U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
Transcript of National Archives History Office Oral History Interview
Subject: Laurence Brewer
Interviewer: Stephanie Reynolds
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Stephanie Reynolds: Today is Friday, December 20th, 2024, and I'm speaking with Laurence Brewer, who's NARA's [National Archives and Records Administration] former Chief Records Officer for the U.S. Government. My name is Stephanie Reynolds, and I'm based out of our National Archives facility in Denver, Colorado. I'm assisting the agency historian, Jessie Kratz, with this interview, and we are documenting the history of the agency by preserving firsthand accounts of events. Laurence, thank you for participating in the National Archives Oral History Project. To get us started, can you please state your full name and spell it for me, please?

Laurence Brewer: Yeah. Thank you, Stephanie. I appreciate the opportunity to have this interview. My name is Laurence Neil Brewer. L–A–U–R–E–N–C–E N–E–I–L B–R–E–W–E–R.

Stephanie: Okay. Thank you. Can you please just tell me a little bit about where you're from and maybe your educational background?

Laurence: Yeah. So I grew up in southern Virginia—Norfolk, Virginia, which is, you know, a lot of people may not know Norfolk unless you are in the military, but that's where Virginia Beach is. I went to college nearby at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg. My degree was in government/political science. And then from there, I went to the University of Georgia—Go Dawgs—and got another degree, a master's in political science. So my hope at the time was, you know, to work in DC and maybe work at, like, a think tank or on the Hill and kind of do that kind of work. My specialization—a lot of the classes were, like, American government. And so that brought me to DC from there. And it was at a very difficult time in the early 90s when there were no jobs. And it was, you know, the government was under hiring freezes. So I took whatever job I could get. And that led me to a contractor, Labat-Anderson, who was doing a lot of government contracting at the time. And I took a job with them and ended up at the Environmental Protection Agency working in the public docket there.

And as a contractor, that was really my first introduction to government. I was young, ignorant, didn't really know too much. But, you know, I got very familiar with regulations and laws and, you know, interactions with the public. And then from there I accepted a job still with the same company but with the contract for EPA that did records management for the agency. My supervisor at the time was actually a former NARA employee and colleague, Laura McHale, who was on our General Records Schedules Team. Now she's at the SEC [Securities and Exchange Commission]. And she, you know, got me interested in doing the CRM, the Certified Records Manager Program, and learning more about records management. And I was there for a couple of years. And from there things opened up in the government, and the National Archives had a program called Targeted Assistance, where they were bringing in a lot of external people to focus on records management projects, mostly at, like, a GS-13 level. So I applied for that and got accepted, and I joined the National Archives in September of 1999.

Stephanie: Wow. Okay. So, and what were you doing with Targeted Assistance?

Laurence: So, I was assigned to an appraisal team. Back then it was Work Group 3, which was the group that dealt with a lot of civilian agencies. So interestingly enough, I had my former agency I was contracted to, EPA, and a lot of [Department of] Commerce bureaus. I worked with NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration], NTIS [National Technical Information Service], NIST [National Institute of Standards and Technology], and my Targeted Assistance project was with the Federal Reserve Board. So I was working with the Board and Jeanne Young, who was the records officer there at the time—was also a former employee—on doing a comprehensive schedule for all of the functions of the Board. So it was a very complex project. But very, very interesting learning all about, you know, the Federal Reserve and the Federal Reserve System, and a lot of really important permanent records that they generate.

Stephanie: So kind of doing that appraisal work. Do you have thoughts on how that process has changed over time? You've been with NARA for, I think, 24 years. How did that change from, you know, when you first came into the agency until today?

Laurence: So, yeah. I mean, it's changed some. I mean, not a lot. I mean, some of the things that have changed, you know, were how appraisals were documented. So, back then, we wrote really long reports, sort of organized and framed but however the appraiser, you know, wanted to frame it. It was basically a memo. And there are certain things that were in the SOPs [Standard Operating Procedures] that you needed to cover and recommendations that you would make, and you would document, you know, the visits that you had off-site. Now, in the way, you know, when I left NARA, we were doing it, it was more of a structured appraisal template with much, much less narrative, where it was sort of a companion piece to the schedule. Whereas, when I first came on board, it was, you know, you had a schedule. But then you really put a lot of information, including administrative histories of the agencies, that would also go into the appraisal report. So, you know, there were many, many pages in most cases. And we, similar to what we would do now, we'd spend more time focusing on the permanent records. But apart from that, I mean, really, a lot of things haven't changed. I mean, the workload for appraisers is still a lot. We still review schedules and do things, you know, in a similar way that we did back in '99. I think some of the things that have changed is, like, we did a lot more appraisal on-site visits, especially for permanent records, then than we do now.

And I think a lot of that, a lot changed, you know, because of the pandemic, when we were forced to do things virtually. And I think a lot of those practices in conducting appraisals virtually have just continued. Plus, back then, almost everything was paper. Now everything's electronic. So the need to go on-site is not as pressing. You know, people can do shares, you can do demos and screen shares to see the records and learn more about the systems than you could back in the day where you were really, like, sitting and going through file rooms or going out to WNRC

[Washington National Records Center], which we did a lot, to look through records that agencies were storing there off-site. So, I mean, I think that's probably something that has changed a lot. I mean, I think appraisal can be more efficient now because of the electronic records that we're creating. But in terms of the process, a lot of that has not changed. But, some of the ways in which we wrote appraisals up and communicated with stakeholders, you know, have been a little bit more streamlined in the way that we're doing them now.

