NEW HAMPSHIRE DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Best Practice Guidelines for Vital Records Preservation

October 21, 2006

Introduction

The New Hampshire Secretary of State (SOS) and the Vital Records Improvement Fund Advisory Committee (VRIFAC) support and encourage city and town clerks to utilize "best practices" for vital records[1] storage and preservation. This document summarizes, with links to further details, specific guidelines to ensure the long-term preservation of these important records.

While the focus is on vital records, as described in RSA 5-C:15 [2], the practices detailed in this document are generally applicable as well to preservation of permanent municipal records consistent with RSA 41:58-59 and RSA 33-A [3].

Our goal is to encourage New Hampshire cities and towns to target specific interventions that can have a lasting impact. While we recognize that achieving ALL of these standards may be expensive and time consuming, we want to emphasize that, by addressing ANY of these recommendations, you will be helping to improve vital records preservation in your community. Our suggestion is to start by targeting the most beneficial results that can be achieved with the least amount of time and money.

The SOS and the VRIFAC are available to assist you in this effort, including offering grants to NH municipalities for vital records assessment and planning; improvements to the storage environment, records security, and related equipment; and rehousing, reformatting and conservation of records, including microfilming.

The Records Storage Environment

"*A benign storage environment is the first order of business in preserving permanent . . . records.*" [4]

- Think "cool, dry, dark, and clean."

---

[1] "Vital record," as defined in RSA 5-C:1, refers to a certificate or report of a (a) Birth, (b) Adoption, (c) Death, (d) Fetal death, (e) Marriage, (f) Divorce, (g) Legal separation, or (h) Civil annulment.

[2] Web site link to RSA 5-C:15 is http://www.gencourt.state.nh.us/rsa/html/NHTOC/NHTOC-I-5-C.htm .

[3] Web site link to RSA 41:58-59 is http://www.gencourt.state.nh.us/rsa/html/NHTOC/NHTOC-III-41.htm and link RSA 33-A is http://www.gencourt.state.nh.us/rsa/html/NHTOC/NHTOC-III-33-A.htm .

[4] "Records Management and Archives for Local Governments in New Hampshire," NH Local Records Education Project, Dartmouth College, www.dartmouth.edu/~nhlrep/about/index.html

- Establish a physically secure storage area, ideally in the central core of the building (not in the basement or attic) and of adequate size to allow for future growth.

- To maintain climatic stability, ensure that the space is well insulated with vapor barriers and monitored climate controls.

- Stability of both temperature and humidity, with minimal fluctuations, is the most critically important environmental consideration.

- Maintain stable, 24/7 year round temperature at 65-68 degrees F. (70 degree maximum), with monthly fluctuations of no more than 3 degrees. (Note: if the records storage space is distinct from employee work spaces, temperatures of 55-65 degrees F are desirable, again with fluctuations of no more than 3 degrees).

- Maintain stable, 24/7 year round relative humidity at 45%, with minimal (no more than 5 %) fluctuations, through proper climate controls and, if needed, use of a humidifier or dehumidifier.

- Install smoke and water/flood alarms which are wired directly to fire departments.

- Install a fire suppression/sprinkler system.

- Preventative steps are invariably less expensive than remedial ones. Monitor temperature, humidity, mold, light levels, indoor and outdoor pollutants, insects, and dust -- through both regular inspections (of both the storage site and actual records), as well as use of monitoring equipment, such as hygrothermographs, temperature and humidity data loggers, thermometer/hygrometer recorders, and light meters.

- When possible, different media (paper, film, magnetic tapes, etc.) should be stored separately since ideal conditions vary for each; for example, for microfilm 55 degrees is recommended with a fluctuation of no more than 2 degrees.

- Minimize light damage by storing paper records in low light conditions (200-400 lux) through use of covered boxes, curtains, light timers or automatic shut-off switches. To avoid the most damaging portion of the light spectrum, use UV light filters on fluorescent bulbs and windows.

- Protect records from dust through use of covered boxes. Clean the storage space using a HEPA (high efficiency particulate air filter) vacuum cleaner. Ensure routine maintenance of the furnace and air conditioners and regularly replace the filters.

- Use stable metal shelving that is powder-coated steel or baked enamel. Avoid untreated wooden shelving since it has acidic properties and may release indoor pollutants.

- Shelving should be placed at least three inches away from walls (to ensure air circulation) with the lowest shelf a minimum of four inches off the floor. Whenever possible, leave top shelves empty and ensure an 18-inch clearance from sprinkler heads.

- Ensure records security including, if necessary, segregating vital records (for example, installing a caged-in area within a more widely-used records storage facility).

