

Fundamentals of Managing Local Government Archival Records

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INTRODUCTION

As part of their overall records management programs, local governments are responsible for administering, caring for and making available archival records for users. Attending to local government archival records may require as little as an hour or two per month from a Records Management Officer working with just a few boxes of records stored in a vault; or, it could require staff working in an area dedicated to managing and preserving several hundred or even thousands of cubic feet of archival records. Archival operations do not have to be elaborate or expensive to be effective, but should build on certain fundamental activities discussed in the following pages. This publication:

- provides local governments with a general understanding of archival activities and principles,
- introduces vocabulary and concepts related to archival activities, and
- suggests core archival activities which governments may undertake.

Archival Records

When a local government captures information as a photograph, on paper, audio tape, videotape, or computer disk, a record is created. Usually this record is useful for a relatively short period of time and it will be destroyed once it has served its purpose. In a small percentage of cases, the information in a record is of continuing value to the local government and it should be preserved so that it can be used today and for years to come. Such a record is called an archival record.

Archival records are created in the process of government doing its regular business. They may be actively used in offices or stored in a records storage area and referred to only occasionally. Archival records are worthy of continuing preservation because of their on-going administrative, legal, fiscal and historical value.

Why Archival Records are Important

Local government archival records document policies, decisions, and the ways a local government conducts its business. They provide continuity with the past and illustrate interactions between government and citizens. Archival records also may protect individual rights and document government accountability. Archival records witness the origin and history of a local government and the evolution of its functions.

Archives have a definite, beneficial function, rooted in day-to-day practicality. They are used to reconstruct the past and plan for the future. Several cases that demonstrate practical uses of local government archival records in New York are:

- Health care and land use records documenting utility rights-of-way are researched to determine a possible link between child leukemia and children living near high power lines.
- A letter of agreement located in a local planning department's files was used to validate an existing right-of-way between a senior citizen center and a local shopping mall. The developer threatened to close the access route, fearing litigation. The letter of agreement revealed that the original intent of the right-of way was to allow seniors to use the path.
- A suit was brought against several asphalt companies by the U.S. Attorney's office on behalf of a number of local governments . The suit charged that the companies were in collusion for bids on asphalt materials. Only local governments which had retained the necessary documentation had the right to take part in the action. Using bid proposals, contracts, and tonnage reports relating to street and parking lot resurfacing, a town demonstrated that right and received a settlement of over \$80,000.
- Using glass plate negatives and original drawings of sewer archways, a local agency developed a highly competitive grant application and received a multimillion dollar federal grant for reconstruction of their sewer archways.
- A residential neighborhood was interested in becoming part of the region's water district. Using the original maps of the district's borders, the citizens were able to show that the boundaries of the water district included their properties.
- Fifty year-old personnel records were used to verify that a former substitute teacher was entitled to social security benefits.

Each time a department head checks an annual report, a worker verifies a disability or a pension claim, or supervisors use past trends or performances to plan for the future, the value of archival records is confirmed. Archival records are useful, practical assets to local governments. These records provide critical information to local government officials to assist them in decision-making and continuing ongoing operations. They also serve as an important resource to document the "community memory" for local citizens, teachers and students, community groups, and historical researchers.

Managing Archival Records

Archival activities are one component of a local government's records management program. The Records Management Officer (RMO), or an individual in cooperation with the RMO, should have responsibility for the archival records. In addition, the State Archives recommends local governments designate a records advisory board to advise on archival issues and to develop local legislation that addresses ownership, custody and transfer of archival records. (Detailed information related to local legislation and records advisory boards can be found in the State Archives' Records Advisory: *Records Advisory Boards*.)

Each local government determines the level of archival management that best suits the conditions of its archival records and provides access to users. The size of the local government,

quantity of archival records, the functional responsibilities of the local government, fiscal and staff resources, as well as the commitment of the local government to archival endeavors are important factors influencing the management of the archival records.

