Transforming
Lives

About Essential Records. . .

Conversations to have about essential records and how to protect them.

Washington State
**Department of Social
& Health Services**

Transforming lives

What is an essential record?

Essential records provide our agency with information we need:

- To conduct business under emergency conditions; and
- To resume normal business afterward.

Without essential records, daily agency business would stop and public interest could be endangered because of:

- Vulnerability to litigation;
- Exposure to unplanned expenses of financial settlements or revenue loss;
- Disruption of efficiency due to gaps in information; and
- Breaks in the continuity of operations.

Essential records allow DSHS to continue functioning under adverse conditions regardless of intensity and duration.

Conversations to have about essential records and how to protect them.

Ask:

- Which of the records we use are essential?
- Where can we find our essential records?
- What are our actual risks?
- How can we protect our essential records?
- What is our Plan B?

These discussions should include:

- office and line staff.
- information technology staff.
- records management staff.
- emergency management staff.

Let's talk about essential records.
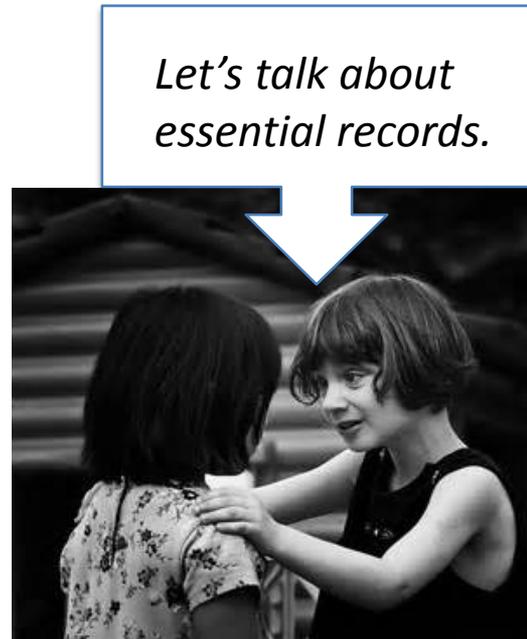
Which of the records we use are essential?

The first step is identifying your essential records.
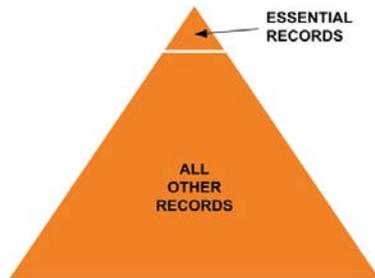
Typically, less than 5% of all government records are essential. DSHS may exceed this percentage as we have a considerable client and individual provider base.

Per Administrative Policy 5.04, essential records include all records needed to protect assets, obligations and resources necessary to provide continuity, preservation, and operation of our agency. DSHS records are considered essential when they:
- are necessary for emergency response.
- are necessary to resume and restore operations.
- protect the health, safety, and rights of DSHS clients.
- would require massive resources to reconstruct.

Emergency response records

Some essential records are necessary at the time of or shortly after an incident. These are called **emergency response records** and include:

- Emergency plans
- Maps
- Building plans
- Delegated authority records
- Essential records inventories
- Insurance records
- Emergency management staff and their contact numbers

These are records needed in order to **_respond_** to an emergency.

Continuity of operations records

Continuity records are essential records required for legal, financial and public responsibilities. Examples of these essential include client or case records, payroll, facility plans, accounts receivables, contracts and other legally binding documents, software source codes, access and permissions lists, etc.

Some examples of DSHS-specific continuity essential records are:

- Client, patient and resident files and case records
- Victim / Witness Notification files
- Background Check Authorizations
- Payroll records
- Provider files
- Contracts and agreements
- Records retention schedules

These are records needed in order to _**continue business**_ during and after an emergency.

Where do we find our essential records?

Essential records are found in many formats - paper, electronic, microfilm, or photographs, for example. Records are considered essential <u>based on the information they contain</u> **not on their format**.

A list of essential records must include the:
- office responsible for the record.
- title of each essential record series.
- format in which the record is stored.
- physical location of your essential records.

Decide who needs copies and establish a procedure to ensure the list is updated, protected and sent to the appropriate people.

Best practice would be to include your program Records Coordinator.

Both the State General Records Retention Schedules and the unique DSHS Retention Schedules identify essential records under the Designation column. For example:

Washington State Archives Office of the Secretary of State	Department of Social and Health Services Records Retention Schedule Version 1.1 (September 2012)

5.1 GENERAL

This section covers records relating to Economic Services Administration.

