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Emergency Preparedness
Canada

Protection civile
Canada

The Preservation of Essential Records

*A guide for governments,
organizations, institutions
and businesses*

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The Preservation of Essential Records

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Introduction

This booklet provides a brief introduction to the concept of essential records and gives basic guidelines on establishing an essential records program within the context of emergency preparedness and business resumption planning.

An essential record is an information holding that is considered to be vital to the operations of an organization. The determination of what is "vital" is a management decision. Some information holdings that are considered "vital" may change very little or not at all. This kind of information is identified in this booklet as *static*. Other information vital to successful operations is constantly changing as circumstances shift or work is done. This kind of information is identified in this booklet as *active*. Both kinds of information may be regarded as essential and should be preserved so that the operations of the organization can be maintained — or resumed, if they've been interrupted.

The methods of preserving essential records should be a matter of organizational policy and should be defined in the records management policy, the emergency preparedness plans and the EDP policy of every organization. The methodology of preserving essential records should be linked with that organization's ability to recover following an interruption in operations. Recovery, particularly a rapid recovery necessitated to ensure business survival, will be aided by having a business resumption plan which includes the ready availability of the organization's essential records.

Plans on how to deal with common emergencies such as fires and floods should encompass arrangements for an orderly recovery of business operations — including ready access to the organization's essential information — in addition to protecting people, equipment and accommodations.

An essential records program is mandatory for federal organizations. Other public service institutions such as hospitals, police and fire services should also have such a plan. An essential records program is for any period of disruption, not just during a disaster or for the post-disaster period.

Although this booklet is intended mainly for governments at all levels, for public service organizations and for commercial enterprises, private individuals may also find it useful in helping decide which of their personal records are essential and should be safeguarded in the event of disaster in the home or workplace.

The information in this booklet is based largely on the *Guide to the Preservation of Essential Records* manual published by Emergency Preparedness Canada in 1987. Additional information and advice from the National Archives of Canada was used in developing this booklet.

The following are three good reference documents: The first and perhaps most useful is *Business Resumption Planning: a guide*, published in 1995 by Emergency Preparedness Canada. It shows the need for developing a sound plan to preserve essential information. The federal *Emergency Preparedness Act* requires federal government departments and agencies to have emergency plans. The *Government Security Policy* sets out security standards for federal government organizations.

Records, essential or otherwise, may take various forms. The most common is paper and includes memos, reports, letters, files and various other documents. Another common form is electronic records stored in computers, on computer diskettes and electromagnetic tapes. Other information storage media include videotapes, audiotapes, maps, charts, blueprints and photographs.

What is an essential records program?

An essential records program should begin with the managers of the organization deciding what information is essential to running the organization. Included in the essential records program should be a description of the arrangements made to duplicate and preserve the essential records, the frequency with which the duplication process will be performed and an identification of the media to be used in preserving the records.

An essential records program should be part of an organization's disaster recovery plan or business resumption plan. It would ensure the continued availability of essential information in the event of disruption to normal operations during which records, including those essential to operations, would be lost.

Why is an essential records program important?

In the aftermath of a disaster affecting any organization, a necessary element to recovery is access to the organization's essential records. If the information contained in those records is lost, the organization may not be able — or permitted — to resume operations.

Many companies involved in a disaster never re-open. Much of the blame for the demise of the business can be attributed as much to a loss of information as to the loss of equipment, accommodation or personnel.

Should my organization have an essential records program?

If your organization is part of the federal government, the answer is "Yes." Federal government organizations are required to have an essential records program. Those records must be stored, by law, in facilities that are dry, temperature controlled and dust free. These sites must also have controlled access separate from the site where the records were created or used regularly.

Other government organizations also need an essential records program. Provincial governments have essential records programs and provide storage through their provincial archives. Good emergency preparedness means regional, county and municipal governments should make similar arrangements.

Some organizations such as banks and other financial institutions, health care facilities and other institutions with special responsibilities for the financial, material and/or physical well-being of clients are well aware of the need to preserve essential records. Any organization whose success depends on continued operations in which information is a necessary part, should also be convinced of the need to preserve essential records.

Who decides what is an essential record?

Each organization should determine its own list of essential records based on its own requirements, jurisdictions and responsibilities. A mission statement, legislation and other such references can help define what constitutes essential services and responsibilities, hence essential records.

What is involved in developing an essential records program?

Those responsible for information management, those responsible for emergency preparedness and the key users of the information contained within records should be among the individuals who devise an essential records program. Legal and technical experts should also be consulted. Senior management needs to be involved from the very beginning of the process to ensure a program is in place and ensure it is kept current.

A determination should first be made of what is essential among all the information held by an organization. Then, each piece of essential information should be categorized by type — *static* or *active*. Certified copies of *static* records should be made and stored in secure sites. *Active* information should be backed up frequently and the back-up copies stored off-site at a location where the information would be readily available. The frequency of backing up active information is dictated by the volatility and volume of the information.

