



May 19, 2024

---

# Proper Storage Conditions

---

Dear Reader:

The following document was created from the CTAS website ([ctas.tennessee.edu](http://ctas.tennessee.edu)). This website is maintained by CTAS staff and seeks to represent the most current information regarding issues relative to Tennessee county government.

We hope this information will be useful to you; reference to it will assist you with many of the questions that will arise in your tenure with county government. However, the *Tennessee Code Annotated* and other relevant laws or regulations should always be consulted before any action is taken based upon the contents of this document.

Please feel free to contact us if you have questions or comments regarding this information or any other CTAS website material.

Sincerely,

The University of Tennessee  
County Technical Assistance Service  
226 Anne Dallas Dudley Boulevard, Suite 400  
Nashville, Tennessee 37219  
615.532.3555 phone  
615.532.3699 fax  
[www.ctas.tennessee.edu](http://www.ctas.tennessee.edu)

<b>Proper Storage Conditions .....</b>	<b>. 3</b>
<b>Records Centers .....</b>	<b>. 3</b>
<b>Establishing Archives .....</b>	<b>. 4</b>

# Proper Storage Conditions

Reference Number: CTAS-204

Like everything else on this planet, records need to be surrounded by the proper environment in order to survive. Most of the time, the records your office uses on a regular basis are kept in the same area that people work. This is good, because generally, the conditions that are comfortable for humans are also acceptable for storage of records of most formats.

Unless conditions are very severe, temperature and humidity are not factors affecting records scheduled for destruction in a few years. ... Wide fluctuation in temperature and high humidity can result in severe damage to these records. Ideally, the temperature range should be 65 to 75 degrees, and the humidity should be kept at 45 to 55 percent.<sup>[1]</sup>

These conditions, at least the temperature ranges, are similar to those in the typical office environment. Unfortunately, the records we use most regularly and keep close around us in our offices are often those that we only need temporarily. Concerns about storage conditions become more important the longer you plan to keep a record. The problem is, those long-term or permanent retention records that need better care are often the ones we access less often, so they get moved out of the way into conditions that are less hospitable.

City halls and county courthouses, with their attics and basements, were never designed to accommodate this ever-increasing volume of semi-active and inactive records. This records growth, plus inadequate records programs, has resulted in the misuse of existing office and storage areas and the use of unimproved warehouses, jail cells, fire stations, abandoned school buildings, and hospital rooms as inactive records storage sites, including storage of records of archival value. The undesirable features of these kinds of storage facilities and inadequate programs become apparent once it is necessary to obtain information from records in storage. It takes only a few unsuccessful attempts to locate records in poorly maintained areas to discourage further use. Time, neglect, and lack of maintenance will take their toll on records stored there.<sup>[2]</sup>

For these reasons, counties should consider setting up facilities specifically designed for storing records on a long term basis. Rather than using basements, attics, or whatever space is available, the county may want to establish a records center for its inactive temporary records and an archives for its permanent value records.

---

<sup>[1]</sup> *A Guide for the Selection and Development of Local Government Records Storage Facilities*, compiled by A.K. Johnson, Jr., CRM, issued by the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators (2<sup>nd</sup> printing, 1991), p. 9.

<sup>[2]</sup> *A Guide for the Selection and Development of Local Government Records Storage Facilities*, p. 2.

## Records Centers

Reference Number: CTAS-1210

A records center is essentially a centralized area for storing records. It is a place where all county officials can send their inactive records as an alternative to keeping them in their own offices where they take up valuable space and get in the way of operations. By default, the basement or bell tower of the courthouse may have become an ersatz records center, but the county should consider investing in a true one. A well-run records center can result in significant savings of both time and money while it protects and preserves records. "The effectiveness of a records center is based upon (a) its use of low-cost equipment which makes maximum use of space, (b) its ability to provide an orderly arrangement and control of records, and (c) its ability to employ procedures which assure prompt and efficient handling of records."<sup>[1]</sup> Setting up a records center may sound like a project that only large counties might try to tackle. But small- and medium-sized governments can also benefit from saving money. One federal government study on cost avoidance estimated that "...for every cubic foot of records stored in a records center, there is a savings of \$16.08."<sup>[2]</sup> When you consider the reams and reams of records in local government offices, including the school system and the court system, the savings can add up quickly.

