

Archives Advice No. 12

Identifying and Protecting Vital Records

Considerations for Government Officials

The Importance of Vital Records

Business continuity and **disaster preparedness** depend on **vital records** for their success. Identifying and securing vital records is one of the important duties of a state or local government agency.

What is a Vital Record?

State law (O.C.G.A. 50-18-91) defines a ‘vital record’ as any record that is critical:

1. to the resumption or continuation of operations, or both:

Examples of such records might include:

- Accounts receivable records
- A database containing client contact information
- A list of staff names and home phone numbers

Ask yourself: “What records do I need to have on the counter or desk in front of me in order to re-open my doors to the public?”

2. to the re-creation of the legal and financial status of government in the state:

Examples of such records might include:

- Tax Rolls
- Accounts receivable
- Contracts with vendors

Ask yourself: “What records do I need in order to prove what money my government owes or is owed? What records do I need to prove the legal authority of my agency?”

3. to the protection and fulfillment of obligations to citizens of the state:

Examples of such records might include:

- Laws
- Active court cases or police investigations
- Hazardous substance files

Ask yourself: “What records help me protect citizens?”



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Identifying Your Vital Records

When determining that a given records series is vital, the agency or its records manager must be able to clearly state which mission-critical operations would be prevented by the loss, destruction, or other unavailability of the indicated records series. For example, all organizations must pay their employees, withhold payroll taxes, account for pensions and other benefits and maintain office buildings, warehouses or other facilities they own or occupy. A municipal government, also, must maintain public safety, assess and collect taxes, issue building permits, enforce building codes, and process zoning applications. Once an agency's mission-critical operations have been determined, then records essential to those operations must be identified. Make a list of the vital records in your office. The local government retention schedules can help in identifying vital records. It is the responsibility of each agency to analyze its own operation and records to determine what information is vital to its continued existence. Following are questions which can be asked to assist in identifying records vital to your operation:

- Which business processes are critical to the function of the agency? to the community?
- What records are absolutely necessary to resume operations?
- What records are necessary to protect legal and financial status of the organization, and preserve rights and obligations of employees, customers, and citizens?
- What other sources, if any, inside or outside the organization, can records be retrieved from?
- In what medium does the needed information reside – paper? electronic? microfilm? other?
- Where are the vital records located – secure off-site storage? in-house storage vault? basement/attic? on your desk?

When feasible, vital records identification can also be included as part of your records inventory to avoid duplication of effort.

Protecting Your Vital Records

Once vital records have been identified, they need to be protected from potential loss. The method used is based on media type, available resources, and environmental and security requirements. Dispersal and Protective Storage are two basic methods for protecting vital records.

Dispersal involves making duplicate copies of the records and transferring them to locations other than those where the originals are housed.

For records which must be kept permanently; such as deeds and marriages, microfilming is the best duplication method to use. Electronic storage is most appropriate for records with a shelf life of up to 15 years because of the many hardware and software changes that electronic media will be subjected to during a 15-year period.

Whenever a new electronic records system is being designed, consider whether the record being created is a vital record and plan for its duplication as appropriate.

Vital records designations for both electronic and non-electronic records series should be coordinated. If the same information exists in both electronic and non-electronic records, one of the formats should be selected for vital records protection.

Protective Storage involves the use of special fire-resistant and environmentally controlled records protection equipment and vaults designed for the protection of the media being stored. Duplicates should be stored a sufficient distance from the original records to ensure survival even during a major disaster. Both duplicate microfilm and electronic media may be stored in the State Archives free of charge.

And remember, even the best plans can go awry. Local governments should develop disaster response plans for salvaging and restoring records that are damaged by fire or flood, etc.

Establishing a Vital Records Program

It is the responsibility of agency heads to protect vital records. The agency records and information manager is usually assigned the responsibility of developing, implementing, maintaining, and updating the vital records program for the organization. This process can be facilitated with assistance from personnel most knowledgeable about vital records. In very large agencies, more than one individual may be assigned responsibility for ensuring that the vital records program is consistent with the overall objectives and requirements set by the organization. This should include establishing communication with emergency services to inform them of the location of vital records and the procedures for their access and recovery. Oftentimes, the development of a vital records program is done in conjunction with the development of a records management program, beginning with an inventory of the records.

There are many steps in developing a vital records program, but once established, the program should include the following:

- A list of all business critical processes and associated records identified as essential to protect legal and financial status, preserve rights and obligations of employees, customers, citizens, and to ensure continuity of business operations
- Procedures to be followed to protect records and maps or floor plans showing the location of vital records
- Procedures to create backups
- Procedures to retrieve backups in an emergency
- Procedures for the recovery and restoration of records and information after a disaster

The vital records program should be reviewed annually and revised/updated to reflect changes in the plan as they occur.

Agencies should adopt a risk-based approach and consult their records manager to develop appropriate management strategies for addressing all recordkeeping concerns. If you need further assistance, please call the Georgia Archives at (678) 364-3790.