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Basic Records Management

Dear Reader:

The following document was created from the CTAS website (ctas.tennessee.edu). This website is maintained by CTAS staff and seeks to represent the most current information regarding issues relative to Tennessee county 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 county 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 CTAS website material.

Sincerely,

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Basic Records Management

Reference Number: CTAS-207

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 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. The information in the following pages should help the elected or appointed county official or department head learn how to get a good grasp on records management for his or her individual office.

Evaluate

Reference Number: CTAS-1183

The first thing to do is find out exactly where you are. Begin with an evaluation of the current state of the records of your office. Performing an inventory of your stored records is fundamental to efficient records management and gives you some hard data with which to make sound decisions. It is virtually impossible for a county office to get any sort of handle on its records situation unless it knows, with some degree of exactness, what records are in storage, how much of them there are, and how old they are.

Inventory

Reference Number: CTAS-1184

Once you have selected someone to do the inventory, make sure they understand the information you need and the goals of the inventory. Your office may wish to use the Sample Records Inventory Worksheet as a guide for performing an inventory. "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."[1]

The inventory will be beneficial to your office in a number of ways.

- Obviously, it will tell you exactly what records you have and where to find them. This alone will increase the efficiency of your office.
- It will help locate records that you can get rid of. Using the inventory and the records retention schedules for your office, you will probably discover a number of records that are unnecessarily taking up space in your office or your storage area.
- It will identify records that are in danger. Paper records can be easily 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.

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[1] *Managing Records on Limited Resources* A Guide for Local Governments, Stephen E. Haller, CRM, issued by the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators, November 11, 1991, p. 3.

Filing Systems

Reference Number: CTAS-1185

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 in your office and reduce costs. "If every employee of an agency of local governments spends even 5 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."[1] A good filing system will provide two major benefits to the people using it: *precise* retrieval and *timely* retrieval.[2] 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 only gives you part of what you want, or gives you back much more than you needed, it is inefficient. Poor filing system performance is generally attributed to seven major factors.

1. Inadequate management attention;
2. Poor organization and structure of files;
3. Poor labeling and indexing procedures;
4. Uncontrolled growth of records;
5. A high incidence of missing, misfiled, or lost records;[3]
6. Inadequate and/or poorly trained files personnel; and
7. Inadequate or no formal record-keeping procedures.[4]

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[1] *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.

[2] The Daily Management of Records and Information, p. 2.

[3] "Studies show that between 1 and 3 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.

[4] The Daily Management of Records and Information, pp. 2 and 3.

Filing Equipment

Reference Number: CTAS-1186

You may think all filing cabinets are alike, but that is just not true. Do not simply assume 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 and 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."[1]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.

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[1] *The Daily Management of Records and Information* A Guide for Local Governments, issued by the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators, p. 8.

Records Disposition Authorizations (RDAs)

Reference Number: CTAS-1187

Your first question is probably "what is an RDA?" The acronym RDA stands for Records Disposition Authorization. An RDA provides a formal statement of when a record can be destroyed and what authority serves as the basis for its destruction. This document can, however, 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;
- information about how the record is created;
- how it is used;
- where it needs to be stored;
- what format it needs to be kept in;

- who should have access to the record;
- how long it is in active use by an office;
- when to move a record into inactive storage;
- whether a record is vital or confidential; and
- whether or not the record can be destroyed.

RDAs and the retention schedules differ in a number of ways. The retention schedules describe the various records of an office, state if 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 will provide you with 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.

RDAs are fundamental to an efficiently operating records management program in any office with a large volume of records. RDAs allow an official to summarize on a single form what records are out-dated and eligible for disposal, and then use that form to request permission from the County Public Records Commission to destroy. Such authorizations may be *continuing*, i.e. ready to use whenever records of a particular type have reached the end of their life-cycle and may be destroyed or placed in an archive. Once created, the RDA would only need 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. Each office should have a set of RDAs that covers all the records it creates as well as older ones it inherits. (See the sample RDA Form developed by the Tennessee State Library and Archives This form may be copied and used to submit RDA’s to the records commission.)

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 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 so long as the mandate requires.
- A record or set of records should be retained by an agency so long as it is useful to performance of its routine functions.
- A decision to retain records beyond such active usefulness or legislative mandate is a decision to maintain them in such condition that 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 the responsibility 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:
    1. essential records that are needed to resume or continue operations or to recreate legal and financial status after disaster, or that are needed to protect or fulfill obligations;
    2. records that have lasting value as legal and fiscal evidence to account for responsible government; and
    3. 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: CTAS-1188

Both large and small offices can benefit from having written records management policies on certain issues. The policies should adopt the Records Retention Schedules, incorporate any Records Disposition Authorizations developed by your office, and include policies for dealing with inactive records, for allowing public access to records and 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 Tennessee State Library and Archives, and a records center or archive if one is in existence in your county. 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 date of its removal. This procedure should help your office track down misplaced records and cut down on losses. If you have an active records commission in your county, it may have already used its authority to develop policies on some of these issues. In that case, you could simply incorporate the commission's policies into your office procedures.

Continuing Maintenance

Reference Number: CTAS-1189

The best records management program will quickly fall into obsolescence if the office does not make efforts to stay on top of things. Records, particularly government records, grow at an astronomical rate. If you do not take steps to regularly move inactive records to other storage and destroy temporary records when they become eligible for destruction, they will soon begin to fill up your filing equipment, then your office, and bring clutter and disorganization to all operations. Consider implementing a "records clean-up day" for annually re-assessing the records of the office to 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.

Appoint a Records Management Officer

You may want to appoint one person within the office to be a records management officer. Having a single person responsible for records management efforts made within your office and to coordinate communication about your records with entities outside your office (the county public records commission, a records center, or an archives) can be a key to achieving success. The person should have good organizational skills, but should obviously not already be overwhelmed with too many other duties to be able to devote any time to records management. It may surprise you to hear that almost one-fourth of local governments have a full time records officer.[1]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 insuring that your records management program succeeds.

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[1] *Managing Records on Limited Resources* A Guide for Local Governments, Stephen E. Haller, CRM, issued by the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators, November 11, 1991, p. 2.

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