



## National Archives and Records Administration Agency Equity Action Plan

**Executive summary:** The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) is the nation’s record keeper, and our mission is to provide public access to federal government records in our custody and control. Two of our four strategic goals are “Make Access Happen” and “Connect with Customers.” By providing equitable access to government records, we will give all Americans the opportunity to claim their rights of citizenship, hold their government accountable, and understand their history so they can participate more effectively in their government. We will sustain equitable access by delivering increasing volumes of records to the American public online and using flexible tools and accessible resources that promote public participation. We will connect with our customers by building trust and engaging with underserved communities to find opportunities to expand public participation and promote equity through our mission.

Advancing equity requires continuous effort and a systems approach. NARA has taken into account two key components for equity changes to be more effective and sustainable.

**Embed equity into organizational values:** We added two new values and one new transformational outcome to our FY 2022–2026 Strategic Plan to integrate equity into our culture and decision-making.

### Values:

- Act with Integrity: Build trust by acting with honesty, fairness, and transparency.
- Advance Diversity: Model diversity, inclusion, equity, and accessibility throughout the agency and expand participation by staff and customers of all backgrounds in NARA programs and decision-making.

### Transformational Outcome:

- A Diverse and Inclusive NARA: We will embrace diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility so that our workforce and our customers of all backgrounds are valued and supported.

**Create a supportive structure for equity:** In the coming year, NARA will recruit a Chief Equity Officer to build the infrastructure for continuous equity assessments and community engagement with underserved communities and to promote equity in decision-making processes. The Chief Equity Officer will frame equity for NARA, adapt competencies to develop and drive forward the key equitable strategies of the agency, and identify equity training that will result in a deeper understanding of equity and public partnership and collaboration.

**Summary of early accomplishments:** NARA identified three program areas of focus for Executive Order 13985 equity assessments. In June 2021, the Agency Equity Team and Subgroups were formed to facilitate, inform, and advance agency progress on the equity assessments, action planning, and other agency actions related to redressing inequities within the

selected programs.

Before the issuing of E.O. 13985, the Archivist of the United States formed the Archivist's Task Force on Racism to identify and recommend solutions to racial inequality in both our customer-facing operations and internally. In July 2021 the Reparative Description and Digitization Working Group (RDDWG) was established based on a key recommendation from the Archivist's Task Force on Racism to repair outdated and harmful language used to describe archival records in NARA's public online Catalog.

Since the release of E.O. 13985, the Agency Equity Team and Equity Subgroups met regularly to exchange knowledge on equity-related activities, engaged in peer-to-peer dialogue about the group's stewardship of equity, and promoted the practical application of an equity lens in NARA's internal and external work. Guided by the initial framework for equity assessments, the Agency Equity Team and Equity Subgroups accomplished the following:

- Hosted a series of benchmarking sessions with peer agencies involved in equity-related initiatives;
- Hosted engagement sessions with NARA Employee Affinity Groups and external stakeholder organizations sessions to identify harmful language in our Catalog descriptions;
- Held "listening tour" sessions (hosted by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission [NHPRC]) involving diverse practitioners and organizations to assess needs and to better align NARA's grants programs to meet the needs of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color working as archivists, scholars, and in associated professions, as well as archival repositories located in underserved and under-resourced institutions;
- Developed tools and resources to assist in equity assessments (Initial Framework for Equity Assessments, External Stakeholder Equity Engagement Guide, External Engagement Equity Strategy, Equity Update Newsletter; Equity Engagement Lessons Learned Template) and created the Internal Collaboration Network (ICN) Equity page to share information on equity initiatives related to E.O. 13985;
- Conducted data call to gather information on external relationships for NARA-wide list of external stakeholders.

To sustain and continue building trusting relationships with our underserved and underrepresented communities and the external organizations that represent these communities, NARA is committed to developing an internal community of practice for all staff interested in community engagement to support equity. Until the Chief Equity Officer position is filled, we will continue with the following activities guided by the External Engagement Equity Strategy:

- Foster a space on the ICN to support community engagement with underserved communities.
- Organize virtual meetings to share good practices, experiences in community engagement, and lessons learned—and invite guest speakers.
- Collaborate with NARA's Learning and Development Division to develop training in the communication of equity concepts and engagement.
- Establish processes for keeping NARA points of contact informed about new outreach efforts.

## **Action Item # 1 — Reparative Description**

**Barrier to Equitable Outcomes:** Members of the public within underserved and underrepresented communities are sometimes required to use harmful language in order to search and find the records that they need in the National Archives Catalog that are pertinent to their research. NARA does not alter original records; however, we plan to perform reparative description to replace or supplement harmful language that is in the descriptive data of our online Catalog. The Catalog provides access to archival records that document the rights of citizens, records that provide a record of government decisions and actions, and some digital copies of the permanent records of the United States Government. Our current description program focuses on archival standards that do not address reparative description, which contributes to this barrier.

