Vital Records: Appendix 4: Prevention Measures

Protective measures are those practices that can be used on a daily basis to protect not only the Vital Records in your office, but all other records as well. These measures need to be followed regularly and evaluated to ensure that you are providing an appropriate level of protection for your records. Listed below are some general preventative tips for various types of "disasters" as well as a discussion of media formats.

Prevention of Disasters

General:

- Reduce the use of fiber or felt tip marking pens for the creation of records unless you are certain they are not water-soluble.
- Handwritten entries in logbooks or other records which have long-term or historical value should be made in permanent ink to prevent loss of information through water damage.
- Follow approved retention periods for records to ensure the timely destruction of obsolete records and removal of inactive records, thus decreasing the amount of paper in your office.

Fire:

- Prohibit smoking in or around records storage areas.
- Do not store records with chemicals, cleaning supplies, etc.
- Do not store records by a furnace, radiator, lights, or heaters. Ensure that electrical appliances are operated at a safe distance from flammable materials, and they are turned off when not in use.
- Comply with all local fire, electrical, plumbing, heating and construction codes.
- Store flammable and combustible materials in a safe, cool place, out of sunlight and inside cabinets made specifically to store hazardous materials.

Water:

- Locate all your drains and have them checked regularly.
- Regularly inspect the sprinkler system and check the general condition of the storage site to determine if the area is susceptible to flooding, if the building has structural defects, roof is developing leaks, etc.
- Try not to store records in carpeted areas. (Carpets may retain water and prevent drainage, thus creating a problem later when trying to stabilize the temperature and humidity of area).
- Try not to store records in areas the have exposed sewer pipes (to cut down on the threat of leakage).

Prevention of theft:

- Identify staff responsible for locking windows and doors at closing time.
- Strict control of all building keys, with locks changed when keys are lost.
- Strict supervision of non-staff who enter the building, especially of cleaners and maintenance workers.
- Limited access to systems, either by the use of passwords or locks.

Animal/insect invasion protection:
Conduct a building inspection to identify and block all potential points of animal or bird entry.
Place strong, fine mesh screening over all necessary openings - such as windows or skylights, ventilators, chimneys and screened doors for all external doorways.
Ban eating in areas containing records or computers.
Regular and thorough cleaning of ceilings, walls, floors and all furniture.

Specific Media Formats

Paper:
- Vital Records with lengthily retention periods (over 10 years) or which are generated in high volumes can be microfilmed.
- Fax transmissions received on thermal paper, which need to be retained as Vital Records or for an extended length of time, should be photocopied onto plain paper. Thermal paper can be recognized by its smooth sheen and tendency to curl; it is sensitive to heat, light, and will react with chemicals found in ordinary office environments (including markers, cosmetics, etc.). The image produced on thermal paper is highly unstable and will deteriorate significantly in a few years, or after contact with water.
- Keep paper records in file cabinets or drawers when not in use.

Microforms:
- Microforms (film, fiche) created through different processes, e.g. silver halide, diazo and vesicular, should be stored in separate cabinets and boxes. The different types of film will interact with each other and produce dangerous gases which can destroy the microfilm images.
- Security copies of microfilm should be stored off site (at least in another building if not in another city).
- Film should be handled by the edges to prevent fingerprint smudges.

Magnetic Media:
- Back-up computer information on a regular basis. Back-up tapes should be stored off site (at least in another building, if not another city).
- Protect media and equipment with plastic covers to minimize water damage.
- Keep magnetic media away from all sources of magnetic fields.
- Re-wind data cartridges to beginning before removing them from the tape drive.
- Store data cartridges securely in their protective plastic cases.
- Never attempt to clean a data cartridge. Never touch the tape or the tape drives rollers with fingers or other objects.
- Regularly clean the tape drive to enhance its ability to accurately read data.

Floppy Disks:
- Always store disks in protective jacket.
- Avoid contact with equipment generating magnetic fields - such as telephones, headphones.
- Do not bend, handle roughly, flex, or bind disks with rubber bands and avoid using clips of any kind to attach items to floppy disks.
- Do not touch exposed portions of the disk.
Photographs and negatives (including Aerial photos):

- Store negatives and photographs separately.
- Do not expose photographs or negatives to direct sunlight.
- Use cotton gloves when handling original photos and negatives.
- Store in cool dry place away from overhead steam or water pipes, washrooms, or other sources of water.
- When not in use, store photos and negatives in individual paper or plastic enclosures (polyester, polyethylene, or polypropylene).
- Do not use manila envelopes, glassine envelopes, polyvinylchloride, rubber bands, paper clips, bulldog clips, ACCO fasteners, etc.
- For more information on protecting specific types of photos please call Records Management Services.

Maps (including architectural drawings and cartographic items):

- Avoid storing maps and drawings rolled or folded. Optimal storage condition is in a flat shallow drawer map case.
- Material should be placed inside acid free folders for added protection.
- Store large, heavy atlases and other bound volumes of maps or drawings flat to reduce the amount of stress placed on the spine.
- Do not laminate oversized records. The process is difficult to reverse without damage to the records and has been replaced by other preservation, storage, and treatment options. Encapsulate old or fragile maps in clear stable plastic.

Audiovisual Materials:

- Always create a master.
- Allow only trained staff to handle masters.
- Lend copies only if an original copy is retained in the office.
- Prevent erasure or alteration of magnetic recordings by disengaging the recording mechanism in the playback equipment.
- Store magnetic masters separately from viewing and listening copies.
- Secure storage area for masters against unauthorized access and protect it from fire, water and chemical damage.
- Store audio visual masters in non-corroding metal or inert plastic containers.