How to Conduct a Records Inventory*

Introduction

When you conduct an inventory, you will locate, identify, describe, count, and measure all records in your office and storage areas – all loose and bound papers, microforms, optical disks, magnetic tapes, network drives, and file servers. The information you gather will allow you to manage and dispose of your records systematically. In short, it will constitute the foundation of your records management program. Once you have obtained an accurate inventory, the Minnesota State Archives will help you develop a records retention schedule, which will tell you what records to destroy, which to store temporarily, and which to store permanently.

Who Conducts the Inventory?

Ideally, the individuals who conduct the inventory will have experience with the records, filing systems, and operations of the division, office or program area. Usually, however, conditions are less than ideal, and the task is given to staffers or part-time workers who must be trained before they begin. The use of staffers has several advantages:

• They know the records.
• You will not have to give outsiders access to restricted records.
• There will be no additional costs.

Planning the Inventory

Communication

Since the success of an inventory project depends on the cooperation of the people involved with the records, staff should be assured the inventory is to identify records and not to criticize their methods. It should be clear that inventory staffers must:

• Have access to all unrestricted records and be given the information they need about those that are restricted
• Have access to staff to obtain information on the way the records are organized and used

Training and Supplies

Minnesota State Archives Department staff can assist with training staff conducting a records inventory. Each inventory staffer should be provided with:

• Organizational charts and any other information that describes the main functions of each office
• Blank inventory forms, which are available from the Minnesota State Archives

* Adapted with permission from the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, “How to conduct a records inventory”, available online at <http://www.state.sc.us/sedah/117_inv.htm>.
• A letter-size lined pad
• A ball-point pen, a pencil, a felt-tip pen or marker
• Adhesive labels to identify records and containers and to show the record has been inventoried
• A flashlight, gloves, and a dust mask for storage areas

Preliminary Survey
Survey all office and storage areas before you begin the inventory to:
• Identify the location of records
• Estimate their total volume
• Flag any hazards
• Note any problems with space and storage

Conducting the Inventory

When you conduct your inventory, you will include all your records and exclude your non-records.

Records and Non-Records

Records:
You create records whenever your office either generates or receives information that gives evidence of its activities. Records include completed forms, correspondence, maps, drawings, photographs, reports, and so forth. The recording media may be paper, microform, optical disk, magnetic tapes, network drives, and file servers.

Non-Records:
1. Reference materials. These are the convenience copies that are made of records you create or receive, and publications that are not evidence of your governmental activities: magazines, catalogues, trade journals, federal and state policies or regulations, books, pamphlets, and so forth. These are not records and are not, therefore, candidates for a records retention schedule.

2. Blank forms. Until they are filled in, blank forms are supplies, not records.

Inventory Forms
You will inventory your records as series, groups of identical or related records that can be evaluated as a unit because they are normally filed, used, and disposed of together; and record the information you gather on an inventory form. Examples of records series include case files, correspondence, time sheets, contracts, and project files. To help locate specific records in a series at a later date, you may find it helpful to fill out a separate form omitting recurring data about the series for each of the locations where records in a series are filed or stored, and to consolidate the information from these forms onto a master inventory afterwards. You will eventually use the information from the master inventory to develop your records retention schedule.
Where to Begin
If your inventory staffers lack experience, start with your active records—those in your offices. They will be more accessible, better organized, and office staffers will be on hand to help. Once your inventory staffers become familiar with your active records, it will be easier for them to tackle the less-well organized records in your storage areas. If a particular office has its own area, inventory the records there as soon as you finish the office inventory. If several of your divisions share a central storage facility, inventory the records in all those divisions and then the records in storage. Exceptions to these situations, however, will arise. Sometimes, for example, you may want to inventory only the records in a single area to see what series you can schedule for disposal. In situations like these, your inventory must take related records in other areas into account because the schedules you establish will affect them as well.

Establishing a System
No matter where you inventory, you should be systematic. Begin at a specific location in a room, proceed logically, tag or label each book or file drawer as it is inventoried, and flag those records that are vital or permanent. These precautions will spotlight your valuable records and decrease your chance of overlooking or duplicating information, especially if you frequently stop and restart—a situation that often arises when the staffers who are taking the inventory are conducting regular office duties as well. Account for every record, but try not to get bogged down! Open each file drawer, each box, and each book, and check the accuracy of each label—sometimes old labels are not removed when the contents of files are changed.

Detail
You will not need to spend a lot of time going through loose items in files to gather information on individual names, dates, and types of documents. On the other hand, records that are difficult to identify and those that are older and contain significant historical data may require more study. Sometimes it is a good tactic to put aside these records, and come back to them after the other records are inventoried. That way you will have something accomplished, and you can spend some time examining records that are difficult to identify, or ones that are older and may have historical value.

Classifying Records Pursuant to the Data Practices Act
The Minnesota Government Data Practices Act (M.S. Chapter 13) states that all government data collected, created, received, maintained or disseminated by any state or local agency or political subdivision must be made accessible to the public unless the data are classified as inaccessible by state statute, federal law or temporary classification. This means that, by law, certain data in your office will have limited accessibility to the public and you are responsible for protecting that information. Identifying records that contain data, which are not public during the inventory process, will help you comply with the Act. It will alert employees who work with records that contain sensitive data to take appropriate precautions. Properly observing the Data Practices Act could protect your entity from a costly lawsuit. Here are the seven classifications of data:
1. Public data
2. Private data on individuals
3. Confidential data on individuals
4. Private data on decedents
5. Confidential data on decedents  
6. Nonpublic data no on individuals  
7. Protected nonpublic data not on individuals

Check M.S. Chapter 13 for the definitions of the classifications and further information. For assistance with determining the data practices classifications of your records, contact the Data Practices Responsible Authority for your entity, your legal counsel, or the Administration Department/Information Policy Analysis Division.

**Identifying Vital Records**

The term vital record is applied to any record that is necessary to the continuation or resumption of your operations. This means that if a disaster occurred, you would need these records to remain in business. Probably, only about 10% of your records are vital. The purpose of identifying vital records is to plan for their protection.

**Conclusion**

Your records inventory will enable you to evaluate the content and function of your records, and will give you data that will be crucial to your ability to make valid, justifiable decisions on the ultimate retention or destruction of those records. You will use the records inventory data to prepare your records retention schedule (refer to *How to Establish a Records Retention Schedule* for more information). Conduct your inventory well, and you will build a solid foundation for a good records management program; conduct it poorly, and you will set the stage for continuing problems.