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January 01, 2000

# An introduction to records management for non-profit organizations

University Libraries - University Archives and Special Collections Department

# AN INTRODUCTION

# TO RECORDS

# MANAGEMENT

## for Non-profit

## Organizations

**MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

# INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This booklet is intended to assist small, non-profit organizations that wish to improve control over their records.  It is an introduction to issues involved in keeping records.  At the end of the booklet is a small section with suggestions for where to go or whom to contact for further information.

The records of non-profit organizations, businesses, churches, political groups, schools, social and cultural groups, and individuals document the character of the community, the people who live and work there, and the services they provide.  Organizations move or close. They outgrow their office space and discard their records or lose them to flood, fire, accident, or neglect. Preserving your organizations records will help ensure that its contribution to your community's and to Boston's history will be recognized.

This booklet was originally prepared by the Minnesota Historical Society in 1997 at the behest of the Minnesota State Historical Records Advisory Board, with funds provided by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. It was adapted by the Northeastern University Libraries, Archives and Special Collections Department to be distributed as part of a grant-funded project to identify, locate, and preserve records documenting Boston's African American, Chinese, Latino, and lesbian and gay communities. The grant was funded by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, Northeastern University Libraries, and the Barnard Foundation.

Additional copies of this booklet are available through Northeastern University (contact information is listed on the last page).  Copies of this booklet may not be made and distributed to others, without the permission of the Minnesota Historical Society.

2000

# AN INTRODUCTION
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# THE PROBLEM–TOO MUCH STUFF

The offices of most organizations share an overriding problem: not enough space. Not enough space for people. Not enough space for equipment. But especially, not enough space for years of accumulated records.

File cabinets are stacked on top of file cabinets. Closets, basements, and attics are filled with file cabinets. Inside those file cabinets, the squeeze continues. There are too many folders in the drawer, too many pieces of paper in the folders.

Finding particular reports or memos becomes more a job for a superhero than for mere mortals. Not only is there too much paper, but it is usually organized haphazardly. Most filing systems suffer from one or more of the "danger signals" listed in **Figure 1.** These problems are dangerous because they impede the accurate creation and retrieval of information, and make it difficult to insure that historically important records are identified and preserved.

So, what to do? You and your staff are already overworked, and the thought of redesigning your filing system has–to say the least–limited appeal. But there are improvements that can be made with a very small expenditure of time, effort, and money.


# THE SOLUTION–RECORDS MANAGEMENT

The solution is records management–the process of determining a useful filing structure, the relative value of the types of files kept by your organization, and a useful (and legally acceptable) method for throwing away files that are no longer useful. For instance, certain classes of records can and should be destroyed routinely three or seven years after their creation. These include (but are not limited to) bank statements, canceled checks, invoices, expense reports, time cards/sheets, meeting planning files, receipts, duplicate copies of anything, publications received from outside agencies and organizations. Such records have administrative value (that is value to the daily operation of the organization) or legal value (that is, a legal requirement that they be retained) only for a limited time, and have little or no long-term historical value. We can call these records **"short-term,"** because they need only be preserved for a relatively brief time. While these records must be retained for three or seven years, most of them cease being useful in the daily operation of the organization after one or two years. When records are no longer regularly consulted by the organization they are said to be **"inactive."**

# WHEN YOU NEED RECORDS MANAGEMENT

| ORGANIZATION  DANGER  SIGNS | MAINTENANCE DANGER SIGNS |
|---|---|
| 1.  Filing system changes when employees change. | 1.  Records storage space problems. |
| 2.  Information gets "lost" or misfiled. | 2.  Frequent requests for more supplies, equipment, records personnel. |
| 3.  Time and money are spent recreating information you already have. | 3.  Records clutter office area. |
| 4.  Delays in finding requested information. | 4.  No one knows where all the office's records are. |
| 5.  There are folders with only one document in them, or folders filled beyond capacity. | 5.  File weeding is sporadic and arbitrary. |
| 6.  Information retrieval depends on an individual's memory. | 6.  There are no written procedures and controls for file system and filing operations. |
| 7.  Security measures aren't adequate to protect confidential records. | 7.  Some records get filed but are never referred to again. |
| 8.  Requested information is not always complete and accurate. | 8.  Supplies and equipment are not appropriate to records housed in them. |
| 9.  The same type of record crops up in several locations in the filing system. | 9.  Physical appearance and condition of files make them unpleasant to work with. |
| 10. File folders are created arbitrarily, and there is no current file/guide/index. | 10. There is no plan for what gets filed, and no plan for movement of records into and out of the filing system. |

