

# A NATIONAL RISK:

# The State of State Electronic Records Report, 2017



By Barbara Teague, CoSA SERI Consultant



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Archives Collaborating and Cooperating with External Strategic Stakeholders (ACCESS), Action Plan, 2015

Program for Electronic Records Training, Tools, and Standards (PERTTS), Final Report, 2015

State Electronic Records Initiative (SERI) — Phase II Report, 2015

State Electronic Records Initiative (SERI) — Phase I Report. June 2012. 66 pp.

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## FOREWORD

Through hard work and dedication, the Council of State Archivists successfully launched the State Electronic Records Initiative (SERI) in 2011. This important endeavor allowed all state and territorial archives to move forward in electronic records management and digital preservation. SERI has become our flagship program and is vitally important to the success of our organization going forward. Our success, however, is quite fleeting. The pressures of collecting and managing digital government records are only going to increase. The volume and complexity of electronic records compound these pressures. Resources will continue to be constrained. Our challenges will endure.

It is with these thoughts in mind that we announce the publication of *A National Risk: The State of State Electronic Records Report, 2017*. This report and call to action, written by Barbara Teague, CoSA Program Consultant, examines the progress SERI has made over the past seven years in the improvement of electronic records and digital preservation capabilities in the 56 states and territories. From assessment to planning and action, the report traces the development of SERI's programming and outreach efforts, and raises an urgent call to action in support of creative approaches to secure the safety and security of state government digital records and information.

I would like to especially thank Barbara Teague for her exceptional work in researching, compiling and drafting this document. I would also like to acknowledge and thank Libnova whose generous support made the distribution of this work possible.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Tim Baker". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Timothy Baker  
CoSA President  
and Maryland State Archivist

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite years of effort by state archivists and records managers, digital government records remain in danger of being lost, deleted, misplaced, or misappropriated in many states. Loss of government records and data potentially jeopardizes our physical safety, official transparency and accountability, and individual rights. **A National Risk: The State of State Electronic Records Report, 2017** examines the work of the Council of State Archivists (CoSA) and the fifty-six state and territorial government archives in preserving these digital records for future generations.

State government electronic records are in danger because most states do not adequately fund or support initiatives for electronic records management and digital preservation. Recordkeeping remains a relatively low priority in state government, even though records are key in documenting policies, actions, and the intent of the government. The proper care and preservation of government records is fundamental to sustaining our democracy and to protecting our rights as citizens. Increased state and territorial investment is vital to the long-term stability of electronic records management programs nationwide. On average, state and territorial governments spend 0.007% of their budgets on archives and records management.<sup>1</sup> With such minimal investment and attention, *our state governments are in danger of losing important digital information that can never be retrieved, putting our nation and its identity at risk*. Digital records are more at-risk than paper records because of the fragility of digital media, obsolescence of systems and software, migration issues, and the increased technical expertise needed to properly manage and preserve electronic materials.

Acknowledging the urgent need for state and territorial governments to establish and to commit support for electronic records and digital preservation programs, the Council of State

Archivists, the national association of all fifty-six state and territorial archivists, launched the State Electronic Records Initiative (SERI) in 2011 to effect improvements in these crucial areas. CoSA has long been involved in promoting best practices for managing, preserving, and providing access to government records of historic value. Its members are skilled in developing materials that are of use to other state archives, partners, and stakeholders. CoSA's membership has a history of working effectively together on collaborative projects and in convening groups to seek solutions to key issues, including prior projects concerning local government records and disaster preparedness. This strong record of strategic project management helped CoSA model SERI as an effective collaborative program.

CoSA approached the challenges of electronic records management and preservation with the SERI initiative, recognizing the need to assist all members with capacity building. Each state and territory has its local challenges, so CoSA cannot and does not proscribe one solution. Instead, SERI helps each state and territory assess its status and provides tools and shares knowledge on a variety of technologies, tools, and resources to assist its members in improving their electronic records management and digital preservation programs. With the majority of state archives having joint records management and archival programs, CoSA members can also concentrate on the entire record lifecycle. Without this focus on individual improvements in each state and territory, electronic records programs would likely be developed only in states with comparatively more funding and staffing resources. CoSA adopted a multi-faceted approach to increasing the capability of state archives and records programs to manage electronic records and digital preservation work by centering activities on:

- **education and training** for state and territorial archives staff, to ensure up-to-date knowledge and skills;

- **tools and resources**, to assist state archives staff in locating and understanding new technologies, software, and management tools; and
- **awareness and outreach**, to share information about the importance of state government electronic records.

Most SERI programs have been started with federal grant funds and sustained by volunteers from CoSA’s membership. CoSA is currently applying for additional grant funding, and plans to sustain SERI as an ongoing part of CoSA’s mission.

States rated their electronic records management and digital preservation programs at the beginning of the SERI initiative in mid-2011 and again in March 2017, nearly six years later. CoSA asked that states consider their programs through the entire lifecycle of a record, from records management contacts to permanent digital preservation. These responses show that *CoSA’s efforts through SERI have resulted in demonstrable, incremental improvements in electronic records management and digital preservation* in the fifty-six state and territorial government archives, with most of states showing gradual improvement.

