

Report of the Blue Ribbon Panel

a supplement to
The State of State Records
a status report on
State Archives and Records Management Programs
in the United States

January 2007



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COUNCIL OF STATE ARCHIVISTS

Blue Ribbon Panel

Findings and Recommendations

The Council of State Archivists (CoSA) convened a Blue Ribbon Panel to consider the results of its surveys of state archives and records management programs and make recommendations on how to improve the management, preservation, and use of state government records.

CoSA selected members of the Blue Ribbon Panel to represent the primary constituents and partners of state archives and records management programs nationwide. Panel members included:

Nancy Beaumont, Executive Director, Society of American Archivists

Roger Bruns, Immediate Past President, Association for Documentary Editing

Anthony Creswell, Deputy Director, Center for Technology in Government

Jay Hakes, Director, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library

Edie Hedlin, Director (retired), Smithsonian Institution Archives

Barbara Vines Little, Immediate Past President, National Genealogical Society

Susan McKinney, President, ARMA International, and Director, Records and Information Management, University of Minnesota

Larry Reger, President, Heritage Preservation

Roy Rosenzweig, Director, Center for History and New Media

Diane Vogt-O'Connor, Chief of Conservation, Library of Congress

The Blue Ribbon Panel met in Arlington, Virginia, on October 25 and 26, 2006. In advance of the meeting, the panel members reviewed a report summarizing the status of state archives and records management programs in 2006 along with profiles of the programs in each state and a series of detailed tables containing data from CoSA's surveys.

The formal discussions at the panel meeting started with a review of the data and its implications presented by CoSA's officers, staff and the Survey Management Team that has been responsible for execution of this project. Members of this group included:

Tracey Berezansky, Director, Government Records, Alabama Department of Archives and History

Richard Cameron, Director, State Programs, National Historical Publications and Records Commission

Conley L. Edwards III, CoSA Vice President/President-elect, and Director, Archival and Information Services Division, The Library of Virginia

Gordon Hendrickson, State Archivist, State Historical Society of Iowa

Karl J. Niederer, CoSA President, and Director, New Jersey Division of Archives and Records Management

Kathleen Roe, Chair, CoSA Survey Management Team, and Director, Archives and Records Management Operations, New York State Archives

James Henderson, State Archivist of Maine, also a member of the Survey Management Team and involved in developing and analyzing the survey data, was unable to attend the meeting.

Support for the work of the Blue Ribbon Panel and Survey Management Team during the meeting was provided by Bob Wright, Organizational Development Associates, who facilitated the discussion, and CoSA staff members Vicki Walch and Jenifer Burlis-Freilich.

Following the joint discussion, the Blue Ribbon Panel deliberated on its own to develop a consensus on findings, including perceived strengths and weaknesses in state archives and records management programs, and to propose recommendations for improving these programs.

CoSA staff prepared the following summary of findings and recommendations based on notes taken by the facilitator during the panel's discussions. Panel members reviewed the summary and provided additional comments and suggestions during that follow-up process.

Overall Findings of the CoSA Blue Ribbon Panel

STRENGTHS

The state archives and records management programs are to be commended for their proactive efforts and successful track record in addressing a number of important issues, both individually and collectively through CoSA-sponsored initiatives. These efforts include:

Emergency preparedness. During the summer of 2006, every state archives completed an assessment of emergency preparedness and an emergency response plan as part of CoSA's Emergency Preparedness Initiative. CoSA is pursuing partnerships with appropriate state and federal agencies and other organizations to publicize the results of the assessments, gain support for needed improvements, and raise the overall level of preparedness in archives nationwide.

Local government records. A number of states have instituted substantial programs for assisting local governments to manage their records using innovative funding streams, supported by relatively small filing fee increases that generate substantial support for these services. CoSA is leading a nationwide project to ensure the long-term care of local government records by improving support for and status of local government archives.

Gubernatorial records. In October 2006, the National Governors Association (NGA) published a new manual on gubernatorial records that was prepared by a CoSA task force. It was based on a document originally developed by the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators (NAGARA) in the 1980s. NGA will use the manual during its orientation programs for newly elected governors and their staff members held each November starting in 2006.

Partnership for the American Historical Record (PAHR). State archives nationwide have begun building the case for a federal program that will provide formula-based funds to each state to support archives and records programs in both public and private organizations. Through PAHR, CoSA is working with the Society of American Archivists (SAA), NAGARA, and others to raise awareness about this initiative and secure support for it.

The section of the report entitled "Why Government Records Are Important" makes a powerful, persuasive statement on the value of state archives and records management programs. CoSA should use it as the foundation for building a case for supporting state archives and records management programs.

