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Reasons for Records Management

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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Proper records management not only conveys organizational and managerial benefits to an office, but also—for local government offices—it is a vital task, necessary for fulfilling important legal requirements and duties. The following are just a few of the reasons your county should take records management seriously.

Space

In most counties, space is not the final frontier; it is the final battle. It is rare for a county office or courthouse to have all the space it needs. Most local officials would complain that the necessary records of the office are rapidly filling up all available space. Courthouses are bursting at the seams with old records stuffed into basements, storage closets, attics, and other creative locations. For this reason alone, it is important and cost effective for a county to implement a records management program.

Records Serve as a Legal Foundation

In a society of laws, local governments and the citizens they serve are both dependent upon good documentation to demonstrate their legal status. Court orders, marriage licenses, and the minutes of the county commission are just a few examples of important documents that create relationships, establish rights or liabilities, and authorize certain actions. When disputes arise over legal issues, it is important to have good documentation on which to rely. Local governments have an important responsibility to preserve these records. Proper records management will ensure these records are preserved and can be found when needed.

Open Records Requirements

Since government records are generally open to public inspection, the task of managing records becomes even more important and more complicated. The principle of allowing public access to government records, combined with so-called "sunshine laws," which require open meetings, is considered an important check on government and an important defense against corruption in public office and mismanagement of public resources. Unless there is a specific legal exemption that makes a record confidential, the public has the right to inspect and get a copy of the records of government agencies. So you must as a county official, not only preserve and keep records, you must also allow public access to these records for inspection. Unless your records are well organized and well protected, you may not be able to comply with public requests for information, undermining public confidence in government and hindering your office's relationship with the citizens it serves.

Historical Preservation of Documents

Counties play a vital role in preserving our nation's history. The documents and records of local governments give us insights into the lives of our ancestors and the circumstances of their times. Counties with too many records and too little space for the records end up putting them wherever they can. In many cases, these storage areas do not adequately protect the records from the elements. Heat, moisture, mildew, insects, and vermin can quickly render records useless. The county and its citizens may be losing important information as well as a part of their past and their heritage. With proper records management, the important records are preserved, the less essential records are destroyed when no longer useful so they do not take up all the available space, the records are catalogued and organized so officials and the public can access them, and records are stored under proper conditions to enable long-term preservation.

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