

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY**



**Bill 22-842, the “Commission on Archives and Records Management
Act of 2018”**

Testimony of
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Before the
Committee on Government Operations
Council of the District of Columbia
The Honorable Brandon Todd, Chairperson

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Good morning, Chairman Todd and members of the Committee. I thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding Bill 22-842, the “Commission on Archives and Records Management Act of 2018.” My name is Lauren C. Vaughan, and I am the Secretary of the District of Columbia. With me today is Rebecca Katz, Public Records Administrator, who oversees the Office of Public Records.

When Mayor Bowser first took office, we took over an Office of Public Records that seemed to have received little recent investment and had a vague goal of moving to a new, larger building. Every summer, the air conditioning continued to fail, leaving both employees and the most valuable historical records of the District in harsh, dangerous conditions. At the time, OPR had only four employees who were struggling to keep up with their workload.

Today, we have a clear, quantified idea of the space and program OPR needs to effectively carry out its mission to schedule, collect, store, and manage records of the District government through the services of the District of Columbia Archives, Records Center, and the Library of Governmental Information. OPR now has six employees, including two archivists with graduate degrees in library and information science, and our Public Records Administrator is a Certified Records Manager. We also use interns and volunteers in various capacities to assist with the workload. While the flow of work remains consistent, we have accomplished a significant number of long-overdue tasks:

1. We have revised retention schedules for 20 agencies, which will ensure those agencies have a current roadmap for document retention. We will complete the remaining District government agencies over the next three years.
2. We have worked with the Federal Records Center to dispose of thousands of cubic feet of records that were overdue for destruction, saving the District tens of thousands of dollars per year for storage.
3. We have begun tracking researchers and research requests in an archives information system. Where statistics were previously generated manually, they are now available at the touch of a button.
4. Our Public Records Administrator has participated in the planning of the Annual Conference on DC History that is held every November by a collaboration of local repositories.
5. OPR’s HVAC system has been replaced.

6. OPR's shelving system has been partially upgraded. The shelving system was installed in the late 1980s, and the parts for it have not been manufactured in many years. OPR is the last user of this model of shelving system in the mid-Atlantic region, if not in the entire country. The partial upgrade to the system was necessary to ensure continued ability to access our holdings.

7. With the assistance of interns and volunteers, OPR has begun two large-scale processing projects. The first is the building permit project that you have heard about at previous hearings. The second project involves reviewing and cataloguing DC Jail and Police Court records from the 1870s through 1890s, which were rescued by OPR in the mid-2000s. A large portion of these records are from Frederick Douglass's time as United States Marshal and bear his original signature.

8. With the assistance of a volunteer, OPR has begun the very necessary project of reviewing every box on every shelf, to verify the inventory. This is essential prior to moving, but has immediate benefits, including confirmation of what is in OPR's collection and that everything is where it is supposed to be. Additionally, we are able assess the condition of the storage boxes and replace them as necessary with boxes made from archival-quality, acid-free folders and boxes (a process OPR had already begun in preparation our move).

9. I am extremely pleased that we have identified a location for the new Office of Public Records on the campus of the University of the District of Columbia, and we expect to finalize terms and proceed to construction during 2019.

There is much more to be done, of course, but I believe OPR is on the right path to meeting its goals.

The Bowser Administration is committed to ensuring that our public records are safe and securely preserved and made available to the public. Our Public Records Administrator has made great strides to improve the operations of the OPR, and we are concerned that the Commission proposed in Bill 22-842 would duplicate the authority of the Public Records Administrator and her staff. While we would welcome the opportunity to further engage interested stakeholders and residents regarding OPR and its operations, the responsibility to develop a strategic plan is precisely the role of the Public Records Administrator. The *Public Records Management Act* places records management and archives policy squarely in the hands of the Public Records

Administrator.

