The Importance of America's State Archives

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State Archives: An Institution at the Crossroads

The modern state archives is more than just a simple placeholder for paper and final destination for public documents. A state archives secures the rights of citizens, provides public access to government records, develops policies and procedures for managing government information, preserves historic and significant records, and maintains records in multiple formats including paper, electronic, audio, and visual. While many of the core principles in archives remain unchanged since the first formal state archives programs began more than a century ago, the advent of technology, open records laws, and disaster planning has required tremendous changes in the role of state archives.

The International Council on Archives adopted the Universal Declaration on Archives in September 2010 suggesting six benchmarks for archival programs worldwide.

- Appropriate national archival policies and laws that are adopted & enforced;
- Management of archives is valued & carried out competently by all bodies, private or public, which create & use archives in the course of conducting their business;
- Adequate resources are allocated to support the proper management of archives, including the employment of trained professionals;
- Archives are managed and preserved in a manner that ensures their authenticity, reliability, integrity and usability;
- Archives are made accessible to everyone, while respecting the pertinent laws and the rights of individuals, creators, owners and users; and
- Archives are used to contribute to the promotion of responsible citizenship.

With these expectations in mind, the Council of State Archives is releasing this report on *The Importance of America's State Archives*.

Archives Uncover Family Ties

"I had a real need for clarity on my grandmother's mental illness. I felt that knowing more about her diagnosis and treatment would help me and my three daughters, and also their children. I am very grateful to the Indiana State Archives for providing my grandmother's hospital records and the accompanying letters from family that were included in establishing her family history. I also treasure the lovely picture of my grandmother which you so kindly enlarged for us." - M.S.H. from Phoenix, AZ upon receiving her grandmother's medical records pertaining her stay at the Madison State Hospital in 1919.

Primary Programs & Functions of State Archives

America's state archives provide multiple important functions and programs. Ten of the most common duties performed by state archives include:

1. Critical and Vital Records: Archives agencies responsible for public records management administer programs to select, protect, and establish redundancy of information deemed essential to the continuity of government and or the protection of individual rights.

2. Local Government Records: Most state archives are responsible for the scheduling and disposition of local government records in their states. The archives may establish rules outlining requirements for local storage standards for permanent records or accept the records at the state. The state archives coordinates and educates local officials about records management, public access laws, and disposition schedules; enabling local citizens access to certain records that may have otherwise been destroyed prematurely.

3. Electronic Records: A few states are leading, some following, and others lag behind in managing the substantial influx of electronic records in government. A large and growing percentage of government is taking place electronically and needs to not just be captured, but preserved to ensure accessibility and maintain each record's historical and research value. In some cases, decades of electronic mail have been lost due to a lack of a procedure or system to retain essential electronic records. State archives agencies in partnership with the National Archives, Library of Congress and each other have worked toward a solution, but are often obstructed by the lack of technical staffing and financial resources that have hindered many states from resolving the issue at great peril to the state's history. Regrettably, local governments are faring even worse in the preservation of electronic records.

4. Consulting & Technical Assistance: State archives provide assistance to local government, state agencies, and private entities or taxpayers. They also provide essential guidance like establishing best practices in records management and preservation strategies for important documents.

5. Training and Education Programs: Archives and records management staff serve as educators to government employees. The switch from an era of paper filing and storage boxes to electronic files has resulted in each employee becoming his or her own records manager. Employees are now responsible for making determinations about what should and should not be kept and for how long. State archives provides training to these state employees.

Did You Know?

The Council of State Archivists conducted surveys 2006 and 2010 that show the cumulative amount of State Archives electronic records holdings nationwide increased from 72.9 Terabytes of data to 234.3 Terabytes by 2010, more than a three-fold increase in just four years. During the same time, the Archives and Records Management programs saw a 17.83% decline in full-time equivalents (FTEs).

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6. Schedule and Inventory Control for Records: State archives and records management staff work together to inventory and schedule records, regardless of format, for disposition. This allows for intellectual control and access over the vast holdings of state and local government records.