**Figure 1.**

Some records in an office become **inactive** only after a long time, and continue to have potential usefulness–or must be retained for legal reasons–essentially for the entire lifetime of an organization. These records are referred to as **"permanent,"** because the agency has to keep them safe and accessible for the indefinite future. Many other records in an office–reports, correspondence, minutes, etc.–may have long term **historical** value but cease to have administrative value after three to five years. These historical records form the **archives** of an organization. The archives is an organization's memory, ensuring that as staff changes and the organization evolves, its history is accessible. *An organization's archives should preserve, in the smallest amount of records possible, documentation of its origins, purposes, major activities, significant accomplishments, and most important interactions with clients and/or other agencies.*

Designating files as being **short-term, permanent**, and/or **historical** is the essence of establishing a **records retention schedule**. At its simplest, a records schedule identifies how long each portion of an organization's records needs to be retained, and–perhaps more importantly–how soon each portion can be thrown away. **Figure 2** is a sample general retention schedule for a small organization. Please note that this schedule covers only the most common types of records; most organizations will have records that are not listed here, but they can be placed on an expanded schedule. Also, these retention periods are guidelines; you should check with your organization's lawyers, accountants, and/or major funders to ensure that these guidelines (and schedules for any record types not listed here) conform to state laws, state revenue department rules, and funding agency requirements. Most of an agency's records need not be retained for more than seven (7) years, and many probably do not need to be retained more than three (3) years.

This means not only that all those ten-year-old receipts and canceled checks can be thrown away, but that each year's worth of material–three to seven years old–can be discarded It should be easy to destroy such records by following a **records retention schedule** except for the fact that most filing systems do not break files on a regular basis. **"Breaking a file"** means starting a new folder every year (or every five years) without fail. In this way, not only do folders not become overcrowded, but also it is extremely easy to purge records according to a schedule.

Indeed, if files are broken by year, it is a simple matter to remove **short-term** records each year (or whenever they become **inactive**), box them, and store them elsewhere for the duration of their legal or administrative lives. **Permanent** and **historical** records, too, once they become **inactive**, can be moved out of filing cabinets and into boxes. Preferably, long-term inactive records should be placed in boxes in the same order that they were maintained as active files. File cabinets, after all, are expensive, and under the proper circumstances boxed storage is equally as safe and adequately accessible.

# MANAGING YOUR RECORDS

The following list provides general guidelines for managing organizational records. Routine records that can be destroyed, records that should remain in the office, and records that should be preserved are listed.  More specific guidelines in the form of a *records schedule* may be created by the organization. The following recommendations are guidelines only, context and uniqueness can also determine a records historical value. Organizations should check with their lawyers, accountants, and/or major funders to ensure that these guidelines conform to legal, IRS, and funding agency requirements.

*Records that usually have permanent historical value*  provide the most concise and comprehensive information about the organization's mission and activities.  These records are non-current and, therefore, no longer necessary for the day-to-day operation of the organization.

*Records that have long-term administrative value and should remain in the office* are used routinely or occasionally to provide information that is legally or administratively necessary for the efficient operation of the organization.  Should the organization cease operating, these records would be considered of permanent historical value unless otherwise noted.

*Records that are usually routine with no long term value* are created or collected during the day-to-day operation of the organization, but duplicate information provided in a more concise form, are not relevant to the organization, or have informational value that expires after a limited time.  Should the retention period expire or the organization cease operating, these records would be discarded.

