



---

# Establishing an Essential Records Listing

**Guidelines for Protecting Critical Information and Ensuring  
Continuity of Operations**

**March 2025**

---

**RECORDS MANAGEMENT BRANCH**  
ARIZONA STATE LIBRARY, ARCHIVES, AND PUBLIC RECORDS  
1901 W MADISON ST | PHOENIX, AZ | 85009  
[www.azlibrary.gov](http://www.azlibrary.gov)

☎ (602) 926-3720 | ✉ [records@azlibrary.gov](mailto:records@azlibrary.gov)

## Table of Contents

<b>WHAT ARE ESSENTIAL RECORDS?</b> .....	3
<b>WHY IS AN ESSENTIAL RECORDS LISTING IMPORTANT?</b> .....	3
<b>TYPES OF DISASTERS</b> .....	4
<b>RESPONSIBILITIES OF STATE AND LOCAL AGENCIES</b> .....	4
<b>ROLE OF THE STATE LIBRARY</b> .....	4
<b>IDENTIFYING ESSENTIAL RECORDS</b> .....	5
<b>CRITERIA FOR IDENTIFYING ESSENTIAL RECORDS AND PRIORITIZING RECOVERY</b> .....	6
<b>COMPLETING THE ESSENTIAL RECORDS LISTING</b> .....	8
<b>ESTABLISHING AN ESSENTIAL RECORDS PROGRAM</b> .....	10
<b>PROTECTING ESSENTIAL RECORDS</b> .....	11
<b>RESPONDING TO A DISASTER</b> .....	11
<b>RECOVERING FROM A DISASTER</b> .....	11

# WHAT ARE ESSENTIAL RECORDS?

---

Essential records, also known as vital records, are those documents crucial for maintaining or resuming an organization's operations during and after a disaster. These records are key to ensuring business continuity, disaster preparedness, and the effectiveness of Continuity of Operations Plans (COOP). Identifying essential records is critical for restoring the key functions of an organization in the event of an emergency.

Essential records are records necessary for the day-to-day operations of government entities during and following a disaster. Regardless of format or archival value, these are the records that must be recovered within 72 hours to support business operations. They are also vital for safeguarding the rights of the individuals and the interests of government agencies.

While some records are broadly recognized as essential and will be marked as such in retention schedules, the classification of essential records is not universal. These records are agency-specific – what is deemed essential for one agency may differ based on its specific functions and operational needs. Therefore, each agency is responsible for determining which records are essential for its operations.

# WHY IS AN ESSENTIAL RECORDS LISTING IMPORTANT?

---

Identifying your agency's essential records is a crucial business practice. While there may be initial costs associated with identifying and safeguarding these records, they are minimal compared to the potential expenses involved in recovering damaged records after a disaster. By identifying and tracking the location of essential records, your agency can:

- Respond effectively to disasters impacting records
- Minimize operational disruptions following an emergency
- Restore government services quickly
- Reduce the economic impact of a disaster

When disasters occur, government agencies cannot afford to cease operations. In many cases, agencies are the first responders to emergencies. Essential records are needed by emergency responders to manage the situation and continue critical functions. The loss of these records could significantly disrupt operations and hinder the agency's ability to assist individuals directly affected by the disaster.

In the event of a disaster, losing essential records could lead to:

- Disruption to vital public services
- Unanticipated financial costs, such as settlements or loss of revenue
- Increased risk of litigation
- Reduced productivity due to missing or incomplete information

## TYPES OF DISASTERS

---

Disasters come in many forms, varying in scale from major tragedies, such as September 11, 2001 attacks, to smaller, more localized events, like a busted water pipe flooding a file room. Disasters generally fall into two categories: natural and man-made.

Natural disasters can include floods, fires, hurricanes, earthquakes, and other environmental catastrophes. In contrast, man-made disasters might involve sabotage, terrorism, arson, mechanical failures, or nuclear incidents. While large-scale disasters are catastrophic, smaller ones are more common. For instance, a busted water pipe is more likely to occur than a city-wide flood.

