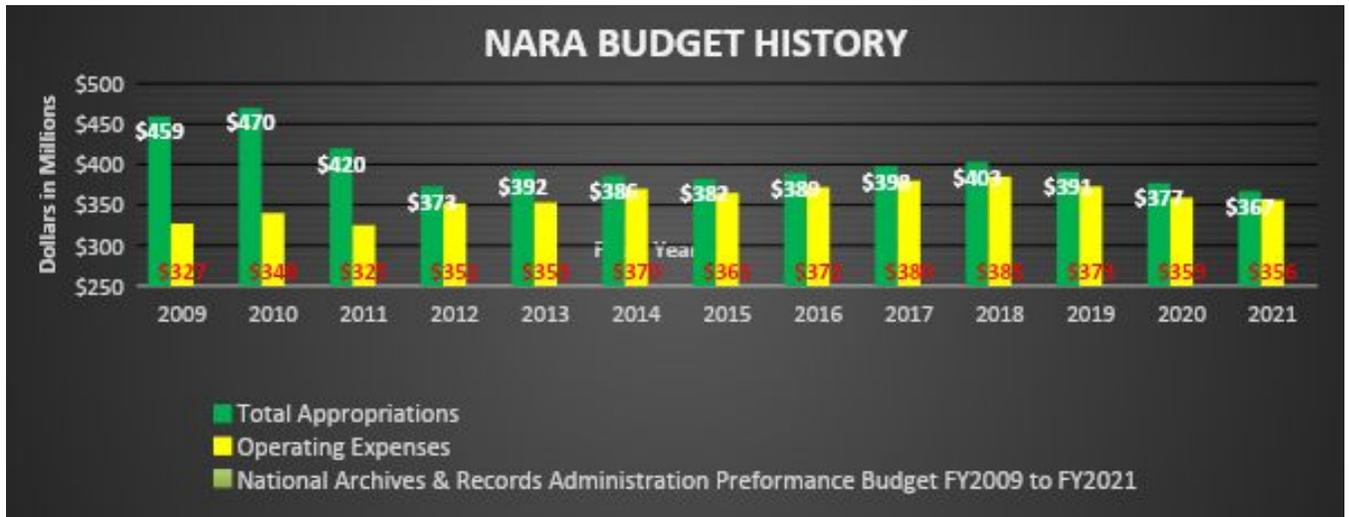
Report language: Due to recent budget constraints, the National Archives and Records Administration reduced research services staff and hours of operation, restricted the number of documents available daily for research, and deferred the replacement of aging equipment. Those cuts have imposed significant burdens on veterans in documenting their requests for critically needed benefits. Furthermore, the reductions impose a substantial hardship on all who use the NARA research rooms, especially educators, historians, lawyers, students, and other government agencies. Therefore, the Committee has provided an increase of \$30,000,000 to 30 NARA and Presidential Library public research rooms in 18 States and the District of Columbia to improve public access to critical records and reduce backlogs. The funding will be used to hire public-facing staff, augment NARA's hours of operation, and improve the Agency's creation and handling of digitized records. The Agency should prepare an annual report back to the Committee, due February 1, 2022, and report the Agencies' progress in reducing backlogs of Veterans' requests, Archived Records requests, FOIA requests, and increasing access to public research rooms for in-person research.

Fast Facts or Highlights:

- **There are Archive facilities in 17 states and another 16 Federal Records Centers. Four metropolitan areas (Chicago, St. Louis, Atlanta, and Washington, D.C.) are home to multiple archive facilities.**
- **ARA supports hundreds of professional researchers, veterans, veterans' associations, universities, authors, film companies and students in the USA and many other countries who need historical documents for VA and health benefits and their work.**
- **Since 2009, the Agency has seen a reduction of \$98 million dollars in appropriated funds, a 21% reduction.**

