

Mr. William Bosanko
Chief Operating Officer
National Archives and Records Administration
via e-mail: william.bosanko@nara.gov

August 2, 2021

Dear Mr. Bosanko,

The American Historical Association (AHA) is writing to express concerns regarding the National Archives and Records Administration's planned research room capacity across its facilities, including presidential libraries, as the agency begins to reopen following pandemic closures.

Potential high demand for archival research, combined with NARA's limited capacity, is likely to result in frustration for researchers. With historians eager to resume research for dissertations, books, articles, and other projects that have been put on hold due to the pandemic, many have begun to plan research trips, particularly to NARA I and II. The AHA has been fielding many questions about the reopening, and historians have raised questions and concerns about NARA's plans.

We recognize the strain the pandemic has placed on NARA staff and the difficulties of operating facilities around the country during a pandemic in which conditions remain fluid and the health and safety of staff are paramount. Reopening reading rooms amidst fluid health conditions at the same time that staff provide pandemic-initiated research assistance tasks and digitization initiatives both remotely and on-site create competing demands for the time and attention of NARA's staff.

In such a changing environment, exacerbated by varied conditions across the nation, we write to seek clarity as to NARA's plans and to offer our help in communicating with the community of history researchers. The AHA would be glad to assist our colleagues at NARA in managing the expectations of a likely surge of researchers in terms of advocacy, messaging, or in other ways.

In consultation with history researchers and other history organizations, including the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations and the State Department Historical Advisory Committee, we have developed the following list of questions and concerns for your consideration as reopening plans continue to develop:

1. What measures are in place or in development to accommodate a potential surge of researchers when current restrictions are lifted entirely?

2. We understand and expect that restrictions will be lifted in increments, depending on local public health conditions. Will any pandemic-related requirements become permanent? We hope these requirements are indeed temporary and that we will be notified if plans change in this regard.
3. Might NARA institute a process within the contours of federal regulations that maximizes equitable access for NARA's various constituencies? Some researchers have specific limitations as to time and material resources to complete their research. Travel distances also differ among individuals and categories of researchers.
4. We encourage NARA to revise upward the limits on the number of boxes that a researcher can access at one time, particularly those traveling long distances domestically or internationally with restricted time to spend. Does NARA plan to modify or otherwise revise its plans according to the most current data available from OCLC's REopening Archives, Libraries, and Museums Project (REALM)?
5. Does NARA maintain metrics on average usage of its research rooms? Can this information be shared with the public? Would it be helpful for scholarly organizations to survey their members regarding the timing of their planned research trips?
6. How have the closures of NARA facilities during the pandemic affected the digitization program overall?
7. Does NARA possess the infrastructure to accommodate digital facsimiles of records created by researchers, and the ability to collect such facsimiles? Might the historical community help in this effort as part of a community-driven initiative that would work in tandem with NARA's systematic ones?
8. Has NARA examined the possibilities of extending research room hours to include evenings and weekends, as pandemic conditions and federal personnel policies allow? At a minimum, can all the facilities be opened on Saturdays?
9. Is it possible to temporarily redeploy, perhaps with additional training, personnel from other NARA departments and/or to rehire retired NARA personnel to staff research rooms, according to magnitude of research interest?
10. Given the situation, we would expect an increase in research queries, given the uncertainties of the current moment. Does NARA have sufficient staff to respond promptly and thoroughly to researchers' queries? Can the process of responding to queries be made more efficient?
11. What can the scholarly community do to assist NARA as it reopens its research rooms to onsite research in terms of advocacy, messaging, or anything else?

12. Does the federal budget process provide any opportunities for NARA to request supplementary funds for the above purposes? Can scholarly organizations and the community provide support for soliciting additional resources?

The questions we have posed are by no means exhaustive. Our members and other researchers have additional concerns not covered here. It is in NARA's interest, and ours, for users to have easy and clear access to facts. Is it possible for NARA to establish some mechanism by which users can pose questions directly about reopening and receive informed responses?

The AHA encourages NARA to serve as many people as possible within the limitations of current conditions to protect the health and safety of staff, recognizing that there will inevitably be issues of equitable access based on proximity to the archives. We strongly encourage NARA to do everything possible to mitigate these disparities and to be as transparent as possible about current policies and regulations to manage researchers' expectations, especially those who must travel long distances to conduct research.

The AHA is eager to assist NARA in communicating with the community of history researchers and in any other way that would be useful. We also stand prepared to add new items and arguments to our recently increased level of advocacy for NARA in the federal budget process.