A variety of options exist in managing archival records. For example:

- a local government might identify its archival records and move them to a special room or vault where they are cared for and made accessible to the public during regular hours;
- archival records, such as land records, may be kept in clerks' offices where they remain in active use;
- a local government, such as a school district, may operate a decentralized records management program in which archival records are housed and cared for at individual schools throughout the district;
- a local government may combine resources with another government to share staff and facilities cooperatively;
- while generally not a preferable choice, a local government may choose to place its records on deposit with an historical records repository. This is a viable option under certain circumstances. It is particularly important for the local government to secure a written agreement that describes the terms and conditions of the deposit, ownership of the records, storage conditions, accessibility of records, etc. Formal approval by the State Archives is not required, but its Regional Advisory Officers provide advice upon request. (More information relating to depository agreements can be found in the State Archives' Technical Information Series No. 42, *Guidelines for Off-Site Storage of Inactive Local Government Records*.)

The option for managing archival records is based on what archival records the local government has, its space, access needs and condition. Much of this information is gathered during the records inventory and needs assessment process.

Core Archival Activities

Archival activities should be undertaken within a local government's overall records management program. The diverse nature, size, and responsibilities of local governments means that there is no single formula for managing archival records. However, any archival operation should include certain basic core activities, which may already be part of the records management program.

The core archival activities are:

- Identifying archival records
- Providing storage and a stable environment
- Preserving records for the future
- Arranging and describing records
- Making the records available
- Offering outreach and public programs

IDENTIFYING ARCHIVAL RECORDS

Appraisal is the process of evaluating records to determine their ongoing importance. Archival records can be identified through use of the State Archives' records retention and disposition schedules. The State Archives' records schedules assign permanence by appraising the importance of records series based on their continuing value to government. These values flow from the reasons the records were created:

- Administrative value. The records support ongoing, day-to-day, administrative affairs of the government. Examples include minutes of meetings, policies, procedures, and annual reports.
- Legal value. The records document legal obligations and protect rights. Examples include city charters, wills, and minutes of the chief governing body.
- Fiscal value. The records establish fiscal responsibility, accountability and track the flow of revenue. Examples include budgets, ledgers, and assessment rolls.

Since records are created for specific reasons, they are normally useful only as long as they are needed for that purpose. The record retention schedule identifies how long records must be kept to fulfill the reason they were created. In some cases, the schedules identify record series that have potential historical or other research value. Since these values vary from community to community, the RMO may reevaluate or appraise certain records, and decide that various non-permanent records should be kept because of the historical value to a particular locality. New York's local governments, and the records they create, are so diverse, that the State Archives' schedules cannot make determinations of historical value for every record series. Therefore, appraising records for historical value is an activity local governments will want to undertake themselves.

- Historical or other research value. Records with historical or research value provide significant information about:
 - people such as home owners, entrepreneurs, laborers, women or ethnic groups; their values, concerns and economic situations;
 - places such as particular local building sites, the Erie Canal, the Great Camps of the Adirondacks or the Tug Hill Plateau;
 - events with which the local government is involved from national events such as the Civil War to an event of local significance like the construction of the Ashokan Reservoir in Ulster County.

The Records Management Officer may wish to re-evaluate certain non-permanent records before they are destroyed to determine historical significance. Records should be analyzed by considering the local government and the community it serves. Local historians can assist the RMO in determining the historical value of records.

PROVIDING STORAGE FOR A STABLE ENVIRONMENT

Because archival records are permanent, they should be stored in a clean, pest-free environment, avoiding wide swings in temperature and relative humidity. Local governments should make a

concerted effort to do the best they can with available staff, funds and space to provide an appropriate, secure and safe environment for their records.