**Figure 2-1.**

**ADMINISTRATIVE RECORDS**

*Records that usually have permanent historical value*

Agenda packets (background material provided to Board members)

Annual meeting programs and minutes

Annual reports (to members, granting agencies, federal agencies)

Audio visual materials (photographs, audio tapes, video tapes of work situations, facilities, staff, and events–if labeled)

Correspondence–(incoming and printouts of significant outgoing correspondence–delete computer file after copy is filed and document is no longer needed in electronic form)

Daily schedules and calendars

Directories (membership, resource, etc) of the organization

Job descriptions

Membership lists

Memoranda to or from senior staff

Minutes, agendas, and attachments of committees (maintain most recent 2 or 3 year period in office)

Newsletters and other publications generated by the organization (save 2 copies)

Newspaper clippings (files of press clippings about the organization)

Organizational charts and historical summaries

Position papers

Policy and procedure manuals

Press releases and public relations materials

**Figure 2-2.**

**ADMINISTRATIVE RECORDS** *(cont.)*

**_Records_ _that_ _have_ _long-term_ _administrative_ _value_ _and_ _should_ _remain_ _in_ _the_ _office_**

Architectural records and construction plans

By-laws, charters, and incorporation papers (send copies to archives for reference and safekeeping)

Legal files

Personnel records

Property management files

Warranties for equipment in use

**_Records_ _that_ _are_ _usually_ _routine_ _with_ _no_ _long_ _term_ _value_**

Audio tapes that have been transcribed

Contracts

Correspondence-- routine mailings and junk mail

Duplicates (keep 2 copies of printed or published materials, posters, etc.)

Insurance records of inactive policies

Publications, flyers, minutes of other organizations (if these may be the only evidence of a defunct community organization, they can be kept in correspondence or subject files)

Personnel records (not needed to determine retirement benefits)

Phone messages

Reference materials

Unsolicited job applications and resumes

Warranties and instructions for equipment no longer in use

Figure 2-3.

**FINANCIAL RECORDS**

***Records that usually have permanent historical value***

Annual budgets

Development records (grant proposals and reports; fund raising campaign and event materials)

Financial statements and audit reports

***Records that have permanent administrative value and should remain in the office***

Donor lists

Personnel files

***Records that are usually routine with no long term value***

Bank statements and canceled checks

Budget preparation records

Expense reports, reimbursement requests

Grant proposals (not funded)

Letters accompanying donations and copies of checks

Monthly ledgers/journals, quarterly budget reports

Payroll files, rolls, ledgers

Purchase orders

Receipts, bills, and invoices

Tax  returns

Time sheets

**PROGRAM or PROJECT RECORDS**

*Records that usually have permanent historical value*

Audiovisual materials

Planning documents

Posters, brochures, buttons and other ephemera (2 copies)

Press releases

Program evaluations

Public service announcements and advertisements

Reports on projects

Speeches and testimony

Subject files

Training materials and manuals

**Records that have permanent administrative value and should remain in the office**

Client files

**Figure 2-5.**

# STORAGE OF INACTIVE, SHORT-TERM RECORDS

Storing **inactive, short-term** records in file cabinets is a waste of what is probably your organization's most scarce and expensive storage space. Once they become **inactive, short-term** records can be moved to less desirable and accessible locations. Because it is necessary that the records be identifiable and retrievable for however long they must be retained, and because it is important to be able to easily identify records that have become eligible for destruction, some formalities should be observed when records are retired from the filing cabinets.

- Records should be removed from the file cabinets in their original folders and in as close to their original order as possible.
- Records should be placed in standard, lidded, storage boxes available from any office supply store. This type of box is slightly more expensive than scavenging for cast-off boxes at the liquor or grocery store, but they are: a) easier to handle; b) sturdier; c) stackable; d) reusable. The best storage boxes are the 15 x 12 x 10-inch size that weigh approximately 35-lbs. when full, are relatively easy to move, and will easily stack or fit most utility shelving. These two-piece boxes will accommodate either letter or legal folders, and are manufactured with large blank labeling spaces. Avoid purchasing the double sized 15 x 24 x 10-inch box. It is much heavier for one person to move easily and is more likely to crush when stacked more than two high. The so-called "drawer files," which are basically cardboard versions of filing cabinets, are generally too weak to stand up to even infrequent use and are nearly impossible to move safely unless completely emptied.
- The boxes should be labeled with the following information: type of records (e.g., invoices, canceled checks, and payroll cards); earliest and latest year-dates contained in the box (e.g., 1994-96), and the person or (in larger organizations) the office that put the records in the box. Ideally, adhesive labels should not be used to record this information, because most of these labels have short-term adhesive that is rendered even less predictable by the storage conditions found in basements, attics, etc. The labels may fall off in as little as a couple of years. Therefore, it is best to use a permanent marker and record the information directly on the boxes.