**Populations most impacted by barrier:** We have assessed an initial universe of communities and have identified and begun working with three underserved and underrepresented communities most impacted by this barrier: African American communities, Puerto Rican communities, and Native American communities.

**Evidence indicating that this barrier meaningfully impacts full and equal participation:** Members of the public from underserved communities will no longer be required to type in or submit harmful and inappropriate terms in order to perform research for pertinent records in the Catalog.

**Action and Intended Impact on Barrier:** NARA is taking the following actions to eliminate harmful terminology in the Catalog:

- Engage and collaborate with underserved and underrepresented communities to identify harmful terms.
- Develop and publish agency-wide Guiding Principles for Reparative Description.
- Develop and publish agency-wide standards for replacing harmful terms in the Catalog. The standards will be developed through engagement sessions with underserved and underrepresented communities, benchmarking, and identifying best practices.
- Develop Catalog reports identifying descriptions with harmful terms and the units across the agency that are responsible for updating those terms.
- Train description archivists across the agency on the new reparative description standards, and develop processes for description archivists across the agency to update harmful terminology in the Catalog.

**Reasons for prioritizing the actions:** NARA has received complaints from the staff and members of the public about the harmful terms in the Catalog. These actions are the most direct methods for our reparative description work, and they ensure that the work is handled at the agency level. By creating new standards to enhance descriptions and eliminate harmful terms, we ensure that the agency is working with one voice on this effort. We will promote equity by making it easier for members of underserved communities to search, discover, and use archival records to exercise their rights of citizenship, ensure government accountability, and illuminate the struggles and contribution of underserved communities in American history.

**Reducing or eliminating the barrier to equitable outcomes:** We will be able to identify the total number of times a harmful term is included in the descriptive metadata of our Catalog and will be able to track the reparative description efforts against the total number. In this way we can ensure that harmful terms are not required for anyone to find pertinent records in the Catalog.

### **Tracking Progress**

- **Near to mid-term (2–4 years out):** NARA will check in with communities annually to confirm terms to be updated and discuss our progress. NARA will quantify the number of terms, the number of instances of the harmful use of the term, and the reparative description used to update the term across the Catalog.
- **Long term (5–8 years out):** Members of the public will be able to find pertinent information in our Catalog without having to use offensive or harmful terminology.

**Accountability:** In accordance with our new FY 2022–2026 Strategic Plan goal 1.3, NARA will collaborate with traditionally underserved communities to correct at least 1,000 outdated descriptions in the Catalog and prioritize citizen engagement projects that increase access to records that are important to underserved communities.

NARA has launched a public-facing web page to provide transparency for our reparative description efforts. See “[Reparative Description at the National Archives](#).” The web page will be updated as milestones are completed and will be reviewed annually.

### **Action Item # 2 — Digitization**

**Barrier to Equitable Outcomes:** NARA is seeking to identify records that are pertinent to underserved and underrepresented communities and to determine if the records have been digitized and should be shared or, if not digitized, should be prioritized for digitization. In some cases, the agency has already scanned numerous pertinent documents and, the issue is that we have not communicated this well enough with underserved and underrepresented communities.

The agency has over 13 billion pages of textual records as well as maps, photographs, video, and more. Digitization is much more than simply scanning a paper record; it includes preservation, archival description, and reshelving of the record. Even though NARA has a variety of strategies to complete this work, and has successfully uploaded over 150 million digital copies into the Catalog, we have a long way to go to reach our goal of 500 million digitized pages by FY 2026. Resources for these efforts are our biggest barrier. Our prioritization thus far has taken into account the most requested records that are best suited for the digitization process. This effort will introduce a new prioritization of records pertinent to underserved and underrepresented communities.

**Populations most impacted by barrier:** Underserved and underrepresented communities are most impacted by this measure. We have identified an initial universe of communities and have started to engage with representatives and peer institutions within African American communities, Puerto Rican communities, and Native American communities.

**Evidence indicating that this barrier meaningfully impacts full and equal participation:**

Archival holdings that are available only in analog formats are largely accessible only in person, in public research rooms. Members of the public researching records prioritized for access by underserved and underrepresented communities will no longer be required to travel to a particular facility in order to access and review records but will be able to view digital copies of the records through NARA's online Catalog.

**Action and Intended Impact on Barrier:** We are taking the following actions to identify digitized records that underserved communities are interested in and to prioritize additional pertinent records for digitization:

- Identify what NARA considers to be pertinent records for a community.
- Engage and collaborate with underserved and underrepresented communities to further identify pertinent records and to confirm or update our priorities list.
- Determine the digitization status of those records. If already digitized, ensure the records are available through the Catalog and discuss access options with the community.
- If identified records are determined to require digitization, develop a project plan and prioritization for digitization. Continue communication with the community regarding best access approaches to the records.