In evaluating six years of continual program development and improvement, CoSA and its members have come to recognize that the coordinated effort to ensure the safety and security of our permanent digital government records is still in its infancy. As the following table illustrates, although positive change has occurred, many challenges remain. For example, in 2011, 41% of state and territorial archives reported having a full or partially operating electronic records management program. Even though that increased to 65% in 2017, 65% is still a failing grade, considering that digital information is central to an ever-growing number of online programs and services in all fifty-six states and territories. Of that 65%, or thirty-six state archival agencies, *only fifteen state archives have a fully functioning electronic records management and digital preservation program in 2017*. If only fifteen archives, or 27% of state archives, are providing standard management and care for electronic records, the fragility of the records that are being created in the remaining 73% of states is of paramount concern.

**Figure 1. Which best describes the current status of your electronic records management program?<sup>2</sup>**

Category	Number of State Archives		Percentage of Total	
	2011	2017	2011 (n=54)	2017 (n=56)
A: Have an electronic records program that addresses all stages of the life cycle	5	15	9%	27%
B: Have an electronic records program, but it does not address all stages of the life cycle	17	21	32%	38%
C: Have started an electronic records program, but little or nothing has been implemented	19	15	35%	27%
D: Have not yet begun tackling electronic records	13 (9 state archives and 4 territorial archives)	5 (3 state archives and 2 territorial archives)	24%	9%

The answers do demonstrate general progress toward stronger and more effective electronic records management and digital preservation programs in state governments. In 2011, thirty-two state archives indicated little or no action in the establishment of an electronic records program; that number decreased to twenty in 2017, with only five of those twenty, or 9% of all state and territorial archives, indicating that they had no electronic records program. Incremental changes in most state and territorial archives has been evident throughout the SERI program, and more improvements are expected as state archives staff implement programs and services for electronic records and digital preservation.

We face a critical moment in the history and public service mission of our nation's state and territorial archives. As custodians of digital media produced since the latter decades of the twentieth century, state archivists must guarantee the retention and ongoing accessibility of these records. Effective management of electronic records requires knowledgeable involvement throughout the lifecycle of a record, to ensure proper creation, use, preservation, and access. This is especially true as the management of electronic records is substantially more complex than managing paper-based records.

CoSA will continue SERI as part of an active plan to further improve management and preservation of digital government information through sustaining current initiatives while also creating new and innovative programs to support the management and preservation of government records. CoSA will look for assistance from partners, stakeholders, and others to help ensure the survival of these critical records.

## FUTURE INITIATIVES SUMMARY

Over the next decade, CoSA will continue its progress in the improvement of electronic records management and digital preservation in all fifty-six state and territorial archives, concentrating on the following areas:

### **Promote awareness about the criticality of managing and preserving government electronic records, and the urgent need for action**

CoSA will continue to increase awareness among state and territorial government officials of the importance of managing and preserving records and to emphasize the urgent need to fully manage government electronic records to ensure our nation's future safety and security.

### **Collaborate with allies, stakeholders, and users of government information**

CoSA will continue to work with current partners, and will emphasize outreach to allied groups, to increase awareness of and support for state archives in managing electronic records and digital preservation issues.

### **Create comprehensive and sustainable programming for electronic records management and digital preservation in state and territorial archives**

CoSA will support a comprehensive SERI program, and its board and members will continue to examine ways to increase fiscal support for this program.

### **Increase engagement of CoSA members**

CoSA will continue to improve communication and outreach with its members. CoSA will also coordinate efforts among state archives to increase the number of cooperative projects and to share programs, services, and lessons learned in electronic records management and digital preservation of state government records.

### **Strengthen SERI's continuing education and training program for state archives staff**

CoSA will remain committed to sustaining and improving its successful continuing education and training program for state and territorial archives staff, and issued a training plan in conjunction with this report.<sup>3</sup>

### **Improve PERTTS portal and CoSA resources**

CoSA will continue to sustain and enhance the [Program for Electronic Records Training, Tools, and Standards \(PERTTS\) portal](#) to provide a comprehensive resource for information on electronic records management and digital preservation, freely available for all.

### **Think and act creatively**

The perilous state of electronic records management and digital preservation in state governments calls for increasingly bold action. Time will not wait for traditional methods and slow approaches to ensure proper digital preservation of our state and territorial government records. How prepared are we to meet the challenges facing us?

<sup>1</sup> Council of State Archivists (CoSA), *The State of State Records: A Status Report on State Archives and Records Management Programs in the United States, Part 2, Tables* (Albany, New York: Council of State Archivists, 2017), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Of the 56 state and territorial archives, 54 responded the 2011 survey. There were 55 respondents to the 2017 survey. The one state/territory that did not respond in 2017 does not have an electronic records program and was placed in category D in this chart.

<sup>3</sup> SERI Education and Training Plan, August, 2017.