



Protecting Essential Records from Disasters

A Municipal Action Guide

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THE CHALLENGE

During times of natural and human-caused disaster, residents turn to their elected officials for assistance and aid. They expect their government to respond to the disaster, to protect their lives and property and to restore their community quickly and effectively. At each step the government relies on certain essential records to manage the crisis. Some records help first responders react effectively

during the initial crisis; others ensure that government will continue functioning; and others help rebuild lives and communities after the disaster has passed. Elected officials will be most successful if they identify potential threats, identify essential records and safeguard essential records before a disaster occurs.

STRATEGIES

Elected officials and governments should embed essential records planning into their overall emergency planning strategy. Too often records are an afterthought, but response and recovery cannot happen unless certain records survive the initial crisis. Every agency should be required to provide specific planning for essential records in their agency Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP). Tabletop exercises and other emergency planning drills should include instances where various records are “lost”

so that participants can gauge the impact such losses might have. Planners should remember that as a crisis lengthens, more records become essential. Certain records, such as property deeds, may be inaccessible for a day or two without significant impact, but those same records might become essential if they were inaccessible for a month or more. Plan for both short-term and long-term disasters.

ACTION STEPS

Identify the threats

Disasters range from localized to widespread: A single building may burn; many buildings may be destroyed in a tornado; entire regions may be devastated by a hurricane. Be aware of potential threats to your region, particularly those that are unique to your part of the country. Wherever possible (in cases of building fires and broken water pipes, for instance), minimize the threats through frequent inspections and mitigation. Threats include:

- Building fires
- Broken water pipes
- Wind-damaged roofs
- Landslides
- Floods
- Earthquake
- Hurricane
- Tornado
- Wildfires
- Blizzards
- Hail
- Ice storms
- Chemical spills
- Terrorist attack
- Nuclear plant crisis

Identify essential records

Essential records fall into five broad categories:

| Records that: | Examples |
|--|---|
| Are necessary for emergency response | Copy of emergency plan Infrastructure and utility plans Maps and building plans Emergency contact information |
| Protect the health, safety, property and rights of residents | Deeds, mortgages, land records Birth and marriage records Medical records Active court proceedings Military service records |
| Are necessary to resume or continue operations | Delegations of authority Contracts Leases Payroll Jail and parole records Insurance records |
| Would require massive resources to reconstruct | Geographic Information Systems data Tax records |
| Are necessary to restore order and community | Historical documents Photographs Identity records |

As part of their emergency planning each government agency should identify the records in their agency that fall into one of these categories. They should note the location of the records and how they are safeguarded.

EXAMPLES

City of Savannah, Ga.

The director of Savannah's Municipal Research Library has proactively organized city agencies and cultural organizations to plan for natural and human-caused disasters. When Hurricanes Hannah, Ike and Josephine threatened in rapid succession, the library director evacuated key records to Atlanta, well away from the potential disaster area. City agencies had already identified their essential records, and many had pre-labeled boxes already standing by to hold them. As the hurricanes approached the preparation meant that records could be handled in an orderly and systematic fashion. The state archives evacuated the records and returned them after the danger passed.

Village of Cloudcroft, N.M.

Cloudcroft, a village of less than 1,000, is located at 9,000 feet elevation next to a national forest. The danger of forest fires is great and the village has had to evacuate several times in the last few years.

Village offices have identified the essential records by marking the filing cabinets with a red label. As part of their evacuation plan responsibilities, staff members bring a truck and trailer to Village Hall and load the marked filing cabinets, which are moved to the predetermined safe location.

Some of the records that have been identified include: original ordinances; minutes; joint powers agreements; license

Safeguard essential records

Cooperate

City agencies should work together to create and maintain a shared plan to identify and safeguard essential records. Agencies must understand the concerns of emergency response personnel, and vice versa, before a disaster occurs.

Duplicate

Duplication, and storage of duplicates well away from the originals, is the most effective means of safeguarding essential records. Duplication works well for records that change infrequently over time. Property records, for instance, may be duplicated at the time of filing. Duplication may take the form of digital duplication, microfilm or (in rare cases) photocopies. Digital duplication is preferred for many records because electronic data is easy to backup and is usually compact enough to be sent to offsite storage with little effort. Some records, though, have a very long retention period, and electronic records are difficult and expensive to keep viable for long periods of time. Hardware and software changes rapidly, and the cost of migrating to new software versions can become prohibitive over time. For these records, such as property records, microfilm may be a better alternative. Of course, such records

could be scanned, and microfilm produced from the scanned images, to provide the best of both worlds.

