

# Why Records Management Matters

by Bruce Dearstyne

**R**ecords management is a part of sound government administration. Records are created every day by government officials in the course of carrying out their official responsibilities; other records are created or received in the course of serving the public and carrying out public business. In fact, second only to the government's employees, information is probably every government's most important resource. Records—essentially, recorded information—are the most important subset of information.

Records management means the leadership, coordination, and other work required to ensure that adequate records are created to document government functions and meet administrative, legal, and other operational needs. It also means that recordkeeping requirements are built into electronic information systems, records are organized and accessible, records are retained and disposed of based on legal requirements and analysis of their function and value, and records of continuing value—or archives, also known as archival records—are preserved and accessible.

## **RECORDS MANAGEMENT MATTERS**

Records are not always managed well by jurisdictions (see box on page 25). Sound records management, however, reinforces and is consistent with several ICMA priorities:

- Strengthening performance management; records provide the basis for measuring, comparing, and improving local service delivery.

- Implementing the policies envisioned by local councils; those policies are themselves records, and records also document their formulation and legislative intent.
- Planning strategically; records document government and provide the basis for planning and organizational effectiveness.
- Mastering information technology; IT needs to be incorporated appropriately in plans to improve service delivery, information sharing, and citizen access, including managing the electronic records that are created in the process.
- Managing for emergencies; preserving key records is essential to government continuity.

Here are six more reasons why records management matters:

**1. Records management helps government employees find the information they need.** Missing or incomplete information plagues many government projects. In contrast, the existence of too much information—in government files, on the Web, and elsewhere—creates a needle-in-a-haystack situation.

One study concluded that knowledge workers, or employees who need information to get their work done, spend from 15 percent to 35 percent of their time searching for information; searchers are successful in finding what they seek only 50 percent of the time or less.<sup>1</sup> Much of what local government employees do each day involves finding and using information. Better organized records can aid in information seeking.

**2. Records management helps local government administrators and executives find the information needed for decision making.** City and county managers are all too familiar with one of the problems of decision making: not enough current, accurate information. “In the end, you have to have the guts to make a decision,” noted a chief executive in Jeffrey Garten’s study, *The Mind of the CEO*. “You’ll

## Records Need Better Care

Responsible managers of public resources wouldn’t consider leaving the management of public assets such as public buildings or equipment to chance. Yet in too many cities and counties, records management is disorganized, neglected, or uneven. How does this come about?

- Records are not seen as central to the business of government; instead they are often regarded as physical by-products of transactions and operations.
- Records are confused with their physical formats (paper, microfilm, computer hard drive) instead of being recognized as carriers of information regardless of format.
- Responsibility for records management is not assigned or is unclear, and a plan and program for managing records does not exist; everyone has records but no one in particular is responsible for their systematic management.
- Legal responsibilities, including retention and disposition requirements, are unknown or not implemented.
- Records are retained well beyond their minimum legal retention periods on the chance they might be needed, creating a costly storage burden that makes finding any particular records all the more difficult.

never have all the data you need. You’ll never be able to sort through all the risks that are right in front of you. You [try to] get the right information and couple it with the right instincts to make a decision.”<sup>2</sup>

Almost every local government executive has faced problems that include “the amount of information available, the timing of access to information, the potential for rumors to substitute when good information is not available, and insufficient information.”<sup>3</sup> Records management can’t solve this problem, but it can help by making sure that the administrator can readily get at the necessary information in the government’s own files.

**3. Records management helps local government respond to citizen requests for records and information.** Every city and county operates under Freedom of Information statutes that mandate that records be made available to citizens. Systematic records management and orderly recordkeeping practices can help local governments meet these legal obligations.