When it comes to electronic records, special considerations are required. Protection of both hardware and software, along with comprehensive systems documentation, are essential when assessing which records are crucial to maintain. Electronic records face unique threats such as power outages, equipment malfunctions, software issues, virus attacks, and human error, all of which can compromise their integrity.

## RESPONSIBILITIES OF STATE AND LOCAL AGENCIES

---

The head of each state and local agency is responsible for establishing and maintaining an ongoing program to manage the agency's records efficiently and cost-effectively. As part of their responsibility, agency heads are required to submit a list of all essential records in their custody to the State Library every five (5) years, as outlined in [ARS §41-151.14 \(A\)\(4\)](#).

Although the law mandates submission of the essential records listing every five (5) years, it is recommended that the list be reviewed annually to account for any changes. The list should be updated whenever records are added or removed from retention schedules, relocated, or undergo changes in designation.

## ROLE OF THE STATE LIBRARY

---

In accordance with [ARS §41-151.12 \(A\)\(4\)](#), the State Library is responsible for establishing criteria to designate essential records within two key categories:

- a) Records containing information vital for government operations during a disaster-related emergency.
- b) Records containing information necessary to protect the rights and interests of individuals or to define the powers and responsibilities of governments in the aftermath of a disaster.

The State Library will maintain and safeguard the essential records listing submitted by state and local agencies, ensuring they are protected from unauthorized disclosure. In the event of a disaster, the

designated agency Records Officer (RO) may request a copy of these listings. Additionally, the State Library provides disaster preparedness training and offers consultation services to agencies regarding their essential records listing and related programs.

## **IDENTIFYING ESSENTIAL RECORDS**

---

Identifying essential records may seem overwhelming, but only a small fraction of an agency's records is typically considered essential. The criteria outlined below will serve as a helpful guide to identify these crucial records.

When designating essential records, it is important to assess each stage of a record's lifecycle. For example, an accounts receivable record may be essential until payment is received, or a contract may contain vital information until the contract is completed or terminated, after which it is no longer considered essential.

A common misconception is that essential records must always be archival or have long-term retention. However, this is not always the case. Essential records are not necessarily permanent, and not all archival records are essential. Some essential records are permanent and may include governing board minutes, policies, and procedures.

The agency Records Officer (RO), or the staff member responsible for the essential records review, should collaborate with personnel who are most familiar with the records in each department of the agency.

The process of identifying essential records begins with an on-site survey of records. This survey should document the specific record series, their physical location, the servers they are stored on, and the staff responsible for them. All records, regardless of format or medium, should be evaluated to determine if they are essential.

The second step is to review all relevant retention schedules, including both general and custom schedules. Each record series listed on custom retention schedules should be located, as well as those on applicable general retention schedules. Knowing the location of the records is essential for quick retrieval in the event of a disaster. If any records listed on custom schedules cannot be found, or if there are records not listed on either custom or general retention schedules, the Records Management Branch may be contacted for assistance.

After completing the on-site survey and retention schedule review, the next step is to apply the established criteria to identify the agency's essential records. This review should include all records, regardless of format, even those not found on current schedules.

# CRITERIA FOR IDENTIFYING ESSENTIAL RECORDS AND PRIORITIZING RECOVERY

---

Essential records are classified into five (5) key categories, each with specific criteria for identification and recovery prioritization:

1. **Records Critical for Emergency Response:** These are records required for immediate actions in the event of an emergency or disaster.
2. **Records Vital for Resuming or Continuing Operations:** This includes records that establish the agency's existence, powers, and functions, as well as those necessary for the ongoing operation of its programs. It also encompasses financial records, such as funds owed to or by the agency or government program.
3. **Records Safeguarding Public Health, Safety, Property, and Rights:** These records are essential for protecting the well-being and rights of residents during and after a crisis.
4. **Records Difficult or Impossible to Reconstruct:** This category includes unique or irreplaceable records that would require significant resources to recreate, making their preservation critical.
5. **Records Documenting Community or Family History:** These records hold cultural, historical, or genealogical value, and their loss would be a significant loss to the community or society.

