

Avoiding Disaster: Emergency Preparedness

How to Prepare, Respond, and Recover from Disasters



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This guide was produced by
the Rhode Island Department of State



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Overview of the State Archives and Public Records Administration

The State Archives and Public Records Administration oversees records management functions for all state and municipal agencies. This includes records management advice, assistance, and consultation. Records management is a comprehensive task encompassing all records, regardless of format or media.

This guide is intended to serve as a resource providing information on how to prepare, respond, and recover from a disaster when the unexpected happens, and what the requirements of lawful records destruction are for when records are beyond salvaging.

Things to Know

What is a public record?

Public records include all documents, papers, letters, maps, books, digital or other media, and other materials, regardless of physical form or format, that were made or received in connection with the transaction of official business by any state agency.

What is emergency preparedness?

It is critical for all agencies to proactively prepare in the event of an emergency to mitigate damage to records. Sudden or unexpected events always have the potential for disaster, but a well-planned response reduces the level of damage and potential loss.

Emergencies of any kind can be overwhelming, and by preparing in advance, it helps to reduce panic and facilitate a smooth recovery of records. While risk exposure can be reduced, it cannot be eliminated. Risks can be identified so that their impact can be mitigated if agencies are prepared to be able to respond efficiently and effectively.

What is considered a disaster?

Any event that has the potential to damage records can be considered a disaster, including but not limited to fire, severe storms, hurricanes, tornados, utility failure, flood, hazardous material accidents, civil disorder/demonstrations, terrorism, bomb threats, explosions, major transportation accidents, and/or earthquakes.

What is a Disaster Plan?

Similar to a [Continuity of Operations Plan \(COOP\)](#), a Disaster Plan is a living document created to prepare for an emergency in advance that describes how to prepare for, prevent, mitigate, respond to, remediate, and recover from a disaster in order to prevent

an agency's essential functions from being significantly impacted to keep continuity of operations.

After this document is developed, it is approved by the head of an agency. It is imperative that **all** agency employees are not only aware of the plan but are familiar with it in the event of a disaster to be able to quickly respond in an emergency situation.

Can public records be destroyed in the event of a disaster?

Yes, if records are damaged beyond repair and by following a specific procedure.

Proper documentation is essential for transparency and safety.

*Public records **cannot be destroyed** in any way without the consent of the Public Records Administration program of the Secretary of State.*

What rules govern destruction of public records?

The act of disposing of public records is outlined in three (3) sections of the Rhode Island General Laws, "Disposal of records" ([§ 38-1-10](#)), "Public records custody and disposal" ([§ 38-3-6](#)), and "Determination of value" ([§ 42-8.1-10](#)).

How can public records be disposed of?

A list of all records to be disposed of, together with a statement certifying compliance with the law, the Certification of Records Destruction, signed by the agency head and State Archivist, shall be completed, and approved before being filed and permanently preserved in the office from which the records were created or received.

What would make public records ineligible for being disposed of after a disaster?

If the record(s) is able to be saved from damage or is able to be recovered.

When do I contact the State Archives and Public Records Administration?

Contact the State Archives and Public Records Administration as soon as the agency has identified records are at risk or are compromised.

Additional Considerations

Can all public records be disposed of in the same way?

No. There is also a Rhode Island General Law entitled "[Safe Destruction of Documents Containing Personal Information](#)" which went into effect in 2009.

This law outlines safe destruction of certain types of documents.

Please see excerpts below:

§ 6-52-1. Definitions.

(1) "Business" means a sole proprietorship, partnership, corporation, association, limited liability company, or other group, however organized and whether or not organized to operate at a profit, including a financial institution organized, chartered, or holding a license or authorization certificate under the laws of this state or any other state, or the parent, affiliate, or subsidiary of a financial institution. This term includes any entity that destroys records, including, but not limited to, the state, a state agency, or any political subdivision of the state.

(3) "Personal information" means the following information that identifies, relates to, describes, or is capable of being associated with a particular individual: his or her signature; social security number; physical characteristics or description; passport number; driver's license or state identification card number; insurance policy number; bank account number; credit card number; debit card number; any other financial information or confidential health care information, including all information relating to a patient's health care history; diagnosis condition; treatment; or evaluation obtained from a health care provider who has treated the patient which explicitly or by implication identifies a particular patient.