For instance, the Ohio Coalition for Open Government, a group repre-

sending newspapers and other media, conducted an audit to test compliance with Ohio’s FOI law a few years ago. Only about half of the requested records were made available the same day as the request or the next day, leading to assertions—all too common—about local officials’ lack of training and overly restrictive interpretations of the law.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, a more fundamental explanation is often simply the difficulty of locating requested records. Better approaches to records creation, access, filing, storage, and retrieval systems—all in the domain of records management—can help.

**4. Records management is essential to the application and use of information technology.** Most governments run on electronic information, and most records are now originally created electronically, even if they are later converted to paper through printing and copying. “Although paper records will continue to occupy the offices of local governments, paper is increasingly being relegated to the status of the casual printout,” notes one expert quoted in *Electronic Records Management*, a book published by ICMA in 2006.

Increasingly, recordkeeping capacities have to be built into electronic information systems. These records have to be managed electronically and, as this same expert noted, data processing melds into document management. Static documents become virtual documents, and the business objectives of records management need to expand to include process improvement and cost reduction.<sup>5</sup> Records management is particularly important for e-mail, Web sites, and electronic databases with critical information.

**5. Records management saves money.**

Good records management fosters efficient information access, relegates inactive records to inactive storage areas or facilities, and ensures the disposition of obsolete records, thereby reducing storage costs. Records management is something managers can justify to elected officials and taxpayers—it streamlines operations and saves tax dollars.

**6. Records management ensures the documentation of local government's accomplishments.**

Archival records are sometimes stereotyped as old and are thought to be interesting to only a narrow group of historical researchers. In fact, archival records that have long-term value and that must be kept indefinitely may have been created as recently as last week: board minutes, updated plat maps, and probate files are just a few examples. Their users include local government officials, students, citizens protecting their personal or business interests, and other people interested in various local issues and developments.

Archival records, of course, are not just for use today. Their preservation also is a responsibility that local governments have for tomorrow. But viewed more broadly, the most important records document what local government does. That is an important story, and records are the source for understanding it.

“Managing so that citizens may be free,” was the way one manager put it

in an article in *PM* last year. Cities and counties are “closest to the people” and deliver “services that have the most direct impact on people’s daily lives.” Examples the manager cited included ensuring potable water; collecting and treating wastewater; maintaining the transportation network and public transportation; providing free access to information via the public library system; and ensuring public health, public housing, and law enforcement.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, the list could go on. A full, well managed set of records documents local government’s services, impact, and interaction with people’s lives.

Archival records, of course, are not just for use today. Their preservation also is a responsibility that local governments have for tomorrow.

**FUNDAMENTALS OF RECORDS MANAGEMENT**

Essentially, a successful records management system boils down to these elements:

- Active interest and support from the manager and other top officials.
- An ordinance, local law, or other enactment outlining the program’s authority, mission, and goals.
- Someone in charge, often with a title something like “records management officer,” who can advise, educate, guide, and—where appropriate—ensure compliance with state-issued records retention and disposition schedules.
- Coordination with such other offices whose work impacts on records management; these offices include the IT department, chief information officer, and the free-

dom of information office.

- A responsible recordkeeping environment in which local government employees receive training and understand their records management responsibilities.
- Adequate controls and access systems to ensure timely records and information retrieval.
- Adherence to state-issued retention and disposition schedules that indicate how long records need to be retained or to locally developed schedules that meet state requirements.
- Understanding of the records management implications of information technology that lead to building recordkeeping capacity into electronic information systems.
  - Segregation and storage of inactive records that are no longer needed for day-to-day use but haven’t yet reached their minimum retention periods.
  - Special attention to archival records with enduring value; this must include secure storage, description and access, and preservation, often under the custody of a separate archival program that should be closely related to the records management program.
- Attention to records as part of the local government’s disaster preparedness and continuity-of-operations planning.

**AND THERE’S MORE**

ICMA is cooperating with the Council of State Archivists’ project, Closest to Home, which is a national initiative to strengthen the preservation and management of archival records. Information is available online at [www.statearchivists.org/lga/index.htm](http://www.statearchivists.org/lga/index.htm).

