

January 2012

## **A Presidential Charge to Improve Federal Records Management**

***By David S. Ferriero  
Archivist of the United States***

President Barak Obama has designated the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) as one of the lead agencies in his Open Government Initiative to bring more participation, collaboration, and transparency into government.

The President has charged NARA with overseeing a major overhaul in the way government agencies keep and manage the records they create. We accept this responsibility with enthusiasm.

We will create a 21st Century framework for records management involving special attention to electronic records of all kinds and the transition of paper-based records to electronic records management.

Records management isn't the kind of government activity that makes it into textbooks about history and government. Even when it is done well, it isn't mentioned on the evening news and doesn't grab many headlines.

But government records and access to them are vital in a democracy.

These records allow citizens to document their rights, hold government officials accountable, and have an unbiased history of our nation—our triumphs and tragedies, our moments of pride and moments of shame.

That's why it's important not only to preserve the important records of government, but to manage them well, so they can be accessed and used in a timely fashion the way they're meant to be.

This is not happening now.

In 2010, we asked 245 federal agencies and their components to do a self-assessment of the status of their records management program. The results were disturbing. Of the vast majority of agencies that responded, 95 percent were at a high to moderate risk of compromising the integrity, authenticity, and reliability of their records.

Put another way, many, many government records are at risk of being lost forever.

The President, in his Memorandum to the Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies in late November, recognized this risk. He is requiring every agency to designate a senior official responsible for overseeing records management—thereby increasing the visibility and authority of this vital function within agencies.

This approach has worked when dealing with classified records. Previously, the designation of a senior official for classification issues was successfully implemented in agencies working with NARA's Information Security Oversight Office (ISOO). Benefits have included improved declassification procedures and the release to researchers and the public of additional formerly-classified records.

The President also directed departments and agencies to report to NARA on the status of records management in their organizations and to provide suggestions for the records management directive by July 2012.

NARA will work with the Office of Management and Budget and the Associate Attorney General to create this new approach for records management. The directive is to focus on:

- Creating a Government-wide records management framework that is more efficient and cost-effective;
- Promoting records management policies and practices that make it easier for agencies to fulfill their record-keeping mission;
- Maintaining accountability by documenting agency actions;
- Increasing public access to Government records;
- Helping agencies preserve records with information relevant to litigation; and
- Transitioning from paper-based recordkeeping to electronic recordkeeping where feasible.

The President's action on records management comes at a crucial time for us at the National Archives.

We have moved into the operations and maintenance stage of our Electronic Records Archives, which will be the repository for all the permanently valuable electronic records created by federal departments and agencies.

And we are making steady progress in our digitizing programs, in some cases in partnerships with private, non-government entities. We will not allow the 12 billion pieces of paper that document much of our past be left behind in the digital future. Effectively managing these records is crucial to the Open Government Initiative.

In launching his Open Government Initiative the day after he took office in 2009, the President said:

“My administration is committed to creating an unprecedented level of openness in Government. We will work together to ensure the public trust and establish a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration. Openness will strengthen our democracy and promote efficiency and effectiveness in government.”

In September 2011, the President announced his National Action Plan for Open Government. In it, the White House made the modernization of the management of government records second only to public participation in government.

The significance of the President's action on Federal records management should not be taken lightly. It marks the first time since the Truman years that a President has taken explicit action that involves the National Archives in a major role.

Now, we have the President's personal charge to help our government to better preserve and protect—and manage well—the records that are the backbone of our democracy.

After all, it's what we always do.

\*\*\*\*\*