A number of states have developed new sources of revenue to support archives and records management programs. The most common of these in the last twenty years are the document filing fees now collected at the county level in fifteen states and dedicated to local government archives and records management programs.

Many states have wisely invested in the physical facilities that house state archives. Twelve new state archives buildings have been constructed in the last fifteen years and at least eight new buildings or major renovations are scheduled in the next three to four years. Environmental controls are generally good and there is more consistent adherence to sound storage standards across states than there was twenty years ago.

Overall usage of state archives holdings has increased, which may also indicate that the level of overall public awareness about state archives and their holdings has also increased.

State archives websites are improving, enabling broader electronic access to holdings for users of all kinds. Use is the ultimate goal of retaining archival records, and technology offers important opportunities for archives to dramatically increase awareness and use of these significant resources. State archives are actively creating valuable online access tools to facilitate this.

The volume of records held by state archives has increased substantially over the last two decades. The collective holdings of archives at the state level are comparable in size to the volume of federal records held by the National Archives, and have increased by 139 percent since 1994 and 247 percent since 1986.

There is a trend toward consolidation of archives and records management programs in the states. Combined programs have the advantage of overseeing the entire life cycle of records, from creation to disposition, and make it more likely that records managers and archivists work together effectively. The CoSA survey data also suggest that separate records management programs are more vulnerable to staff reductions or elimination.

WEAKNESSES/RISKS

State archives and records management programs have insufficient resources to fulfill their responsibilities. Funding and staffing levels are chronically low and many have been further downsized in response to state budget reductions. Facilities are too small to accommodate the volume of incoming records. Although a number of state archives and records management budgets appear to have increased at a rate that exceeds the inflation rate, in most cases those funds now cover expanded responsibilities, so there is no actual net gain.

Digital records present an enormous challenge. Every archivist and records manager is confronting the challenges associated with electronic records and those working in state government are no exception.

- They must develop new methods for ensuring the long-term preservation and use of records that are “born digital” (i.e., those that are originally created and maintained in electronic form).
- Many archives are also converting older records from their original paper format to digital images or electronic data files to make them easier for researchers to use and to provide copies for preservation purposes. Most of this digital investment work is being done despite the fact that archives nationwide lack the resources to pay the ongoing “digital mortgage.” That is, they lack adequate infrastructure, training, staffing, and resources to manage digital preservation in the long run for these otherwise short-lived electronic records.
- Cross-boundary coordination among all who are responsible for digitally stored state government records is essential in order even to begin addressing these concerns.

Archivists and records managers must work closely with librarians, chief information officers, information technology staff, and, ultimately, all state agency personnel to ensure that essential information created or held in electronic form survives.

- Archivists and records managers are not receiving sufficient training to deal with digital materials. At the same time, information technology employees are not getting enough training on archival requirements for the records they create and manage in digital form.

There is a gap between the authority to act and the ability to act effectively. While most state archives and records management programs have sufficient authority in law or regulation to establish policies and procedures for current records and to ensure that those of long-term significance are preserved, most do not have commensurate resources, enforcement mechanisms, or mandates to assert this authority effectively.

State and local government records are at risk because of inadequate emergency preparedness and Continuity of Operations (COOP) plans that do not include provisions for records. While most state archives have disaster plans in place, many are not up to date or practiced regularly. CoSA's Assessment of Emergency Preparedness indicates that most state archivists and records managers are not involved in developing emergency response plans for state or local governments. Existing plans in state and local agencies rarely make adequate provisions for securing records that will be essential to the resumption of government operations following a natural disaster or other emergency.

In addition to concerns about long-term preservation of digital records, there are reasons to be concerned about other types of non-textual records in state government, like photographs, film, audio recordings, and maps. The state archives collectively hold relatively modest numbers of photographs, moving-image materials (film and video), maps, and audio recordings, at least when compared to the quantities of similar materials held by the National Archives. It is not clear whether the discrepancy stems from insufficient aggressiveness in acquiring these materials, or because state governments do not produce them in the same quantities as their federal counterparts. More analysis is needed to understand the causes and significance of this divergence. This is a serious concern as non-textual materials are particularly vulnerable to mishandling and poor storage.

The state archives have not developed sufficient finding aids for their holdings. The only way to make records available for use is to know what information they contain and how to locate the specific records that will answer a researcher's question. To facilitate use, archives produce a variety of finding aids – descriptive guides, inventories, and indexes – but too many state archives holdings are not covered by such finding aids.

While many states have constructed or expanded facilities in the last twenty years, most are already full to capacity or will be soon. Adjunct facilities used to house the overflow of archival records do not, in most cases, meet suitable standards for the storage of permanent records.

