



# Vital Records & Disaster Recovery



**What Are Vital Records?** Vital records are your agency's most essential and irreplaceable records that are needed to meet operational responsibilities under national security emergencies or other emergency or disaster conditions (emergency operating records) or to protect the legal and financial rights of the Government and those affected by Government activities (legal and financial rights records). 36CFR 1236.14.

**1. Emergency Operating Vital Records** – These are needed during an emergency (first 24-48 hours): they are essential to help keep an agency functioning or to help reconstitute the agency after the emergency passes. Examples are:

- *Disaster plan*—so you know how to respond to emergency or disaster conditions
- *Delegations of authority*—to reference lines of succession and those in charge at the point in time the disaster occurs
- *Building plans*—for emergency responders who need to enter a structure affected by the disaster
- *Computer system documentation*—code books, layouts, and manuals that tell you how to restore files from backup tapes and resume computer operations at an alternate site
- *Other records* relating to the protection of people and material, and the maintenance of public health, safety, and order

**2. Legal and Financial Rights Vital Records** – Legal and financial rights records are needed once a disaster is over and your agency begins to return to normal. These records will be needed to protect governmental and individual's rights. Examples are:

The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) is our national recordkeeper. At NARA we work to ensure that anyone can have access to the records that matter to them. NARA ensures, for the Citizen, and the Public Servant, for the President and the Congress and the Courts, ready access to essential evidence. Thus, one of NARA's Primary goals is to ensure that all records are controlled, preserved, and made accessible as long as needed. NARA—Rocky Mountain Region, Bldg. 48, DFC, Denver, CO 80225, Records Management Division—303-407-5720, [workshop.denver@nara.gov](mailto:workshop.denver@nara.gov)



- *Accounts receivable*—in order to continue to collect funds due your agency and avoid loss of income.
- *Social security, payroll and retirement records*—to protect the rights and entitlements of your current and past employees, and continue paying your staff during the crisis
- *Land titles, leases, and contracts*—to be able to prove title to land or property, or to uphold contractual obligations if the original documents are destroyed.
- *Research findings, licensing and compliance records, and unique legal records*

**What percentage of your records are “vital”?** – No more than **5%-7%** of an agency’s records should be designated as vital records. It would be too costly to try and categorize and protect higher percentages of records as “vital.” Some vital records don’t stay “vital” forever. Many vital records have limited time values; they are only “vital” for a specific period of time, and once that time passes, the copies become valueless for post-disaster business resumption.

**How are vital records identified?** An agency can’t use someone else’s list of vital records. They must examine their own functions and decide what records support the more essential of those functions. These are the steps to take in identifying vital records:

- Determine the mission critical functions of the agency
- Determine what records support those functions
- Determine what/how/and if to keep certain records
- Conduct a records inventory and survey record creators

**How do I protect my vital records?**

- Copying (photocopy, extra printout, imaging, filming, backup)
- Routine dispersal—copies distribute in the normal course of business
- Planned dispersal—deliberate extra copies produced at time of creation
- Offsite Storage:
  - > Emergency Operating - keep within 30 miles, or, in some nearby location that is unlikely to be affected by the same natural or human-made disaster that strikes the agency office location.
  - > Legal & Financial - further distance OK

## What are some suggested resources to help develop a vital records program?

### 1. Training

NARA—National Archives and Records Administration.

[http://www.archives.gov/records\\_management/training/nationwide\\_training.html](http://www.archives.gov/records_management/training/nationwide_training.html)

*Disaster Preparation & Response for Records Managers* - Two-day workshop that covers identifying and protecting vital records, and disaster planning, mitigation, response, and recovery with regard to records and information.

*Asset and Risk Management* - A one-day workshop for records managers and information professionals that covers an introduction to asset and risk assessment including assessing of records and information problems, using risk mitigation strategies, identifying priorities, and use resource allocation strategies.

*Disaster Recovery Institute International (DRII)*. <http://www.drii.org/>

DRII offers basic and advanced level courses in continuity planning and disaster recovery including a certification program.

*Disaster Recovery Journal (DRJ)*. <http://www.drj.com>

DRJ hosts Business Continuity conferences twice yearly with sessions on emergency preparedness, disaster recovery, and business continuity planning.

### 2. Websites

*Association of Contingency Planners (ACP) International*

<http://www.acp-international.com>

*Association of Records Managers and Administrators (ARMA) International*

<http://arma.org>

*Stanford University—Conservation Online* <http://palimpsest.stanford.edu/>

*Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)* <http://www.fema.gov>

*Northeast Document Conservation Center* <http://www.nedcc.org>

*National Fire Protection Administration* <http://www.nfpa.org>

*NARA, National Archives and Records Administration*

[http://www.archives.gov/records\\_management/initiatives/vital\\_records\\_and\\_disaster](http://www.archives.gov/records_management/initiatives/vital_records_and_disaster)

[\\_recovery.html](#)

Society of American Archivists <http://www.archivists.org>

Smithsonian Institution Archives [www.si.edu/archives/report/disaster/sevena.htm](http://www.si.edu/archives/report/disaster/sevena.htm)

### 3. Organizations/Vendors

Belfor U.S.A. Water damage recovery & restoration services, 1-800-856-3333.

BMS Catastrophe, Water damage recovery/restoration service, 1-800-433-2940.

IBM Business Recovery Services, Hot site recovery and general DR consulting  
1-800-599-9950.

Munters Moisture Control, Water damage recovery & restoration.  
1-800-I-CAN-DRY

Sungard Recovery Services, Hot site recovery and general DR consulting  
1-800-247-7832.

### 4. Publications

Eulenberg, Julia Niebuhr. Handbook for the Recovery of Water Damaged Business Records. ARMA International Publication Sales, 4200 Somerset, Suite 215, Prairie Village, Kansas 66208, ISBN 0-933887-17-5, 1986, 800-422-2762.

Judith Fortson and Neal-Schuman. Disaster Planning and Recovery, ISBN: 1-55570-059-4, 1992.

Jones, Virginia A., CRM, and Kris E. Keyes. Emergency Management for Records and Information Programs, ARMA International, Prairie Village, KS, ISBN: 0-933887-70-1, 1997.

*National Fire Protection Association (NFPA): Archives and Records Centers: Standard #232AM*, 1991, Quincy MA.

Vital Records and Records Disaster Mitigation and Recovery, National Archives & Records Administration, College Park, MD 1996.

Vital Records- A Guideline. ARMA International Standards Vital Records Task Force, ARMA International, 4200 Somerset, Suite 215, Prairie Village, Kansas 66208, 1984/1991, ISBN 0-933-887-14-0, 800-422-2762.