



**Records
Preservation
& Access Coalition**

2024 Policy Priorities

Records Preservation and Access Coalition
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Records Preservation & Access Coalition

The Records Preservation and Access Coalition (RPAC) is a nationwide coalition that advises the genealogical and historical communities and other interested parties on ensuring proper access to vital records and on policy related to strong records preservation practices.

Statistics indicate that **more than 1,000 genealogists live in every congressional district.** Genealogists are researchers, writers, forensics specialists, geneticists, educators, and hobbyists. You probably have a genealogist or family historian in your family.

Genealogists are integral to our financial markets and justice system. Every day, 2,200 professional, forensic, and board-certified genealogists perform important legal and forensic work that intersects with significant federal and state initiatives, including:

1. working with law enforcement to identify recent and cold case suspects,
2. aiding DoD in identifying military remains and finding next of kin for repatriation
3. proving Native American tribal membership,
4. tracking relatives with possible inheritable diseases,
5. conducting research for probate cases,
6. helping adoptees find birth parents,
7. locating owners or heirs in land disputes, and
8. locating owners of oil and gas leases.

The Records Preservation and Access Coalition (RPAC) represents more than 2,500 local, state, regional, national, and international organizations across the United States. Our work is sponsored by the National Genealogical Society and the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies with the support of the American Society of Genealogists, the Association of Professional Genealogists, the Board for Certification of Genealogists, the International Commission for the Accreditation of Professional Genealogists, and major genealogy companies. These organizations represent **more than 500,000 members and millions of people researching family history.**



SUPPORT FOR THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

Action Needed

We urge Congress to safeguard and preserve the records of the federal government and ensure continuing access to these documents by genealogists, historians, and other researchers. **Congress must fund the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) at the level of the President's FY2025 request of \$481.1 million.** Funding must include full support for the National Archives and Federal Records Center facilities, the National Personnel Records Center, and National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) grants. The National Archives is funded under the Financial Services and General Government Appropriations bill.

Background

Genealogists are the largest user group of the National Archives and have been for decades. Many genealogy society research groups and individual researchers from across the United States visit the National Archives and its facilities annually. Thousands of professional genealogists as well as large companies like Ancestry and FamilySearch rely on the National Archives for information. Professional genealogists use the National Archives to assist clients in identifying records and preparing reports. Genealogy companies support NARA by assisting with digitization activities and making records publicly available. And your constituents use the National Archives to research their ancestors, leaving a legacy for their family and adding to the American historical record.

Increased funding for the National Archives is necessary to manage, preserve, and make accessible the federal government's records. NARA's budget has either decreased or been stagnant in recent years even as its responsibilities have grown. at roughly \$400 million per year and under 3000 total staff across over 40 facilities around the country. NARA is no longer able to support its core mission. The agency is at risk of mission failure due to a decades-long gap between ever-increasing holdings and stagnant resources.

SUPPORT FOR THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION, CONT'D

The result is frustrated researchers, who now wait years for NARA to start work on requests for records that aren't open yet. **NARA needs to be right-sized by increasing appropriations to a level appropriate for the ever-increasing volume of its archival holdings**, allowing NARA to:

- hire more archivists,
- acquire better technology to work with electronic records, and
- dramatically expand digitization.

Our community supplements NARA resources and has for years. Companies and non-profit entities work with NARA microfilming and digitizing federal records, including the Census and the War of 1812 Pension Files. **We are funding a new \$2 million project** to digitize Veteran Bounty Land Warrant Application Files at NARA. In addition to financial support, genealogists donate millions of volunteer hours indexing microfilmed and digitized records to make them more accessible. Genealogists from every U.S. county use the military, land, census, tax, and other records from the National Archives. We support NARA wholeheartedly.

We ask Congress to fund NARA at the President's request to make public records accessible to the public.



