

# Establishing Records Retention

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## IIMC RECORDS MANAGEMENT TECHNICAL BULLETIN No. 4



INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MUNICIPAL CLERKS

**NAGARA**  
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF GOVERNMENT  
ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATORS

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### Introduction

The **survey** and **inventory** data collected on the records and information maintained by your organization is used to compile a records retention schedule—refer to *IIMC Records Management Technical Bulletin No. 3*. By appraising this data, you will be able to establish reasonable retention periods, maintenance specifications and disposition procedures. By following a retention schedule, systematic control of information from its creation to final disposition is established. Retention schedules are the most important part of a records management plan.

### What is a Retention Schedule?

A **records retention schedule** (also known as a **records control schedule**) lists records series and provides instructions and special guidelines for their care—how long to retain them, how to maintain them, and procedures for disposing of them. Retention schedules reflect the length of time that records have operational, legal, fiscal, or historical value.

- **Note:** Many states issue “general” retention schedules that its municipalities can use. Contact your state’s records management / archives agency to see if a general retention schedule for your records exists.
- Your state may have special requirements for establishing a retention schedule, such as submitting it for approval by the agency or a board.

### Benefits of a Schedule

**Ensures** that records needed for legal, fiscal, or administrative use will not be destroyed prematurely.

**Determines** when records may be transferred to inactive storage or to another repository for permanent storage.

**Assists** with making reformatting decisions (i.e., converting records to a microform or scanning them for use on a computer).

**Allows** records that are no longer useful to be destroyed legally.

**Helps** reduce the space and equipment necessary for filing records, thus saving money.

**Provides** information to develop a vital records protection plan.

**Releases** electronic storage space on computer disks, video and audio tapes.

**Ensures** the preservation of records with historical value.

## **Building the Retention Schedule**

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Refer to your **inventory** or **survey** forms to examine the data gathered on each records series. Each valid records series will become an item on your proposed retention schedule.

- A **records series** is a group or unit of related documents or information that is normally filed or kept together because they relate to a particular subject or function, result from the same activity, or document a particular transaction or activity.  
**Examples include correspondence, time sheets, contracts, ordinances, fiscal vouchers, project files and resolutions.**

## **Evaluating Retention Periods**

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The retention period for records is based on the value of the information and laws that govern the records. Most records have a short life span (about five years) but others have longer retention periods for various reasons. Certain types of records are kept permanently because of historical value.

- At what point does the information cease to be useful? When can it be destroyed without hindering the functions of an office or municipality, or denying the rights of citizens?
- The federal, state and/or municipality may have laws or regulations that specify a recordkeeping requirement. Your legal counsel can provide guidance on these. A retention period may not be less than what has been set for them by a state or federal law, regulation or court ruling.

- Other municipalities may have established retention schedules that will assist you. However, do not simply adopt those schedules—their records, procedures and regulations may be different from yours.
- Consult those who use the records about their specific administrative needs. Determine when the information is no longer needed.
- **What is the administrative value?** These records are necessary for the day-to-day business operations of your office. Do they establish policy or document operations? Administrative value is usually short-lived. **Examples: correspondence, memos and reports.**
- **What is the financial value?** These records document your office's fiscal responsibilities, such as the receipt, payment, transfer, adjustment or encumbrance of public funds. They usually lose their value once an audit has been approved. However, records that establish or change fiscal policies will have a longer retention. **Examples: canceled checks, deposit slips, invoices, receipts and purchase orders.**
- **What is the legal value?** These records have a mandated retention by statute or regulation, may be needed as evidence in litigation, or document the rights of citizens or obligations of government. Determine the legal value of records with assistance from legal counsel. **Examples: leases, deeds, titles, contracts, franchises and court case files.**
- **Does it have historical value?** These records, which usually have a permanent retention, document the history of the government and community, and constitute only a small percentage of the total volume of records in an organization. These historic, or archival, records contain significant information about persons, places, events, government or corporate organizations, etc. Sometimes records are valuable because of their age or rarity, such as records of the 18th and 19th centuries. **Examples: minutes, resolutions, ordinances, plat maps, policies and annual reports.**

**Other considerations:**

- Value of the records as a source of information about the subject or action they document.
- Duplication of the records in other offices of government.
- Reliability and completeness of the records.
- Accessibility and usability of records.
- Maintenance and retention of records and costs associated with storage.

## Composition of Schedule

Generally, schedules include the following information:

**Schedule number.**

**Date effective.**

**Name of organization.**

**Name of department.**

**Records series title** (include commonly used title, if appropriate).

**Description** of the of the records series.

**Retention period for records**, including on-site (for active records) and off-site (inactive records) periods.

**Method of records disposal or preservation.**

**Special instructions.**

## Making the Schedule Legal

After the schedules have been drafted, seek internal approval for them. Submit the draft to department heads, legal counsel and the municipality's managing official or body for comments. Negotiate changes as necessary.

Once your municipality formally approves the schedule, submit it to the state records management / archives agency for review and approval, if mandated.

The schedules become your office's legal documentation for the retention and disposition of its records. Distribute copies to all departments, along with records management procedures.

## Document Records Destruction

Most states have public records laws requiring that the destruction of public records be documented. Usually a form is used to enter information regarding the records to be destroyed, and various authorized persons approve the destruction. Refer to Appendix for a sample records destruction form.

## Implementation of Schedules

**Review** the inventory / survey and identify the records eligible for destruction under the schedule.

**List** the records on a records destruction authorization form and obtain signatures to approve their disposal.

**Use** a method of destruction appropriate to the records.

**Establish** a regular review and disposal of records, usually at the end of the calendar or fiscal year.

**Review** retention schedules periodically and revise as needed.



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