Stephanie: Okay. Then what did you—or do you remember your supervisor, who that was?

Laurence: I do. So, the appraisal team leads were not supervisors. So, there were sort of three branch chiefs who oversaw—each oversaw two appraisal teams. So my formal supervisor was Larry Baume. It's B–A–U–M–E. Larry passed away a few years ago. But he was my supervisor for, I think, the four years that I was an appraiser when I joined. My team lead was Yvonne Wilson, who I think is over at . . . I forget where she's at now. I think she was at FTC [Federal Trade Commission]. She may still be at FTC.

Stephanie: Yeah, I think so.

Laurence: So, yeah, she wasn't my supervisor. She was my team lead, and she was the one, you know, sort of like mentoring me when I first came on board at the National Archives. But Larry Baume, along with the other two supervisors, Jerry Nashorn and Wilda Logan, all reported to Marie Allen at the time, who was the division director.

Stephanie: Okay. I had forgotten that. So I wonder why they did it that way with the supervisors and team leads and things like that. A little convoluted, it seems.

Laurence: Yeah. And it was one of the reasons why, you know, in the years later, that we changed it and made the appraisal team supervisors, not leads anymore, but supervisors who could actually, you know, were empowered to kind of do the things that they were already doing but unofficially. So, it was just awkward, like, Yvonne would have to go to Larry for anything of a personnel nature related to the team and couldn't handle things directly.

Stephanie: Yeah. Okay. Yeah. It makes sense why they would change that. So then what did you do after working on that Targeted Assistance, doing the appraisal?

Laurence: Yeah. So after, I mean, after I completed the project, I did a few more things in appraisal, and there were a number of special projects that we were working on at the time. And then after that, I applied for a position on a new team that they were standing up. This is when electronic records were becoming more prominent. And it was called the ERM [Electronic Records Management] Policy Team. So this was a team that was led by Mark Giguere, and he got approval to hire six people in the 2210 series, which were IT specialists at a GS-14 level. So I was a [GS-]13 appraiser. I applied for it, and I got one of the positions along with other NARA employees, like Bruce Ambacher.

Stephanie: Okay.

Laurence: And then there were some external people that were hired. Let's see. I don't know if I can even remember all of the names. But there were other NARA people who eventually got hired to the team. Arian Ravanbakhsh worked on the team. Denise Pullen worked on the team. I'd have to go back and look at the names . . .

Stephanie: That's okay.

Laurence: Yeah. So, one of them was Susan . . . I can't remember her last name. She was the records officer before Debbie.

Stephanie: Oh, yeah.

Laurence: I can't remember her last name now. I'm blanking on that.

Stephanie: Yeah. Me too.

Laurence: Well, we can fill it in later. I'm sure you can look it up.

Stephanie: Yes, we can. We can add it later. [Susan Sullivan was NARA's records officer through March 2014. Tasha Thien served as her replacement June 16, 2014–June 30, 2016. Debbie Armentrout took over on October 17, 2016.]

Laurence: So Susan, she's, I don't know, I think she's retired now. But she joined the team. And so, you know, we were working on policy, and that was when we were developing the transfer format guidance. So that was my next job was developing, like, transfer guidance for various types of electronic records, including scanned images and digital photographs. So it was really the first ever to sort of, like, develop standards and guidance and metadata elements specifically for electronic formats coming into the Archives.

Stephanie: So how would you come up with that? Are you doing your own research and you're testing things out? Are you getting agency input? How do you come up with that?

Laurence: Both. But we did a lot of internal research, looked at industry standards, looked at what agencies were doing. We held a lot of focus groups with agencies to get their feedback and input on what they were doing with specific formats. For example, I mean, even then, for scanned images and photographs, there were a lot of, like, ISO [International Organization for Standardization] standards and, you know, government guidelines that we were able to leverage. And we developed drafts for comment, got them reviewed within stakeholders within NARA and then outside with agencies. And then they were all issued as NARA Bulletins. So they became formal requirements for agencies.

Stephanie: With these bulletins and when you're coming up with the standards and the metadata, all that stuff, is there—how should I say that? Sometimes there seems to be a tension between being, like, too prescriptive or being, you know, overly broad. Is there a sweet spot there?

Laurence: Yeah. And I think, you know, at the time, and I think in a lot of our guidance we do it now, we try to include the musts and the shoulds. So we had a lot that was in there that were recommendations, because we couldn't tie it to, like, an ISO standard or another requirement either in our regs or elsewhere. So a lot of it was guidance based on best practice, but there were also a lot of requirements in there, which is why it was issued as a bulletin. So, you know, it was more than just like an FAQ. It was, like, if you're sending records to us in these formats, here are the very specific things you must do. And then as you are creating these records, here are some things that you should keep in mind as a best practice.

Stephanie: Okay. How long were you on that team? Do you remember?

Laurence: Yeah. I think I joined somewhere around 2002. And it was like three years, until 2005, that I had my next position.

Stephanie: Okay. All right. And then let's see here. And then you became the director of the Life Cycle Management Division, NWML?