Where to store these boxes? Short-term inactive records can be stored in many places that are not suitable for storing records you want or need to keep for a long time: a basement (so long as the boxes are stored off the floor, the basement is relatively dry, and there are no silverfish, or rodents); a garage (ditto); a rented "self-store" locker (ditto again); an attic (so long as there are no squirrels or mice living up there). Ideally, the boxes should be stored on shelves in any of these locations, but record storage boxes can safely be stacked up to five (5) high unless the environment is quite damp.

# STORAGE OF PERMANENT AND HISTORICAL RECORDS

Storage of **inactive permanent** and **inactive historical** records is similar to that of **inactive short-term** records, but differs in a few important respects. Removing the materials from filing cabinets and placing them in well-labeled record storage containers is the same for both kinds of records. However, for **permanent** and **historical** records, one additional step is necessary. Because these records will be in storage indefinitely, and because they are being saved permanently due to some continuing utility to the organization, these records must be made more accessible and more secure than **inactive short-term** records. To ensure their accessibility, **box inventories** should be prepared in addition to the information written on the boxes.

**Box inventories** are simply brief lists of the files found in a particular box. Usually, the inventory consists of the following information:
- Name of the person or office whose files are in the box;
- Date the files were placed in the box;
- Overall description of the files in the box (e.g., "Correspondence Files," or "Subject Files," or "Minutes");
- Earliest and latest year-dates represented by the contents of the files in the box;
- List of folder titles in the box (or list of item titles for audio or video tapes, photo albums);
- Location where the box is stored, if more than one storage space is being used.

The **box inventory** should be prepared at the time the box is filled, and should be filed in an agree-upon place within the organization (a second copy should be placed inside the relevant box, for safety's sake). The inventories will be a quick and easy guide to current and future staff members giving an indication of what files have been placed in permanent storage and where they are. Being able to refer to the inventories will save considerable time otherwise spent in aimlessly rummaging through boxes looking for specific information.

The other principal difference in the storage of **permanent** and **historical** records as opposed to that of **short-term** records is *where* they should be stored. Basements, garages, self-storage rental spaces, and attics should *not* be used to store **permanent** and **historical** records unless there is no alternative. Better storage space for these records would be in closets, storerooms, or other rooms in your organization's main office building. Ideally, storage space for **permanent** and **historical** records should be in a space that is heated in winter, cooled in summer, generally dark, free from vermin, and dry as possible at all times. The boxes should be on metal shelving, and away from water pipes.

## A WORD ABOUT CASE FILES

Those organizations that provide social service, medical, or legal assistance to clients maintain client case files as a matter of course. Generally, these files remain **active** for as long as the client has contact with the organization; however, because clients may return to an organization after a long period without contact, the line between **active** and **inactive** files is often unclear.

The principal determinant of client case file status and retention for an organization receiving funds from state or federal sources are the requirements defined by their funding agencies. After the retention duration required by funding agencies has passed, client case files may continue to have administrative or historical importance for the organization. The bulk of these files, *and the strict rules usually governing access to them*, often make it impractical for an organization to make such files **permanent** or **historical**. If the organization has an agreement with a repository (see "Alternatives to Preserving Historical Records"), it is possible that some or all of the client case files might find a home there, but the organization must be particularly careful to insure that its agreement with the repository accounts for any retention and access restrictions imposed on the case files by state or federal laws or regulations.

## A WORD ABOUT LEGAL RISK

Case files are one example of the fact that certain types of records are inherently more important from a legal standpoint than others. For many non-profits, routine inter-office communications and even formal studies, reports, and plans, are not records which are mandated by law or likely to come under any form of legal scrutiny. The same is not necessarily true of an organization's minutes, case files, or financial records. Minutes may be required by the statutes under which an organization is legally chartered; case files may contain items regulated by state or federal statute; financial records are subject to audit.

What this means in practice is that a greater level of care is necessary to guarantee the reliability of the record-keeping system and the authenticity of the records; *greater attention must be paid to issues of security, access, audit trails, and the like*. If such records are kept and generated in paper form, the organization of the files, accurate and timely filing (and re-filing), secure storage, and written **retention schedules** that are applied consistently are important to reduce legal risk. If records are kept and generated in computer form, it is also important to use reputable software (especially for accounting and tax preparation) and ensure that records are not only backed-up but accessible (i.e., still usable by the current software on your computer) for as long as the

law requires. (For further discussion of computer records, see "Non-Paper Records: Computer Records.")

