Identifying and Locating Your Records

By John H. Slate, CA

Records Management Technical Bulletins

The Municipal Clerks Education Foundation (MCEF), established in 1984, is a tax-exempt, nonprofit foundation under Section 501 (C)(3) created to raise funds for its partner, the International Institute of Municipal Clerks. IIMC uses these funds to promote, train and educate Municipal Clerks, making them proficient in the services they provide for the citizens of their community. MCEF is a diverse team of volunteers who are passionately committed to helping IIMC pursue its educational objectives.

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The National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators (NAGARA) is a professional association dedicated to the improvement of federal, state, and local government records and information management programs and the professional development of government records administrators and archivists.

The National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), a statutory body affiliated with the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), supports a wide range of activities to preserve, publish, and encourage the use of documentary sources, created in every medium ranging from quill pen to computer, relating to the history of the United States.

Like every organization, local governments create and maintain large quantities of records. Many of these records not only are of great value to the local government, but also are of concern and essential to the citizens of the community. Federal and state-mandated program requirements, changes in growth and development patterns, expanded service needs, the use of computers and other technologies for creating and using information, and the proliferation of copies in various formats, have all contributed to this enormous accumulation of records. Each publication is intended to make available to local governments the basic principles, policies, and guidelines that should be followed in establishing a sound records management program and in carrying out sound records management practices.

The series is intended for local officials, with limited resources, who lack formal records management or archival training but who have custodial responsibility for records. These local governments include townships, villages, cities, counties, school districts, and other local political subdivisions and special-purpose districts. Each of the following publications in the series includes a bibliography that refers to other reading for more detailed information and guidance.

Overview:

Starting a Records Management Program, The Daily Management of Records and Information, Making Your Records Management Program Successful, Managing Records on Limited Resources, Funding Your Records Management Project

Creation, Collection and Storage:

Identifying and Locating Your Records, Establishing Records Retention, The Selection and Development of Local Government Records Storage Facilities, Developing a Records Storage System

Preservation, Promotion, Use and Access:

Archives for Local Governments, Protecting Records, Using and Storing Microfilm

Care, Management, and Preservation of Electronic Records:

E-Mail Management, Selecting and Using Document Imaging Systems, Managing Electronic Records, Preparing for E-Discovery

Copies of these bulletins are available on the IIMC and NAGARA websites.
IIMC at www.iimc.com • www.nagara.org

Acknowledgements

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Julian Mims is a career archivist, records manager and educator. He directed the local records program at the South Carolina Archives from its inception. He was in charge of the Long Island office of the New York State Archives and Records Administration (NYSARA). As a Vice President and Award of Merit winner of ARMA International, he helped to found a record ten ARMA chapters. Dr. Mims is the author of the International City/County Managers Association (ICMA) best-seller, *Records Management: A Practical Guide for Counties and Cities*, and was editor of ICMA's *Electronic Records Management*. Earning a doctorate from the University of South Carolina in 2001, he has taught at six colleges and universities.

Special thanks to the support team:

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INTRODUCTION

Identifying and locating records is the bedrock practice in their management and use. This Technical Bulletin provides guidance on systematically identifying records within your municipality or office. Through a records inventory, you will learn how information in your organization flows, how it is managed, and what its value is.

Get your department or administration to sign on to your project. Inventories are easiest to accomplish when they are endorsed/promoted by management, led by the local government's records officer, archivist, or other responsible party, and conducted according to a reasonable timetable.

A records inventory is the primary source of information not just for the creation of retention schedules but also for vital records protection, indexing systems, reports/forms management, and records storage. In essence, a records inventory is the first step in creating a local government records management program.

Before beginning an inventory, contact your state's records management / archives agency. Many have established questionnaire forms and procedures for conducting an inventory.

Refer to Appendix for sample inventory form.

A good inventory lays the groundwork for the systematic and documented disposal of records.

What is a Records Inventory?

A records inventory (also called a survey) is the process of identifying all records series, their function and their use.

This is an undated photo of county courthouse records housed in poor storage conditions. Records had not been fully inventoried or scheduled for disposition. (Photo courtesy of State Historical Society of North Dakota.)

Inventories are the basis for determining records retention and disposition. Records series are described in a set of descriptions called a schedule. A schedule provides guidelines that list records series and what to do with them -how long to retain them, special maintenance instructions, and sometimes procedures for disposing of them. Retention schedules reflect the length of time that records have operational, legal, fiscal, or historical value. Most states issue "general" retention schedules that all its local governments can use. Why reinvent the wheel when you have an existing tool to use?