Laurence: Yes. And that was the big change, because that was the first time I was in management as a supervisor. So all my previous positions, even on the ERM Team, they were just staff positions. So yeah, the Life Cycle Management Division was the name. And that was where I started at the National Archives. So I became the director, which, you know, was Marie Allen's position. She had since left and gone to the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation]. And at that time, it was sort of like dominoes. So Paul Wester was the director of the Life Cycle Management Division, and then he got promoted to director of Modern Records Programs, which was NWM. And then the Life Cycle Management Division was NWML underneath Paul's new position as director of Modern Records Programs. So he hired me to that position. And then that was probably about the time that we changed the whole workgroup lead structure into, you know, teams where they were formal supervisors. But that was, I mean, that was a good time for me. And, you know, I loved all of my jobs at NARA, but that one was, I think, I learned the most and enjoyed doing a lot of things to really improve the appraisal function for NARA.

So my former supervisor remained a supervisor underneath me, which was awkward. Larry Baume was still there, along with Wilda Logan and Jerry Nashorn. But then we had others like Maggie Hawkins who, you know, were really important in terms of, like, handling high profile projects and keeping the work going and being the key people who on the staff were getting a lot of the work done. But I learned a lot from Jerry and Wilda and Larry and really enjoyed, you know, being with everyone that I used to work with when I first came into appraisal.

And it was different than the way things are now. I mean, back then, in the Life Cycle Management Division, there weren't specific focused, targeted teams like there were when I left. Like, we had training, we had evaluations, we had inspections, we had appraisal, and they were all being done by the same people. So the problem was you had this tension, you know. “I'm an appraiser now. I got to focus on my appraisal workload. But I also got to carve out time to do training for agencies and be a part of an agency inspection.” So it was only possible, because we had a lot bigger staff then. So now we have fewer people doing appraisal, but that's all they're doing. They're just doing appraisal. Back then, we had a lot of people, but they were doing appraisal and training and inspections and everything else, so it was more of a challenge. I think the lack of focus was one of the reasons why, you know, we changed that paradigm to something that was more focused and let people concentrate on, like, one business function. But I think for a lot of staff, they really enjoyed that time because they liked the variety in the work so they got to do a lot of different things. I know when I was in appraisal, I enjoyed doing that. I did a lot of training when I was an appraiser, was part of a couple of inspections, and I was involved in policy because back then the appraisal teams in NWML were always, like, the key subject matter experts working with the ERM Policy Team to develop guidance.

Stephanie: Okay. So it sounds like there's a bit of pros and cons where everyone was doing everything before, and there wasn't a lot of focus. But at the same time, it did give them some variety in their job that, maybe now with these specific teams, they don't have as much.

Laurence: Right, exactly.

Stephanie: Okay.

Laurence: Yeah. I mean, you sort of have to make a choice. And, you know, part of that was driven by reduced numbers of staff overall. I mean, we sort of, you know, had to move to that because we had fewer people, and we needed people to focus on specific things if we were going to get anything done, because we couldn't ask the same staff to do everything with fewer things.

Stephanie: Can you give me, like, rough numbers of maybe how many people we had working in records management versus what there is today.

Laurence: Yeah. I mean, I think NWML, at that time, there were I think six teams and probably about six to eight people in each team. And actually, there might even have been more. It's hard for me to remember thinking about my own team. I don't think we had more than six to eight people on our workgroup team. But, you know, now we only have like four appraisal teams. And, you know, there may be four to five people on each team, perhaps less for some of them, you know, depending upon what the vacancies are. So, I mean, it was more, but it wasn't significantly more. But yeah, I mean, I can't remember the precise numbers.

Stephanie: Yeah.

Laurence: And even after we changed from that model, I mean, you know, at one point we probably had about 100 people after we transitioned to the new model. But because of sequestration and budget cuts, that number went down probably by about 20% or more to where it is now.

Stephanie: Okay. In 2009, you had a key role in overhauling NARA's records management regulations. Can you tell me anything about that?

Laurence: Yeah. I remember, I mean, it was a big project. It was like the first big update for the regs. I was not leading it at the time. I was part of the team, and I remember the team lead was run out of an office called NPOL, which was the old policy office that supported the Archivist. And the person who was leading it was Nancy Allard. And Nancy and Laura McCarthy, who was a staff person assigned to her, sort of set up the meetings, made sure that, you know, we were focused on specific sections, and then we would meet as a group. And the rest of the group, the subject matter experts other than me, were Henry Wolfinger, who was also in NWML at the time, and Jason Baron, who was the director of litigation in NGC. [David Langbart was also on that team]. I think that was essentially the team. And really, you know, there were two focuses for what we were trying to do. One, turn them into kind of, you know, a plain language overhaul. And then turn the requirements from, like, "Agency shall do this" to more of an FAQ format. So, "What do I do if I have this?" And then, you know, the answer will be written, not in a thou shalt, but in plain language, as a response to a question. The other thing that we were charged with doing in 2009 is it was really trying to focus more on electronic records and making them more electronic or media neutral and not as paper-centric or paper-based as they were written. So there were a lot of sections, especially like the one on electronic records management, which had to be completely overhauled, rewritten. And, I don't know, it probably took us a few years to get through it all. But, you know, we got through every section, and I think it held up pretty well until, you know, recent efforts to kind of make the updates to the regs that they're doing now.