A records center does not have to be a separate building. "A small government can usually convert an existing room quite easily since less space is required. There are many cities, towns, or counties that need no more than 1,000 cubic feet of records storage space. A records center of that capacity can be placed in

a room about the size of a two-car garage.”<sup>[3]</sup> If your county likes the idea but still thinks it does not have a great enough need to justify the expense of a records center, consider doing something radical—co-operate with other local governments. If the county, the school system, and all the municipalities within a county worked together through an inter-local agreement to establish a records center, costs would be spread among them and enough inactive records should be found to justify establishing the records center.

The Rome/Floyd County Records Program (population 81,250) is an excellent example of a cooperative venture supported by four Georgia local governments. This innovative records management program serves Floyd County, the city of Rome, and two school districts (Rome city schools and Floyd County schools). Each government partially funds the program. Service features included a records center with a capacity for 18,000 cubic feet (providing for records transfer, reference, selected microfilming, and records disposal) and technical assistance (a records management officer) on the proper management of records. These four local governments by combining resources to create a professional program which none could individually afford achieve most of their essential records management goals. All records placed in the records center still remain the property of the respective originating governments, however. The program has received the National Association of Counties achievement award, and it saved more than \$68,000 for the four local governments in 1990.<sup>[4]</sup>

If your county wants more information about starting a records center, including exactly what sort of space, equipment and organizational procedures are recommended for operating the center, contact the Archives Development Program at the Tennessee State Library and Archives or consult a publication entitled *A Guide for the Selection and Development of Local Government Records Storage Facilities*, published by the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators. While concerns regarding improper storage conditions are magnified the longer a record is kept and are therefore more crucial in an archive than a temporary records storage center, environmental concerns should not be ignored for records centers. These recommendations are a useful resource for considering both the creation of a records center facility and evaluating any current storage space you are using for records. The idea of setting up a records center is closely connected to setting up a local archives. Many of the same concerns apply to both, but they serve different functions and tend to be frequented by different groups. A comprehensive records management program will benefit from planning that considers and incorporates both concepts.

- 
2. <sup>[1]</sup> *A Guide for the Selection and Development of Local Government Records Storage Facilities*, p. 4.
4. <sup>[2]</sup> *A Guide for the Selection and Development of Local Government Records Storage Facilities*, p. 11.
11. <sup>[3]</sup> *A Guide for the Selection and Development of Local Government Records Storage Facilities*, p. 11.
- <sup>[4]</sup> *Managing Records on Limited Resources—A Guide for Local Governments*, Stephen E. Haller, CRM, issued by the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators, November 11, 1991, p. 10.

## Establishing Archives

Reference Number: CTAS-1211

In addition to, or in conjunction with setting up a records center, your county should consider establishing a county archives if one is not already in existence. An archives differs from a records center in that the records center generally keeps inactive records for a temporary time period before their final disposition. A records center will primarily be used by the officials and employees who created the records that are stored in the center as some need requires them to retrieve older inactive records. An archives is usually dedicated to preserving records of such historical value that they should be maintained permanently. The two may be located in the same facility and virtually indistinguishable to the public, or they may be separately located and operated facilities. An archives provides many of the same benefits as a records center, namely, removing records that are not regularly used by an office from expensive and cluttered office space and providing proper storage conditions for the records. An archives also serves an important role in preserving the history of our country and our communities and provides a valuable resource for members of the community researching our past. More likely, these private researchers will access the records of a county archives more often than county employees. By providing another location for this

research, the archives indirectly helps county officials by allowing them to refer genealogists, students, and other researchers to another office rather than diverting time and effort from their daily tasks to assist those people in accessing the older, historical records of the county.

### Sample Resolution to Establish a County Archives

#### Specifications

Since the primary purpose of the archives is to preserve records permanently, the environmental conditions for the archives are even more important than those for a record center. The following considerations for archival space are recommended by the Tennessee State Library and Archives.<sup>[1]</sup>

#### *Archives Storage and Management Space*

Archival standards should be met so as to preserve local archives for future use. The closer local archives come to meeting these standards, the more likely it is that the records will survive.<sup>[2]</sup>

