VITAL RECORDS MANAGEMENT

Introduction

Vital records must be protected from destruction because they offer direct evidence of legal status, ownership, accounts receivable, and the particulars of obligations incurred by government agencies. These records are critical because they contain information required to continue functioning during a disaster, or to reestablish operations after a calamity has ended. Vital records are irreplaceable, and in some instances must be maintained in their original form to be legally admissible as evidence.

Government agencies whose vital records program grows out of comprehensive records management will recognize overlaps in goals and methods for records preservation, and be able to achieve their objectives more economically and efficiently than agencies without a comprehensive program. Yet, even by itself, vital records management is a cost-justifiable strategy because it is a form of self-insurance that preserves a public trust.

Objectives of Protecting Vital Records

The objective of vital records management is to prevent the loss of information which is critical to the continuing operation of an organization in the most efficient and economic manner possible. In the public sector, vital records programs protect the public interest and ensure maintenance of individual rights.

Liabilities Due to Loss of Vital Records

Although only three to five per cent of a typical agency's records can be classified as vital, without this minimum number of records the daily business of an agency would stop and the public interest would be endangered because of:

1. Vulnerability to litigation,
2. Exposure to the unplanned expenses of financial settlements or loss of revenue,
3. Disruption of efficiency due to gaps in information, and
4. Breaks in the continuity of operations.

Although these potential dangers are similar to the risks posed by haphazard, unauthorized records destruction, losses that occur during a catastrophe carry an added burden because of the severe strain that a disaster places on staff and resources. A vital records management program is instituted to avoid these potential dangers.

The Process of Vital Records Management

Records Classification

Knowledge of record holdings is necessary before appropriate controls for vital records protection can be instituted. Identification and analysis of record series is most easily accomplished during a routine records inventory conducted as a first step in developing a comprehensive records management program.

To a great extent, records classification is simplified by the use of retention schedules by State agencies, school districts, and local governments. Records retention schedules are essentially lists of what kinds of records exist in an office, a description of contents, as well as a listing of the prescribed time periods for which they should be kept in both active, semi-active, and inactive storage.

The records of each agency identified by inventory or audit are matched to their corresponding retention schedules, and can be placed into four general categories:

1. Nonessential Records - Loss of these records presents no obstacle whatsoever to restoring daily business,
2. Useful Records - These records, if lost, might cause some inconvenience but could be easily replaced. Loss of these records does not present any real obstacle to restoring daily business.
3. Important Records - This category of records is replaceable only at considerable expense of funds, time and labor, and
4. Vital Records - These records are irreplaceable, and copies do not have the same value as the originals. They are essential to the continuity of services during a calamity or the restoration of daily business if it has been interrupted.

Some examples of vital records are accounts receivable; master personnel listings including employee name, title, rate of pay, length of service, current leave time status, pension, disability, insurance information, and incremental anniversary dates; irreplaceable research or development data; original, signed copies of major contracts or agreements, including change orders and amendments; insurance policy information; ordinances and reso1utions of governing bodies, and standing executive orders of local officials. These records are considered vital because they provide the legal basis for an agency's existence and establish the policies which direct its operation.

Protection Methods

Estimating the severity of a calamity which could destroy government records is a basic step in determining appropriate protection measures for vital records. This protection, along with an examination of costs of protection methods and budgetary levels, provides a basis for choosing options.

The three most commonly used ways to secure vital records are duplication and dispersal, on-site storage, and off-site storage:

1. **Duplication and Dispersal** - Many records can be adequately protected by simply distributing duplicate copies to one or more locations other than the central or primary agency building.

Duplicates may be created in paper, microfilm or other suitable electronic media. In choosing a format, considerations should include volume, frequency of updates, storage requirements (especially any need for special environmental controls, e.g. electronic media and original master negatives of microfilm require controlled temperature and humidity), equipment and power requirements, and costs and budgetary levels.

Certain methods have clear-cut advantages. For example, CDs and computer output microfilm (COM) are particularly suited for storing large volumes of frequently updated computer runs.

Once duplicates have been created, they may be distributed or dispersed in a variety of ways. Records are often distributed to locations other than the primary agency as part of regular operating procedures. Many local governments give copies of minutes, resolutions and ordinances to their public libraries or local representatives. Local governments that use private vendors for microfilm or electronic data services often have microfilm master copies and computer backup tapes/disks stored at the vendor's off-site location. In these cases the local governments should ensure that dispersed records are kept for their minimum retention periods, and that they are available to appropriate officials.