Stephanie: Okay. So, it sounds like you had a team within NARA that was kind of working on it. And then, at that point, once you come up with something, do you share it with agencies for their input as well or . . . ?

Laurence: Yeah, yeah. And again, that was something that, that part of the process was held . . . was carried out by NPOL and by Nancy and Laura. As a participant, you know, just participating as a subject matter expert, I wasn't involved in that processing, but, yeah, it had to go through all public comment, NARA review at a management level, before it could be issued. Yeah.

Stephanie: Okay. And yeah, I know that they continue to work on them today. I'm not sure how far they've gotten, but yeah. Kind of a constant process, I guess, just making sure they're up to date.

You were talking about dominoes before with, you know, with you and Paul and being directors and . . . So Paul Wester, he was the first agency chief records officer, and he left NARA in October of 2015, at which point you became acting.

Laurence: Right.

Stephanie: So the role of acting, I'm realizing, can be very tricky sometimes. What was it like to be acting in that position? Did you feel like you had any authority to do anything, to manage, to change anything? Or did you feel more like you were just filling a gap?

Laurence: So, I mean, it was a big change to be acting because it was an SES [Senior Executive Service] position, and I wasn't. But in terms of function, you know, the job really wasn't a whole lot different than what I was doing as the director of Life Cycle Management Division. I was still leading the records management program for the agency. It was a little different in that, with the new structure, I had responsibility over other functions. So, you know, when Paul was chief records officer, he was overseeing the policy team. And, in my role, I was in that organization, the director of records management operations. So I was really just focused more on the records management stuff, including permanent records capture, but not policy. That was something that Paul was overseeing.

So stepping into that acting role, I had to get more involved in overseeing policy and the other functions that Paul was overseeing in his role. You know, it wasn't uncomfortable. I felt like I knew everybody having been in the program for so long. I felt like I had a lot of support. I don't think there was—and I say this with all humility—I don't think there was a better candidate than myself at the time to be acting because someone had to be acting. I mean, it wasn't going to be a situation where, like Paul's boss, you know, and I can't—it was probably Jay Bosanko at the time, that he was going to do his job and be acting for Paul's job after he left. So, you know, I think it made sense for me to do it at the time. And I just relied on everybody who was already in place to continue to do the work that they were doing. And yeah, I mean, it was, I don't know, probably—I can't even remember how long it was—several months before the position got filled. Because I guess I got the position in May of 2016. So, yeah, I mean, it was a matter of, you know, several months before the position got filled. But you know, I don't remember that as a difficult period. I didn't really pay attention to the fact that I wasn't an SES or was an SES. I didn't really care. Still, I don't even really care about, you know, rank and grade. For me, it was always about getting the work done. And I felt like I was in a good place to work with everybody to get the work done.

Stephanie: Okay. And during that period that you're acting, was that also when you completed that Excellence in Government Fellows Program?

Laurence: Yeah, I think it was about the time. It was probably like 2015, somewhere around then. Yeah. Yes. No, I remember because as I was finishing the program, that's when the announcement for Paul's position was announced. So I remember having conversations with people over at EIG [Excellence in Government] about "How do I write my ECQs [Executive Core

Qualifications]?" And, you know, "How do I write this up, and how do I prepare for the interview?" So I had gone through most of the program before that job was announced, but probably for the entire time that I was acting—and it was a great program. I loved the people there. And I'm still in contact with a lot of the people that were on my team at EIG. And I just thought it was really helpful, as you know, someone who really wanted to be a part of, like, managing, leading people, coaching people, and getting the work done through other people. And it's not something everybody wants to do. But through that program, I really learned how important it is and how to do it well. So yeah, it was [LAUGHS] also at that same time. It was crazy. And none of those were virtual. Back then, I mean, everything was face-to-face. So, you know, I was always like running off down to DC or going on field trips. And it was a pretty crazy, hectic time.

Stephanie: Interesting. I know they still have it. But yeah, I haven't done it. And, yeah, I think a lot of the meetings are virtual and so . . . yeah.

Laurence: Well, I mean, you should! I would definitely recommend applying. I mean, you could talk to a lot of the people who have done it, you know, at NARA, people like Ashby and . . . A lot of the people who have done it are already gone. But . . .

Stephanie: Yeah.

Laurence: But yeah, it's a really good program.

Stephanie: Okay. And Ashby is back to NARA again, so . . . [LAUGHS]

Laurence: Ashby is back! I know. He's doing something completely different.

Stephanie: Yes. So I do have the date that you were appointed the new CRO [Chief Records Officer], and that was May 1st of 2016. So can you tell me about that selection process?