Selecting essential records

Deciding what records are *essential* to an organization in the event of an emergency or disaster can be difficult. The following are offered as guidelines and suggestions in approaching the task:

Points to consider

- Only the organization can decide which of its records are essential. There is no universal standard or list of documents that applies to every organization, institution or type of business. In some cases, legislation, regulations, or policies may determine what information holdings are essential.
- To determine which records are essential, the roles and responsibilities of the organization should be clearly defined.
- The records manager, the EDP manager, the organization's librarian and the emergency planner should work closely with key users of the information to determine which records are essential.
- Records should be essential, not merely desirable.
- Select records as *essential* also on the basis of ensuring continued delivery of programs and services.
- Consider what records are required to ensure the ongoing legal, property and other rights of individuals and corporate bodies.
- The criteria for selecting essential records should be established at the outset. Consider what information is absolutely required in order to

maintain the operations of the organization or to re-build the organization virtually from scratch after a disaster.

- Essential records *must* be kept current. If not, the safeguarded records will be of little use after the disaster. A procedure for updating essential records should be part of your organization's records management system.
- Removing records that have been superseded or are no longer applicable according to a records retention and disposition schedule should also be part of an organization's essential records program.
- The "essentialness" of a given record may change as work-in-progress changes within an organization.
- Essential records should be kept in a secure location, geographically separate from the headquarters of the organization or business, in the event that the building and surrounding community is destroyed or rendered inaccessible for an extended period.
- Choose the most appropriate form of record available in keeping with the need that the information will serve when it is the only copy available. (Summaries, lists, maps, charts.)
- Records should be complete, concise, clear, and easy to understand. If instructions are needed to retrieve or make use of the information contained in records (especially electronic records) those instructions should be included.
- Verify that the essential records are not already held elsewhere and that any duplicated records are essential to the agency holding them. If such shared or duplicate records are deemed essential by the other organization, that organization should protect and store the records as part of its own essential records program.
- Some information may be required by other organizations as part of their recovery plan. Consider which records are required and safeguard them as essential records. Similarly, consider any information necessary to your operations that is being held by another organization. Make arrangements for the safekeeping of those records.

Other considerations of an essential records program

- Consider the best method of preserving an essential record: photocopy, storage on computer diskette, tape, etc. Cost effectiveness, accessibility and retrieval mechanisms are other important considerations.
- Original records that have been duplicated for essential records purposes should be dated and annotated as having been copied for essential records.
- Consider the best place to store your organization's essential records, e.g. a branch office in another city, in a reinforced vault away from your headquarters, or in commercial storage.
- The National Archives of Canada is responsible for administering secure sites for federal government departments and agencies and providing advice on other aspects of an essential records program.
- Essential records should be tested periodically. If the information they contain is no longer essential, the records should be deleted from the essential records program. Such spot-checks and tests would also help pinpoint any missing or excluded essential records.
- Generally, essential records should comprise not more than 10% of the total volume of records held by an organization.
- An essential records program should include the preparation and maintenance of a list of who is allowed access to the essential records. The list should be distributed to information managers, to senior managers and to those whose names appear on the list.

Storage equipment and criteria

- Consider how best to store your organization's essential records: in filing cabinets, in cartons on shelves, special containers such as those for protecting maps and wall charts and electronic data, and how to keep an inventory of the records and a method of retrieval.
- Consider the level of physical security and confidentiality required for the records to be stored. Access to the records storage area should be

tightly controlled. Your organization's records may contain highly sensitive personal, financial or proprietary information.

- A master inventory should be created, indicating where each document or piece of information is located.

The following checklist is intended as a guide to what *may* be an essential record for your institution, organization or business:

- records essential to re-establish the organization
- constitution and bylaws
- accounts payable and receivable
- audit records
- bank records
- capital assets list
- charters, franchises and orders-in-council
- contracts in force
- engineering data
- licences and permits
- leases
- inventories of equipment and supplies
- insurance policies
- payroll/personnel records
- stocks, bonds
- certificates of incorporation and registry
- deeds, blueprints and technical drawings
- fixed asset records
- mailing lists
- organization charts
- financial signing authorities
- union agreements
- blank forms of various types
- computer programs
- supplier listing
- production formulae
- management succession lists
- copies of legislation, Acts, regulations, policies
- court documents
- leases

- insurance policies
- contracts and agreements
- property and land files
- procedural manuals
- personnel records, annual reports, organization charts, inventories and forms
- research and technical data and specifications on specialized projects
- personnel documentation such as superannuation records, payroll documents, pension fund files, salary deduction lists
- special agreements with clients
- sales records and guarantees.

Potential Essential Records for Government Organizations

(in addition to some of those listed above)

- lists and locations of essential records in all categories
- lists of key personnel with specialized training
- locations and quantities of stocks of materials necessary to restore basic services to the public
- rescue plans and resources
- records vital to public order, safety, and public health
- details of utility systems (power, water, sewage)
- topographic and demographic data
- maps of infrastructure such as roads and rail systems, bridges and pipelines
- technical records for highways and road systems, communications systems,
- surveys and plans of public utilities, waterways, buildings, bridges, wharves
- navigation charts
- copies of international agreements
- memoranda of understanding with other organizations and levels of government
- information on facilities such as hospitals, schools, nursing homes
- evacuation routes.

References on essential records

Business Resumption Planning a guide (booklet)

Emergency Preparedness Canada

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(available from Emergency Preparedness Canada)

Information Technology Security Handbook
by Charles Miller
Minister of Government Services Canada, 1993
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ISBN 0-662-59922-5

Administrative Policy Manual
Chapter 6.3: Management of Government Information Holdings (August 1990)
Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat

Emergency Preparedness Act (1988)

Government of Canada Security Policy
Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat

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