In cases where vital records are not being dispersed as part of routine procedures, special measures can be adopted for distributing them solely for the purpose of protecting them, e.g. sending vital human resources records for safekeeping to other buildings. Use of this technique has practical limits imposed by the degree of care given to records by agencies which have no specific need to receive them.

2. **On-Site Storage** - Often an agency building is the only available facility in a locality, or the only facility with staff, equipment and supplies capable of housing records. On-site vital records considerations include the analysis and improvement of buildings or facilities, equipment and supplies, as well the institution of procedural controls. Examples are:

a. **Building considerations** inc1ude establishing the adequacy of floor load capacity, lighting and ventilation, fire ratings of walls and doors, smoke and fire alarms, sprinklers or fire suppression systems, and eliminating such hazards as leakage and infestations by insects or vermin.

b. **Equipment considerations** include the construction of fire-resistant vaults or the purchase of cabinets or safes that meet or exceed Underwriter Laboratories specifications.

Underwriter Laboratories rates storage and filing equipment on the basis of interior temperature and humidity levels during various lengths of exposure to fire. As a general rule, paper begins to deteriorate at 350 degrees Fahrenheit with humidity greater than 65 percent, while the limits for electronic media, microfilm and photographs are considered to be 150 degrees Fahrenheit and 85 percent humidity.

c. **Procedural considerations** include routinely updating vital records, prohibiting food, beverages and smoking in records areas, segregating combustible material, and conducting periodic electrical, building and fire inspections. Another important procedure is the regular testing of a vital records program through simulations to ensure adequate functioning in the event of a genuine emergency. Exclusive reliance upon on-site vital records protection measures is not recommended because of the potential for total or near total destruction of a single location in a disaster.

3. **Off-Site Storage** - Involves keeping vital records in a single location separate from the central building. An off-site storage center should be close enough for access, control, and updating. Locations which may be considered for off-site vital records storage include other agency buildings within a locality which are reasonably secure (neighboring agencies could exchange vital records, thereby using their neighbor's facility as an off-site storage location), or a commercial storage vendor. The advantages of central, off-site storage include:

a. **General effectiveness** - It is less likely that an off-site storage facility will be affected by the same disaster that occurs to your building,

b. **Ease of retrieval** - Unlike dispersal techniques where vital records may be distributed to a number of off-site locations, central off-site storage simplifies access,

c. **Ease of control** - The ability to incorporate the same design and procedural considerations for security, facility and equipment compatibility, as used in on-site storage, and

d. **Ease of staffing** - The ability to use trained records professionals to administer the facility.

Program Staff

Vital Records Coordinator

For those local governments that have already established a comprehensive records management program including procedures for managing vital records, the records manager is the most appropriate person to coordinate any special efforts required. When no comprehensive program exists, it is advisable to appoint a coordinator from an existing agency with considerable experience in managing records. The vital records coordinator who is not a records manager must become familiar with record holdings by conducting records inventories and by interviewing agency representatives to review their record holdings.

Vital Records Team

An important part of successful vital records programs is the appointment of appropriate officials to assist the vital records coordinator. The major function of this team of officials is to aid the coordinator in determining when a record becomes vital and to provide for adequate protection. Expertise in administration, finance, law, and records management should be considered in selecting team members.

Communications

Because identifying vital records and selecting appropriate protection measures is necessary to prevent loss of critical information in the event of disaster, it is important for the vital records coordinator to communicate policy and procedures to agency staff and enlist their active participation and support.

Agencies should consider publishing a vital records manual and conducting periodic seminars, or using a more informal procedure, such as a vital records master list. If staff are aware of the importance of vital records and know the protection measures adopted, then it will be easier to assemble or reconstruct critical files. This will permit agency services to continue without interruption should a disaster occur.

SUMMARY

Vital records management programs are instituted to prevent the loss of information critical to the daily operations of government, to permit the government to continue functioning during a calamity, or to reestablish services afterward.

A vital records management program begins by conducting a records inventory to gain knowledge of record holdings. Records identified should be classified into one of four categories: nonessential, useful, important or vital. Appropriate protection methods are chosen to safeguard vital records and include duplication/dispersal, on-site storage and off-site storage.

In case of emergency or for additional information, contact the Government Services Section, Delaware Public Archives, Dover, DE. (www.state.de.us/sos/dpa)