Laurence: Oh, yeah. So—and I say this to anybody who asks—nobody should ever want to be an SES just because they want to be an SES. Because it is a lot of work, and it's a painful process to get through it. So, I remember how much time I spent writing up my ECQs. And then, when you do go through the interviews, you know, you're basically getting grilled by, like, four of the top managers in the agency. So daunting. But, I mean, fortunately for me, because of the position that I was applying for, I had a lot of experience and a lot of things that I could talk about and a lot of examples to go through. So, you know, I think, I'm sure I was nervous before the interviews, but I think they went well. And then I do remember I got a call to meet with the Archivist, David Ferriero, at the time. So I didn't know if he was going to chew me out about something or I didn't know. But it was a great meeting, and he told me that they were going to . . . he was going to select me for the position. He gave me a little keychain with a backbone on it, because this was the time where, you know, we said that records management was the backbone of open government. And, you know, he was one of the prominent supporters of the open government work that we were doing at the time. So he gave me a little keychain with a backbone on it. But I mean, overall, you know, I think it was a good process. I mean, I felt like the first year at least I had a lot of support for the work that we were doing. Kind of changed over time. But at least from, you know, the Archivist and from Paul, who had since left. My supervisor at the time was Jay Trainer. I felt like there was a lot of support for what we were doing and changes we wanted to make. And the first few years, I think, were really good.

Stephanie: I was going to ask what kind of leeway you felt that you had, or leeway that you were given, to kind of make the position your own because, again, you were only the second CRO. Right? And so, yeah, if you were able to make changes and if you would have the support behind you for that? So . . .

Laurence: Yeah, I mean, I think I always did from certain people. I think from, you know, Jay Trainer and other colleagues like Gary Stern, John Hamilton. I really enjoyed working with all of them. And, you know, in the later years, I had some issues with Micah Cheatham and CMA [Chief of Management and Administration]. And I think part of that was Micah was always looking to, you know, cut the bottom line and reduce spending and try to get NARA in line with what the Administration wanted to see out of agencies at the time. And I think his perspective was different anyway. I mean, he was Management and Administration. He was focused entirely and exclusively on the internal operations of the National Archives, where our office was the opposite, focused primarily on federal agencies and the oversight work that we were doing. So I think there was a lot that he didn't get or understand, and he had a lot of influence with the Archivist and in affairs that were happening within the agency. So, you know, there were some discussions and there were requests to downsize and cut, most notably the training program that we had in place. And some of those ideas were good ideas. And I think part of it, part of my issue with some of, you know, the mandates to reduce and cut were not the goals themselves, but in sort of how they were communicated and carried out. And I did my best, and we did our best to kind of, you know, manage that process the best we can. But it was a challenging time. I mean, that was sequestration and budgets were being reduced and something had to be done. And it was not like the times when I started where we had a lot of staff and, you know, we felt like if we had vacancies, we would fill them and we would continue to get the work done. And it was much more challenging in later years.

Stephanie: So did you have any—did that CRO position have any power to advocate for more staffing, more resources, things like that?

Laurence: We did constantly and continuously. We would always send requests through Jay Trainer. But then, you know, in the last several years, there was the Resource Allocation Board. So we had to convince Jay Trainer to send requests to the Resource Allocation Board, and then the Board would decide what positions to fill. So it became very hard to fill vacancies, because it was always, you know, a matter of agency priorities. So a vacancy in my office would be balanced against a vacancy in Research Services. And if it was felt that that was more important, then that position would get filled and my position would not.

Stephanie: Yeah. That's very hard to take when it's your program and you can see the need.

Laurence: Yeah. And that was a big change. I mean, before the Resource Allocation Board, yeah, if we had backfills, we generally got them and we got them done quickly.

Stephanie: Is part of that also, where they're cutting things and just trying to, you know, cut the budget down to what is maybe available . . . we—me being out in the field—I'm based out in Denver, right. We've been seeing more, you know, positions that are, if someone leaves or they move to another agency, retire, or whatever, then those positions either are not filled at all or they're moved back to headquarters. Is that all part of that same struggle with, you know, getting resources and all of that?

Laurence: I mean, I don't know if, like, location was as big a driving factor as the need for a particular function.

Stephanie: Okay. Yeah.

Laurence: I mean, at the end of the day, I don't think it mattered where people were located. We just had to, like—we wanted to get like a minimum of five people in every appraisal team or, you know, five people on each oversight team. And, there was a time certainly, where management wanted to staff positions in headquarters. But, I don't think it was in an effort to kind of phase out the field operations within our office. I think it was more, you know, we, management, needed to do an assessment and really think through where each position is best utilized and most needed. And at the time, we weren't doing things virtually as much as we are now. There certainly was a desire to have more staff in DC to support the agencies where most of the staff, you know, headquarters, are in DC. So that was certainly something that we had to navigate. And, you know, we always wanted to support everybody wherever they were located. And, I think, now it's becoming, I wouldn't say it's easier to get position staff everywhere, but I think as we do more telework and more virtual meetings, it becomes less of a need in DC to have people, you know, available to run down to an agency, because we're doing less of that.

Stephanie: Right. Yeah. Okay. As you were the CRO, what were some of the things that you were focusing on? I know that you ran the whole gamut of, like, records management. Did you have certain things that you really focused on?

Laurence: Yeah. I mean, I think the main things that we were focused on first and I think foremost initially was getting training where we needed it to be. So I talked before about, you know, how we had to downsize training. But it became really clear during the pandemic that we had to move away from, like, training in the basement of Archives II and face-to-face training with three-ring binders to, you know, a more modern way of doing training with electronic modules and doing things virtual, but being able to support agencies through that process. So that was something that I was, you know, really very much involved in in transitioning the training program to something that left behind that kind of, like, paper-centric model. And then inspections, as you know, working in the program, changed a lot. We created new tools like assessments. That was really important to me to add to, like, the formal inspections we were doing so we could learn more about specific topics and gather data about what's going on by engaging with agencies on, you know, things like executive secretariat records or records of the historians and doing it in a way that wasn't kind of a heavy-handed inspection with formal recommendations and action items. So, you know, I think that's something that was really important to me to kind of use that program to do more than just do oversight of agencies.