Some of the states with general schedules also have enacted laws which require local governments to establish/maintain a records management program and comply with state laws.

In conducting the inventory, you will identify records as a records series. This is a group or unit of related documents or information that is normally filed or kept together because they relate to a particular subject or function, result from the same activity, or document a particular transaction or activity. Examples include correspondence, contracts, ordinances, fiscal vouchers, project files, resolutions, and time sheets.

Paper-based records series will be located in on- and off-site storage areas, filing cabinets, shelves and boxes. Electronic documents are maintained on local hard drives and on networks. Regardless of form, records need to be identified.

Remember: This is not a folder-by-folder or document-by-document individual item inventory; it is an examination of records grouped together.

As you review record groups, you will learn a great deal about how information flows and how it is managed. You will determine who originates documents, who receives copies (and how many), and how long they are needed.

Methods

Records inventories can be time-consuming. Therefore, it is best to make active records your priority, or those that have organization – wide

applicability, such as finance records, or ones with which you are familiar, such as those in the municipal clerk's office.

There are generally three approaches to conducting the inventory:

Individual: Those familiar with particular office functions and records complete the inventory or survey form on their own. This generally is not the most effective means of gathering the necessary information because records study seldom is the individual's priority; thus the return rate likely will be low. Also, people may not understand the form and might return incomplete or inconsistent forms. Extensive follow-up is then required.

Records coordinators: With this approach, a member of each department or area is designated as the records coordinator/liaison and works with the local government's records officer. These individuals form a records management committee and are responsible for gathering/ disseminating information. The committee becomes familiar with the inventory forms/ procedure, and members conduct an inventory within their areas. Forms are submitted to the records officer or his/her designee for review.

Records management professionals: This method uses professionally trained records analysts to go to every department, gather information about an office's function/ records, and complete inventory forms. This is an excellent approach when funds underwrite professional analysts.

## Understanding Information Flow Through a Diagram

A context diagram assists the traditional inventory of records. It is a visual diagram of a process; it shows players and information flow; and it identifies the information, regardless of media or format. Retention schedules can then be applied to each type of information.

You may want a meeting of key employees (all-levels) that are responsible for a process or function to get together to develop the context diagram. Start by identifying a Process your department is responsible for:
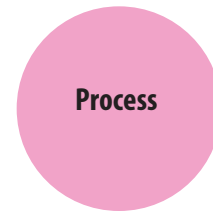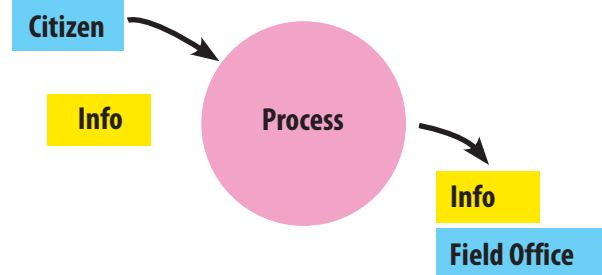

Add descriptors of the people involved using rectangles to identify each. Show the direction of the information flow with arrows and use squares to identify the information.
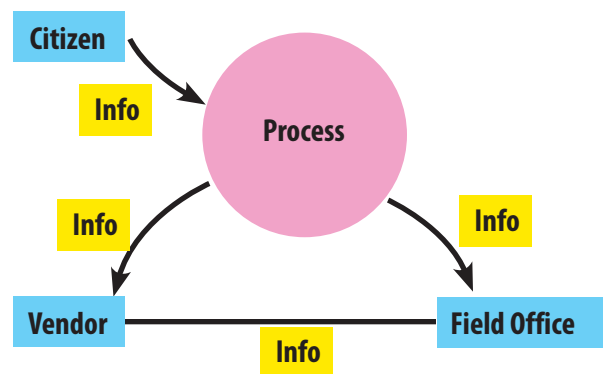
Include the type of information (request for service), not the media (paper, e-mail, fax, telephone call):
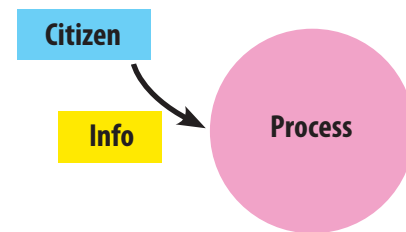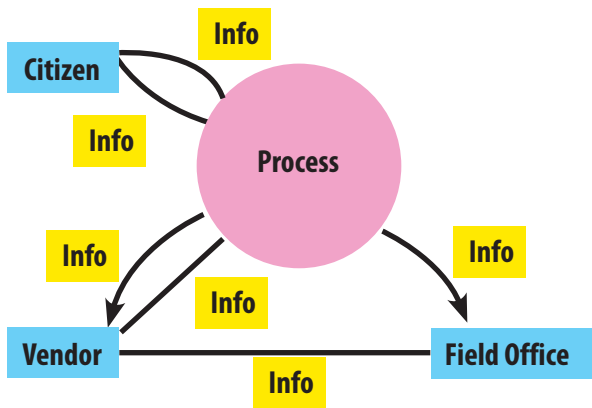