## **Examples of Essential Records for Agencies or Programs:**

- Disaster recovery plans
- Official minutes from boards, commissions, councils, or boards of supervisors
- Property ownership records
- Accounts payable and receivable records
- Licensing documents
- Municipal incorporation or charter documents
- Policies, directives, and orders
- Unique computer programs
- Employee lists and rosters
- Payroll and employee benefit records (including survivor benefits)
- Annual financial reports and general ledger summaries
- As-built drawings, plans, and specifications for government-owned infrastructure
- Active contracts, compacts, and agreements
- Product warranties, maintenance agreements, and insurance policies

When identifying essential records, it is also crucial to assign priority for recovery. The Intergovernmental Preparedness for Essential Records (IPER) framework provides a guideline for categorizing records and establishing a recovery timeline post-disaster.

PRIORITY FOR ACCESS	ESSENTIAL RECORDS ARE RECORDS THAT:	EXAMPLES INCLUDE:
<b>PRIORITY LEVEL 1:</b> First 1-12 Hours	Are necessary for emergency response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Copy of Emergency and/or Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP)</li> <li>• Disaster Recovery Plan</li> <li>• Infrastructure and Utility Plans</li> <li>• Maps and Building Plans</li> <li>• Emergency Contact Information</li> </ul>
	Are necessary to resume or continue operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employee Lists or Rosters</li> <li>• Delegations of Authority</li> <li>• Contracts and Leases</li> <li>• Payroll Records</li> <li>• Prison, Jail, and Parole Records</li> <li>• Insurance Records</li> <li>• Accounts Payable and Receivable Records</li> </ul>
<b>PRIORITY LEVEL 2:</b> First 12-72 Hours	Protect the health, safety, property, and rights of residents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deeds, Mortgages, and Land Records</li> <li>• Birth and Marriage Records</li> <li>• Medical Records</li> <li>• Active Court Proceedings or Police Investigations</li> <li>• Education and Military Service Records</li> <li>• Voting Records</li> <li>• Professional Licenses</li> <li>• Hazardous Substance Files</li> </ul>
	Would require substantial resources to reconstruct	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Data</li> <li>• Tax Records</li> <li>• Unique Computer Programs</li> </ul>
<b>PRIORITY LEVEL 3:</b> 72 Hours and Beyond	Document the history of communities or families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Historical Documents</li> <li>• Photographs</li> <li>• Identity Records</li> <li>• Property Ownership Records</li> <li>• Municipal Incorporation/Charter Documents</li> </ul>



2. **Records Officer Name, Signature, Email, and Phone:** Enter the contact information for the person designated as the agency Records Officer (RO). The Essential Records Listing shall be signed by the agency's designated Records Officer (RO) or it will not be accepted.
3. **Record Series Number / Description:** List the exact record series as found on the approved retention schedule(s) being followed. Include the Record Series Number and a description. If the records are unscheduled, use the terminology adopted by your agency.
4. **E.D. (Essential Designation):** Enter the corresponding number for the essential designation of the record series. This number will reflect the criteria that make the series essential, as outlined below:
  - 1. Necessary for emergency response
  - 2. Necessary to resume or continue operations
  - 3. Protects the health, safety, property, and rights of residents and the government
  - 4. Would require substantial resources to reconstruct
  - 5. Documents the history of communities or families
5. **Media Format:** Select the box that designates the format of the records in the series (e.g. paper, electronic, microfilm, other).
6. **Document Type:** Select the box to indicate whether the records are original documents or copies.
7. **Location:** Provide the physical location information for the records, or the server where they are stored (e.g. building, floor, room, filing cabinet number, drawer number, etc.).
8. **Quantity:** Specify the quantity of records in the series. This could include the number of boxes, shelves, filing cabinet drawers, cubic feet, linear feet, megabytes, etc.).
9. **Update Cycle:** Describe the frequency at which records are updated at this location (e.g. weekly, quarterly, annually, etc.).
10. **Salvage Instructions:** Briefly explain the urgency of salvaging the record series (e.g. immediately, if necessary, etc.).
11. **Backup Information:** If there are copies of record series listed and they are not described on a separate line, note whether the copies are on-site or off-site and provide the location of those records.
12. **Submitting the Form:** Submit the completed form via email to [records@azlibrary.gov](mailto:records@azlibrary.gov). Faxed submissions will not be accepted.