And then in policy, you know, really one of the things that I wanted to do is provide more practical guidance to agencies. So previously, like, before even when Paul was there, he was focused on getting guidance out and sort of issuing the musts, you know, like, “Here's what you as an agency must do.” And “You’ve got to do that. That's important.” But what I heard and what I wanted to be responsive to is providing more of the how-to kinds of guidance, FAQs, scheduling guides, you know, wherever and whenever we could do it, you know, try and provide the kinds of resources that really help agencies make improvements. Because it's one thing to know what the end goal is and what the requirement is. But if you don't know how to get there and you don't give agencies the guidance to do it, it's not going to get done. And then you're just going to end up doing inspections and they're going to say, “Well, I don't know how to get there.”

Stephanie: Exactly. Yeah.

Laurence: And so I was really happy with it. You know, we were able to get buy-in to kind of doing those things in addition to, you know, the NARA Bulletins and the regs that we're working on.

Stephanie: In terms of the whole transition to electronic recordkeeping, you were kind of on the front lines for this whole thing, right? So are you able to talk about your involvement in those NARA/OMB [Office of Management and Budget] memos? There was the M-12-18 and 19-21, now M-23-07. Can you talk a little bit about those and your involvement in those and the creation of those.

Laurence: So, I mean, initially I wasn't directly involved, because I think M-12-18 was when Paul was chief records officer. That was 2012. And a lot of that work was being done in the Policy Team, which I didn't have oversight of. I was Records Management Operations. So, you know, that was something that I think Mark and his team, including Don Rosen, were a part of. I mean, obviously, you know, we provided support and I reviewed and provided comments, but I wasn't directly involved in M-12-18, and it really wasn't until M-19-21 in 2019 where I was more involved, but not fully involved. So the original guidance that came out was drafted by, you know, probably Micah Cheatham and others and coordinated with OMB. And then it was kind of like handed to me. “Go ahead and lead this with agencies.” So it was a situation where we were given a draft and we provided comment to the draft, but we weren't involved in the negotiations and the resolution of the comments in what ultimately became the OMB/NARA memos. And I think it got better later, you know, with 23-07, the most recent one. Again, I was *more* involved in that one, but again, I think it was also something that Jay Bosanko, Micah

Cheatham, and the Archivist at the time were kind of leading that, and we were doing our best to support, provide comments, and contribute feedback.

Stephanie: Interesting. Yeah. You would think Records Management—seeing that these are records management memos—that, you know, Records Management would have more—the CRO position at least would have more—input on them. Do you think that they [the memos] hit the sweet spot? Do you think that they kind of missed the mark? Would you do anything different with those?

Laurence: Yeah, I mean, we had comments and we had things that we, you know, we recommended and we wanted to see in there, and not all of it got in there. But, you know, big picture, I mean, the overall goal, I don't think any of us would disagree. I mean, we want everything to be fully electronic, and there were certainly things in there which, you know, they probably were requirements from OMB about closing commercial records centers and not something that we would have any stake in. But, you know, overall, it was something that needed to happen, because there's still way too much paper being created and it's not doing anybody any favors by continuing to work in 2024, the same way we worked in, you know, 1998. And change needed to be made and it's still being made, and we're still not all the way there. But I think a lot of good work and a lot of improvements have been made. So, you know, while I may not have been the one to, like, write the memos, I could easily support the memos and work with agencies to try and help them get closer to where we want them to be.

Stephanie: Okay. Do you have advice for the next CRO who will basically oversee the continuation of this transition?

Laurence: I think my only advice is, you know, the job is all about relationships and communication and the kinds of connections that have to be made within the National Archives with other members of the leadership team so that you have continuing support, but then also really spending time being out there with agencies and meeting with agencies and meeting with senior agency officials for records management and doing your best to kind of come up with some practical answers to questions that they all have. And unfortunately, the biggest concern—and I'm experiencing it now in my current position—is insufficient resources, needing more people and more money to do the kinds of work that the memos require. So the person needs to have an understanding of that and then be flexible enough to be able to work with agencies to say, you know, "I understand your limitations. What can we do in the meantime as you're trying to get the resources to do the work? And how can you leverage what's currently available to you in your agency to just move things a little bit forward?"

Stephanie: You brought up a good point about those SAOs. I know the *Presidential Memorandum on Managing Government Records* and then M-12-18 required that agencies designate someone in that senior agency official for records management role. And I know that was before you were the CRO, but I really feel like you supported and kind of championed that position. Can you talk about maybe how you were supporting that role within agencies?

