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Records Disposition Authorizations (RDAs)

Dear Reader:

The following document was created from the CTAS website (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

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Your first question is probably “what is an RDA?” The acronym RDA stands for Records Disposition Authorization. An RDA provides a formal statement of when a record can be destroyed and what authority serves as the basis for its destruction. This document can, however, be much more. A comprehensive RDA becomes a plan for the entire life of a record series from creation to final disposition. Among other things, a comprehensive RDA should include—

- a basic description of a record series;
- information about how the record is created;
- how it is used;
- where it needs to be stored;
- what format it needs to be kept in;
- who should have access to the record;
- how long it is in active use by an office;
- when to move a record into inactive storage;
- whether a record is vital or confidential; and
- whether or not the record can be destroyed.

RDAs and the retention schedules differ in a number of ways. The retention schedules describe the various records of an office, state if a record is permanent, identify the minimum amount of time a temporary record must be kept and state a legal authority or rationale for that retention period. They generally do not tell you where to keep a record, how long the record may be in active use, and when a record can be moved to inactive storage or an archive. Those determinations are office-specific based on the resources available to you and the operating procedures of your office. The retention schedules will provide you with the foundation for writing your RDAs; but you are encouraged to consider them only a starting point. If your office handles a large number of records and a lot of people deal with them, consider putting more than the minimum into your RDAs.

RDAs are fundamental to an efficiently operating records management program in any office with a large volume of records. RDAs allow an official to summarize on a single form what records are out-dated and eligible for disposal, and then use that form to request permission from the County Public Records Commission to destroy. Such authorizations may be *continuing*, i.e. ready to use whenever records of a particular type have reached the end of their life-cycle and may be destroyed or placed in an archive. Once created, the RDA would only need periodic review to ensure that the plan you laid out for a group of records still makes sense and complies with your needs and any applicable legal requirements. Each office should have a set of RDAs that covers all the records it creates as well as older ones it inherits. (See the sample RDA Form developed by the Tennessee State Library and Archives This form may be copied and used to submit RDA's to the records commission.)

The following general principles and considerations may be helpful in making decisions about how to manage your records. They are quoted verbatim from the Tennessee State Library and Archives Tennessee Archives Management Advisory entitled Appraisal and Disposition of Records.

- If a legislative mandate requires permanent or temporary retention of any record, set of records, or class of records, then the record(s) specified in the mandate must be kept at public expense for at least so long as the mandate requires.
- A record or set of records should be retained by an agency so long as it is useful to performance of its routine functions.
- A decision to retain records beyond such active usefulness or legislative mandate is a decision to maintain them in such condition that they can be examined readily by the public. Such a decision requires a commensurate commitment of resources to continuous care and custody for the entire term of retention.
- A decision for permanent retention is a decision for perpetual care.
- Records should not be kept beyond their useful life in the public interest.
- No record that is necessary to the public interest should be destroyed.
- Records that are retained beyond their active usefulness to the routine functions of an agency must be of sufficient public interest to justify the expense of keeping and administering them, and

the justification should be clearly stated, understood, and agreed to before accepting the responsibility and paying the cost to retain the record(s).

- The following kinds of records may all be appraised as having archival value for permanent retention:
 1. essential records that are needed to resume or continue operations or to recreate legal and financial status after disaster, or that are needed to protect or fulfill obligations;
 2. records that have lasting value as legal and fiscal evidence to account for responsible government; and
 3. records that are of such high evidential and historical value that they should be retained at public expense for the sake of a sound, reliable, and comprehensive understanding of the political, social, economic, and historical context of government and culture.

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