- Distinctly exclusive space—An entirely separate building is desirable, but not essential, and some counties may not be able to afford it. In an existing building, a separate, exclusive space that can be secured from unauthorized entry and that meets the following general specifications is the minimal requirement to assure proper maintenance. The space should not be combined or confused with any other use.<sup>[3]</sup>
- A strong, durable building that is earthquake-resistant and storm-resistant—Heavy (e.g. masonry and steel) construction is desirable, not only to resist storm and earthquake damage, but also to help meet the other standards, below with greater economy of operating costs.
- Secure against theft and other hostile intrusion—A safe and secure locking system for the space is highly desirable. Entry to and exit from the space should be controlled by official staff so that patrons are not free to come and go without surveillance, so as to assure that documents will not be stolen or removed inadvertently without proper authorization.
- As damp-proof as possible with a consistently moderate relative humidity—The best relative humidity for archival materials is a constant RH of 45–55 percent; excessive ranges and changes in humidity tend to speed up deterioration of archives materials. Leaky roofs, walls, and foundations that invite seepage and mold are natural enemies of archives. The site of the archives space should be chosen to protect it from flooding, either from nearby rivers or from excessive ground-water during heavy rains. Care should be taken to see that water pipe systems that serve the space are sound and leak-free.
- Consistently moderate temperature—The best temperature for archival materials is a constant temperature between 65 and 70 degrees Fahrenheit. Excessive ranges and swings of temperature tend to speed up deterioration of archival materials.<sup>[4]</sup>
- Free of pollutants—As much as possible, air circulation systems should be filtered to remove contaminating acids, dust, and other air-borne dangers to archives materials.
- Free of biological pests—As much as possible, the archives should be protected against and free from insects, rodents, mold, and other biological dangers to records.
- Free from ultra-violet light—As much as possible, sunlight and other sources of ultra-violet light, such as fluorescent tubes, that tend to damage film and paper documents must be excluded from the archives by shielding and filtration.<sup>[5]</sup>
- Fire-proof—To the greatest extent possible, construction materials should be of masonry, steel, and other fire-retardant or fire-resistant materials. Care should be taken to see that heating and electrical systems that serve the space are not likely to cause accidental fires.
- Protected by a reliably-tested fire suppressant system—The most commonly-advised system is a reliable water sprinkler system with proper drainage for the water to be eliminated readily. Desirable fire protection includes rapid response by local fire fighting teams and briefing and orientation of local fire departments by local government officials on the nature of the archives and the need to preserve the content materials.<sup>[6]</sup>
- Shelves and other containers should meet archival specifications—Shelving should be of strong, baked enamel steel construction.<sup>[7]</sup> Enough space should be left between shelves, for convenient access and to inhibit fire migration. Shelves should be deep enough so that there is no overhang of boxes. Oversize materials (such as engineering drawings) should be in oversize shelving or metal cabinets.
- Foldering and boxing of records—To the extent possible, records should be kept in acid-neutral

paperboard boxes and folders (available from archival suppliers). This often requires removing records from original folders and boxes to new ones and labeling the new containers.

- Disaster plan—A well-devised disaster plan for actions to take in case of fire, flood, water leakage, earthquake, theft, bomb-threats, or other dangers to archives should be written. There are good models of disaster plans already in existence. Local archives can acquire one of these and adapt it to local conditions.<sup>[8]</sup> Archives staff should be trained in its provisions and should know what to do in any emergency.

#### Technical Assistance

The Tennessee State Library and Archives is making an active effort to encourage the development of local and regional archives across the state. It is an excellent source of technical assistance and advice in developing an archives. The Tennessee State Library and Archives has produced a series of Tennessee Archives Management Advisories that provide a wealth of information on a number of topics.

---

[1] These recommendations are from the Tennessee Archives Management Advisory (TAMA) 99-004 Basic Archives Management Guidelines, p. 5.

[2] More detailed standards are available from the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

[3] In the past, some people have regarded archives as “dead” storage and put valuable records into rooms with old furniture, cleaning equipment, fuel stores, or into fire-trap attics and basements with dirt, vermin and the like. That kind of negligence endangers the very evidence that public interest needs to save and protect.

[4] There are stricter archival standards, with narrower ranges of tolerance for ideal conditions. Some materials may also require slightly optimum temperature and humidity. However, these present standards are tolerable for local archives that do not have the resources for highly-sophisticated environmental control systems.

[5] Incandescent lights do not produce strong ultra-violet rays, but fluorescent lamps do and they must be shielded with ultra-violet ray filters if they are used.

[6] Much damage has been done to records when local fire-fighters treat archives as they would any other storehouse of replaceable goods.

[7] Wood is flammable and it often gives off gasses and oils that may damage archives.

[8] The University Library of Tennessee Technological University in Cookeville has a well-developed disaster plan that may be used as a model. Other models are available from TSLA and CTAS.

---

**Source URL:** <https://www.ctas.tennessee.edu/eli/proper-storage-conditions>