

The Challenge of Improving Records Management: Protecting Vital Records

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Federal records are crucial to documenting U.S. history and providing future generations with an understanding of the government challenges and strategies that drive actions. Through the [Presidential Memorandum for Managing Government Records](#), the Obama administration indicates that records management, by enabling participatory, transparent, and collaborative government, is the backbone of open government. This memorandum places an importance on the appropriate preservation of government records not seen since the Truman administration. The Presidential Memorandum for Managing Government Records instructs agencies to transition to electronic records as a feasible way to save taxpayer dollars, promote accountability, and increase transparency. However, even with the executive support required by the memorandum, agencies face challenges modernizing records management policies and practices, especially while preserving vital records.

Vital Records

The federal vital records program was initiated in the 1950s during the Cold War as part of an effort to ensure continuity of government operations during a national emergency and the resumption of normal agency activities after the emergency's conclusion. Recently, the federal vital records program has focused on continuity of operations (COOP) and protection of records in the face of natural disasters and the threat of terrorism.

Agency programs to preserve vital records cover two categories of records. The first category includes records required to protect the financial and legal rights of both the employees and the agency. These records include such documentation as employment history, payroll, Social Security, and retirement. They are vital because they enable agencies not only to protect rights and entitlements of past and current government employees but also to continue paying employees during an emergency or crisis. Examples of agency vital records include records relating to contracts, accounts receivable, leases, obligations, licensing, legal, and compliance. Employee and agency records in this category are considered vital because the loss of these records would pose a significant risk to the rights of employees and government agencies.

The second category of vital records includes the information an agency needs to conduct mission-critical functions during an emergency and to resume normal business afterward. Examples in this category of vital records include emergency operating plans, staffing assignments, orders of succession, delegations of authority, emergency operations center access credentials, classified or restricted access container documentation, and building plans and equipment inventories for all agency facilities.

Preserving Vital Records

To identify, protect, and provide access to vital records, agencies must comply with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Federal Continuity Directives as well as the Managing Vital Records section of 36 CFR 1236.14. Records managers play critical roles in identifying agency vital records and incorporating vital records plans into their agency COOP. Although vital records may make up less than 10% of an agency's records, safeguarding vital records is a critical responsibility for records managers because these records have the greatest value in emergencies and require extra protection because they document legal and/or financial rights. In addition to preserving vital records so that they are accessible and safeguarded against environmental damage, agencies should determine the location of a facility for offsite storage of these records. The facility should be close enough to the agency headquarters to aid in conducting mission-critical functions during an emergency yet in a location that is unlikely to be affected by the same disaster, such as flood, earthquake, conflict, or terrorist attack.

The following measures can equip federal records managers to properly plan for and protect vital records:

- Agencies should view vital records and COOP programs as related and include personnel from information resources management, automatic data processing, security, and facilities management in creating the vital records plan. Staff from all these areas have essential roles in the continuity of operations if disaster strikes. The vital records program should be part of COOP, and the required annual review of the agency vital records program should be performed as part of agency continuity exercises.
- Agencies should find suitable storage locations that meet all applicable standards for vital records. For example, storage facilities should be resistant to seismic activity, tornadoes, hurricanes, and other natural and man-made disasters; guarded by perimeter, entry, and interior security protocols; and equipped with fire-safe construction and dependable water supplies.

- Although agencies are transitioning to digital records, agency vital records today are captured in multiple media, paper, electronic files, email, tapes, etc. For vital records recorded on more fragile media, such as microfilm or magnetic tape/discs, agencies should ensure that the storage facility has proper environmental control systems tailored to the unique needs of paper, triacetate and polyester film, magnetic and optical media, and color documents and photographs.
- Records managers should develop a comprehensive checklist to ensure full compliance and develop reporting tools that easily and thoroughly demonstrate adherence to compliance requirements.
- Records officers should provide training on the agency vital records program for all records managers/liaisons and emergency management staff and ensure that the required annual tests of agency and/or vendor capabilities provide access to vital records and support continuity of operations in the event of a disaster.

By organizing and protecting critical information — regardless of format, media, or location — with a full suite of backup, recovery, and archival services that meet federal code, federal agencies can ensure that vital records enhance the ability of agencies to fulfill their statutory missions and run the business of government during an emergency and resume normal agency activities after the emergency's conclusion while maintaining accountability and transparency through documented agency actions.

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