7. Disaster Planning and Preservation Services: State archives' professional conservation staff and treatment lab enhance the life of records and documents in the care of the archives. Often times, this staff is also part of the state archives response team when manmade or natural disasters strike and vital government records are in peril. Planning for disasters and access to records as part of the Continuity of Operations Plans (COOP) has placed the Archives in a partnership with state Homeland Security agencies to assist agencies in developing their plans.

8. Micrographics and Scanning: Some states retain a micrographics section to assure certain critical records are preserved on film (and often digitally) to protect the integrity of these records as well as create redundancy. Archives set the state's quality standards for microfilm requirements.

9. Standards & Compliance: The state archives agency generally establishes policy and standards for records-related issues, including micrographics quality and applications; equipment, technology and supplies used for records creation, maintenance and storage; documentation standards for electronic records systems; and records retention and disposition policy. They also have the authority to enforce the standards, rules and regulations they promulgate.

10. Statutory Authority: State archives have wide legal responsibilities to manage government records. They generally include managing the records of terminated agencies, accessioning records of outgoing officials, providing access to non-confidential records, developing disposition and destruction schedules, enforcing replevin statutes (retaining legal control over government records that have improperly left government control), certifying official copies of government records, establishing standards for record keeping systems and procedures, as well as enforcing compliance with these issues.

State Archives: Physical Facilities

State archives' responsibilities require an appropriately secure and climate-controlled facility to maximize the safety and integrity of the records it houses. Therefore, archives must appropriately preserve the administrative and historic records of state and local governments in the United States.

Additionally, archives have become required to store more than just physical records (paper and microfilm) since the advent of electronic records and absorb the costs of servers & related technology infrastructure investments associated with them.

Archives Link to Our Past

"There are some things that you can only find at the Archives. Being able to see the actual language of this bill (SB 1129 from the 88th Illinois General Assembly) on the same day that it was first raised in discussions was extremely helpful to the President of the Senate in his conversations with members of our Caucus & with Republican Senators alike."

James W. Dodge
Deputy Chief Legal Counsel
Office of the Senate President
Illinois State Senate

State Archives: Issues & Challenges

As described, there is much progress to report one century removed from the establishment of the first state archives. Despite this progress, results from surveys conducted by the Council of State Archives' highlight a number of continuing challenges:

- Developing and maintaining sound records management and archival programs that are essential to the effective functioning of state & local government, documentation of government's work, and identification, preservation & accessibility of records that have continuing value.
- Obtaining an appropriate and consistent revenue stream, particularly as most programs have experienced significant growth in both their holdings and customer base (particularly with the advent of access over the Web).
- Resolving problems related to long-term preservation and access to electronic records, which are now created in abundance by every state government office.
- Meeting rising user expectations & demand as new technologies provide opportunities for much broader access to holdings of state archives, but are tempered by inadequate resources to meet the increased demand.

In the face of such challenges, state archivists see both opportunities in their role as state historical records coordinators and in providing statewide leadership and direction.

State Archives: Return on Investment

Beyond the statutory requirements to maintain a state archives, and the inherent necessity to preserve the records and documents of government, there are significant administrative, legal and monetary reasons to maintain strong state archives programs.

- Analyzing the cost of out-sourced archival storage versus maintaining a State Archives facility significantly favors the Archives. Vendors charge monthly per box storage costs, access fees, administrative fees, etc., which are significantly higher than the storage costs associated with a State Archives facility in large part because of the vast volume.
- A portion of every State Archives houses confidential materials. The handling of these materials is an on-going expectation of the state employees managing the archives and an additional cost when out-sourced. A state runs a higher risk of mistakenly disclosing information when private sector employees are making public access decisions.
- Most states allow free and unfettered public access to review non-confidential public records. Third party entities involved in records storage charge for retrieving the materials; additionally, the State Archives maintains the accession registers to determine where particular files are stored & from which agency of government. A vendor does not provide this level of service.
- Beyond storage costs, the archives staff conducts research for patrons and governmental entities as well as certifies official copies of records. These services would not be provided from third parties, and are currently provided as part of the State Archives mission.