§ 6-52-2. Safe destruction of documents.

A business shall take reasonable steps to destroy or arrange for the destruction of a customer's personal information within its custody and control that is no longer to be retained by the business by shredding, erasing, or otherwise destroying and/or modifying the personal information in those records to make it unreadable or indecipherable through any means for the purpose of:

Preparing for Disasters

Disaster Planning Best Practices

Creating a Disaster Plan

A formal Disaster Plan will not prevent an emergency but can reduce the likelihood that emergencies become disasters by establishing and following effective emergency

management practices. A plan that is readily available to staff is indispensable as that will help them to prepare for and respond to disasters as they occur.

To create a Disaster Plan for your agency that can be used in the event of any type of disaster, collect all critical and necessary information that is pertinent to your agency including (*at minimum*) the following:

- A list of where records are located and what they are;
- Who will be part of the response team and what their duties are;
- An evacuation plan; and
- What your agency's salvage priorities are.

A consolidated plan with key contact information is good to have more readily available that includes the essential information needed by staff in the event of a disaster or emergency. Every person on the Response Team should have a copy of this with them at all times. An example of this is the Pocket Response Plan™ (PReP™), created by the Council of State Archivists, which has made [templates available online](#) for government agency's use.

For additional assistance, the Public Records Administration has created an easy-to-use **Disaster Plan Template** for agency's use to get started which is [available online](#).



Disaster Plans should be reviewed and updated annually.

Agency Employee Awareness

The Disaster Plan cannot anticipate every type of disaster, but knowledge of the procedures will help in the preservation and recovery of important government records.

- The Disaster Plan should be distributed to all agency staff members and department leadership upon completion and annual updates.
- All staff members should read the Disaster Plan and become familiar with the emergency procedures described.

Proactive Prevention

Taking Action

By assessing risks, engaging in preventive building maintenance, and maintaining information about building systems, you can prevent disasters that might damage records and protect records from any disasters that do occur. The following are basic steps that can be taken:

- Select a storage space least vulnerable to fire, flood, and harsh weather where records can be stored at least six (6) inches off the ground.
- Create a disaster kit in case staff members must remain in the building during a disaster event (i.e., flashlights, radio with weather band, batteries, food and water, first aid, etc.).
- Check for hazards near and around the building (i.e., dead or rotting trees that could fall during high winds).
- Ensure the building roof can sustain the weight of heavy snow accumulation.
- If flooding occurs frequently in your area, purchase flood insurance and stockpile supplies for protecting your building.
- Establish security routines and alert all staff members to what they are.
- Ensure all staff members are aware of evacuation routes with alternatives in case the primary route is blocked.

Responding to Disasters

Immediate Response

As soon a disaster occurs, it is most important to ensure employee safety. Remember, ***human safety is always the highest priority***. After all staff members are safe, the Response Team should initiate their first steps of the predetermined Disaster Plan.

A quick and efficient response is a must, as damage to records can occur quickly. For example, mold can grow on records within 48 hours of a disaster.

Evaluation

Before any remediation steps can be taken, the response team needs to quickly, but effectively, evaluate the condition of records impacted by the disaster. This includes:

- Removing unaffected records immediately from the impacted areas;
- Determining what kind of damage and the extent of the impacted records; and
- Securing qualified vendors to identify if there is a biohazard or other human risk.

Remediation

After a damage assessment is completed, immediate remediation steps should be taken to stabilize compromised records, which may include the following depending on the type of damage:

Water Damage

- If wet materials cannot be dried within 48-72 hours, they should be frozen to prevent the development of mold, particularly if there is high humidity. This will stabilize the records and prevent further damage. Most paper records can be frozen, and if necessary photographic materials can as well, though it is better to dry photographs immediately. *Cased photographs (i.e., daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, tintypes, etc.) should never be frozen.*
- Records should be placed in the freezer as soon as possible after becoming wet with temperatures below -10 degrees Fahrenheit to reduce distortion and facilitate drying. This method could take several weeks to several months, depending on the temperature of the freezer and the extent of the damage.
- Air-drying is best used for small numbers of damp records. This requires no special equipment, but it is very labor-intensive, requires a lot of space, and often results in bindings or paper that can become distorted. It is best to contact a conservator or preservation professional about drying unique or rare materials.
- Air-drying must be done in a clean, dry environment with low temperatures and humidity. At a minimum, the temperature must be below 70 degrees Fahrenheit and humidity must be below 50%. It is best to keep air moving enough to discourage mold growth but not so much as to blow away loose records, such as pointing fans at the ceiling.
- Other methods of drying include vacuum freeze-drying, vacuum thermal drying, and on-site dehumidification.