Laurence: Yeah. I mean, it's a critically important role. And I think it was something that was really needed, and it was a gap that I think, you know, in talking with Paul, we all recognized that in most agencies, a records officer, in some cases at a GS-13 level, is not going to be able to effect change or be able to advise the head of an agency where a lot of the issues in records management were happening. So establishing the position was important, but also continuing to cultivate engagement with all the SAORMs about records management in their agency and their need to support the records officers and the records programs and advocate for resources for those programs. So, you know, we did what we could to try and have regular meetings, send out communications, when we write reports make sure that they go to the attention of the SAORM, or anything that we could do to keep them engaged and informed. And I think, you know, it's still a model. And we've seen, even since the position was established, other senior agency officials, you know, whether it's privacy or what have you are being established to kind of do a similar kind of thing. And agencies are big. Bureaucracies are unwieldy. And you can't rely on a records officer to get the kinds of things done that need to get done without that kind of a champion within the agency. So I did spend a lot of my time talking with the SAORMs. And I think that's, you know, one of the reasons why the chief records officer position has to be an SES to be able to talk to these people and be listened to by these people. But I think building that community was something that was, you know, really important to me and important to the position and something that needs to continue to happen.

Stephanie: Okay. I also want to talk about the Capstone approach for email, for managing email. That came out in 2013, you know, a role-based method for managing email records. Did you have any involvement in the creation of that approach?

Laurence: Yeah. We did, and I was part of the initial Capstone development teams representing Records Management at the time. Again, that's when Paul was still here. So Policy and that team had the lead on developing it, but Records Management—me, my staff—were very involved in contributing to the initial guidance in 2013. And it was something, you know, in talking with people on the team like Jason Baron, which we all acknowledged was not a perfect solution but something that needed to happen because, you know, we knew printing and filing was not resulting in any transfers of important email records. I mean, and they would, you know, occasionally you would see emails filed into case files, but there was no legacy for senior officials and what they were doing with their communications and their emails that were ever going to be transferred to the National Archives had we not made that change. So, you know, we thought it was going to be like an interim solution to something else. But it's lasted because the interim solution is taking a long time to get funded, conceptualized, and implemented. And right now, we expect a lot of that's going to have to do with artificial intelligence and more sophisticated tools that will help us preserve those kinds of records. But right now, the ability to identify accounts at a permanent level will at least result in the National Archives getting a lot of information for future researchers that will provide a lot of insight into the issues that were discussed at senior levels and decisions that were made, which, if it weren't for Capstone, we may never have any insight into.

Stephanie: Yeah, we talked to Jason Baron as well about that and his involvement in the Capstone approach. And yeah, it sounded . . . just not much was happening before. So at least, you know, we're capturing some of this now. So.

Laurence: It was definitely a step forward . . .

Stephanie: Yeah.

Laurence: . . . as imperfect as it was, you know, because as part of the approach, you're basically taking in a lot of non-records and junk. And if the individual doesn't cull that stuff out, then Archives is going to be left with a lot of collateral trash that is not going to be valuable. But that's sort of the price of getting everything else that is.

Stephanie: Right. You served as the CRO under, I believe it was three different Presidential administrations: Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden. Right? Did you notice any differences in, like, AC's mission or perhaps like the support or authority that we received depending on the administration?

Laurence: No, not at our level. I think, you know, the mission of records management continued. And I think there was, you know, even whether it was a Republican or Democrat in the White House, we had a lot of support for OMB/NARA memos, and I think there was definitely bipartisan support for good recordkeeping. So, yeah, I mean, I think that was not an issue. I think where we had some impacts is, you know, administrations' approaches to staffing and budgets. And I think, you know, that was something that affected everybody, not just us.

Stephanie: Right. Yeah. We weren't targeted or anything. Yeah. Okay. So for, like, the position of CRO, of the Chief Records Officer, how did you see that role within the wider federal records management community? I know that, you know, we're pushing out policy and training and other things to agencies. How did you really see that position within that wider community?

Laurence: The CRO position?

Stephanie: Yes.

Laurence: I don't know. I mean, I never really thought of it, you know, as, I don't know, maybe some people think it was sort of like the leader of the records management community. I sort of felt my role was more of a facilitator. Because, as I said, I mean, the critical skills for that position are communication, collaboration, building relationships internally and externally. So I never really thought of the position—and I still don't think the position is like—for whoever comes next, is one where, you know, I'm going to sit in my ivory tower and tell agencies, "This is what you must do." I mean, nothing got done that way. And, you know, everything that we did from policy to an inspection is always a partnership. And I felt like regardless of the program, and as you know, like, even if you're doing an inspection, it's not like, "Well, we're NARA. We're coming in, and we're going to tell you what to do." You have to communicate with the agency.

You have to work with them, you know, to schedule visits. You have to work with them to see the records. And I felt like that was what my job was as CRO: to facilitate, to remove obstacles if there were problems or challenges. You know, I would step in to see what I could do to work through whatever the challenge was. So, I guess one of the—right before I left, a good example was in one of our inspections, as you know well. At NNSA [National Nuclear Security Administration], we had an open action item to get the Manhattan Project records in, and we could never get them in. So, to my point, I could never call up the SAO and say, "You must transfer those records now," because they just ignore you. So that is sort of a trap that anybody comes into the position and thinks, "Well, I'm just going to tell people what to do." It doesn't work that way. I had to work with the Department of Energy. I had to work with NNSA. I had to set up meetings. I had to meet with the scientists to talk to them about why it's important to transfer these records. So I was trying to facilitate the process, solve a problem and, you know, get to the result that we needed to happen. And that's really what I think the position is for the records management community. If any agency is having a challenge with records management, they could come to NARA, and they could come to me, and then we would see what we could do to resolve a problem.

