

# Identifying, Protecting, and Salvaging Vital Records

## **1. Identifying Vital Records**

Vital records are essential documents necessary for the continuity of government operations and the protection of legal and financial interests. Many records categorized as "permanent" or "archival" in record disposition schedules will also be considered vital.

### **Examples of Vital Records:**

(This list is not exhaustive but provides a general guideline.)

- **Financial & Legal Records**
  - Accounts Payable/Receivable
  - Bank Account Information
  - Budgets
  - Capital Asset Records
  - Charters
  - Contracts, Leases, Agreements
  - General Ledgers
  - Insurance Policies
  - Payroll/Pension Fund Records
- **Property & Taxation Records**
  - Deeds
  - Property Tax Assessment Records
  - Maps (taxation, topographical, utility)
  - Zoning Records
- **Public Safety & Identification**
  - Police Identification/Fingerprint Files
  - Licenses and Permits
- **Vital Statistics & Personal Records**
  - Vital Records List
  - Birth, Marriage, Divorce, and Death Records
  - Wills

## **2. Protecting Vital Records**

The best strategy for safeguarding vital records involves **duplication and dispersal** to prevent loss during disasters.

### **Best Practices for Protecting Records:**

#### **Physical Records**

- **Make Copies:** Photocopy critical paper documents and store them securely.
- **Use Fireproof and Waterproof Storage:** Store originals and copies in fireproof safes or vaults, though this alone may not protect against catastrophic loss.
- **Offsite Storage:** Maintain duplicate copies in a secondary location to ensure access if the primary location is compromised.

#### **Electronic Records**

- **Digital Backups:** Convert paper records to electronic formats through scanning.
- **Multiple Storage Media:** Save digital records on CD-RW disks, USB drives, or external hard drives.
- **Cloud Storage:** Utilize secure, encrypted cloud services for accessibility and disaster resilience.
- **Regular Updates:** Ensure backups are performed frequently and tested for integrity.

## **3. What to Do When an Incident Starts**

Even without a formal disaster plan, immediate actions can help protect vital records:

### **1. Secure Digital Records:**

- Remove backup disks and storage devices from the office.
- Store them in a safe, controlled environment with backup equipment.

### **2. Protect Computers & Electronics:**

- Wrap each computer in a plastic garbage bag and seal it with a tie around the power cord to prevent water damage.

### **3. Preserve Paper Records:**

- Move records off the floor to higher shelves or surfaces to minimize water exposure.
- Identify temporary sites where agency operations and record salvage can continue.

#### **4. Salvaging Water-Damaged Records**

Records exposed to water can often be salvaged **if action is taken within 48 hours** to prevent mold and mildew growth.

##### **Key Steps for Salvaging Water-Damaged Records:**

- **Work in a Clean, Dry Environment:** Maintain a temperature of **65°F** with **40% relative humidity** to slow deterioration.
- **Use Plastic Sheeting:** Cover work areas to protect records from further contamination.
- **Handle Records with Care:** Transport wet documents in ventilated plastic crates (e.g., milk crates).
- **Do Not Force-Separate Wet Pages:** Wait until they dry slightly before carefully placing absorbent paper towels between pages. Change towels frequently.
- **Use Air Circulation:** Employ fans to increase airflow, reducing drying time and mold risk.
- **Consider Vacuum Freeze-Drying:** This is the most effective and fastest drying method but requires professional assistance.

By implementing these proactive and reactive measures, agencies can minimize data loss and ensure the resilience of vital records in emergencies.