State Archives: Summary of Conditions

Governmental archives across the country are faced with maintaining ever increasing quantities of paper and electronic records, while having to reduce staff and manage with smaller budgets. The archives also face increased responsibilities, such as participating in disaster planning for the state, fomenting open government and conducting proper records management training for state employees. There is growing concern among the archival community that many State Archives programs are on a course toward failure. Failures in their systems will jeopardize the right of citizens to safeguard the integrity of official records and access public records, including vital records like birth, marriage, and death certificates (identity fraud) property records impacting ownership of private property.

While there is no denying the budget realties states currently face, archives and records management operations are core functions of government and need to be garnered such consideration. Their role, responsibilities and importance have expanded dramatically in the last decade, but as illustrated their resources have declined.

No one disputes the importance of State Archives in preserving the nation's history and the rights of its citizens. With that in mind the institutional integrity of the nation's state archives must be safeguarded.

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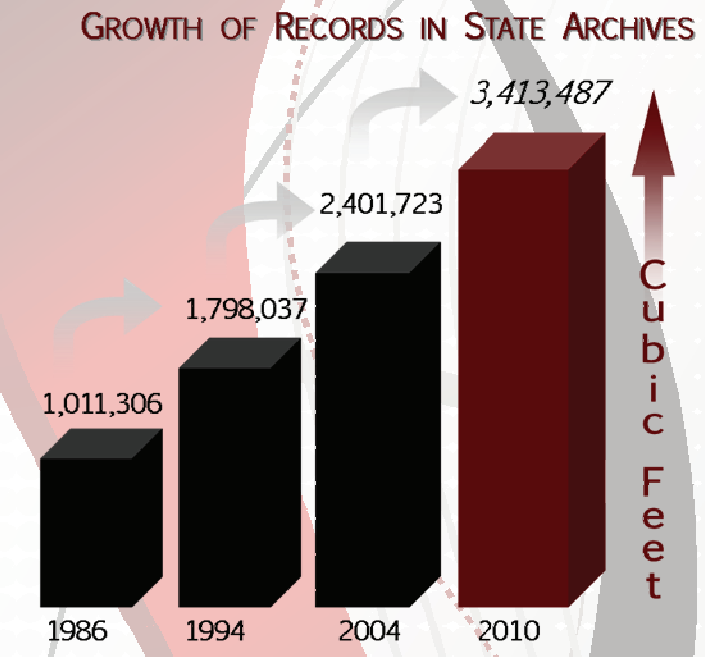

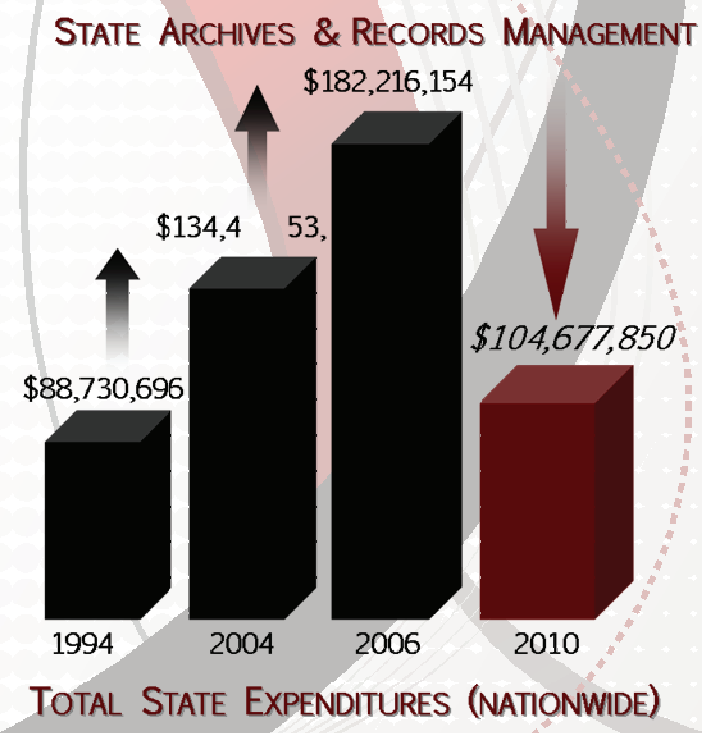

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