Fire Damage

- Damage may include charring, smoke or soot deposits, and/or smoke odor.
- If charred but still readable, records can be microfilmed or photocopied if they are of value, but great care must be exercised because the paper may be extremely brittle.
- For residual smoke odor, contact a professional company that specializes in deodorization. Treatment in an ozone chamber will reduce odor, but ozone is a powerful oxidizing agent that accelerates the aging of paper, so it should not be used on archival, permanent, or other intrinsically valuable materials.

For additional information on remediation steps that can be taken based on the type of damage to the records, see the [National Archives and Records Administration's Recovery Procedures](#), and the [Northeast Document Conservation Center's Emergency Management Resources](#).



If records are compromised and beyond salvage, the agency must contact the Public Records Administration immediately to initiate the emergency destruction process as part of the response and recovery processes.

Emergency Destruction of Records

Policies

The State Archives aids agencies regarding public records to “protect and preserve them from deterioration, mutilation, loss, or destruction and, whenever advisable, shall cause them to be properly repaired and restored” (R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-8.1-8).

For records that “have been compromised, rendered illegible, reasonably evidence as posing a public health hazard or otherwise unusable due to catastrophe, natural disaster or other event” (§ 100-RICR-50-00-1.8(C)), agencies may submit for emergency destruction of records which have been damaged beyond repair.

- Records considered for emergency destruction must present, or demonstrate potential to become, a hazard to public health, safety, or property, or the information must be substantially destroyed.
- Records which meet these criteria may be eligible for destruction prior to the expiration of the approved retention through the following means.

Requirements

Prior to the destruction of records, agencies must immediately notify the Public Records Administration of any situation that might require the use of a Certification of Emergency Records Destruction and provide the following as a written request to the State Archivist and Public Records Administrator:

1. Justification for requested destruction of the damaged records, detailing the conditions that make emergency destruction necessary, including:
 - a. Details about the nature of the disaster, events, and activities that contributed to the hazardous condition of the records;
 - b. Details of the precautionary action taken to prevent damage to the records prior to the disaster or catastrophe;
 - c. The specific impact the disaster or events had on the records; and
 - d. A qualified vendor's signed statement of a known/potential hazard or peril;
2. What records were affected and the subject of the request for emergency destruction, including record types, date spans, associated record series numbers, titles, and retention requirements;
3. A completed and signed Certification of Emergency Records Destruction to accompany the request and notification;
4. Documentation regarding alternate copies, electronic or physical, of the damaged records; and
5. Photographs to document the extent of the damaged or hazardous records and conditions.

Only after the following has been completed can emergency destruction take place:

- The Public Records Administration and State Archivist have assessed the situation;
- It has been determined that the records are unsalvageable;
- The head of the agency or their designee and the State Archivist and Public Records Administrator have signed the Certification of Emergency Records Destruction form; and
- The countersigned form has been returned to the agency.



Records may only be destroyed by a *qualified vendor* after the agency has received the countersigned form.

Completing the Certification of Emergency Records Destruction

The Certification of Emergency Records Destruction form documents all records your agency is ready to destroy by record series name, description, date, volume, and when the records met, or would have met, retention.

The following information must be included on the form in addition to the signature by the agency head or their designee at the bottom:

1. **Department** – enter the name of the state or local government agency.
2. **Division** – enter the name of the sub-unit of any department, if applicable.
3. **Date** – enter the date you are *submitting* the form. **Do not enter the date the records were created in this field.**
4. **Record Series Number** – enter the exact record series number, as listed on the records retention schedule. Some record series also have a sub-series designation, which may be a letter. Any sub-series designation must also be included on the form.
5. **Record Series Title** – enter the exact record series title, as listed on the records retention schedule.
6. **Dates From/To** – enter the earliest and latest dates covered by the records proposed for destruction. In most cases, just the year will suffice. For more information on calculating retention, see section 1.9.1 in the [Public Records Administration State Agency Manual](#).
7. **Volume** – enter the number of records to be destroyed. Volume is most easily measured by the number of inches or linear feet of records, although cubic foot

State of Rhode Island
Rhode Island State Archives & Public Records Administration
CERTIFICATION OF EMERGENCY RECORDS DESTRUCTION
These records have been identified as a hazard to human life and property, cannot be used or repaired, and with the approval of State Archives & Public Records Administration are therefore eligible for emergency destruction pursuant to R.I. Gen. Laws § 38-3-6(h)(2).

