



Tennessee Archives Management Advisory

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MANAGING INACTIVE RECORDS AND ARCHIVES: GUIDELINES AND MODELS FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Keeping inactive records and archives is a significant problem and cost for local governments.

Archives. The problem of what to do with older permanent records (archives) is best solved by creating a local archives facility—a place where the older permanent records can be kept safe and made available to anyone as needed, and a staff to do the work. The site may be a former post office, school, bank, jail, or other substantial building, or the archives may share space with the local public library, or even be lodged within a new courthouse or county office complex.

Inactive Records. This advisory encourages local governments to use a **records center** to manage **inactive records** that *are not yet archives*. It encourages cooperative arrangements to protect records, provide ready access to records, and to save costs of keeping the records.

What are “inactive records”?

They are records you must keep but do not need every day.¹ They fall into two categories:

- **Temporary records.** Some inactive records must be kept for a specific length of time (retention term), and then they can be destroyed, according to an authorized “records disposition schedule” or “records disposition authority”.
- **Permanent Records.** Some inactive records must be kept permanently because of their legal or historical value; these become “archives”, once their retention term in their originating office expires and they are transferred to the archives according to a records disposition schedule.

What should be done with inactive records?

Most government offices face a large problem of what to do with records that they do

not need every day, but that they may not yet destroy, or that they may not yet turn over to the archives.

Furthermore, according to law, even inactive records must be ***readily accessible to public inspection*** when requested. There are four common alternatives, of which the last—a ***records center***—is the best.

- ***The usual bad solution: Operating offices can try to accommodate the inactive records themselves.*** This is not very satisfactory, and it is inconvenient. Everyone who tries it eventually gives up in exasperation. Filing cabinets and shelving units quickly fill up and older records are usually jammed wherever space can be found for them, and sometimes the records are just thrown away, no matter what the records disposition schedules advise. Not only the records suffer. The ability of the office to do its work efficiently and effectively drops sharply.
- ***A common, but still not good enough: Each operating office may acquire some “off-site” storage for its own inactive records.*** Although this gets the records out of the immediate office, it is still not very satisfactory, and it is costly. Sometimes, “off-site storage” is little better than a basement or attic “cell” in the local courthouse or executive office building, where records are kept next to building maintenance inflammables such as gasoline for the lawn mower. Sometimes it is little better than a commercial storage locker. Records in such storage are usually inaccessible or difficult to get at when needed, and they run grave danger of damage or deterioration. Even under the best storage conditions, it is excessively expensive for each office to have its own storage.
- ***Better, but not best: Operating offices pool their resources and share storage space for inactive records.*** This is a big improvement over the first two options, above. It offers shared storage space under one roof in a building that is controlled by the local government so that there is enough space and a good environment for the records. There remains, however, a problem of security and accessibility. Unless each office has its own relatively expensive lockable space within the larger space, ease of access and control of access become conflicting aims.
- ***Best solution—records center: Operating offices pool their resources, and the local government legislative body creates and fund a records center operation.*** In a ***records center***, the inactive records are kept in a single building and are tended to by a staff responsible to the local government—usually to the local executive. It is a service for all offices of the local government. The records center manager (and staff if needed):
 - tends to the building operation so that the records are safe and secure;
 - uses economies of scale to keep records on high shelving in relatively dense arrangement;

- keeps the records of each office separate from each other;
- accounts for all records received;
- helps operating offices and the public find and examine records;
- makes sure that no records are lost;
- releases records only to people explicitly authorized by an originating office;
- informs originating offices when the retention terms of records have expired;
- transfers records to the archives when authorized to do so; and
- destroys records according to legally-approved methods when authorized to do so.

A records center operation gives a local government the greatest degree of security, accessibility, service and compliance with legal obligations at the best cost per cubic foot of records.

Inter-governmental cooperation

Another way to assure records survival and accessibility at reasonable cost is to create inter-governmental cooperative facilities—for records centers, for archives, or both.

Intra-county cooperation

Within any given county, two or more municipalities, or municipalities and the county, may combine to establish and manage a joint records center and/or a joint archives, under the general management of a board of directors appointed by the several governments, and administered by a staff appointed by that board. The county public records commission may also serve this function, upon the agreement of the participating governments. Participating governments would share costs on a prorated, cost-reimbursable basis, depending on the volume of material contributed to the center or archives.

Inter-county cooperation

Two or more counties could combine under a similar arrangement to establish and manage a joint records center and/or archives. Such regionalization of the management of inactive records and archives saves everyone tax money.

¹ “Active records” are those still being used by an office to do work, or needed for frequent reference. There is no precise definition in terms of time spans because the status depends on need, not an arbitrary term limit.