A successful record management plan is needed by counties to comply with statutory responsibilities under the Data Practices Act. One of the most important considerations in successful records management is how long to retain the record after its creation. The State of Minnesota released a general record retention schedule to govern record retention in 1985, with minimal updates made in the interim. Consequently, the general schedule no longer encompasses all records being created by counties, and county officials struggle to manage the influx of records being created. Fortunately, counties can amend the general schedule to better fit their needs in conjunction with the Records Disposition Panel and the State Archives’ office.

To update a record retention schedule, a county must consider who will lead the project, what records to include, how long to retain the record, how to organize the record retention schedule, and how to plan for regular updates to the schedule. Drawing upon informational interviews with county employees and the State Archives’ office, this guide is intended to address these aspects of adapting a record retention schedule for counties, as well as provide sample language on specific record types to add.

**PROJECT LEADERSHIP**

All counties interviewed chose one individual to handle the project in a supervisory role, rather than share the responsibility among department heads. This may be a member of administration, an attorney, or a dedicated records manager on staff. A county may also choose to include its IT department if an update to data storage software is needed. Counties may choose to tap specific department leaders, such as Human Services, if most requests or records come from that department.

At the start of the project, the project manager should:

- Contact department leaders with notice of upcoming revisions;
- Meet with department staff to inventory records;
- Establish procedures to meet operational needs; and
- Disseminate the new record retention schedule once it is completed and approved.

**DEFINITIONS**

**Record:** Any data or file created by county officials whose content describes official operations, regardless of the medium it is created in. Does not include temporary, reposted, or unofficial communications.

**Record Series:** An organizational method of grouping records with similar functions or characteristics. May encompass records from multiple departments.

**Record Retention Schedule:** A comprehensive list of all record series created by a county with assigned retention periods that govern how long the record must be retained and available for use or request.
The County Attorney’s office should be consulted to review the schedule. County attorneys can provide information on legal precedence or statute that governs data retention beyond the general record retention schedule’s provisions.

**RECORD INVENTORY**

The State Archive’s office suggests counties start a schedule update project by categorizing all the records that need to be included in the new record retention schedule. This is when an inventory of the records should be made. The project manager should work with individual departments, examining their operations and what records originate from their office. For each record type, the following should be included in the inventory:

- Record name
- Public or private designation
- Department of origin
- Brief functional description
- Essential or non-essential designation

If the document matches a record type in the state’s record retention schedule, it should be linked to its series number.

**RETENTION PERIOD**

The retention of government records is typically governed by the Data Practices Act, Federal or Minnesota Statute, or legal precedence, making it difficult to amend. Because of this, most counties do not deviate far from the state schedule’s retention periods, as it has already taken these regulations into consideration. However, some minor changes can be made to reduce the county workload, meet operational needs, or account for changes in record creation.

One common change is holding records longer than the general schedule requires. For example, the general schedule requires that annual reports be kept in house for 7 years, and then can be transferred to the State Archive’s office, but some counties elect to hold on to annual reports permanently.

Another county did the opposite with their special committee reports schedule and stored reports for 50 years, rather than retain them permanently per the state’s schedule.

Overall, most changes are minor, and updates to the schedule focus less on retention periods and instead on the schedule’s organization, data list, and layout.
SCHEDULE ORGANIZATION

All counties interviewed advocated for a “big bucket” approach to organizing the record retention schedule. This process involves clustering a large group of record series with similar usefulness and grouping them together on the schedule. The buckets cross departmental lines and instead reflect functionality. The record retention schedule could include a “Communications” bucket that includes correspondence, marketing promotion, county bulletins, email, social media, or annual reports. When a new record type or series is created by your county, you can include it into a bucket by its function.

Most updated record retention schedules still list the record’s department of origin. But they also attach a record series that allows for identification of a record by its function. This is useful for identifying records that are unfamiliar or categorizing new record types quickly. Utilizing the big bucket approach transforms a record retention schedule from a comprehensive list to a searchable and usable resource.