- The ideal environment for paper records has a temperature of 65oF, a relative humidity of 45%, with a minimum variation of +/- 2oF and +/- 2%RH.
- Maintaining airflow around the records reduces mold growth.
- Minimizing exposure to light and dust reduces harm to records.
- Smoke/fire detection/suppression equipment can minimize destruction of records.
- The archival storage area should be locked and accessible only to authorized personnel.
- Eighteen-gauge industrial grade steel shelving (or metal cabinets for certain large formats) is recommended.

Separate storage. Whenever possible, local governments should segregate archival records from inactive records. This can be a special shelf or section within an inactive records storage area or a vault. There are several reasons for this:

- Storage needs. Archival records may require a more controlled climatic environment or special handling for preservation purposes.
- Security. Certain archival records are confidential. Some archival records are a temptation for theft and must be protected.
- Retrieval and access. Archival records are frequently retrieved. Space should be set aside for public use.
- Identification during a disaster. Prior identification and placement in a specific location permits quicker removal.
- Accidental destruction. Separation of archival records from inactive records avoids accidental destruction along with obsolete records.

Separate storage ensures the physical survival of critical archival records. Examples that typify storage alternatives include:

- The Village of Barneveld (Oneida County) stores its archival records in cabinets located in the local fire house.
- Cambridge Central School District (Washington County) houses its archival records in a designated area of its records storage room.
- Westchester County operates a county-wide archival facility.

PRESERVING RECORDS FOR THE FUTURE

Preservation consists of general maintenance and other practices that reduce deterioration of records. Where records are stored and how they are stored and handled are key to prolonging their life. This means that archival records should be stored in a stable environment, protected from dust, mold and vermin. Activities that promote preservation include:

- Rehousing records in alkaline/lignin-free file folders and records cartons or placing them in polypropylene sleeves.

- Undertaking safe handling practices, such as using only pencils around archival records. Archival records should not be exposed to food, drink, tobacco smoke, fumes or careless treatment.
- Using microfilming or other methods of duplication to ensure that recorded information is reproduced onto a stable medium. When done properly, microfilm will easily outlast today's highly acidic paper records. Microfilming reduces wear and tear on the original records by permitting substitution of the microfilm copy for the original, it provides security for the information in the records, and makes it possible to disseminate or duplicate the information easily and inexpensively.
- Choosing conservation treatments when repairs are crucial. These activities should be undertaken by a professionally qualified conservator. Conservation treatments are processes in which documents are physically or chemically stabilized. These treatments may consist of several options, such as deacidification and mending. Once the expense and effort to conserve documents is completed, it is important to return the items to an environment that will not cause further deterioration.

ARRANGING AND DESCRIBING RECORDS

The purpose of arranging and describing local government archival records is to help users locate needed information. Local government archival records should be systematically arranged and described following standardized practices that build on the methods used in the basic records inventory for all local government records. When local government records are well organized and managed to begin with, a solid foundation is provided for arranging and describing them if and when they are transferred to archival storage. The basic records management inventory worksheet briefly describes records based on the concept of a record series. A record series is "a group of identical or related records that are normally used, indexed and filed together and related to a similar function or administrative activity, and which are managed as a unit for disposition purposes."

To construct a more detailed record series description, archival description expands upon the rudimentary information provided in the inventory worksheet. Both the inventory worksheet and the record series description provide standardized information about each archival record series created, including:

- name of the record creator
- series title and inclusive dates
- physical characteristics of the series
- historical or background information about why the records were created
- a summary of the information in the records.

Archival series descriptions provide more detailed information about the context, depth and extent of the records; they describe the office that created the records and explain why the records were created. Comprehensive series descriptions may also provide index terms that identify special subjects, geographic places, or people mentioned in the records, as well as a variety of other information. All archival records should be described at least at the series level. For some other records, greater descriptive depth will depend on their research value, anticipated

level of demand, and physical condition. Further details about the process of archival arrangement and description may be found in the State Archives publication, *Guidelines for Arrangement and Description of Archives and Manuscripts: A Manual for Historical Records Programs in New York State*.