Second, the bill suggests that OPR does not have a strategic vision or action plan, when actually, we have worked hard to develop a plan for the Office. Central to OPR's five-year strategic vision is the development and construction of a new building that is welcoming to researchers and provides meaningful access to the history of the District of Columbia. The full strategic vision can be divided into four components:

1. A new building. This component of the vision addresses the facility needs of OPR, including sufficient storage, effective climate control, adequate space for processing archival collections, and additional space for staff.

2. An archive that is welcoming to researchers. This component of the vision includes program elements of the new building, such as exhibits, meeting and education space, proximity to public transit, and a research room. It also includes operational elements that we hope to implement independent of the new building, such as continued improvements in response time to researchers and outreach to communities within the District.

3. Meaningful access. This component of the vision reflects the idea that the purpose of retaining records is to make them available for use. OPR is working to make records more accessible by making our collections available online, digitizing and indexing our most requested record series, creating robust finding aids for collections, writing research guides for topics of interest, and working proactively with agencies to enhance their records management programs and fully implement their record retention schedules.

4. History of the District of Columbia. This component of the vision is a very simple statement of OPR's role and mission. OPR is the protector of the history of the government of the District of Columbia.

I will now turn to the action plan for each of OPR's operational branches as guided by the strategic vision I just outlined. It is critical to note that these action plans are inspired by three decades of previous studies and reports commissioned by the Office of Public Records that have never been fully implemented.

The first operational branch of OPR is records management. Over the next two years, the records management projects will include the development of tools to facilitate the transfer of

records pursuant to retention schedules, a complete review and revitalization of our records management trainings, completing the effort to ensure that every agency has a retention schedule, and regular disposal of records that have met or exceeded their retention period. This, of course, is in addition to the ongoing work that OPR does daily.

The second operational branch of OPR is the DC Archives. With the recent hire of an additional credentialed archivist, OPR intends to make progress on processing the backlog that has been accumulating since the late 1990s. Additional material will be added to the OPR website to enhance access to the District's archival collections.

The third operational branch of OPR is the Library of Governmental Information (LGI). The LGI, as we call it, has never had a dedicated librarian in the 33 years of its existence. Over those 33 years, a variety of inventory tracking tools have been used. We intend to implement an online catalog that will serve as an inventory management tool, a portal for researchers to search the LGI collection, and a digital repository for those government reports that are only published electronically.

The final operational branch is the administrative function. This is where all of the projects and tasks that affect more than one branch are categorized and is where all of the tasks that are part of planning for a new facility are identified. One of the key actions that will be undertaken is the identification of the operational costs that will be necessary to move to a new building, such as the costs of movers, project hours, and temporary staff.

OPR's staff will be busier than ever in the coming years to implement this action plan. And their day-to-day efforts are best focused on working toward the vision of a welcoming OPR that provides meaningful access to the history of the District.

However, engaging with the public and soliciting their feedback is a critical component of ensuring that OPR is effectively preserving the District's history in a manner that is accessible for residents and researchers. To that end, we believe that a method of formalized engagement is appropriate and suggest that, rather than creating a new commission, that we instead revive the State Historic Records Advisory Board (SHRAB). This is a board that exists in many states as an

advocate for archives statewide and was initially created to be able to receive federal funding from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC). We believe that this advisory function is quite appropriate and will be useful to OPR as we move forward to implement our strategic vision. The SHRAB would provide a forum for interested stakeholders to engage regularly while maintaining the integrity of our executive functions.

In addition to formalizing our means of engaging and obtaining feedback from stakeholders, reinvigorating the SHRAB would ensure that efforts are not unintentionally duplicated. Beyond that, a reinvigorated SHRAB would be eligible for federal grants offered through the NHPRC. We would welcome the opportunity to partner with you in our efforts to reactivate this board.

We are incredibly excited about the work that lies ahead, including the opportunity to develop a new Archives building. We look forward to finding ways to keep the community engaged as we move ahead, and we invite your partnership in this effort. This concludes my testimony. I am more than happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.