Continue adding players and the flow of information:

More players and information flowing between them:

Complete the diagram for the entire process. Now the squares of information are the records that must be included on the departmental retention schedules.

Inventory Form

The inventory or survey form is a series of fill-in- the-blank queries used to obtain information to describe the records series and to determine its retention period. It should be logical and written in layperson's language. An inventory form includes the following:

Records series title: Use the name by which this group of records (documents, files) is commonly referred.

Records series description: Explain the function and purpose of records.

Dates: List the earliest and latest dates, including all records in the series, regardless of where they are stored (location or format).

Quantity: Estimate the amount or volume of the records.

Storage medium: Describe the format in which the records are maintained, including paper, microfilm, disks, or tapes.

Filing system: Identify the manner in which the files are arranged, e.g., alphabetic, numeric, chronological, alphanumeric.

Vital records: Indicate if the records series is vital to continuing the operations of the government. This information is used in developing a disaster plan for records.

Retention requirements: Identify any laws, regulations, professional requirements or other mandates/guidelines for determining the length of time to maintain the records.

Other elements that may be included in the survey include:

- Name of custodian of records.
- Originator of records.
- Location of records.
- Source and location of other copies.
- Current retention practice.
- Access restrictions or conditions affecting the privacy or confidentiality of the records.

Conducting the Inventory

An effective inventory procedure requires cooperation, persistence, patience, curiosity, good humor, and a "big picture" perspective. There are no hard-and-fast rules for conducting the inventory, except to use a consistent form to gather the information and:

FIND all files in all storage equipment and areas. This should include all formats and media.

ASK questions until it is clear what the file is, why it is kept, who uses it, and how long it should be kept.

Electronic Records

Inventorying information kept on personal computers, disks, drives, tapes and mainframe computers may seem complicated. Although they are different from paper-based records, electronic files should be treated in the same manner as paper-based records. You will need to investigate how each electronic system is used and how it works, who has access to it, what and how many kinds of reports are produced, how the information is kept, and how often information is superseded, deleted and backed-up.

Develop a good working relationship with your information technology staff to keep abreast of changes to systems, programs and procedures.

What to Expect

You may encounter difficulties and delays as you conduct the inventory. It can be an exhausting and time-consuming project. Dealing with disinterested or reluctant employees who are not supportive of the inventory's objectives will require patience.

Know what records you have, where they are stored, and when their retention period ends.

This photo was taken in 1986 by Oceanside, California City Clerk staff when the city's official records management program began. It shows a below-ground room at a sewage treatment plant that was used by several departments to store records. The room was vandalized by transients and infested by various rodents and insects.

Many records are situated in inappropriate locations and environments-they may be hard to reach, dirty or contaminated when they are accessed. They also may be filed haphazardly, misfiled and confusing (are they original records? master copies of records? duplicate copies?).

Remember to complete a records inventory whenever new records are created and maintained or received (in any format).

Results

The information gathered from the records inventory will be used to draft records retention schedules. The inventory also can help create a vital records program, to ensure the protection of those records essential to conducting local government business.

Bibliography and other resources for more information

ARMA International. *Retention Management for Records and Information*. Overland Park, KS: ARMA International, 2005

Etherington, Suzanne, and Przybyla, Ann Marie. *Inventory and Planning: The First Steps in Records Management*. Albany: New York State Archives Government Records Services, 2003.

Ohio Historical Society. *Local Government Records Handbook*. Columbus: State Archives of Ohio, Local Government Records Program, n.d.

Texas State Library and Archives Commission. *Inventorying and Scheduling Records: Local Government Bulletin* C. www.tsl.state.tx.us/slrm/recordspubs/lgbullc.html#intro

Glossary

Date span. The period of time covered by a certain set of records

Disposition. The final action performed upon records: either destruction or transfer to an archives

Duplicate. An extra copy of a record.