Department: Date:
Division/Unit: Disaster/Catastrophe:

Record Series Number	Record Series Title	Dates From/To	Volume	Dates Met Retention
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Documentation of remediation efforts, reports of identified records as unsalvageable, and all submitted paperwork to the Public Records Administration shall be maintained with this Certificate.

Please sign this certificate and return to the Rhode Island State Archives and Public Records Administration.
If faxing, please provide a return fax number.

☐ I certify that I have reviewed the above listed records and authorize their destruction.

Department Head or Records Custodian: Signature: Date:

Print Name & Title:

State Archivist & Public Records Administrator: Date:

Signed and executed Certificate is a permanent record (R.I. General Laws § 42-81-10)

Form RI/PRA ECRD (Rev. 09/2022) Form may be reproduced.

measurements give a more accurate figure. The number of boxes or folders is also acceptable.

8. **Dates Met Retention** – enter the date that the records would have, or already have, originally met retention if not for the disaster.

For a blank Certification of Emergency Records Destruction form, contact the Public Records Administration by emailing records@sos.ri.gov.

Recovering from Disasters

Rehabilitation

After records have been remediated and salvaged, rehabilitation, or the process of returning records to a usable state, must occur until all active threats are eliminated and the records have been stabilized. This final stage is focused on bringing agency operations back to normal by:

- Addressing immediate record needs (i.e., drying or freezing);
- Addressing longer-term conservation needs;
- Establishing new locations for records post-disaster;
- Completing facility and equipment damage/condition assessment;
- Addressing repair/replacement needs (i.e., walls, carpeting, furniture, etc.); and
- Returning treated records to storage.

Depending on the nature and extent of the disaster, the rehabilitation process may be relatively quick and easy, or it may take a great deal of time and money.

If there is a large amount of work to be done, it may be necessary to hire professionals or hire and train additional personnel to handle the work.

Agency Rehabilitation

When the time comes, agencies need to ask themselves the following questions before creating a plan to rehabilitate records:

1. What specific steps are needed for each rehabilitation activity?
2. Who will carry them out and who will supervise the work?

3. Where will the work be done?
4. Will temporary storage space be needed?
5. What funds will be available (i.e., from operating budgets, from insurance, etc.)?
6. How should rehabilitation priorities be set to allow for quick resumption of essential services the agency provides?
7. How much of the work can be done by staff and how much needs to be contracted to professionals?

For additional rehabilitation steps based on specific record types, see the [National Archives and Records Administration's Recovery Procedures](#), and the Northeast Document Conservation Center's [Emergency Management Resources](#) and [Disaster Response and Recovery Resources](#).

Qualified Vendor Rehabilitation

It is critical to have a list of qualified vendors who specialize in a variety of rehabilitation services on hand before a disaster strikes. This information should be included in every agency's Disaster Plan.

For a list of qualified vendors based on type of damage, see the [National Archives and Records Administration's recommendations](#).

Going Forward

What Other Preservation Actions Are Possible?

- **Timely Disposition:**
Destroy records that have met their retention period per their corresponding records retention schedule; or
- **Preserve:**
Transfer permanent state records deemed appropriate for long term preservation to the State Archives.

By staying organized and taking proactive steps, you may prevent the potential that a disaster could complicate proper identification of records and disposition after records have been damaged.

Helpful Resources

- **Public Records Administration Promulgated Regulation:**
<https://rules.sos.ri.gov/Regulations/Part/100-50-00-1>
- **Approved Records Retention Schedules:**
https://sosri.access.preservica.com/uncategorized/SO_055847f5-a7d7-4cd3-86af-509cfbfe8d68/
- **National Association for Information Destruction:**
<https://naidonline.org/certifications/>
- **Disaster Preparedness, Prevention and Response:**
<https://ri.dplan.org/>
<https://olis.ri.gov/manage/preservation/index.php>