Store duplicates offsite

Essential records are not safe if the duplicates are stored near the original records. In a localized disaster, such as a building fire, it may be sufficient for the duplicate records to be stored a block away. In a widespread disaster, though, duplicate records may need to be stored 100 miles or more from the originals in order to safeguard them adequately. Consider various disaster scenarios when determining where to store duplicate records.

Evacuate

Some essential records change frequently, making them difficult or impossible to duplicate and store far offsite. These records should be identified and made ready for evacuation if sufficient warning of a disaster permits. City governments in hurricane-prone areas, for instance, might identify such records, purchase and pre-label boxes for their evacuation and determine to evacuate them when the hurricane is 36 or 48 hours from landfall. In tornado-prone regions essential records might be identified and stored in vault space each night, giving them higher priority over records that have been duplicated and safeguarded.

agreements; mutual aid agreements; lease agreements; deeds and easements; current employee records; motor vehicle and heavy equipment titles/records; current month's utility billing records; emergency management system billing records (outstanding); and most recent financial records (monthly financial statement).

Non-records include: timesheet forms; blank checks; petty cash; and any cash receivables.

City of Huntington Beach, Calif.

Although this coastal southern California city has very few weather-related problems, earthquakes and tsunamis are at the top of its "things to be prepared for" list. Therefore, the city clerk of Huntington Beach has made it a priority since 2006 to scan all permanent records into an electronic data management system via SIRE Technology.

All paper documents are kept on site in a large vault/room protected by a special waterless, non-toxic-to-humans, fire suppression system, and the city's information systems department backs up electronic records daily and stores them offsite for archival and disaster recovery purposes. Because earthquakes are this city's most pressing concern, the city is in the middle of a two-year retrofit of the entire five-story civic center building.

Prince William County, Va.

The Prince William County Department of Fire and Rescue began planning for a pandemic influenza in the fall of 2005. Accepting that pandemic influenza planning is a specific type of event and there is a need to plan for all hazards, the Pandemic Influenza Task Force became the COOP Planning Group in June 2006. Each agency was asked to address three types of disruptions: loss of access

to a facility; loss of services due to a reduced workforce; and loss of services due to equipment or systems failure.

All participants provided a list of the essential records — including the current form and backup — and whether the records would need to be transported or if they could be pre-positioned at an alternate facility.

RESOURCES

Your state archives

Your state archives is a good source of information and advice regarding essential records. Many state archives have programs specifically designed to assist local governments and elected officials. For a complete list of state and territorial archives, with contact information, visit www.StateArchivists.org.

Vendors

Some document recovery vendors will enter into contracts that may be invoked in the event of a disaster. Having such

Agencies that maintain real estate records, personnel files, payroll information and financial records have a difficult daily task to secure records because the information constantly changes. Other agencies utilize Web-based systems to store data. As a result of this planning, agencies now realize the importance of backing up information and what records may need to be removed during evacuations.

a contract in place before the disaster gives your records priority for recovery and restoration. Contact your state archives for more information.

Organizations

The Council of State Archivists. www.StateArchivists.org
National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators. www.NAGARA.org
Heritage Preservation. www.HeritagePreservation.org

Who is Responsible?

Who creates essential records and who helps protect them? While every city is different, all cities have key players who create and protect essential records:

Mayors and City Councils

Planning for emergencies takes time and money, and few agencies will put forth the effort without support from the top. Mayors and city councils should make planning a priority and ensure that essential records are included in every department emergency plan.

City Clerks

City clerks (or their equivalents) are likely to produce or maintain the records that protect the property (deeds, mortgages) and civil rights (birth, marriage) of residents. They may maintain minutes and proceedings of legislative bodies or court records as well. All of these qualify as essential records.

Court Clerks

Court clerks (or their equivalents) may produce or maintain records of ongoing or past court proceedings. During disasters prisoners may be evacuated to other regions of the country and their records must be available if trials and probation hearings are to continue uninterrupted.

Chief Information Officers

Information technology agencies often maintain records that are essential to other agencies. While the IT department may not create such records, they are the custodians — on servers, backup tapes and disks — of records that other agencies assume are secured against disaster. IT professionals need to work closely with other agencies to ensure the safety of essential records

Emergency Personnel

Public safety departments, fire departments and other emergency responders create and maintain records that are essential during the response phase of a disaster. Emergency plans, contact information and delegations of authority are just a few of the types of records that are essential to response.

Libraries and Historical Organizations

Local libraries and historical societies maintain the records essential to rebuilding community after a major disaster. While their records may or may not be essential to response, their records are vital to reconstructing the shared past of a devastated community.

You!

Every city agency creates essential records because every agency creates records they will need in order to continue functioning during a disaster. Even if your agency doesn't create records that protect the life and safety of residents, your agency must continue to function during even an extended emergency. For that you need certain records.