DISPOSITION AUTHORITY NUMBER (DAN)	DESCRIPTION OF RECORDS	RETENTION AND DISPOSITION ACTION	DESIGNATION
75-08-13170 Rev. 1	**Public Assistance Programs Correspondence** Public Assistance Programs correspondence from key stakeholders and customers regarding the implementation, maintenance, staffing, budgeting, training, and monitoring used to maintain a records for potential litigation, complaints, comments, or legal interpretations. May address legal issues.	**Retain** for 7 years after end of calendar year *then* **Destroy.**	NON-ARCHIVAL **ESSENTIAL** OFM

In preparing your list of essential records, consider:
- Essential records containing confidential or sensitive information which require special handling (i.e., HIPAA).
- Which records are hard-copy files and which records are located on servers.
- Where these records are located.

What are our actual risks?

As DSHS employees, we have a responsibility to ensure access to essential records in order to provide continuity of services. It's important to know what risks we face.

Potential emergencies may include:

- Fire and water damage
- Natural emergencies
  - Earthquakes
  - Floods
  - Volcanic eruption
  - Storms
- Technological emergencies
  - Power or equipment failure
  - Software program failure
- Civil emergencies
- Malicious computer attacks
- Human error

How can we protect our essential records?

Protecting essential records requires special strategies, such as backing up electronic systems, mapping their location, or copying and dispersing files and resources off site.

Strategies must ensure that essential records are not only protected from the effects of an emergency, but are also accessible during and after an emergency.

After you identify your essential records and potential risks, answer questions like:

- How can you protect essential records during a fire, water pipe leak, or earthquake?
- What safety plans are in place to handle bomb threat or computer virus?
- What security measures are there to stop unauthorized entry into records storage areas?
- Where are your essential records located?
- During an emergency, who should be doing what?

There are simple things we can all do to protect on-site essential records.

Simple Ways to Protect Essential Records On-Site

- **Transfer essential records to the State Records Center as soon as possible.** The SRC provides low cost, secure storage in a safe environment; and returns records quickly when you need them.

- **Locate essential records.**

  - ✓ Mark their location on a floor plan.

  - ✓ Put a copy of the floor plan in your records disaster plan.

  - ✓ Give a copy to your agency's disaster recovery and continuity team members.

- **Keep essential records separate from other records**. They will be easier to find during an emergency.

- **Keep essential records close together**. They will be easier to find and move.
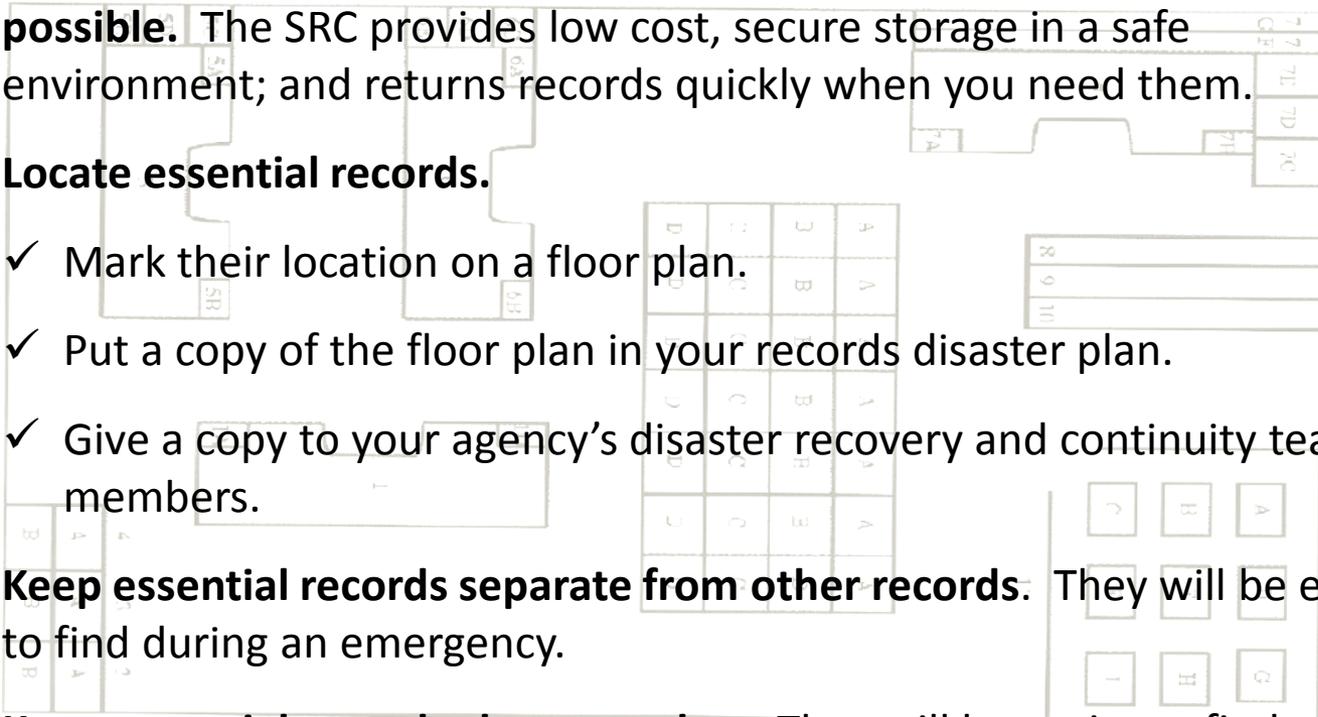
- **Locate essential records as close to the door as possible.** This makes it easier to remove them to safety quickly.