## A WORD ABOUT DOCUMENTATION OF THE RECORDS SYSTEM

Another important consideration–relevant to both issues of legal risk and to issues of administrative efficiency–for both paper-based and computer-based records systems is that the systems be well-documented and widely understood among your organization's staff. If there is only one person in the organization who knows how the filing system is organized, where inactive records are stored, and how the financial books are being kept, the organization may be in deep trouble if that person suddenly leaves. Similarly, if only one person knows anything about your organization's computer system and the records stored in it–how the database was modified to produce special reports, what the cryptic file name abbreviations mean, or how to use the bookkeeping software that's been tracking funds for the past four years–what is going to happen to the organization if something happens to that person? Any organization should have a means of ensuring continuity of record-keeping during personnel turnover; such distributed knowledge will ensure that your organization is much better equipped to handle any problems related to obsolescence, the migration of data, damage or loss of records due to fire or flood, and other difficulties.

## NON-PAPER RECORDS: COMPUTER RECORDS

Computer records–on diskettes, on internal hard drives, on backup tapes, or on high-density auxiliary drives (such as Iomega Zip© drives)–are both similar to and different from paper records. For most non-profit organizations, computer records are just a different form of the same information found in paper records (a very rough analogy would be between an LP and CD version of the same music).  This is particularly true if your organization uses computers primarily for word-processing, spreadsheet, and simple database applications. Computer records can become **inactive**, and most of them (like their paper counterparts) have only **short-term** value. Because of the difficulties inherent in preserving the usability of computer records over long periods of time (more than five or ten years), most small organizations should consider paper copies (if they exist) rather than computer records for **permanent** or **historical** purposes.

Computer records are much more fragile than paper records, and greater care must be taken to ensure that–for however long they may be needed–they can in fact be used. Three things threaten the "legibility" of computer records: obsolete software, obsolete hardware, and deteriorated media. In less than seven years (the useful life of many kinds

of **short-term** records), software can change so much as to make the material recorded on a diskette, backup tape, or auxiliary drive useless. In roughly the same period of time, the hardware necessary to access a particular media may become obsolete–it has just about happened to 5.25" diskettes. At the same time, in as little as three to four years the physical media itself may become too deteriorated for even compatible hardware and software to read–this is particularly true for diskettes, but even backup tapes and auxiliary drives are nowhere near as durable as paper.

To maximize the useful life of computer records, several basic steps are necessary. The first and most critically important is TO BACK UP ALL IMPORTANT FILES AT LEAST WEEKLY, and to store the backup material someplace other than the organization's office. All other preservation considerations are meaningless if a hard-drive crashes or a fire or flood destroys the computer(s). Whenever your organization makes significant software or hardware changes, you should be sure to copy into the new system or format ALL the computer records which still have a legal, fiscal, administrative, or historical value, EVEN IF THOSE RECORDS ARE INACTIVE. Finally, records in computer form (in whatever media) should be stored ONLY in main office or living areas, NEVER in basements, attics, or garages–and never near electric motors, transformers, or other sources of magnetic fields.

## NON-PAPER RECORDS: PHOTOGRAPHS, FILMS, VIDEO AND AUDIO TAPES

Sound and visual records are often an important part of an organization's administrative work and its history. Like computer records, however, **sound and visual** records are different from textual paper records in several respects. **Sound and visual records**, as used here, include photographs (prints, slides, negatives, and transparencies), motion picture film, audio tape, and video tape.

There are three important questions to ask about sound and visual material to help in deciding whether it should be considered for permanent or historical retention:

> 1) *Is it–or can it be, with reasonable effort–identified and labeled?* Typically, only sound and visual materials that are identified and labeled are worth preserving. Moreover, it is almost always wishful thinking to suppose that "someday" "someone" will be able to identify and label material that is now unidentified; unless your organization has a reasonable chance of assigning someone the task of identifying unlabeled material within the next year or so, it is probably best to consider that material of **short-term** value.

If unlabeled sound and visual material is already a problem, the organization should take steps to ensure that sound and visual material created in the future be identified and labeled at the time of its creation. Note what is going on in a photo, who is in it and where the picture was taken. Date the photo as accurately as possible. Write the information on the back of the photo with a soft 6B drawing pencil, which is available in art-supply shops. Be sure to use people's full names and titles if you know them. Similar information should be recorded for audio tapes. For movies, write the identifications on the leader; for video tapes, on a label affixed to the cassette case itself (not just on the case). Note when it was shot, by whom and what the event is.

