



Municipal Technical Advisory Service  
INSTITUTE *for* PUBLIC SERVICE

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## Vital Records Protection

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Dear Reader:

The following document was created from the MTAS website ([mtas.tennessee.edu](https://www.mtas.tennessee.edu)). This website is maintained daily by MTAS staff and seeks to represent the most current information regarding issues relative to Tennessee municipal government.

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,

The University of Tennessee  
Municipal Technical Advisory Service  
1610 University Avenue  
Knoxville, TN 37921-6741  
865-974-0411 phone  
865-974-0423 fax  
[www.mtas.tennessee.edu](http://www.mtas.tennessee.edu)

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## Vital Records Protection

**Reference Number:** MTAS-518

A companion to the disaster contingency plan is the vital records protection program. The records of a local government are one of its most vital and vulnerable resources. If steps have not been taken to protect important records prior to a disaster, the resumption of regular operations after a disaster will be far more difficult and costly.

Whereas a contingency plan will provide instructions on how to respond immediately after a disaster, a vital records protection plan will inform government offices of ongoing practices to preserve the important information of the office. Records protection plans will vary depending on the volume and format of the records to be protected, the resources available to the city, and the technology present in offices. Any plan should, at a minimum, provide procedures for identifying, duplicating and safeguarding vital records.

No office can afford to expend the amount of resources it would take to ensure the protection of every record in the office. For that reason, it is important to determine which records are truly vital and which are not.

Records management experts divide records into four classes:

1. Nonessential records — those that if lost would not really be missed. Most convenience files, internal memos and many routine papers of completed transactions fall into this category.
2. Useful records — records containing information that if lost would cause some difficulty but that could easily be replaced.
3. Important records — records that cannot be dispensed with and that can be replaced only through the expenditure of substantial time, money or manpower.
4. Vital records — records that are essential and cannot be replaced. Vital records contain information essential to the continuity of operations or to the protection of the rights of the government or of individual citizens. <sup>[1]</sup>

Begin by protecting records that are indispensable. Since you cannot anticipate and prevent every possible disaster, the best course of action is to make sure there are off-site archival quality copies of the city's most important records. <sup>[2]</sup>

If some records are stored in electronic format, state laws require that certain back-up procedures are followed to prevent loss of data. <sup>[3]</sup> For obvious reasons tape or disk backups of electronic data should not be stored in the same location as the computer system itself. While less fragile than electronic records, paper records and microfilm also must be properly stored and cared for in order to prevent destruction of the records in the event of a disaster or by the ravages of time. Wherever possible, a city should archive its permanent records in a location or facility that is designed for records preservation. <sup>[4]</sup>

If you need assistance developing these plans for your city, both MTAS and the Tennessee State Library and Archives can help. Copies of contingency plans and other publications on records protection are available upon request. In addition, there are a number of commercial, nonprofit, government, and educational sites on the Internet that provide a wealth of contacts and links to valuable information. The following Internet sites are places you might want to start: <sup>[5]</sup>

- <http://www.nagara.org> <sup>[1]</sup>
- <http://palimpsest.stanford.edu/bytopic/disasters/index.html> <sup>[2]</sup>

### ***Recovery of Stolen or Misappropriated Records***

While they usually don't reach disastrous proportions, there also are certain human behaviors for which a prepared response is necessary. If records are inappropriately removed from the office where they belong, the official who has custody of the records is not without remedy. Of course, criminal theft charges can be brought against someone who steals city documents. Tennessee law makes it unlawful for any person to intentionally and unlawfully destroy, conceal, remove, or otherwise impair the verity, legibility, or availability of a governmental record. A violation of that law is a Class A misdemeanor. <sup>[6]</sup>

What may prove to be a more practical remedy is to pursue an action to recover personal property. [7] This action, also known as replevin, is a judicial proceeding whereby property that is in the wrong hands can be returned to the rightful owner or custodian. It is initiated by filing a complaint in the circuit or chancery court or by causing a warrant to issue in the general sessions court. [8] Ultimately, the proceeding may result in the issuance of a writ of possession that directs the proper officer to take the property from the defendant and return it to the plaintiff. [9] If you need to pursue such an action to recover misappropriated city records, contact your city attorney.

[1] Protecting Records, Harmon Smith, Issued by the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators (March 1992), p.3.

[2] According to the State Library and Archives, the only media that will assure long-term survival of vital records are carbon-based ink on acid neutral paper and archival quality silver gelatin microfilm created and kept under conditions that meet archival standards. See Tennessee Archives Management Advisory 99-07.

[3] For information regarding these procedures, see the chapter in this part regarding alternative storage media.

[4] See the discussion in a previous chapter in this manual on archives.

[5] Sites were current and available as of the date of publication. The Internet is the most temporary of media. If these sites no longer exist, call MTAS for more information.

[6] T.C.A. § 39-16-504.

[7] T.C.A. §§ 29-30-101 *et seq.*

[8] T.C.A. § 29-30-103.

[9] T.C.A. § 29-30-107.

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#### Links:

[1] <http://www.nagara.org/>

[2] <http://palimpsest.stanford.edu/bytopic/disasters/index.html>

*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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