

MEMORANDUM TO:            DISTRIBUTION

FROM:                        SUSAN L. FREY,  
                                     DEPARTMENTAL RECORDS OFFICER

SUBJECT:                    RM 01-31, VITAL RECORDS PROGRAM

This memorandum is to remind Records Managers of the requirement to establish and maintain a vital records program. The Federal vital records program is part of overall efforts intended to ensure continuity of Government during national emergencies. Currently, Executive Order 12656 defines agency responsibilities and information on vital records requirements can be found in 36 CFR 1236, Vital Records During an Emergency.

A vital records program includes two basic categories: emergency operating and rights and interests records. Emergency operating records are those records vital to the essential functioning of the Department for the duration of an emergency and for reconstitution after an emergency. These records include those necessary for military effort; the mobilization and protection of material and manpower resources, of services and systems; the maintenance of public health, safety and order; and the conduct of essential civil defense activities. These records must be available as needed at or in the vicinity of emergency operating centers. Rights and interests records are those essential to the preservation of the legal and financial rights and interests of the Federal Government and individual citizens directly affected by its activities. These may include such groups as personnel records, retirement records, payroll records, insurance records, valuable research records, contracts, leases, and system documentation. These records require protection, but storage points do not have to be at or in the vicinity of emergency operating centers.

Vital records considerations are part of the Department's disaster prevention and recovery program. Records Managers should work with officials responsible for emergency coordination at their site to identify and maintain vital records. Be aware that during an emergency those who will use records may not be the same individuals who refer to them under normal conditions. Keep the volume of vital records at a manageable level, as only the most critical records should be designated. Remember to include essential electronic information systems as well as paper records. Vital records should be properly managed throughout their life. Identify, inventory, provide protection through off-site storage, and review and update the records on an annual basis.

For further information, refer to **Vital Records and Records Disaster Mitigation and Recovery** (1996), a handbook available on the National Archives and Records Administration website. <http://nara.gov.records/pubs/vital/htm>. The handbook includes specific guidance, a sample disaster recovery plan, a listing of potential vital records and a self-evaluation guide.

cc:  
Chief Information Officers, Lead Program Secretarial Offices