2) *Is it–or can it be made so with reasonable cost/effort–usable?* Badly faded or water damaged photographs, moldy audio or video tapes, audio or video tapes with significant creasing or flaking of the magnetic layer, video tapes in badly outdated formats–these are probably costly if not impossible to make useable. Unless the material is of extraordinary importance to your organization, such material should not generally be preserved against a hoped-for future when "someday" "someone" will be able to rescue them. If it is a very important item for the organization's work or history, contact an archives, museum, or historical society for advice on how to salvage the content.

3) *Is the information, unique, i.e., not completely or adequately duplicated elsewhere in the organizations records?* There is almost never a need to keep duplicate copies of sound and visual material, unless there is an active and immediate need to distribute such copies within or outside the organization. Similarly, if a staff member shot two rolls of film of the organization's new building, many of those images will be essentially duplicative, even if technically not identical. If board meetings are tape recorded, and then the minutes are transcribed (verbatim or in large measure), it is possible that the tapes need not be preserved, especially if the organization considers the written minutes the "official" record of the meeting.

One important caution accompanies this general rule: not all sound and visual material are created equal, in terms of their durability. Storage conditions being equal, for example, photographs will last longer than video images; black and white photos will last longer than color photos. Motion picture film will endure much longer than a copy made to video tape, even though the video copy may be easier to play.

If the answer to any of these three questions is "NO," it is likely that the material in question should *not* be considered **permanent** or **historical**.

## Storing Sound and Visual Material

Generally speaking, sound and visual material is more sensitive to storage materials and storage conditions than are paper records. Therefore, sound and visual materials that do have long-term value should be stored in the same "office-like" environment as permanent and historical paper records (see "Storage of Permanent and Historical Records," above). Specialized storage containers are recommended.

*PHOTOGRAPHS*. **It is very important to save photograph negatives. Many people think negatives are a nuisance, but they are the originals, and they allow creation of new prints. Negatives last well if they are not handled and kept in polyethylene or polypropylene sleeves.**

There are two primary ways to store photographic prints–using archival files and boxes or using photo albums. Use archival file boxes if there are a large number of photos to arrange. The pictures can be organized in files by subject, person, or year. It is important to use acid-free folders and boxes. The acids in paper products can be harmful to photos.

Albums allow you to display pictures more easily, but they also tend to be more expensive than files and boxes. Again, seek out acid-free papers and notebooks made from archival board. Or you can buy clear pages made from polypropylene, polyethylene, or polyester and insert the photos. Do not use vinyl pages or notebooks; they emit harmful vapors and shorten the life of photos. Traditional "black paper" albums and the popular "magnetic" photo albums should be strictly avoided. Magnetic albums allow easy arrangement of photos on a page, but archival photo corners allow easy arrangement too and will not damage the photos.

In general, do not take apart existing photo albums. At their best, they present a good chronology and often contain useful captions or identifications recorded on the pages. If the photos in an old album have become loose because of detached or missing photo corners, replace the photo corners. The exception to the do not-take-apart rule is magnetic photo albums. However, if the adhesive has set and made the photos difficult to remove without tearing, leave the album in tact. If such an album is of great importance to your organization, consider having it treated by a professional conservator (call Northeast Document Conservation Center in Andover, MA 1-978-470-1010 or www.nedcc.org).

*SLIDES*: Slides can be stored in boxes or carousel trays if you keep the lid on; they are very susceptible to dust. Non-vinyl slide pages can also be used.

*MOTION PICTURE FILMS:* Movie film should be stored on reels, and either in boxes or in film canisters–lying flat rather than on edge if at all possible. The films should be labeled on their leader strips and on the canister. It is important to realize that motion picture film is much more durable than video tape, so that even if a video tape copy of a film has been made, the film itself should be retained as the original.

*VIDEO AND AUDIO TAPE:* Video and audio tape, like computer diskettes, are "magnetic" media, and so must be stored away from strong magnetic fields because of the possibility of altering or even erasing the images and sound on the tape over time. Store video and audio tape on edge and wind them to the end rather than to the beginning. Tapes in permanent storage should be visually inspected every five years (no visible damage and evenly wound)–otherwise in several decades these "permanent" tapes will be irreversibly deteriorated. If there are tapes that the organization will be using actively (in-house training videos for example), it is important that one copy be designated the "master," and played only to make "use" copies; the use copies should receive the wear and tear, leaving the quality of the master relatively undiminished.

