**Identifying, Protecting, and Salvaging Vital Records**

**Identifying Vital Records**

Vital records may be defined as records required to facilitate the local government's essential operations, to protect legal and financial interests.

Many records marked as “permanent” in general record schedules, or as “archival” in record disposition authorities, will be vital. The following is not comprehensive checklist:

* Accounts Payable/Receivable
* Bank Account Information
* Budgets
* Capital Asset Records
* Charters
* Emergency Plans
* Contracts, Leases, Agreements
* Deeds
* Disaster Recovery Plan
* Equipment/Supplies Inventories
* General Ledgers
* Insurance Policies
* Licenses and Permits
* Maps (taxation, topographical, utility)
* Payroll/Pension Fund Records
* Police Identification/Fingerprint Files
* Property Tax Assessment Records
* Treasurer's Reports
* Vital Records List
* Vital Statistics (births, marriages, divorces, deaths)
* Wills
* Zoning Records

**Protecting Vital Records**

The best method of protecting vital records is through duplication and dispersal.

Paper records and non-digital photographs may be photocopied and/or scanned into electronic files. Files, computer programs, digital photographs, and other electronic media should be backed up on CD-RW disks, USB “flash drives,” etc.

* Hold copies of vital records in a vault or safe. However, if the vault or safe is not "disaster proof", copies and originals will be lost if the entire facility is destroyed.
* Off‑site storage is usually a better method of dispersal. It involves keeping copies of vital records at a location outside the agency, in case the originals are destroyed.

Whatever method, the off‑site facility should offer high volume storage and quick records retrieval in the event of an emergency.

**What to Do When the Incident Starts**

While the following emergency measures are no substitute for a disaster plan, they may enable agencies without a plan to get through. Steps to protect your vital records:

* Take back‑up computer disks and tapes out of the office.
* Ideally, the temporary storage area should have a properly controlled environment and a means of access to the records (back‑up computer equipment, etc.).
* Wrap each computer in a plastic garbage bag and secure the bag with a tie around the electrical cord.
* If you are unable to remove paper records from the site, get them as far above the floor as possible.
* Identify a temporary site or sites where agency functions can resume and records salvage operations can be started.

**Salvaging Water Damaged Records**

Water damaged records are usually recoverable if salvage work begins within two days. Thereafter, mold and mildew develop rapidly.

Because the disaster site will be extremely humid, ideally salvage must be in a clean, dry area with a temperature of 65 degrees and a relative humidity of 40%.

Cover work areas with plastic sheeting and move water damaged records with extreme care. Milk crates or similar ventilated plastic cartons are good carriers.

Do not try to separate stuck together pages as long as they are saturated. When the pages are drier, place paper towels between them to absorb water. Change the towels frequently, using fans to circulate air over damaged records.

Vacuum freeze-drying is the best and quickest way of drying paper records, but it is expensive and requires professional assistance.