FINDING AIDS

Finding aids are any descriptive tools, whether published or unpublished, manual or electronic, which provide better control and access to their information. These may include subject and institutional guides and local, regional and national databases. Information from series descriptions (or inventory worksheets if a government does not have the resources to develop series descriptions) can be assembled into a variety of finding aids including guides, card catalogs, special lists, shelf and box lists, indexes, and statewide and national databases. For instance:

- The Albany County Hall of Records, the Town of Olive, and Washington County have developed brochures that list archival holdings by series title.
- Westchester County and the towns of Amherst and Onondaga have developed comprehensive repository guides that include agency histories and series descriptions of their archival records.

MAKING RECORDS AVAILABLE

One excellent way to build support for archival activities is through reliable and helpful reference services. It is important to publicize when staff are available to assist users with requests for information, as well as to have clear policies that specify who may have access to what records, and notify potential users where and when records are accessible.

- A local government's archival records must be accessible on equal terms to all users who abide by the policies and procedures of the local government's records management program.
- Some local government archival records contain confidential or restricted information; access to those records must be properly managed. Any restrictions on access should be defined in writing and should be carefully observed. Restrictions on access must also conform to the provisions of the State Freedom of Information Law.
- Local government archival records should be available for research use on a regularly scheduled basis. The amount of time is not so crucial as that staff and the public know when those hours are.
- Necessary equipment and space to view the records should be provided under adequate supervision. Some governments may choose to have a separate study area for users; others may simply have a designated table or work space for users. In both cases, users, whether staff or the public, should be directly supervised to ensure proper handling and security for the records.
- Restrictions may be placed on the use of fragile records to protect them from deterioration and prolong their useful life.

There is little value to expending the resources necessary to care for archival records if they are not tapped for the valuable information they hold. It is an important part of the overall records and information service of a local government to ensure that its archival records are utilized in ways that benefit the local government, the taxpayers, and the community.

OUTREACH AND PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Outreach activities are a method of drawing attention to a local government's archival records and its information services. Archival activities should include a deliberate effort, whenever possible, to attract potential users, including government staff, and to introduce the public to the value of archival records and the efforts to manage them. Outreach and public programs may include the use of local government records in informational brochures, local history publications, videos, exhibits, workshops and lecture series.

- Local governments may distribute brochures and finding aids to raise awareness, as the Town of Olive, Albany County Hall of Records, Washington County and Westchester County have done.
- Many local governments, including the Town of Amherst and Ulster County, hold open houses and give tours of their archival records storage and research rooms during New York State Archives Week.
- Often Records Management Officers and local historians give talks and presentations to community and government groups discussing the value and protection of archival records. Other local governments have installed exhibits: the Town of Amherst mounted a long-term exhibit in the Town Library.
- Another approach becoming increasingly popular is to produce teaching packets which utilize the government's archival records.

Archival activities are a tremendous asset to a local government. Such efforts provide local government officials with critical information, which helps them make decisions and continue ongoing operations. They also serve as an important resource to document the "community memory" for local citizens, teachers and students, community groups, and a range of researchers. Each local government needs to develop archival activities as a component of its comprehensive records management program, and to tailor that program to the needs of the local government and its citizens in a cost-efficient and effective manner.

FOR MORE INFORMATION AND ASSISTANCE

Further assistance in developing and maintaining the archival component of a records management program can be obtained from the State Archives' local government records workshops, through other technical publications in this series, or through consultation with Regional Advisory Officers and with staff of Archival Advisory Services (518-474-6926).

The New York State Archives provides records management and archival advisory services to local governments including technical advice and assistance, publications, training and presentations and consultations with local officials concerning records and information management issues. The State Archives has records specialists in Albany and in regional offices

throughout the State to advise on these matters. These services are supported by the Local Government Records Management Improvement Fund. For further information contact your regional office or:

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