Care and Handling of Records

- Establish, publicize, and post use polices, for both municipal employees and the public, including:
    1. hand washing prior to using documents
    2. no food or drink in the document use or storage areas
    3. remove overcoats and store outside the use or storage area
    4. avoid use of sticky notes, tape, rubber bands, paper clips, etc. on the records
    5. no writing on the records.

- Establish a policy as to who has records responsibility and authority, including responding to the public's request for records, moving records from the storage area to the use area and back, and developing descriptive tools to provide information about the records.

- For records use and reading, make available a clean table/surface with no rough surfaces or sharp edges. Ideally, the surface should be at least double the size of the records being used.

- Use microfilm, where it exists, in place of the originals.

- Ensure clear passage from the storage area to the use area.

- Utilize non-original "use copies" for reading or photocopying fragile or heavily-used records.

- Allow records to be used only on site under monitored settings with no option for removal from the building where they are stored.

Rehousing, Reformatting and Conservation of Records

- Avoid doing anything to your records that cannot be undone.

- Place all permanent paper records in pH neutral or alkaline-buffered, lidded storage cartons.

- Use acid-free or alkaline-buffered file folders.

- Fragile paper records and bound volumes need to be identified and prioritized for cleaning, conserving, and reformatting; seek professional guidance before undertaking any records reformatting and rebinding.

- Encapsulation of fragile records in polyester sleeves may be desirable for certain records, consistent with professional guidance.

- Microfilm permanent paper records, following ANSI standards. Microfilm is an excellent medium for long-term preservation, having a usable shelf life of up to 500 years.

- Data imaging (scanning) is an effective means to make records highly accessible via the web, email, etc., but this is not recommended as a primary method for long-term preservation given rapidly changing technologies.

- Protect bindings of bound records by purchasing a drop-edge platen photocopier or photocopier with an edge platen attachment.

- For preserving film, please refer to the National Film Preservation Project listed at the end of this document.

- For guidelines for preserving photographs, see http://palimpsest.stanford.edu/byauth/roosa/roosa1.html .

- For guidelines for preserving magnetic media, including audio and video tape, floppy discs, CDs, DVDs see http://palimpsest.stanford.edu/byauth/st-laurent/care.html .

Other Priorities

- Adopt a policy of using alkaline-buffered paper for new records that have permanent value.

- Develop a municipal vital records disaster plan to identify risks, take preventative measures to eliminate or minimize records losses, and have a detailed response ready in the event of natural or man-made disasters. The Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC) has created a useful planning template which is available at http://www.nedcc.org/plam3/tleaf34.htm . NEDCC and the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners have developed a useful on-line template called dPlan (http://www.dplan.org/).

Sources and More Information

American Institute for Conservation (http://aic.stanford.edu).

American National Standards Institute (http://ansi.org/). Includes microfilming standards.

Archives Association of British Columbia, Archivists Tool Kit. Contains useful information and links. (Available at http://aabc.bc.ca/aabc/toolkit.html).

Conservation OnLine (CoOL) hosted by Stanford University Libraries, Preservation Department. Contains a series of useful articles on conservation of documents and other archival materials (http://palimpsest.stanford.edu).

Minnesota State Archives. Electronic Records Management Guidelines. (http://www.mnhs.org/preserve/records/electronicrecords/erguidelinestoc.html).

National Archives. (http://www.archives.gov/preservation).

National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators (http://www.nagara.org/). Includes a new section on local government records publications.

National Film Preservation Foundation (http://www.filmpreservation.org).

National Fire Protection Association (http://www.nfpa.org) which sells documents with various standards, including:

- NFPA 75: Standard for the Protection of Electronic Computer/Data Processing Equipment
- NFPA 232: Standard for the Protection of Records
- NFPA 909: Standard for the Protection of Cultural Resources

National Information Standards Organization. Permanence of Paper for Publications and Documents in Libraries and Archives. (http://www.niso.org/standards/resources/Z39-48.pdf).

NH Local Records Education Project, Dartmouth College. While no longer an active project, this web site contains useful information and links to many web resources (www.dartmouth.edu/~nhlrep/about/index.html).

NH Department of State, Division of Vital Records Administration. (http://www.sos.nh.gov/vitalrecords). This includes a link to the vital records grant program for city and town clerks.

NH Municipal Records Board. The role of this important board is described on the Department of State web site (http://www.sos.nh.gov/archives/NH_MRB.html).

National Archives of Canada. Guidelines for preserving magnetic media, including audio and video tape, floppy discs, CDs, DVDs

(http://www.collectionscanada.ca/6/28/s28-1017-e.html).

Northeast Document Conservation Center. The NEDCC web site has an extensive series of very useful technical leaflets which are easily downloaded and printed (http://www.nedcc.org/resources/leaflets.introduction.php).

SOLINET. Environmental Specifications for the Storage of Library and Archival Materials. (http://www.solinet.net/emplibfile/environspecs.pdf).