**Reasons for prioritizing the actions:** Digitization democratizes access to the records. It allows people to research records they may not be able to otherwise access due to cost and time barriers for traveling to facilities. Researching in a federal facility may be intimidating for some people, including some from underserved and underrepresented communities. The buildings themselves can be imposing. By providing access to digital copies of our records, we can reach and provide access to diverse groups who may never come to our facilities.

We serve thousands of people each year in our facilities around the country, but we are able to serve millions of people each year through our presence online. Providing digital access to our records already reduces barriers for people to use our records and will do so for currently underserved and underrepresented communities as well.

**Tracking Progress**

**Near to mid-term (2–4 years out):** NARA will check in annually with communities to confirm pertinent records that have been digitized or planned to be digitized. NARA will quantify the number of records identified as pertinent to communities to determine the records that have been digitized and should be shared and to prioritize records that have not yet been digitized.

**Long term (5–8 years out):** Members of the public will be able to find pertinent digital copies of our records in our online Catalog without having to travel to NARA facilities in order to research those records.

**Accountability: In accordance** with our new Strategic Plan goal 1.3, by FY 2026, NARA will collaborate with traditionally underserved communities to correct outdated descriptions in the Catalog and prioritize citizen engagement projects that increase access to records that are important to underserved communities. NARA will publish agency priorities in a digitization plan and report progress annually.

### **Action Item # 3 — Professional Development Grant Programs**

**Barrier to Equitable Outcomes:** NARA is addressing its professional development programs within the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC). These programs have generally not engaged in an intentional effort to reach underserved and underrepresented populations of professionals working in the archival and historical editing fields. Such programs can be useful for the professional development needs of underrepresented populations and enhance recruitment of individuals from underserved communities who stand to benefit from our grant-funded professional development offerings. As a result, greater efforts are needed to ensure greater equity in NHPRC-funded professional development offerings and access to them.

Two NHPRC grant programs provide professional development training: the Institute for the Editing of Historical Documents (for producers of historical and scholarly editions) and the Archives Leadership Institute (aimed at mid-level archives professionals).

**Populations most impacted by barrier:** Archivists, scholars, editors, and other cultural heritage practitioners from underserved and underrepresented institutions have been most impacted by our approach to these programs to date. Since spring 2021, we have engaged with individuals and organizations with significant experience working with African American communities, Native American communities, and Hispanic American communities.

**Evidence indicating that this barrier meaningfully impacts full and equal participation:** In both program areas, beneficiaries have rarely come from underserved and underrepresented communities. Input from leading professionals of underserved and underrepresented communities, learned through our ongoing Institute for the Editing Historical Documents listening tour as well as recommendations stemming from a fall 2020 NEH-NHPRC meeting, illuminated a variety of ways that our professional development offerings have not been responsive to the needs of these communities.

**Action and Intended Impact on Barrier:** We are taking the following actions to better inform our professional development grants programs and to ensure more equitable access:

- Engage and listen to professionals of underserved and underrepresented communities about their professional development needs.
- Collaborate with underserved and underrepresented professionals and organizations to make necessary adjustments to and better promote our program offerings and to expand the community of professionals from underserved communities who will benefit from them.

**Reasons for prioritizing the actions:** Because our grants programs, to date, have not been adequately informed by direct outreach to underserved and underrepresented communities, we have found it necessary to prioritize listening to and learning from practitioners of color and organizational leaders as an essential first step in our equity efforts.

We expect these efforts to result in professional development offerings that are more relevant to practitioners from underserved and underrepresented communities. We also expect to see an increase in the number of participants from these communities, especially Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, benefiting from our programs. To date, our efforts related to the Institute for the

Editing of Historical Documents have already resulted in the expansion of core faculty (now more diverse), revision of curricula, and specific plans for community outreach in the coming year.

### **Tracking Progress**

**Near to mid-term (2-4 years out):** Diversity of faculty/organizers participating in professional development programming and related activities and diversity of participants benefitting from these programs and related activities. Through recurring annual surveys of faculty/organizers, program participants, and program alumni, ensure that the respective programs are meeting the relevant professional development needs of underserved and underrepresented practitioners.

**Long term (5–8 years out):** If successful, we would expect each of these program areas to be in greater alignment with and actively meet the needs of all practitioners, including practitioners of underserved and underrepresented institutions. We would expect to see full diversity of both faculty and participants developing, administering, and benefitting from these programs.