# ESTABLISHING AN ESSENTIAL RECORDS PROGRAM

---

While it is not a legal requirement for the head of each state and local agency to establish an essential records program, doing so is a logical next step after creating an Essential Records Listing and is considered best practice. As mentioned earlier, the costs of identifying and safeguarding essential records upfront are much lower than the expenses associated with recovering damaged records following a disaster.

An essential records program is often integrated into a broader business continuity, disaster preparedness, or Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP). Disaster planning focuses on the critical services an agency will need post-disaster, such as emergency medical care, infrastructure repair, equipment replacement, and perhaps most importantly, the protection of public records. A well-managed essential records program ensures that records most crucial to your agency's operations will be available when needed.

For executive branch state agencies, it is important to consult the Arizona Strategic Enterprise Technology (ASET) for guidance, as they are tasked with developing a statewide disaster recovery plan for information technology.

When developing an essential records program, several factors must be considered. For example, is the storage location free from potential risks such as water or sewage pipes? Are temperature conditions stable in storage areas? Is access to these records monitored by video surveillance or controlled through a key log system? Are there multiple copies of the records, and if so, where are they stored and in what format? Are the records unique and valuable only in their original format, and should they be stored off-site for additional protection? Should copies be retained on-site for easy access?

The duplication and distribution of records to multiple secure locations should also be a key consideration. When duplicating records, factors such as format stability, duplication costs, and the physical storage environment need to be evaluated. Different duplication methods may be used depending on the format of the original records, including:

- Paper copies
- Microfilm (Diazo or Silver)
- Computer Output Microfilm (COM)
- Digital images (e.g. scanned or digital copies)

If your essential records program involves creating copies, it is crucial to distribute the copies to other physical locations to ensure they are not at risk in the event of a disaster that impacts the original records. Additionally, when disposing of records according to established retention schedules, remember to dispose of the copies at the same time, following the same guidelines.

## PROTECTING ESSENTIAL RECORDS

---

While there is no foolproof method for safeguarding essential records, the adage “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” holds true. Protecting records from smaller-scale incidents is more cost-effective and easier to manage than protecting them from major disasters. By being proactive with building maintenance and avoiding storage of records in vulnerable areas such as basements or beneath water and sewage pipes, agencies can reduce the likelihood of minor disasters. This approach also minimizes both recovery time and costs if a larger disaster does occur.

Here are some key steps to include in protecting essential records:

- **Be proactive with building maintenance** – repair leaks, roofs, and window seals promptly.
- **Avoid storing records in high-risk areas** – such as under water and sewage pipes, in basements, or in storage containers/sheds.
- **Store permanent records at least 3 inches off the ground** – in line with state standards.
- **Create duplicates of records** – store them in off-site locations for added protection.

## RESPONDING TO A DISASTER

---

In the event of a disaster, your business continuity, disaster recovery, or Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP) should be activated. If salvage instructions have not already been developed, it is essential to coordinate with first responders and agency leadership to prioritize the recovery of essential records.

According to the Standards for Permanent Records set by the State Library, agencies are required to recover and mitigate damage to permanent records as quickly as possible to ensure they are protected and preserved.

## RECOVERING FROM A DISASTER

---

Recovering from any type of disaster – whether large or small – can present significant challenges. Records damaged by fire, such as paper, microfilm, or computer media, may be beyond recovery. However, smoke or water-damaged records on any media type can often be restored, though this may require specialized techniques and equipment. Bio-contamination from raw sewage or chemical contamination presents even more complex issues. In any case, recovery efforts can be costly, and affected records may be unavailable for extended periods of time.

Commercial recovery services are available, but in the event of a widespread disaster, these companies typically prioritize clients with existing contracts. To ensure timely access to these services, it is important

to contact recovery companies before a disaster strikes. Learn about their services and response times in advance. Additionally, check with the State Procurement Officer for a list of recovery service providers under state contract.

For assistance with records recovery before or after a disaster, contact the State Archives via email at [archives@azlibrary.gov](mailto:archives@azlibrary.gov).