There is a good deal of extremely useful literature on systematic, efficient, cost-effective, proven records management practices that make good business sense and can save local governments money. Mentioned earlier, ICMA’s book, *Electronic Records Management*, is a useful source for that aspect of the topic.

Official state archive programs in

each state provide guidance for local governments, including, in most cases, information about retention and disposition schedules. To locate the state archivist in your state, visit the Web site at [www.statearchivists.org/statearchivists.htm](http://www.statearchivists.org/statearchivists.htm).

Additional information is available from these professional associations:

- ARMA International: [www.arma.org](http://www.arma.org). ARMA is the major national organization representing records managers and administrators, including those in local governments. It offers an extensive collection of publications, training, and a network of regional chapters nationwide.
- Council of State Archivists (CoSA): [www.statearchivists.org](http://www.statearchivists.org). CoSA is leading the Closest to Home project as part of its broader mission to assist the state archives deliver information, training, and financial resources to their constituents, including local government agencies.
- National Association of Government Archives and Records Ad-

## Look to ICMA for Resources

ICMA has books that can help: *Records Management: A Practical Guide for Cities and Counties* and *Electronic Records Management*. Visit ICMA's online bookstore at [bookstore.icma.org](http://bookstore.icma.org).

ministrators (NAGARA): [www.nagara.org](http://www.nagara.org). NAGARA brings together both records managers and archivists from all three levels of government—local, state, and federal—to address issues of common concern.

- Society of American Archivists (SAA): [www.archivists.org](http://www.archivists.org). SAA provides publications and both basic and advanced training on archival principles and practices, preservation, digitization, archival facilities. **PM**

<sup>1</sup>Susan Feldman, "The High Cost of Not Finding Information," *KM World*, March 1, 2004, [www.kmworld.com/Articles/ReadArticle.aspx?ArticleID=9534](http://www.kmworld.com/Articles/ReadArticle.aspx?ArticleID=9534).

<sup>2</sup>Jeffrey Garten, *The Mind of the CEO* (New York: Perseus Publishing, 2002), 146.

<sup>3</sup>Joe Ohren, "Improving Local Government Decision Making: Insights from Local Officials," *Public Management* 89 (January/February 2007), 20.

<sup>4</sup>Ohio Coalition for Open Government, "Statewide Audit: Records Granted Only Half the Time," *Open Records Report: Special Edition*, spring/summer 2004, [www.ohionews.org/pdf/ocogspring2004se.pdf](http://www.ohionews.org/pdf/ocogspring2004se.pdf).

<sup>5</sup>David O. Stephens, "Electronic Records Enter the Mainstream," in Julian Mims, III, ed., *Electronic Records Management* (Washington: ICMA, 2006), 1–16.

<sup>6</sup>Roger Storey, "Managing So That Citizens Can Be Free," *Public Management* 88 (August 2006), 4–7.

Bruce Dearstyne is principal consultant, Council of State Archivists' Closest to Home Project, Albany, New York ([dearstyne@verizon.net](mailto:dearstyne@verizon.net)).



Why did the award-winning City of Naperville's procurement office seek out NIGP's Professional Consulting Services?

## Unrivaled expertise.

When the City of Naperville, Illinois, committed to establishing its procurement office as a role model for the public procurement profession, it turned to **NIGP's Professional Consulting Services** for the insight and guidance it needed to achieve the coveted Pareto Award for Excellence in Public Procurement.

NIGP is the National Institute of Governmental Purchasing. For over 60 years, NIGP has dedicated its resources to the development and support of state and local public procurement agencies and the professionals who serve them. Whether your agency seeks accreditation, process improvement, benchmarking services, or management assessment, NIGP provides the public sector with unrivaled professional resources for procurement-related business issues.

[nigp.org](http://nigp.org)

For more details about **NIGP's Professional Consulting Services** and how to achieve your procurement agency's development goals, contact us at **800-367-6447 x246**.