## WHERE TO BUY QUALITY PRESERVATION SUPPLIES

Basic storage supplies are easy to purchase.  Adequate records storage boxes are available at any office supply store (though boxes of archival quality, should your organization be able to afford those for **permanent** or **historical** records, must be purchased from the suppliers listed below).  Many photograph shops and some stationery stores carry photograph corners, archival-quality plastic pages and non-vinyl photograph albums.

Some high-quality archives and photo preservation supplies are easy to find; others require a little more effort. A list of archival and photographic preservation suppliers follows:

University Products, Holyoke, MA
1-800-628-1912 or *www.universityproducts.com*

Light Impressions, Rochester, NY
1-800-828-6216 or *www.lightimpressionsdirect.com*

Gaylord Bros. Syracuse, NY
1-800-448-6160 or *www.gaylord.com*

It is important to note that archival quality supplies are more crucial for some applications than for others.  Sound and visual materials will probably benefit most from

archival quality storage materials.  Paper records will do pretty well with basic office-supply products (archival boxes and folders will last longer, and provide some additional protection, but they tend to be much more expensive and may not be within the financial reach of many organizations). However, the MOST IMPORTANT factor in the longevity of records–of whatever type–is the storage conditions: cool, dry, and dark. Even the best storage supplies will not protect materials stored in a damp basement or a sweltering attic.

## ALTERNATIVES FOR PRESERVING HISTORICAL RECORDS

Ideally, an organization should preserve its own **historical** records–that is, its own **archives**.  However, it is unusual for an organization to be able to afford the space, the staff time, and resources necessary to devote to proper management of the records and proper service to researchers requesting access to the historical records.  Records maintained within the organization are useful to the organization, but are generally inaccessible to the general public.

The Northeastern University Libraries, Archives and Special Collections Department is one of a growing number of archival repositories in the Boston area that is interested in collecting the records of community activists and the non-profit organizations that they have founded.  As part of Northeastern's focus on documenting Boston's diversity, it is working closely with community members and local archival repositories and libraries to preserve these historical materials.

Archives staff can outline the issues an organization should consider if it is contemplating donating records to a repository. The staff of Northeastern's Archives can also advise organizations on which repository may be best suited to house their records.

It is important for organizations to understand four points regarding to the relationship between a repository and an organization's **archives.**  First, most repositories will only accept organizational records as donations; that is, the organization must give up ownership of their records. Second, a repository may not wish to preserve an organization's entire **archives.**  Repositories preserve records to serve a broad research clientele; some records that may be important to an organization may not be important to researchers.  Before agreeing to donate records to a repository, an organization should make sure it understands which records the repository wishes to preserve.  Third, most repositories will agree to restrict researcher access to some or all of an organization's records for a specific period of time, but eventually records donated to a repository will be open for public research.  Fourth, once material is donated to a repository, it does not circulate to help insure that it is preserved as long as humanly possible.  Access to donated papers is governed by the repository's written policies regarding availability,

photo-duplication and publication.  The organization should become familiar with such policies, and discuss any special needs or concerns with the repository before completing the donation agreement.

Organizations should also be conscious of a repository's capabilities to provide safe storage and make materials accessible.  What are the repository's hours of operation? How is the repository staffed (volunteers may be less familiar with collections, and less able to provide reference service to your organization, than paid staff). Will your organization's records be organized and cataloged in according to accepted archival standards and in a timely manner (though please understand that organizing and cataloging collections is not a simple process and your records may not be the only ones that the repository must work on–expect a delay of 6 to 18 months depending on the size of the repository).  Are the storage areas secure, clean, dry, cool, and are there emergency (fire, flood, and tornado) measures in place?  These issues should be discussed with the repository.

## ADDITIONAL CONTACT INFORMATION

Another source for records management information is the Boston chapter of the Association of Records Managers and Administrators (ARMA) at 1-800-422-2762 or E-mail to *HQ@arma.org.*

The staff at Northeastern University Archives and Special Collections Department is also available to assist.  For more information please contact:

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