  - **Keep essential records folders, documents and disks off desks**. Put them away in file cabinets. Papers and files on desks or credenzas are extremely vulnerable to fire and water damage.

  - **Keep essential records off the floor.**

  - **Keep essential records in metal drawer file cabinets**. File cabinets protect records better than open-shelf files. Shelves that have closing doors are better than open shelves but not as safe as drawer cabinets. Fire resistant cabinets offer even better protection.

- **Keep essential records out of bottom drawers.** Bottom drawers are more likely to be damaged in a flood.

- **Put special labels on essential records file cabinets.** Labels should be readable even after a fire. Metal labels are ideal.

- **For electronic records, or imaged hard-copy documents, store back-up disks at an off-site location.** Your plan needs to include how to retrieve these records when needed.

- **Consider microfilming your essential records.** Microfilm is an affordable medium of choice for duplicating essential records.

  - ✓ Microfilm requires no hardware and software to read and is legible to the naked eye with only the aid of a magnifying glass.
  - ✓ Microfilm stores compactly. Over four thousand documents can be stored on a 16 mm reel of film the size of a small box of crayons.
  - ✓ Microfilm is cost-effective. Each page can be duplicated for only a few cents.
  - ✓ Washington State law provides for these copies to be accepted as originals in court.
  - ✓ **State Records Management will store microfilmed records free-of-charge.**

And, important to any recovery plan, ask. . .

What is Plan B?

Even the best plans can go awry; and no matter how well or carefully we plan, sometimes things still go wrong. A part of your protection planning for essential records should include "Plan B."

In order to salvage or replace information required to conduct business under other-than-normal conditions and to resume more normal business afterward, expect the unexpected. For example:

- Know the staff to contact in the event of an emergency - whether earthquake, bomb threat, or software failure.

- Know what to do in the event your office is flooded and you have water-damaged records or fire recovery methods are required for smoke-damaged records.

- Know how to get to your hard-copy essential records in the event of a locked door.

Expect the best, plan for the worst, and prepare for both.

Resources: Document Recovery

The Department of Enterprise Services has contracts in place for document recovery services for use by state and local government agencies. Details available at their website: https://fortress.wa.gov/ga/apps/ContractSearch/ContractSummary.aspx?c=01112. Your organization is responsible for costs incurred.

Employees may call one of the following vendors as soon as possible in the event of records damage.* Both vendors will give immediate, short-term preservation instructions and will arrange recovery of damaged records.

- BMS CAT, Inc. at 562.673.6322.
- Polygon at 253.709.8677 or 800.422.6379.

                                                                    * Cost is involved.

Resources: Information

For information about protecting Essential Records:

- [RCW 40.10.010 Essential records](#) – Designation – List – Security and protection - Reproduction

- Essential Records and Disaster Preparedness Manual http://www.sos.wa.gov/archives/RecordsManagement/EssentialRecordsDisasterPreparednessManual.aspx

- Building an Essential Records Disaster Recovery Plan

- [Millie Brombacher](#), Agency Records Officer or your local [Records Coordinator](#).

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The time to learn to dance is not five minutes before the party.