

Archives and Records Management



VITAL RECORDS PROTECTION, DISASTER PREPAREDNESS AND
RECOVERY

Guidelines

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VITAL RECORDS PROTECTION, DISASTER PREPAREDNESS AND RECOVERY

These Guidelines form part of a more comprehensive emergency plan, which is being developed for Archives and Records. The Guidelines are being dispatched now as a separate document and copies may be made as necessary for circulation to appropriate personnel.

In order to safeguard the Government and Country against loss, it is the responsibility of Heads of Departments and their designated officers to identify vital records and ensure the protection of such records in the event of a disaster.

1. Vital Records Protection

1.1 Definition

Vital records (sometimes referred to as essential records) are those active records, which are essential for the continuation or reconstruction of the operations of the Government in the event of a disaster. They tend to be records, which will establish the legal and financial position of the Government. They are critical to the establishment of the rights of the Government, its employees and citizens.

Vital records must be protected from natural disasters, such as hurricanes, earthquakes, floods or fires, and man-made disasters, such as accidents, civil disorder, vandalism or sabotage. They also need protection from common threats of mildew, light, dust, insects, rodents and excessive humidity, which may cause a loss of legibility or contribute to accelerated destruction.

1.2 Responsibility

The protection of vital records lies with Head of Departments in which the records are maintained. However, Heads of Departments should designate officers who will be responsible to see that vital records are properly protected.

Archives and Records Management Programme staff may be called upon to assist in the identification of vital records and planning for the protection of these records.

1.3 Determining what is Vital

Each department should have a Vital Record Schedule, which identifies the vital records of the department and how they are to be protected. One copy of this schedule will be forwarded to the Chief Records Management Officer for review and approval in consultation with the Archivist. Copies should be retained in the relevant Section of the Department. Copies of the Vital Records Schedule forms are available from the Records Management Unit.

1.3.1 Identification of Vital records involves two basic steps:

- ❖ Identifying the rights, obligations and essential functions of the Government
- ❖ Identifying the records critical to those functions

1.4 Classes of Government records, which may qualify as vital records, include:

- ❖ Vital Records Schedules and Disaster Preparedness and Recovery Plans
- ❖ Government charters statutes, ordinances, orders, policies and procedures
- ❖ Regulations
- ❖ Original minutes of Boards/Committees
- ❖ Non-Established, Established and Senior Administrative Staff Files (confidential series)
- ❖ Payroll records
- ❖ Pension records
- ❖ Social Security records
- ❖ Educational records
- ❖ Hospital records
- ❖ Deeds, titles, leases for Government property and land
- ❖ Building and site plans

- ❖ Insurance policies
- ❖ Contracts and agreements with government, funding agencies, etc.
- ❖ Accounts receivable records
- ❖ Summary financial reports
- ❖ Records documenting the amounts in various Government bank accounts
- ❖ Court records

1.5 Methods of Protection

Once vital records have been identified, they must be protected. These are three major ways of protecting these records:

- ❖ Duplication and dispersal may be carried out by making back up and security copies when the records are created, or by scheduling the periodic reproduction of records. The duplicate records should be maintained offsite, preferably at a facility that will not be subject to the same disaster. Prior to duplication, it is important to find out if duplicate copies of the records are already in existence, or if the same information may be available in another form or location (e.g. copies of minutes of Government committees will probably be available from other Department in order to avoid unnecessary duplication).
- ❖ On-site storage and vaulting
- ❖ Remote storage and vaulting

The method of protection to be used for each type of vital record should be outlined in the Vital Records Schedule. Procedures on how frequently material is to be copied, transferred to a storage location, and how transferred will be outlined in the schedule as well.

2. Disaster Preparedness and Recovery

2.1 Responsibility

Responsibility for taking precautionary measures for Government's property, including records, against loss or damage in the event of a hurricane lies with Heads of Departments. However, Heads of Departments should designate Records Officers and others who will be responsible to see that the precautionary measures are properly carried out in each department, section/unit. Archives and Records Management Programme staff may be called upon to assist in the protection of records, but as programme staff are only two in number, as much self help as possible should be undertaken.

2.2 Precautionary Measures

See **Appendices A and B**.

2.2.1 Designated Officers should:

- ❖ Remove all loose files and documents from the tops of desks, etc. and store them in a secure place (e.g. desk drawer, filing cabinet, and cupboard) away from windows and off floors at least fifteen (15) inches.
- ❖ Cover tops of open shelving on which records or books are stored in areas that might be susceptible to roof leaks with plastic sheeting or garbage bags. A supply of plastic sheeting or garbage bags should be kept nearby, as in an emergency it will be difficult to obtain needed materials quickly.
- ❖ Store vital records in a secure, safe place such as a vault or cabinet safe
- ❖ If records become damaged by water, steps should be taken to:
 - Stabilize the condition of the records by creating an environment that will not result in further damage
 - Salvage the maximum number of records in a manner that will minimize future conservation/restoration and its costs.