CONGRESS MUST PROVIDE OVERSIGHT OF THE USCIS GENEALOGY PROGRAM AND EXPEDITE TRANSFER OF USCIS RECORDS TO NARA

Action Needed

We urge Congress to **increase oversight of the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Genealogy Program**. Additionally, Congress should **expedite USCIS file transfers to the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)** to ensure those records are not irreversibly destroyed.

Background

USCIS is the sole source of millions of unique historical records only available to the public for a fee paid to the USCIS Genealogy Program. The Genealogy Program has significant customer service issues including requests that take up to three years to fulfill. **USCIS has no plan to improve service or close the years-long backlog.**

USCIS remains years behind in transferring millions of its historical records, flouting agreements signed with NARA more than a decade ago. **USCIS must coordinate with NARA to transfer historical records and associated finding aids to NARA's custody** where they belong. Additionally, several historical record series that USCIS maintains— notably the Certificate Files (C-Files)—are scheduled for destruction in 2056. Congress must **ensure these invaluable historical records receive priority for permanent retention**. USCIS knows that NARA is the appropriate repository for records scheduled for permanent retention. For NARA to properly accession, process, and service these records (paper and electronic), it must receive sufficient funding. Citizens, scholars, small business owners, and others require unfettered access to the complete records of twentieth-century immigration.

We ask Congress to increase oversight of USCIS Genealogy Program and prioritize USCIS records transfers to NARA.



CONGRESS MUST MAKE THE SOCIAL SECURITY DEATH MASTER FILE PUBLIC

Action Needed

We urge Congress to **require the Social Security Administration to provide the public with an accurate, complete, and open Death Master File**, updated monthly and including full name (first name, middle name, surname), dates of birth and death, zip code of application, and zip code of last residence from all fifty-seven vital records reporting jurisdictions. Public availability of the Death Master File prevents fraud and identity theft.

Background

In 1980, the Death Master File (DMF) was first made available to the public and later sold by data aggregators as the Social Security Death Index (SSDI). It was based on death index information from the fifty states, two cities, and five territories, providing independent vital statistics jurisdictions. **The nationwide death index found uses that expanded rapidly.** Insurance companies were able to identify deceased policyholders. Medical researchers could track the outcomes of life-saving surgery and of participants in long-standing research projects. Professional genealogists were able to provide information for clients. The IRS began to use the DMF to reduce the number of fraudulent tax returns in 2011. The Treasury Inspector General for Tax Audits verified that the number of fraudulent returns receiving payments declined over the next three years.

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Since that time, however, **the utility of the DMF has significantly declined.** In November 2011, the Social Security Administration reduced the value of the data by no longer including information it received from the states. The DMF shrunk by millions of records, and its thoroughness and accuracy declined. Further, **Section 203 of the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2013 prevents researchers, including those in the medical field, from accessing the DMF due to inordinately complex and expensive certification procedures.**

CONGRESS MUST MAKE THE SOCIAL SECURITY DEATH MASTER FILE PUBLIC, CONT'D

The Budget Act limits data availability until three years after an individual's death to protect against fraud and identity theft. The unintended consequence, however, is since 2013 death data has not been available at all, contrary to the law. At the time of its passage, Senator Orrin Hatch warned his colleagues of the unintended consequences of Section 203.

Section 203 harms multiple constituencies considerably by limiting access to timely data for medical, historical, and economic researchers. The certification process of Section 203 is inordinately complex and expensive for small businesses, including genealogists who use death data to complete client research projects, help solve cold cases, and assist in military repatriations.

Even worse, the Social Security Administration (SSA) has not honored the three-year availability window. SSA has not made new information available as required by law, creating even greater exposure to fraud for the public and further limiting essential use of the data.

We ask Congress to make the Social Security Death Master File open to the public and sunset Section 203 of the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2013.

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Coalition Sponsors

International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies
National Genealogical Society

Coalition Steering Committee

American Society of Genealogists
Association of Professional Genealogists
Board for Certification of Genealogists
Int'l Commission for the Accreditation of Professional Genealogists
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