



Basic Steps in Records Management Process

Dear Reader:

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We hope this information will be useful to you; reference to it will assist you with many of the questions that will arise in your tenure with municipal government. However, the *Tennessee Code Annotated* and other relevant laws or regulations should always be consulted before any action is taken based upon the contents of this document.

Please feel free to contact us if you have questions or comments regarding this information or any other MTAS website material.

Sincerely,

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Basic Steps in Records Management Process

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Whether or not you realize it, you already have a records management program. The problem is, it may be doing more harm than good. If your records are filed in a haphazard manner, if you don't know exactly what you have and where you have it, if it takes you too long to find what you need, if your office space is packed to the ceiling with file cabinets and boxes, if records are stored in cabinets and boxes, if records are stored in unsuitable locations, if you throw away records too soon, or if you don't destroy records often enough, you could benefit from spending a little time, effort and resources on implementing a beneficial records management program for your office.

Evaluate Current Records System

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Your first task is to evaluate your current system of records management. In other words, conduct an inventory of the records in your office.

Appoint a Records Manager/Custodian Depending on the size of your city, you will need to appoint one or more persons within the office to serve as a records management coordinator. Having a single person responsible for your office's records management efforts who coordinates communication about your records with entities outside your office (the county public records commission, a records center or an archive) can be a key to achieving success. This person should have good organizational skills but, obviously, should not already be overwhelmed with too many other duties to be able to devote the time necessary to records management. Many city recorders are charged with the responsibility for the city's records management.

Inventory: Once you have selected someone to do the inventory, make sure they understand the information you need and the goals of the inventory.^[1] The general goals of the inventory should include:

- Identifying the various "records series" in each office;
- Describing all record locations and
- storage conditions;
- Providing dates and other useful information;
- Measuring space and equipment occupied by records; and
- Providing a basis for writing records retention schedules.^[2]

The inventory will be beneficial in a number of ways. Most obviously, it will tell you exactly what records you have and where to find them. Even if you go no further, this alone will increase the efficiency of your office. Another desirable result of an inventory is that it will help you locate records that you can throw out or otherwise destroy.

Using the inventory and the records retention schedules for your office that are located in Part Four of this manual, you probably will discover a number of records that are unnecessarily taking up space in your office or storage area. A third benefit is identifying records that are in danger. Paper records can easily be damaged by water or even excessive humidity or other environmental problems. If your inventory finds evidence of water damage to records, mold and mildew, or signs of damage from vermin, insects or other pests, take steps to remedy these problems before your office loses vital information. See the chapters in this section on Proper Storage Conditions and Disaster Preparedness for advice about dealing with these problems and establishing a safe environment for storing records long term.

Filing Systems

After you have evaluated the inventory of the records your office keeps, spend some time evaluating your filing system as well. If improvements can be made to the way you file records, you will improve administrative efficiency and reduce costs. "If every employee of an agency of local governments

spends even five percent of the time searching for hard-to-find information, that time translates into very substantial sums of money, and quality of services is sure to suffer.”^[3]

A good filing system will provide two major benefits to the people using it: “precise retrieval and timely retrieval.”^[4] Another way of thinking about these issues is to ask, “Can I find what I want when I want it?” If your filing system results in records retrieval that takes too long, that gives you only part of what you want, or gives you back much more than you need, it is inefficient. Poor filing system performance generally is attributed to one or more of seven major factors:

- Inadequate management attention;
- Poor organization and structure of files;
- Poor labeling and indexing procedures;
- Uncontrolled growth of records;
- A high incidence of missing, misfiled or lost records;^[5]
- Inadequate or poorly trained files personnel; or
- Inadequate or no formal record- keeping procedures.^[6]

Filing Equipment

You may think all filing cabinets are alike, but that is just not true. Don’t simply assume that the storage system you have cannot be improved upon. You have options to consider. Movable shelving, color-coded, open shelving systems, and even bar coding have become common in many offices that handle a large volume of records. The old standard vertical-drawer filing cabinet first came into use in the late 19th century, but many records managers consider these cabinets to be functionally obsolete for most modern office applications. “[The vertical-drawer file cabinet] is the most costly of all filing equipment, since it requires more floor space and more physical time and effort to access the folders. It also does not provide the full benefit of visual retrieval aids, such as special labeling and color coding.”^[7] If you know your filing system is inefficient, consider checking into more modern equipment. Although it will cost money initially, it may save money in the long run by saving floor space in your office, thereby postponing the need for expansion or relocation, and by reducing staff time that is wasted on an inefficient filing system with cumbersome storage units.

Footnotes:

[1] You may wish to use the sample Records Inventory Worksheet located in the appendix to this manual as a guide for performing an inventory.

[2] *Managing Records on Limited Resources — A Guide for Local Governments*, p.3.

[3] *The Daily Management of Records and Information — A Guide for Local Governments* issued by the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators, p.1.

[4] *Ibid*, p.2.

[5] “Studies show that between one percent and three percent of an organization’s records are not available to the users due to one of these causes.” *The Daily Management of Records and Information*, p.3.

[6] *The Daily Management of Records and Information*, *ibid*, pp.2–3.

[7] *The Daily Management of Records and Information*, p. 8.

