Records Management Overview

FAQ for Public Libraries and Public Library Systems

What is Records Management?

Records management addresses the lifecycle of records, the period of time that records are in the custody of state, regional and local governments. This usually consists of three stages: creation or receipt, maintenance and use, and disposition (destruction/deletion or transfer to the Wisconsin Historical Society).

What is a record?

A record is information, in any format, preserved because it is evidence of state, regional and local government functions, policies, decisions, procedures, projects, activities, programs, mission, obligations and/or operations. A record captures the decisions and actions a government organization takes.

Records can:

- Be created in the course of business
- Be received for action
- Be mandated by statute or regulation
- Document state, regional and local government activities
- Support financial obligations or legal claims
- Communicate state, regional and local government requirements

Records may be in any format, including but not limited to:

- Paper
- Electronic files and documents
- Email and voicemail
- Social media content, including posts, comments, and video
- Websites
- Videotapes/DVDs
- Webcasts or webinars
- Calendars
- Documents, spreadsheets, databases
- Personal devices if used for state, regional and local government business
- Audio recordings
- Maps

How can you tell if it is a record?

Does it record a business activity, action, or event? Do you need it to prove a transaction did – or did not – occur? Do auditors require you to retain it? Could it be used to resolve a dispute in the future? Do you need it to identify who participated in an event or had knowledge of an event? Does it support facts you claim to be true? Has the person with direct knowledge of the facts retired or is otherwise unavailable? Does it support what you do? Does it have business, legal, or historical value? Is it mandated by statute or

regulation? Does it communicate state, regional and local government policy, procedure or program requirements? Does it support financial obligations or legal claims? Then it's probably a record!

Examples of records include:

- Business-related correspondence or memos
- Inquiries: internal or external
- Program-related documentation
- Team, project, committee, or workgroup documentation
- Meeting agendas/minutes/handouts
- Training materials you have developed/presented
- Work assignments
- Routine activity reports
- Organizational charts
- Decision papers
- Program, policy, and procedure development documentation
- Operating procedures
- Public records requests and responses
- Calendars, schedules, and daily activity logs
- Applications
- Contracts
- Grants
- Audits
- Invoices
- Completed forms
- Data in databases
- Material prepared for publication on internal or external websites

What are transitory records?

Routine material that facilitates day-to-day operations but does not set policy, establish guidelines or procedures, certify a transaction or become a receipt are transitory records. These are documents of short-term interest with no evidentiary value. Working files are often transitory. Transitory records should be retained until they are no longer needed.

Examples include correspondence such as:

- Are you interested in participating in future meetings?
- I'd like to have further discussion with you on an upcoming project. Check my calendar and feel free to set something up.
- Per our discussion, here is a copy of a document.
- Here are links to the information you asked about in our meeting.
- I'm finishing a project and will be able to provide you with some information next week.

What is NOT a record?

Documents or communications that are not needed for the official record but are useful to an individual for recall of events, activities, and actions are not records. These items can be disposed of immediately or when no longer needed. Examples include:

- Reference materials and stock copies (vendor catalogs, phone books, agency publications, blank forms)
- Copies maintained as reading, reference, or "tickler" files kept for convenience or reference purposes only, and that are identical to the official record
- Draft or working files used internally, including draft documents without substantive comments, personal notes, calculations, and background materials.
    - **Drafts or working files with significant notes that support a decision or drafts shared outside of your organization are considered a record and must be managed by a retention schedule.**
- General announcements and unsolicited email, internal or external, including reminders received by all staff, listserv messages, or spam
- Personal property such as personnel files, leave account information, or personal email

Why is records management important?

State, regional and local government organizations need to manage public records so that:

- Records can be located when needed with efficiency and certainty.
- The organization ensures compliance with public records laws, promotes transparency in government, and fulfills obligations to the public.
- Documents are available for other important uses and decision making.
- Organizational memory and vital information can be safeguarded.
- Open records requests can be responded to efficiently.
- Information is available when needed, when legal counsel needs it, within an open records request timeframe, or for a discovery request.

Records are valuable!

- **Legal Value:** Records document the legal obligations and responsibilities of state, regional and local government organizations and personnel, and can be used to ensure legal rights.
- **Fiscal Value:** Records establish an organization's financial responsibilities and accountability.
- **Audit Value:** Records are used as sources of evidence in an audit.
- **Administrative Value:** Records support the day-to-day business activities of an organization and its staff.
- **Evidential Value:** Records document and provide evidence of the operations, functions, policies, decisions, procedures and activities of an organization.
- **Informational Value:** Records contain information about particular people, groups, events, conditions, problems, places, and other topics with which an organization deals or interacts.
- **Historical Value:** Records document the history of the government through the significant information about persons, places, events, or government that they contain. Historical records usually have a permanent retention and would be of archival interest.

Where should records be saved?

Electronic records must be stored in a way that is accessible, accurate, authentic, reliable, legible, and readable throughout the records' life cycle, in compliance with Wisconsin Administrative Code Chapter Adm 12. Physical records should also be maintained with consistent file structures.

Filing regularly and accurately is as important as anything else you do. Both paper and electronic records need to be organized so that they can be found and managed according to the Records Retention and Disposition Authorization (see below) that controls the required retention period for the record. There are rules governing the use and destruction of state, regional and local government organizations records. It is your responsibility to protect the records in your custody, and there are legal implications for destroying records without the proper authority.

All employees of the organization who create records must be aware of the requirements for records retention and of your organization's records storage practices.

How long are records saved?

Wisconsin Public Libraries and Public Library Systems may utilize General Records Schedules (GRS) approved by the Wisconsin Public Records Board to manage records in compliance with Wisconsin Public Records Law. GRSs outline how long types of records must be retained and how they are to be disposed of when the retention period has ended.

Organizations must formally adopt any GRS and notify the Public Records Board of such.

A record of any format is saved based on the appropriate retention schedule, a binding legal document used to secure approval from the Public Records Board for the disposition (deletion, destruction or transfer of records to the Wisconsin Historical Society) of public records. RDAs outline how long certain types of records are to be maintained and what should happen to them after the retention period has ended. All records must be scheduled with an RDA within one year of their creation. They must be approved before a record can be destroyed/deleted/transferred. Some RDAs are for DPI program-specific records. Other RDAs are statewide General Schedules, used by all state agencies for records common across the enterprise, such as Budget, Payroll, and Human Resources.

Where can I get help?

Have questions? The following resources may be available to assist you:

- State of Wisconsin Department of Justice Public Records Compliance Guide - https://www.wisdoj.gov/Pages/AboutUs/public-records.aspx
- Wisconsin Historical Society Local Government Records Program - https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS15471
- Wisconsin Historical Society General Records Management Guidance - https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/areaadmin/records-management.htm
- Wisconsin Historical Society Best Practices for Organizing Electronic Records - https://wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS15486