Some common examples of larger buckets include:

- Administration
- Financial
- Communications
- Taxes
- Personnel
- Common Records

UPDATING A COUNTY’S SCHEDULE

Regularly updating a records retention schedule saves time when new record types are added, reduces administrative workload for employees, and builds trust between records management staff and departments. No county surveyed created a formal plan for updates but found ways to include it in their normal county operations. Below are a few examples of how counties complete regular updates to their schedules:

1. One county does cyclical maintenance of the schedule by departments. A document specialist completes a thorough check in with departments every 3-5 years to check for significant changes. Additionally, they respond to as-needed requests due to operational changes or an influx of new data requests.

2. Another county completes small updates as needed with their annual readoption of the record retention schedule required by statute. Additional additions have been made at the request of department heads.

3. A final county pairs schedule updates with technology updates. Changes in the portals used for payroll, HR, or other county processes are coupled with a review of the related documents and a discussion with department heads about changes needed.
SAMPLE LANGUAGE

Due to the General schedule’s age, many common record types created by governments are not explicitly included on the general schedule. Some counties have chosen to address these head-on and include them in their schedule. Below is a sample of language used to govern the retention of emails, webcasts/recordings of board meetings, and social media pages.

EMAIL

Emails present a unique challenge to record managers, as they are governed by their content rather than their medium. If an attachment or the body of an email is a specific record series, it should be governed by that schedule. For general emails discussing official business, see below for sample language.

General Schedule

The general schedule does not list emails; the record series most closely matched with email is correspondence. General correspondence should be retained for 3 years, while official board correspondence is retained for 3 years and then eligible for transference to the state archives.

Stearns and Morrison Counties:
Both counties include a specific email line item, but do not attach a retention period to emails. Instead, they govern the retention by the email’s subject:

“Retention should follow the schedule of the subject of the document.”

For general emails, it can be assumed that they are governed by the correspondence retention period. If the email relates to a specific county program, they should be retained like any other record created in that record series.

General Schedule for Cities

The General Schedule for Cities lists emails specifically in their record retention schedule under “Correspondence - Messages”:

“Transitory messages, e-mail, social media, or phone messages of short-term interest which are considered incidental and non-vital correspondence.”

Those emails have no required retention once they are read and may be discarded.
WEBCAST ARCHIVES/
RECORDINGS OF BOARD MEETINGS

Many counties now choose to record and broadcast their board meetings. This is not a substitute for official minutes, but recordings can provide additional insights into the discussions that take place. They do not need to be retained permanently like approved minutes, but holding onto them for some time can still be useful.

General Schedule

There is not a series for visual recordings of meetings, only audio. Taped meetings should be kept for one year after approval of written minutes. These may not be the final record.

Wright County

Specifically lists visual recordings as a line item. It repeats the retention protocol for audio recordings of meetings from the General Schedule.

“Media may be reused or discarded one year after formal approval of written minutes by board. Recordings cannot be the permanent record.”

Stearns County

Lists both webcast archives and video recordings of meetings with a three-month retention period for both. Lists audio recordings in accordance with the General Schedule’s guidelines.

“Webcast Archives of County Meetings: Should be retained for three months.”

SOCIAL MEDIA

This includes posts, attachments, and comments coming from official agency accounts. Repost of non-agency accounts do not belong to you unless you edit or add additional content.

General Schedule

Identical to emails, unless the content falls under a different record series, retain for three years.

Anoka County

Specifically lists social media posts as an example under correspondence. Falls under general correspondence if posted to agency site – six years after creation.

“Documents day-to-day internal business correspondence between Anoka County officials, personnel, or other agency representatives or public entities. May include: […] social media.”
Wright County

Social media is explicitly listed on the record retention schedule.

“Social Media content for the public and Wright County representatives. Examples of third-party social media sites include but are not limited to Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and blogs. Excludes content that is reposted from another source, and information that is considered to be of temporary usefulness and 1) not an integral part of a record series of the agency, 2) not regularly filed with an agencies recordkeeping system, and 3) are required only for a limited time period for a completion of an action by an official or employee of the agency or in the preparation of an on-going record series.”

Records are kept for one year and then destroyed.

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