Justification: Since 1934, the National Archives research rooms have been open for public research. NARA research rooms welcome thousands of researchers annually, providing direct access to billions of America's historical documents, films, photos, maps, presidential papers, and artifacts. NARA's FY-2021 budget is \$367 million, down 20% from an FY2010 high of \$459 million (\$560 million in today's

dollars). The National Archives is now responsible for 38% more records and has sustained an increase of 24% more requests over the same period, despite static staffing. Veterans in need of records can expect to wait 18 months; the wait for a FOIA response will likely be 48 months or more. General reference inquiries have not been accepted (or counted) by NARA over the 11 months the research rooms have been shut down due to COVID, but we can assume significant pent-up demand. Additional funding offers critical assistance in recovering from the consequent cuts in services in response to the decline of appropriated funds.



Role of the Professional Researcher: Even before the budget cuts cited above, the National Archives recognized that performing extensive hands-on research for individuals was not an effective use of its scarce resources. For many years NARA has registered and maintained a public list of Professional Researchers for Hire on its official website with links to the researcher or company. The National Archives continues to promote the use of professional researchers for veterans, other individuals, and companies who require specialized or extensive research, as well as for those who cannot visit NARA's public research rooms. The Archives uses professional researchers as a de facto "force multiplier." Professional researchers can simultaneously service many clients' requests and require less assistance and scrutiny than novice researchers. As a class, professional researchers provide services to tens of thousands of veterans, together with their families and advocates, seeking disability and medical claims at the Veterans Administration. In addition to veterans, researchers service requests for records from numerous other types of requestors: academics, authors, journalists, attorneys, documentary filmmakers, and countless other members of the public. Without the professional researcher, the National Archives' current backlog of primary responses to requests would stretch much longer than the present backlog of eighteen (18) months for many records and 36 to 48 months for FOIA requests, and many detailed research requests would go unfulfilled.

How funds are allocated or used: This FY2022 Set-Aside Funding Opportunity provides fiscal resources available to 30 National Archives and Presidential Libraries public research rooms in 18 States and the District of Columbia. Moreover, it requires NARA to increase service levels approaching those NARA attained in FY2011 – FY2013 and advances the public's ability to access historical records outside regular workday hours. Funding may be used to add additional facility staff and security personnel to support the requirement. The funding also enables NARA to maintain pre-COVID-19 business hours at all other public research rooms and to provide additional staff to increase service at these facilities to the pre FY2013 levels of service at all research rooms, including the National Personnel Records Center, Archival Research Room, and the Federal Records Center Research room in St. Louis, MO.

Public Impacts: This funding increase will start a process of restoring public access to records at the National Archives and Records Administration to historic levels, before COVID and before the cuts of the 2010s. Once hiring is complete, researchers can expect to see additional staff in the public research rooms to handle pulls and inquiries. NARA's existing plans to encourage researchers to pre-plan their research visits and pre-order records to pull will mean that expanded research hours for evening and weekend hours will be more fruitful and more efficient. Additional staff (and the presence of freelance researchers for hire) will begin to reduce backlogged requests from veterans and FOIA requesters. They will meet the pent-up demand for access to

archival records from the public. Most importantly, the funding increase will begin to restore access to supporting documentation required for individual veterans to access critically needed benefits.

Supporting organizations:

- The National Organization of Veterans Advocates (NOVA)
- The Veterans Pavilion
- Veterans Legacy Foundation
- Witness to War Foundation
- The Association of Media Content Users and Providers
- Lincoln Archives Digital Project
- Operation Benjamin (Veterans Grave Marker Correction)
- Governor John W. Carlin (KS 1979-1987) Archivist of the US (1995-2005)
- Many university history departments and their chairs also support this request.

For more information: See ARA's advocacy web page
(<https://archivalresearchers.org/fund-nara-2021/>)

Contact information:

Geoff Gentilini, ARA President
president@archivalresearchers.org

Donald Mounts, ARA, Vice-President, Chair, Legislative Committee
VP@archivalresearchers.org
(352) 457-5018

See updates to this paper at: <https://archivalresearchers.org/fund-nara-2021/>

Date: February 13, 2021