**Accountability:** This effort aligns with and expands the diversity, equity, and inclusion goals of the 2021 NHPRC Strategic Plan to NHPRC-funded professional development programs. We will continue our ongoing listening tour for the Institute for the Editing of Historical Documents and develop a similar listening tour for the Archives Leadership Institute. NHPRC will share these developments with NARA and the public through internal communication, blogs, and social media annually.

### **Action Item # 4 — Grants Program Portfolio**

**Barrier to Equitable Outcome(s):** NARA is also addressing equity in the NHPRC full grants program portfolio in recognition that, to date, the NHPRC has not prioritized outreach to underserved and underrepresented institutions and professionals working in the archival and historical editing fields. Through such outreach, the NHPRC will seek to ensure that its grants program is meeting the needs of underserved and underrepresented institutions, learn how best to promote its programs in cooperation with professional organizations representing underserved and underrepresented practitioners, recruit applications from underserved and underrepresented institutions, and learn how we can best work with applicants from underserved and underrepresented institutions to increase their likelihood of success.

The NHPRC currently administers a variety of grants programs aimed at increasing access to historical records at archival institutions in all U.S. states and territories and through the development of scholarly historical editions.

**Populations most impacted by barrier:** Underserved and underrepresented archival institutions whose collections center the voices of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, as well as archivists, scholars, editors, and other cultural heritage practitioners from underserved communities, have been most impacted by our approach to these programs to date.

**Evidence indicating that this barrier meaningfully impacts full and equal participation:** During 2020–2021, NHPRC analyzed funding of grant awards for all programs since 1965. The results showed considerable variation in the geographic impact of our grant programs, with 18

states identified as underserved. Within all states and territories, however, the Commission has been especially challenged in its ability to attract and fund applications from underserved and underrepresented institutions, such as tribal archives, archival repositories located at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic- and Minority-Serving Institutions, and many smaller institutions.

**Actions and Intended Impact on Barriers:** We are taking the following actions to better inform our grants program portfolio and to ensure more equitable outcomes in our grant funding:

- Develop an NHPRC-wide listening tour in order to engage and listen to archivists, practitioners, and leadership of organizations representing practitioners of underserved and underrepresented communities, tribal archives, and archival repositories located at underserved and underrepresented institutions about their respective needs.
- Collaborate with underserved and underrepresented professionals and organizations to make necessary adjustments to and better promote our program offerings and to expand the community of professionals from underserved communities who will benefit from them.
- Develop and make available a range of information and resources aimed at prospective applicants, including workshops, webinars, and staff consultations.
- Seek out and recruit a more diverse and inclusive body of Commission members.

**Reasons for prioritizing the actions:** While our grant programs have, for nearly six decades, supported numerous projects involving historical records of underserved and underrepresented populations, we nonetheless recognize that we must expand our efforts to ensure more equitable funding for collections of work that centers the voices of African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, and other underrepresented U.S. populations. To date, our grant programs have not been adequately informed by intentional and concerted outreach to underserved and underrepresented communities. Nor have we, to date, cultivated the kinds of ongoing relationships with the key organizations that could facilitate our work. In order to meet the diversity, equity, and inclusion goals of our new Strategic Plan, we believe it necessary to prioritize listening to and learning from practitioners of color and organizational leaders as an essential first step in our equity outreach strategy, to begin the process of building trust and cultivating the necessary organizational relationships.

We expect these efforts to result in grants program offerings that are more relevant and responsive to underserved and underrepresented archival institutions and to the practitioners of color who serve these institutions and their constituent communities. We also expect to see an increase in the number of applications, including successful applications, from archival and other institutions serving underserved and underrepresented communities. Finally, we would expect to see an increase in the number of funded projects involving historical records that center the voices of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

### **Tracking Progress**

**Near to mid-term (2–4 years out):** We will develop means to track the following:

- Number and proportion of pre-application consultations with underserved and underrepresented institutions, by grant year.
- Number and proportion of applications received from underserved and underrepresented institutions, by grant year.



- Number and proportion of funded applications from underserved and underrepresented institutions, by grant year.
- Number and proportion of funded projects involving collections work that centers the voices of African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, and other underrepresented U.S. populations, by grant year.
- Number and proportion of diverse participants benefitting from our grant programs and related activities, by grant year.

**Long term (5–8 years out):** All of our program areas are in greater alignment with and actively meet our Strategic Plan’s diversity, equity, and inclusion goals and more fully meet the needs of all practitioners, including practitioners of color at underserved and underrepresented institutions.

**Accountability:** This effort aligns with and expands the diversity, equity, and inclusion goals of the 2021 NHPRC Strategic Plan. We will continue to implement the NHPRC-wide listening tour plan developed in 2022. NHPRC will share these developments and outcomes with NARA and the public through blogs and social media annually.