Active users of state archives are limited to a few audiences. The CoSA survey data suggests that most users of state archives are state employees and genealogists. The National Archives has found that genealogical usage is declining sharply because of the increased availability of scanned online records and databases that hold the key data extracted from such records. In-person visits, telephone calls, email requests, and similar direct contacts are decreasing, while Web usage is expanding.

Recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Panel

A large, cross-organizational collaborative effort is necessary to address the challenges presented by records created in or converted to digital form.

- Archivists and records managers in state government must connect with existing efforts by public and private organizations, associations, universities and other research centers, and developers and vendors of hardware and software.
- This effort should involve CoSA, the Society of American Archivists, the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators, ARMA International, the National Association of State Chief Information Officers, and the National Archives and Records Administration, and other associations and agencies at the federal and state levels.
- It must include a systematic assessment of the current situation, establishment of standards of measurement and terminology, delineation of the training needed for records professionals and others, and consideration of creative solutions, including partnerships with private-sector entities like Google.
- State archivists should work with NARA, the Library of Congress, foundations, and grant-funding agencies to develop strategies for and funding of (1) additional training for staff, (2) the assessment and sustainability of electronic records infrastructures to hold electronic records nationwide, and (3) work with the private sector to develop certified digital repositories.
- In addition to working on preserving born-digital materials, state archivists should make aggressive and effective use of digitization as a mode of outreach and should expand and upgrade their presence on the Web, where Americans increasingly seek information.
- State archives staff need increased training in all aspects of electronic records management, including the digitization of older records and the preservation of and access to born-digital materials.

Archives, records, and information management programs should be more closely tied together. Sound records management takes into account the entire life cycle of records—from creation to disposition. Generally, records managers oversee records while they are still in active use by state agencies, while archivists take responsibility for records having long-term value and therefore warranting permanent retention in the state archives. Because the life cycle of records is a continuum, it is essential that records managers and archivists work together closely. Data from the CoSA surveys further suggest that some records management programs administered separately from archives have been more vulnerable to reductions in staff, funding, and authority. This problem becomes even more critical when managing electronic records, because records managers often provide an essential bridge between information technology and archives. At the very least, each state should have an adequately funded, staffed, and equipped (e.g., buildings and complete and up-to-date records schedules) records management program with a strong legal mandate to manage the state's temporary records.

States should determine the relative proportion of records now held by state archives to the total volume of permanently valuable records destined for archival custody but not yet transferred. The Blue Ribbon Panel rightly noted that while the growth in state archives holdings over the last two decades is impressive, there is no way to determine how well the states are doing without knowing the universe of records that *should* be in archival custody but are not. For space-planning purposes, this evaluation needs to consider total volume still held outside the archives and their condition and status. This information may be relatively easy to capture in those states that have comprehensive records schedules in place. More difficult will be an evaluation of the state government functions and subject matter covered in the records, as well as any special care requirements these records may pose (e.g., privacy issues, mold mitigation, flattening, insect issues).

State archives must increase the volume of records covered by finding aids in order to make them fully available for use. Every state archives should have a series-level descriptive record following a common archival descriptive standard (e.g., MARC or EAD) for all of the records they hold. CoSA survey data indicates that more than one-third of all state archives holdings are described only at the most basic level. Describing and stabilizing this backlog by holdings maintenance, processing, and basic description should be a priority nationwide.

State archives should learn more about their users and expand their user base. CoSA and the state archives must develop better methods for capturing information about both in-person and Web users, as well as a broader view of the full range of potential users who are currently underserved. The CoSA surveys gathered only limited information about users of state archives. Data on the types of users are largely subjective, based on responses to a question asking state archivists to report what percentage of overall use came from each of several categories (e.g., genealogists, scholars, state government administrators). While use of state archives' websites has skyrocketed in the last few years, only a handful of state archives are able to report meaningful statistics on numbers of users and length of stay, and neither of these provides any qualitative insight into who uses the websites or why. In addition, some consideration should be given to assessing the satisfaction level of users. State archives should consider conducting user surveys and focus groups, and developing marketing plans to get a better idea of how their current and potential stakeholders regard their services and operations.

Efforts to expand the user base of state archives should examine how to better serve the following groups:

- K-12 students and their teachers, who are very likely to be using the state archives websites already to search for materials. Since they do not tend to show up in person in the state archives reading rooms, however, the K-12 category ranks low among the user categories reported by state archivists.
- Professional historians, who are not always aware of what is available and how to access it. State archives should engage in outreach to university-based historians and their students.
- Faculty and students in other scholarly disciplines—especially political science, public administration and finance, law, and economics—who could be expected to use holdings of state archives.