3. Recovery

3.1 Stabilization of the Environment

Mould growth is encouraged by conditions of high relative humidity and temperature. By reducing the relative humidity and temperature in an area where there are damaged records, mould growth can be reduced. This can be accomplished by:

- ❖ Increasing air circulation by opening all windows and doors and running several fans in the area. If electricity is a problem, run extension cords from the nearest available power supply (e.g. portable generator) if possible.

(NOTE: All power lines must be waterproof and grounded.)

- ❖ Reducing the temperature as much as possible by running portable air-conditioners in the area
- ❖ Removing excess water and all wet debris (e.g. carpets)

During this period, windows and doors must remain open to allow for air circulation; thus, special security measures must be taken. Access control should be monitored through the use of security personnel, sign-in/out register and the use of staff I.D. badges.

3.2 Damage Assessment and Salvage

The extent of damage should be documented in both written and photographic forms.

Assess the damaged records without handling when possible in order to prevent further damage. Note the type and status of the material (e.g. soaked, partially wet, damp, etc.)

3.3 Priority treatment must be given to the wettest material as follows:

- ❖ Indices, if they are the only complete listing of the records
- ❖ Vital or particularly valuable records (e.g. records necessary to re-establish the operation of the Government)
- ❖ Records that have already developed mould if they are of long term value
- ❖ Leather, parchment and vellum-bound materials

- ❖ Artefacts, original manuscripts, prints, drawings, maps and books with water soluble components (e.g. inks, water colours)
- ❖ Records printed on coated papers (provided they are not records of marginal value). If allowed to dry closed, such materials will congeal irreversibly into solid blocks.

3.4. Other Routines:

- ❖ Materials should be carefully packaged in plastic garbage bags and removed to pre-designated large open space for drying.
- ❖ Extreme care must be taken in handling water-damaged records, as they will be very fragile and will tear easily.
- ❖ No materials should be stacked on the floor awaiting removal, as this may cause further damage.
- ❖ Following removal of the wettest materials, partially wet and extremely damp records can be removed.
- ❖ Extremely wet materials securely packed in garbage bags or wrapped in plastic sheets may have to be frozen in a deep freeze or freezer chest to prevent mould growth until salvage can begin.
- ❖ Careful documentation must be kept on all records removed from offices to the drying space to ensure that material is not lost.

3.5 Rehabilitation of Salvaged Records

After salvaged records are removed to a pre-designated large open space for drying:

- ❖ Documents should be spread out on blank newsprint or paper towel to absorb moisture.
- ❖ Books should be placed upright with pages fanned to permit air flow
- ❖ Other appropriate measures, such as reformatting should be taken, resources permitting.

Appendix A

Disaster Management Tips for Records, Archives and Museums

- (1) Observe general precautions outlined in the Disaster Manager Handbook.
- (2) Select your response team in each office Registry and know who is responsible for doing what when disaster strikes e.g. know who holds keys etc.
- (3) Examine roofs where necessary and check for leaks in records, books and artifacts storerooms.
- (4) Know where fire-extinguishes and sprinklers are located
- (5) Store books, documents, and records off the floor especially if the storeroom is at ground level.
- (6) Store plastic sheeting for covering stacks of shelves and documents.
- (7) If on ground floor shelve documents on upper shelves.
- (8) Store bags of sand to check floodwater.
- (9) Peruse the checklist of in-house supplies.
- (10) Ensure you stock the essential items.

Appendix B

Disaster Management: Checklist of in-house stock supplies

Please ensure that you have access to the following basic precautionary supplies:

Book trolleys
Boots, rubber
First-aid kits
Ladders
Gloves
Dust masks
Extension cords (3 wire grounded, 50 feet)
Overcoats
Brooms
Mops/garbage bags
Flashlights/batteries
Hammers/nails
Scissors

For water damaged documents:

Drying Supplies

Clothesline (nylon)
Clothes pins, plastic
Portable fans
Unprinted paper e.g. deli wrap, newsprint, blotting paper (for interleaving between wet pages)
Paper towels
Plastic sheeting
Dehumidifiers

For removing mould:

Vacuum (with HEPA filter)
Clean rags
Soft bristled brush
Lysol or Clorox

For packing materials:

Boxes (cardboard)
Packing slips
Pencils/pens
Waxed paper