Develop RDAs

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Step Two: Develop RDAs

Your first question is probably “what is an RDA?” The acronym RDA stands for records disposition authorization. At a minimum level, an RDA provides a formal statement of when a record can be

destroyed and what authority serves as the basis for its destruction. But these documents can be much more. A comprehensive RDA becomes a plan for the entire life of a record series from creation to final disposition.

Among other things, a comprehensive RDA should include:

- a basic description of a record series;
- how the record is created, how it is used,
- where it should be stored,
- in what format it should be kept,
- who should have access to it,
- how long it is in active use by an office,
- when to move it into inactive storage,
- whether it is vital or confidential,
- and whether or not it can be destroyed.

Fully developed RDAs differ from records retention schedules in a number of ways. Retention schedules uniformly describe the various records of an office, state whether a record is permanent, identify the minimum amount of time a temporary record must be kept, and state a legal authority or rationale for that retention period. They generally do not tell you where to keep a record, how long the record may be in active use, and when a record can be moved to inactive storage or an archive. Those determinations are office specific based on the resources available to you and the operating procedures of your office.

The retention schedules give you the foundation for writing your RDAs, but you are encouraged to consider them only a starting point. If your office handles a large number of records and a lot of people deal with them, consider putting more than the minimum into your RDAs. While they take a significant amount of work to develop, RDAs are fundamental to an efficiently operating records management program in any office with a large volume of records. Once created, they will need only periodic review to ensure that the plan you laid out for a group of records still makes sense and complies with your needs and any applicable legal requirements.

The following general principles and considerations may be helpful in making decisions about how to manage your records. They are quoted verbatim from the Tennessee State Library and Archives, Tennessee Archives Management Advisory (TAMA) 99-08 entitled "Appraisal and Disposition of Records."

If a legislative mandate requires permanent or temporary retention of any record, set of records, or class of records, then the record(s) specified in the mandate must be kept at public expense for at least as long as the mandate requires.

- A record or set of records should be retained by an agency as long as it is useful to performance of its routine functions.
- A decision to retain records beyond their active usefulness or legislative mandate is a decision to maintain them so they can be examined readily by the public. Such a decision requires a commensurate commitment of resources to continuous care and custody for the entire term of retention.
- A decision for permanent retention is a decision for perpetual care.
- Records should not be kept beyond their useful life in the public interest.
- No record that is necessary to the public interest should be destroyed.
- Records that are retained beyond their active usefulness to the routine functions of an agency must be of sufficient public interest to justify the expense of keeping and administering them, and the justification should be clearly stated, understood, and agreed to before accepting responsibility for and paying the cost to retain the record(s).

- The following kinds of records may all be appraised as having archival value for permanent retention:
 - Essential records that are needed to resume or continue operations or to re-create legal and financial status after a disaster, or that are needed to protect or fulfill obligations;
 - Records that have lasting value as legal and fiscal evidence to account for responsible government;
 - Records that are of such high evidential and historical value that they should be retained at public expense for the sake of a sound, reliable, and comprehensive understanding of the political, social, economic and historical context of government and culture.

Develop Written Policies and Procedures

Reference Number: MTAS-469

Step Three: Develop Written Policies and Procedures

Both large and small offices can benefit from having written records management policies on certain issues. The policies should adopt the records retention schedules in this manual; incorporate any RDAs developed by your office; and include policies for dealing with inactive records, for allowing public access to records and guidelines for making copies, for responding to emergencies that threaten records, for maintaining confidential records, for keeping records in alternative storage media, and for interacting with the county public records commission, the State Library and Archives, and a records center or archive if one exists in your city. MTAS recommends that personnel records, other than personnel records of undercover police officers, be kept in the central office repository by the records custodian, rather than by the different departments. Having personnel records scattered in different departments can lead to problems, including lost files and parts of files.

If you think your office has had or may have a problem with files being lost, stolen or misplaced, develop a policy and procedures for tracking files as well. Require anyone removing a file from its storage space to fill out a sign-out sheet indicating who they are, what record they are taking, and the dates of its removal and return. This procedure should help your office track misplaced records and cut down on losses. If you have an active records manager in your city, he or she may already have developed policies on some of these issues. In that case, you could simply incorporate those policies into your office procedures.

Municipalities have a great deal of flexibility in adopting the retention schedule recommended in this publication. It can be adopted by ordinance, resolution, motion, citywide policy or a records commission if the city has one; or applicable portions can be adopted as departmental policy.

Continuing Maintenance

Reference Number: MTAS-470

Step Four: Continuing Maintenance

The best records management program will quickly fall into obsolescence if the office does not make efforts to stay current. Records, particularly government records, grow at an astronomical rate. If you do not take steps regularly to move inactive records to other storage and destroy temporary records when they become eligible for destruction, they soon will fill up your filing equipment, then your office, and bring clutter and disorganization to all operations. Consider implementing an annual "records clean-up day" to reassess the records of the office and identify what can be moved or destroyed. Select a time that is not in the middle of your busy season (perhaps around the holidays), and designate a day for everyone to identify records that can be destroyed, and collect them. Remember, also, that having an appointed records management officer who can designate part of his or her time year round to keeping the office files current will go a long way toward ensuring that your records management program succeeds.

DISCLAIMER: The letters and publications written by the MTAS consultants were written based upon the law at the time and/or a specific sets of facts. The laws referenced in the letters and publications may have changed and/or the technical advice provided may not be applicable to your city or circumstances. Always consult with your city attorney or an MTAS consultant before taking any action based on information contained in this website.

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