- Other nonscholarly special interest communities who care about history, such as local historians, legal historians, historic preservationists, amateur groups with special interests in the Civil War or railroads. State archivists could work with NARA and other historically focused groups (American Association of State and Local History, SAA, American Association of Museums, American Historical Association, Organization of American Historians) to explore new communities of audiences for state archives. Individual state archives could conduct environmental scans to identify underserved audiences in their states and work with volunteer business marketing professionals to develop marketing plans to better reach out to these communities.

State archives and records management programs should continue to seek new sources of revenue to support the management of current records and preservation of archival holdings.

State archives need a more diverse revenue base and more innovative financial planning. The positive experiences that some states have had with income generated from document filing fees may provide a model for all states to expand their funding through fee-based services. New revenue sources might include a system of formula up-front charges or charge-backs to all state agencies served by the state archives and records management program; state fees on copy orders; up-front funding in all projects for the care of digital records produced; grant applications to foundations that fund in their state as listed in publications of the Foundation Center; grant funding from corporate giving programs and corporate foundations in their state; and more products through online stores such as CafePress.com and VStore to develop revenue bases. State archives should consider using an experienced financial planning consultant to investigate and recommend new revenue sources and how to tap them. CoSA should pursue funding sources for enterprise projects affecting state archives nationwide.

CoSA should develop a multidimensional “risk profile” for state archives and records management programs. Such a profile would be designed to convey clearly and quickly the current status of these programs in the states and to underscore the risks to government, citizens, and society if these programs do not function well. The profile should include a summary of records currently held by state archives, as well as records destined for archival custody but not yet transferred. It could also use the Intensity of Care index developed by Paul Conway to identify severely understaffed archival programs and a similar index for assessing records management staffing levels.

In delineating specific threats to archives and records and their potential impact on governments, citizens, and society, the profile should identify the causes or circumstances that serve to raise or lower risk levels for archives and records management programs, such as

- vulnerability to natural disasters in certain geographical locations;
- technological change in the creation and use of records;
- diminished life expectancy for records because of poor and overcapacity storage environments;
- mechanical damage resulting from inadequate staff and user training;
- theft or vandalism because of poor security;
- legal risk because of privacy, publicity, or copyright concerns; and

- risk of terrorism because of geographic proximity to a target or simply by being a government entity.

CoSA should collaborate with other organizations serving archivists and records managers to identify and refine standards for measuring archival performance, buildings, staff training and management, and holdings. The Survey Management Team and Blue Ribbon Panel both acknowledge a general lack of standards for reporting activity in certain important areas, especially electronic records and website usage. State archives use a variety of measures to “count” their holdings of digital materials; none of them use the metrics adopted by the National Archives. As a result, it is impossible to compare one institution’s holdings with another’s, and there is no way to measure growth in holdings over time as new electronic records are accessioned. Similarly, only a few state archives are currently able to report meaningful numbers of visitors to their websites and none appear to have attempted to analyze the reasons for these visits or the types of users involved. Further complicating the issue, privacy issues that prevent government agencies from collecting personal information make certain kinds of information collection off limits. In the end, however, the only way to determine change and progress over time is to establish common standards for benchmarking. This is an effort that will require cooperation among all archives and records management programs, not just those in the government sector.

Recommendations about reaching out to archival customers, stakeholders, and resource providers.

1. Keep working on the “Why do government records matter?” statement as a way to build the case for supporting state archives and records management programs.
2. Develop metrics for benchmarking appraisal, accessioning, holdings maintenance, arrangement, description, reference, and outreach. Determine the applicability of existing standards used by other archival repositories, including the National Archives, as well as the possibilities for developing formulas based on numbers of FTEs in state government or population size to determine appropriate service levels within each state.
3. Make use of awards and recognition programs or events to draw media attention. CoSA should consider giving awards for most-improved archives.
4. Present information about archives and records in easily understood ways.
 - Replace references to “linear feet” or “cubic feet” with a measurement more easily grasped by the general public, such as the number of pages.
 - Enhance the visual components of reports and presentations.
 - Talk about the communities that need and use records and how these records make a real difference in people’s lives, not just about the archives and the records. Use stories to illustrate the impact of records.
5. Develop specific messages for each audience and select media that are most likely to reach each one, focusing on poignant stories that have an impact on real people.
6. Look at the full array of media and ways to use them, including press releases, public service announcements, media alerts, videotapes, tours (including Web-based special tours), linkage to past historic events, special event announcements, and open houses. Develop effective press e-mailing lists, websites with media focus, and other electronic dissemination tools.
7. Consider ways to reach other audiences who would be open to learning more and could have influence at the state and local level, including local business clubs, foundations, reenactors, historic preservationists, and legal historians.
8. Work with the Business Volunteers for the Arts to develop model marketing plans for state archives that can be copied by others. Engage in dialog with the National Archives to learn more about what it is doing along these lines for the presidential libraries and its regional branches.