Electronic Records Overview

What is an Electronic Record?

Regardless of the format, recorded information is usually considered a public record if it documents activities or functions of a government agency or entity. Many states' public records laws and statutes consider format inconsequential when determining if a file is or is not a public record.

Records are created and maintained in a wide variety of formats including email, databases, word processing documents, spreadsheets, digital images, text messages, instant messages, voicemail, audio, and video. These various formats require special attention, expertise, software, and hardware to read, manipulate, store, and provide long-term access to the information.

More Electronic State Records Every Year

U.S. state and territorial governments are creating and receiving electronic records at an exponential rate. At this point, most state government actions and decisions are conducted over an electronic medium, and documentation of government policies is created electronically. Government data is used at multiple levels of decision making and by groups outside government, as well. Good decisions require access to state electronic records.

CoSA's research reveals:

- 1693% growth in state and territorial electronic records between 2006-2016
- 445% growth in electronic versus paper records in state and territorial archives
- 1371TB of electronic government records held by states and territorial archives

Electronic Records Need Special Attention

Electronic records are more complex and less durable than traditional records. Without attention to ensure they are preserved and accessible over time, electronic records can become unusable. Intervention is required at specific points in the lifecycle of the electronic record in order to protect them for future use. Without such timely action to preserve them, electronic records can be overwritten, lost in media migrations, or become inaccessible due to obsolescence of hardware and software that is a natural part of the technological life cycle.

Examples of attention that electronic records require include: migrating files to new storage media such as from a CD or DVD to tape or spinning disk; converting obsolete file formats to new file formats so that the content can be accessible and usable in the future; and even checking the fixity or stability of a file to confirm the bits (the ones and zeros that make up the file) are unchanging over time, thereby proving the integrity of the file. Sustained attention and resources are needed to ensure the long-term management and accessibility of state electronic records. Archives and records management agencies in state government are knowledgeable about electronic records management and digital preservation, making them an excellent source of information and assistance.

Checklist for Overview of Electronic Records

☐ Know your state's laws and statutes. Understand what electronic files are public records and how to properly manage them. Contact your state archivist for help.

☐ Get ahead of the curve. There are more electronic records produced every year. Get in the habit of managing them properly so your agency isn't overwhelmed.

☐ Plan to transfer your electronic state records to the appropriate archive or records management agency quickly and efficiently. Ask for guidance on transfer workflows.

Additional Resources

To learn more about electronic records and how to manage them, CoSA recommends the following:

National Archives and Records Administration
Electronic Records Management Guidance on Methodology for Determining Agency-unique Requirements
https://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/policy/requirements-guidance.html

New York State Archives
Electronic Records
http://www.archives.nysed.gov/records/mr_erecords.shtml

South Carolina Department of Archives and History
Electronic Records Management Guidelines
https://scdah.sc.gov/records-management/electronic-records/electronic-records-management-guidelines

National Association of State Chief Information Officers and Council of State Archivists
State Archiving in the Digital Era: A Playbook for the Preservation of Electronic Records
org/files/9815/3989/0743/StateArchivingInTheDigitalEra_
PlaybookForThePreservationOfElectronicRecords_2018-10.pdf

Council of State Archivists
State Interagency Electronic Records Transfer Checklist
https://www.statearchivists.org/files/2615/7021/8359/CoSA_transfer_checklist_100319.pdf

About CoSA

Formed in 2002, the Council of State Archivists (CoSA) is a national nonprofit using collaborative research, education, and advocacy to provide leadership that strengthens and supports state and territorial archives in their work to preserve and provide access to government records. Its members comprise the state archivists in the 50 state, 5 territorial and District of Columbia archives. These individuals oversee agencies that hold a legal mandate to document government and protect the rights and history of the American people across our country.

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