



Vermont State Archives and Records Administration

Office of the Secretary of State

1078 US RTE 2, Middlesex • Montpelier, VT 05633-7701 • Tel: (802) 828-3700 • Fax: (802) 828-3710

ELECTRONIC MESSAGES BEST PRACTICE FOR ALL PUBLIC AGENCIES **Date Effective: APRIL 1, 2009. Last Revised: April 2020**

PURPOSE

The purpose of this best practice is to establish a set of statewide recommendations for the retention and disposition of electronic messages created with electronic communication systems (such as electronic mail systems). This best practice is not intended to be a statement of the current ability of public agencies to store, retrieve, and access records. It is a statement of goals and expectations. The realization of such goals and expectations will result in more effective records and information management.

SCOPE

This best practice applies to all electronic messages created or received by public agencies.

STATEMENT OF AUTHORITY

Pursuant to 1 V.S.A. § 317a, 3 V.S.A. § 117, and 3 V.S.A. § 218, the Vermont State Archives and Records Administration (Office of the Secretary of State) is authorized to establish and promulgate standards, procedures and techniques for the effective management of public records.

STATEMENT OF BENEFITS

Sound records management practices and procedures result in a number of benefits: fulfilling legal mandates, improving access and accountability, reducing costs for the retrieval of records, ensuring the creation and management of accurate and reliable records, and reducing the costs of storing records.

STATEMENT OF RESPONSIBILITY

Maintaining complete and trustworthy records over time is a shared responsibility. Establishing and operating effective recordkeeping systems and practices requires a multidisciplinary approach. Public agencies should make effective use of the necessary range of expertise available throughout the State of Vermont. This includes expertise in archives, records and information management, information technology, business process management, risk management, and law.

CONTACT

Questions about this best practice may be directed to the Vermont State Archivist and Chief Records Officer.

DEFINITIONS

Electronic Communication System: Any system that was specifically designed for sending and receiving messages electronically (e.g. electronic mail systems).

Electronic Message: Any message transmitted or received electronically.

Electronic Recordkeeping System: A computer application that can collect, organize, and categorize records to facilitate their management, preservation, retrieval, use, and disposition.

File Plan: A classification scheme or taxonomy describing different types of records, how they are identified, where they are stored, and how they are indexed for retrieval.

Receipt Data: Information generated by electronic communication systems showing the date and time the message was received and/or acknowledgment of receipt or access by the addressee(s).

Record: Any written or recorded information, regardless of physical form or characteristics, which is produced or acquired in the course of agency business (1 V.S.A. § 317(b)).

Record Schedule: A policy issued by the Vermont State Archives and Records Administration and approved by the State Archivist governing the life cycle management, retention, and disposition of public records (3 V.S.A. § 117).

Recordkeeping System: A system of coordinated policies and procedures that enable records to be collected, organized, and categorized to facilitate their management, including preservation, retrieval, use, and disposition. Systems may be manual or electronic.

Transmission Data: Information generated by electronic communication systems showing the identities of the sender and addressee(s), the date and time the messages were sent, and the file name(s) of any attachments.

ELECTRONIC MESSAGES BEST PRACTICE

1) Messages and attachments produced or acquired during the course of agency business are records.

- Records are defined as “any written or recorded information, regardless of physical form or characteristics, which is produced or acquired in the course of agency business.” (1 V.S.A. § 317(b)).

2) Messages and attachments created with electronic communication systems should be retained and disposed in accordance with record schedules approved by the State Archivist.

- A record schedule is “a policy issued by the Vermont State Archives and Records Administration and approved by the State Archivist governing the life cycle management, retention, and disposition of public records” (3 V.S.A. § 117(a)(6)).
- Custodians of public records shall not destroy any record or records unless authorized by law or under a record schedule approved by the State Archivist (1 V.S.A. § 317a).

3) Retention and disposition of electronic messages depends of the content and context of the specific message.

- Specific messages should be treated the same as any other agency record created or received during the normal course of business.

4) Records created through electronic communication systems should be fully retrievable and available until retention requirements specified in their respective record schedules have been met.

- Records should be easily accessible in the normal course of all business processes.
- Public records should be searchable and retrievable for legal, administrative, or informational purposes.
- Training and user support programs should be available to ensure that users can access and retrieve records.

5) Messages and attachments may be converted to an appropriate file format and transferred to an existing recordkeeping system.

- Agencies should have policies and procedures that address how their agency will transfer records from their electronic communications systems to existing electronic recordkeeping systems or paper-based recordkeeping systems.
- Records transferred from an electronic communication system to a recordkeeping system should include all transmission or receipt data.
- Agencies with electronic recordkeeping systems should transfer records to their system and file according to existing file plans.
- Agencies with paper-based recordkeeping systems should print file their records and file according to existing file plans.

6) Records transferred to a recordkeeping system should be completely removed and deleted from the electronic communication system upon verification that the transfer was successful.

- Records should be deleted from the message inbox and all deleted messages folders and trash cans.
- Backup tapes, related recovery records and transmission logs should be retained and disposed in accordance with existing disposition orders or record schedules.

7) When messages and attachments are sent to multiple people, senders and recipients should manage the records, including subsequent responses (threads), in accordance with their respective record schedules.

REVISION HISTORY

2020-04-15 Replaced header and removed references to the former Department of Information and Innovation; Chief Information Officer; and Agency of Administration statutes. Definition update for "record schedule" to reflect current definition in statute. Minor revisions in Section 2 to align with current legal definitions and in Section 7 to clarify applicability of record schedules to both senders and recipients.