Electronic record. Information, evidencing any action, transaction, occurrence, event, or other activity, produced or stored by electronic means and capable of being accurately reproduced in forms perceptible by human sensory capabilities. Simple definition: a record that is in electronic form.

File. A collection of related records that are treated as a unit, sometimes used synonymously with "records series" and sometimes referring to the contents of one case or file folder.

Record. Legal definition for local governments: Any book, paper, map, photograph, microphotograph or any other information storage device regardless of physical form or characteristic which is the property of the state or any state agency, department, division, board, bureau, commission, county, city, town, village, district or any subdivision thereof by whatever name designated in or on which any entry has been made or is required to be made by law, or which any officer or employee of any said bodies has received or is required to receive for filing. Informal definition: Information, in any format, that is created by an organization or received in the formal operation of its responsibilities.

Records inventory - A records inventory is taking stock of the records series and information systems found in the organization. The inventory could include a look at the types, locations (active and inactive records), dates, volumes (cubic feet), equipment, classification systems, and usage of an organization's records, as well as other things that were identified when the review of the organization was taking place.

Records inventory. The process of locating, identifying, and describing the records maintained by an organization; sometimes called "inventory."

Records Management. The systematic control of all records in an organization throughout their life cycle.

Records management officer (RMO). the person responsible for overseeing a records management program for a state agency or local government.

Records retention. See "retention".

Records retention and disposition schedule. A list of records series titles that indicates the length of time to maintain each series; also called a "records schedule" or a "retention schedule".

Records schedule. See "Records retention and disposition schedule".

Records series. A group of related records (such as minutes of a board, payrolls, and purchase orders) that are normally used and filed as a unit and that normally have the same retention requirements.

Records survey. A review that gathers basic information about the quantity, type, function, location and arrangement of records in an organization.

Retention. The act of keeping records for the time required, given their administrative, fiscal, legal, or historical value and use; also called "records retention".

Retention period. The amount of time a record must be kept to meet administrative, fiscal, legal, historical, or use requirements.

Retention schedule. See "Records retention and disposition schedule".

Schedule (noun). See "Records retention and disposition schedule".

Series. See "Records series".

Records Inventory (Survey)

SAMPLE FORM

1. Municipality Name	2. Department/Division Name
3. Section/Sub-Unit Name	4. Name of Contact Person 5. Telephone No.
6. Records Series Title	7. Date Range of Records

8. Description (what is the purpose and function of this records series?)
(Use No. 21 if additional space is needed.)

9. File Arrangement	10. Records Format/Medium
• Alphabetical by • Numerical by • Chronological by • None	• Paper (size) • Microform (type) • Machine readable (disk, tape, etc.) • Other (specify)
11. How often do you reference these records? • Daily • Monthly • Weekly • Less Often	12. Cut-off period for records • Calendar year • Continuous (no break) • Fiscal year • Other (specify)

13. Are the records (check all that apply)
• Originals
  Does your department originate these records? Y/N
• Duplicates
  If duplicated where are other copies kept?
• Record or master copy? Y/N
	14. Are these vital records essential to conducting business? Y/N
	Explanation:

15. ANNUAL Accumulation of the Records Letter/Legal-size drawers: Letter/Legal-size boxes: Other (specify):	16. TOTAL Accumulation of the Records (include all storage locations) Letter/Legal-size drawers: Letter/Legal-size boxes: Other (specify):

Letter/Legal-size drawers: Letter/Legal-size boxes: Other (specify):	Storage Locations Letter/Legal-size drawers: Letter/Legal-size boxes: Other (specify) Location(s) of records:

17. Cite any agency, state or federal policy, regulation or law, or professional organization's recommendation pertaining to the actions documented in the series. Please attach copy of citation.

18. Access to Records (attach copy of citation)
   • No restrictions
   • Protected under
   • Exempt from public disclosure under the
   • Other legal restrictions (specify)

19. Your Recommended Retention and Disposition (complete as applicable)

   a. Total length of retention (day / months / years / permanent)

   b. Retain on-site (days / months / years)

   c. Retain off-site (days / months / years)

   d. Reformat after (days / months / years)

   Reformat to: • microfilm • Optical disk

   Retain reformatted material (days / months / years / permanently)

20. Comments/reasons for recommendations listed in No. 19 (include any citations requiring or recommending specific retention).

21. Additional Comments if needed)

22. Survey Conducted By	23. Date of Survey