Stephanie: Yeah. You brought up some very good points because, well, one, I mean, the position title was Chief Records Officer for the U.S. Government, and it makes it sound like you are sitting on this throne above everyone else. And so I think there is a misconception at times about what you have the authority to do, maybe, in that position. But then, too—and we find this a lot also in inspections where, yeah, it seems like NARA doesn't really have that stick [USES AIR QUOTES] to enforce those records management regulations. So, I mean, could more be done to enforce those, or what are your thoughts on that?

Laurence: I mean, that would take, you know, an act of law. I mean, NARA is an oversight agency, not an enforcement agency. So, you know, there's very little that can be done.

Stephanie: Okay. Okay. All right. So going through here quickly, well, I think let's just skip to . . . so you left NARA July 13th of this year, 2024. And, you know, like you said, you've accepted that position at DOJ [Department of Justice]. Can you talk about what factors went into that decision?

Laurence: I think the main reason for applying for the position was I'd been at NARA for, what, 24 years and doing my job for a really long time. And I just wanted to do something different. You know, part of what I said in my interview when my boss, who's currently now at DOJ, said, "Why are you applying for this?" was the first question he asked me. And I said, because, you know, I wanted to see what implementation is like from an agency perspective. You know, we've been telling agencies what they got to do all these years, and I wanted to see what it was like to actually work in an agency to do it. And I felt like it would be different enough to keep me energized and focus on a lot of important, different things. So that was intriguing. And the other thing, too, it was DOJ, and I knew the records officer, Jennie Plante, and knew the program was in good shape. And I knew a number of the staff who were already there, and I figured if I'm not going to do this now, I'm never going to do it and just decided to, you know, to give it a shot.

And really, the only thing that I thought about as someone who was possibly leaving NARA was you and everybody else in AC that I was leaving behind. I mean, there were a lot of people that I worked with for a really, really, really long time. And it's those relationships that, you know, I probably, if I were to stay, that would be the only reason why. I mean, it wasn't like I was leaving records management. So I can't say it's like, you know, I was leaving records management behind because I was getting to do it and lead a records management program, just doing it from a different perspective. So it was an opportunity to do something completely different. And that was intriguing at the time.

Stephanie: Okay. Now that you're on the agency side, how well do you think that NARA is meeting the needs of agency RM programs?

Laurence: I mean, we use NARA's guidance all the time, and I think NARA has done a good job of, like, convening communities of practice and BRIDG [Bi-monthly Records and Information Discussion Group] meetings and things like that to answer our questions. And I think, you know, as I expected, when I was working for NARA, a lot of the challenges that agencies have are problems that agencies have to solve. And NARA can't solve them, because a lot of them, as I said, have to do with resources. So yeah, I mean, nothing has been, you know, a surprise coming over to the agency. It's been kind of what I expected. But things are definitely different. The focus is different. The scope is different. And that was another thing that was appealing is, like, instead of doing, you know, all this for everybody, now I can focus on just what does DOJ need to modernize.

Stephanie: Okay. Did you do any sort of succession planning when you were getting ready to leave? I know Bill Fischer took over as the acting [CRO]. Was there any sort of succession planning?

Laurence: No. I mean, I think that was really for Jay Trainer to figure out internally. We had our management team, but, you know, I kind of expected someone from one of the managers would . . . they would all do a good job in just kind of like keeping the work going. I mean . . .

Stephanie: Okay.

Laurence: They have been doing the work for a really long time. The fact that I left wouldn't affect the fact that that work was not going to continue and to continue, you know. So I wasn't really concerned about succession planning. And I think NARA management currently is, you know, they haven't been focused on filling that position right away because I think Bill Fischer and with the staff that are currently there, I feel like everything's, you know, under control.

Stephanie: Yeah. Okay. Out of all of your accomplishments while you were at NARA, do you have anything that you're most proud of?

Laurence: For the work? No. Not really. I mean, I think, you know, we did a lot of good things, whether it was training and overhauling policy and all the good work that I did at appraisal. I mean, the things—I mean, what I'm probably most proud of are the relationships and the friendships that will continue as I leave NARA and wherever I go next. Those are the things that will last and linger with me. It will probably be another couple of years, and I'll forget everything that I did at NARA. And that's okay. But I won't forget the people that I worked with.

Stephanie: Okay, well, you'll have it documented in this transcript. So.

Laurence: Good!

Stephanie: [LAUGHS] Was there anything else that you wanted to add that we didn't cover? I know you don't have much time.

Laurence: No. I feel like I talked more than I thought I was going to talk, so. I mean, I hope it worked for you and for what you need to document for the oral history.

Stephanie: Okay. Well, perfect. Well, you know, just thank you so much for doing this. It was super interesting. Loved it. I'm going to turn off the recording, but like I said, I'll get this transcribed and then I'll send it over to you. Of course, it's going to be after the New Year. But I'll give you a chance to review it before we do anything else.

Laurence: Okay. Sounds good.

Stephanie: All right. Well, have a happy holiday. And it was so great talking to you, Laurence.

Laurence: Yeah, it was great to see you, too, Stephanie.

Stephanie: Okay.

Laurence: Happy holidays.

Stephanie: Happy holidays. Bye.

[END RECORDING]