What are Vital Records?

Vital records, sometimes called essential records, are the records necessary for the continuity of operations during and following a disaster. They are records an agency must have to maintain one or more of the following vital functions:

- Document the agency's legal authorities, rights, and responsibilities
- Resume or maintain operations in a disaster or emergency situation
- Document the rights of individuals (deeds, mortgages, court case files)

As per the State of Washington's Essential Records Manual

The essential functions of your organization will determine what vital records you will have. Examples of vital records may include:

- Emergency/Continuity of Operations (COOP) Plan
- Staff contact and assignment information, such as names, addresses, and phone numbers
- Orders of succession and delegations of authority
- Policies and procedural and systems manuals
- List of credit cardholders to purchase needed supplies
- Maps and building plans
- Employee records, including financial and pay records
- Customer records
- Social security and retirement records
- Titles, deeds, and contracts
- Licenses and long-term permits

Vital Records should make up no more than 10% of the total volume of records held by an organization.

What is a Vital Records Plan?

A Vital Records Plan is your written guidance to follow in the event of an emergency. It should include:

- Roles and responsibilities of the assigned staff
- Location of vital records and who can request the records
- Protection strategies in place for vital records and the cycling timeframes
- Location of alternate work site
- A vital records master list consisting of a complete inventory of vital records for the entire agency and a list of vital records for each office as well as their location.
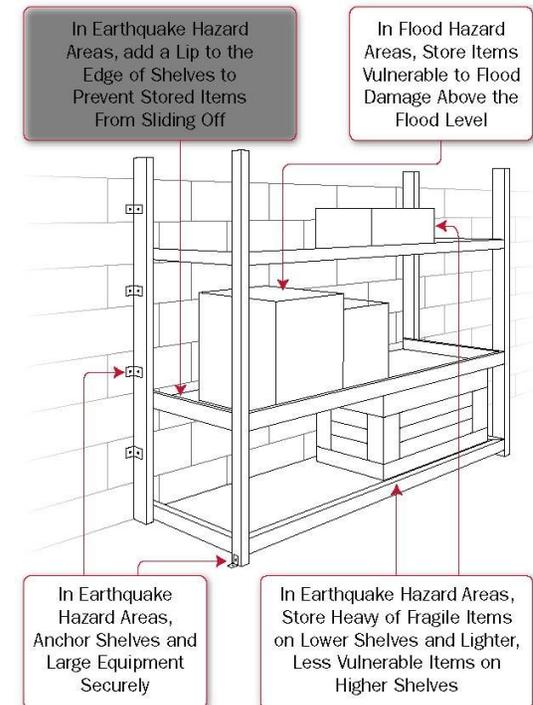
Include a Vital Records Plan in your organization's COOP Plan. Each organization's functional responsibilities and business needs are different. Therefore, an organization must decide which records are vital and assign responsibility for their protection, storage, and upkeep to the appropriate staff. The following actions can help:

- Conduct a Risk Assessment and an Impact Analysis to determine the most vulnerable records and how to protect them
- Identify records recovery experts and vendors to assist with recovery in the event of records damage
- Periodically review the packet to ensure that the information is current
- Develop procedures to routinely update vital records to ensure that they always contain the most current information

How Do I Protect my Vital Records?

To reduce your vulnerability, determine which records, files, and materials are most important in both your primary and alternate facilities. Consider their vulnerability to damage during different types of disasters (such as floods, hurricanes, and earthquakes), and take steps to protect them, including the following:

- Raising computers above the flood level and moving them away from large windows
- Securing equipment that could move or fall during an earthquake
- Considering off-site protection plans such as planned dispersal, E-vaulting, or duplication of records
- Regularly backing up vital electronic files and storing backup copies in a secure off-site location
- Moving heavy and fragile objects to low shelves
- Purchasing fire-resistant cabinets and vaults

In Earthquake Hazard Areas, add a Lip to the Edge of Shelves to Prevent Stored Items From Sliding Off

In Flood Hazard Areas, Store Items Vulnerable to Flood Damage Above the Flood Level

In Earthquake Hazard Areas, Anchor Shelves and Large Equipment Securely

In Earthquake Hazard Areas, Store Heavy of Fragile Items on Lower Shelves and Lighter, Less Vulnerable Items on Higher Shelves

TIPS

Keep these points in mind when you are storing vital records:

- Vital records are usually copies of records and are preserved to maintain critical information that will be needed during and after an emergency or incident
- Consider storage location. For example, do not store records near a hot water tank or pipes that could be damaged and burst during an earthquake, or near windows that could be damaged during hurricanes or other storms
- Assign vital records continuity duties to employees. For example, some employees could be responsible for securing storage bins and others for backing up computer files and delivering copies to a secure location
- Many vital records have limited time value. They are only vital for a specific period of time, and once that time passes, the copies become valueless for post-emergency business resumption. It is essential that vital records are reviewed and updated on a set schedule

ESTIMATED COST

The cost of these measures will depend on the size and structure of your organization, the nature of the potential hazards, and the effort required to ensure proper protection. In some instances, you may need to buy new equipment, such as a backup tape-drive system.

Regulations and Guidance

- 36 CFR 1236, Management of Vital Records
- 36 CFR 1236.14, Management of Vital Records—Definitions
- Vital Records and Records Disaster Mitigation and Recovery (NARA Publication)
- Executive Order 12656, Assignment of Emergency Preparedness Responsibilities
- Federal Continuity Directive 1, Federal Executive Branch National Continuity Program and Requirements, Released February 5, 2008
- Federal Continuity Directive 2, Federal Executive Branch Mission Essential Function and Primary Mission Essential Function Identification and Submission Process, Released February 5, 2008
- Continuity Guidance Circular 1, Continuity Guidance for Non-Federal Entities (States, Territories, Tribal, and Local Government Jurisdictions and Private Sector Organizations), Signed January 21, 2009
- Continuity Guidance Circular 2, Continuity Guidance for Non-Federal Entities: Mission Essential Functions Identification Process (States, Territories, Tribes, and Local Government Jurisdictions), Signed July 23, 2010
  For copies of FCD 1, FCD 2, or CGC 1, go to:
  http://www.fema.gov/about/org/ncp/coop/planning.shtm

Other Sources of Information

- The National Archives Vital Records and Records Disaster Mitigation and Recovery: An Instructional Guide
  http://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/vital-records/
- The National Archives Vital Records and Disaster Recovery http://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/vital-records/recovery.html
- Federal Emergency Management Continuity of Operations (COOP) Programs
  http://www.fema.gov/ppt/government/coop/vital_records.ppt
- Your state archives are a good source of information and assistance. To locate your state archives, visit
  http://www.statearchivists.org/statearchivists.htm

Vital Records Awareness

An Overview

FEMA