



# MANAGING STATE RECORDS IN ALABAMA



*Alabama* DEPARTMENT OF  
ARCHIVES & HISTORY

*2024 Edition*



The Alabama Department of Archives and History (ADAH) is the state's government-records repository, a special-collections library and research facility, and home to the Museum of Alabama, the state history museum. It is located in downtown Montgomery, directly across the street from the State Capitol.

One of the ADAH's central missions is to aid state and local governments in the management of their records. ADAH staff in the Records Management Section work with state and local agencies to organize, manage, and preserve their records for long-term access. This work is vital to the maintenance of accountability and transparency by government on behalf of current Alabamians and future generations.

This booklet provides state government officials with an introduction to their records obligations and responsibilities.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Alabama Records Law .....	4
The State Records Commission.....	5
The Records Disposition Authority.....	6
Records Responsibilities .....	7
State Agency Records Destruction .....	8
Transmittal of Permanent Paper & Electronic Records ..	11
Access to State Agencies' Records at the ADAH .....	12
Annual RDA Implementation Report .....	14
State Records Center .....	14
RDA Creation & Revision .....	16
Paper Records Preservation .....	18
Electronic Records Maintenance .....	19
Training .....	23
Glossary .....	24
Stay Informed .....	27
Contact the Records Management Section .....	27

# ALABAMA RECORDS LAW

Anyone elected, appointed, or hired to work at any level of state or local government, as well as anyone paid in whole or in part by state, county, or municipal funds, creates public records (Code of Alabama 1975 § 36-12-1 through 36-12-2).

Because these records are created in part or in whole with taxpayer money, government entities have a responsibility to be good stewards of public records.

**Public records** include “all written, typed, or printed books, papers, letters, documents, and maps made or received... in the transactions of public business” (Code of Alabama 1975 § 41-13-1).

As provided in the Uniform Electronic Transactions Act, public records may exist in many formats, including as electronic records (Code of Alabama 1975 § 8-1A-12).

Public records connect citizens and communities to the government that serves them, fostering accountability and good stewardship.

While all government records are public records, not all public records are **open records**. Various federal and state statutes restrict access to some government records.







# THE STATE RECORDS COMMISSION

***No state officer or agency head shall cause any state record to be destroyed or otherwise disposed of without first obtaining approval of the State Records Commission (SRC).***

***- Code of Alabama 1975 § 41-13-21***

Authorized by state law in 1955, the SRC has several duties, including conducting public records surveys, classifying all public records, and determining which public records should be permanently preserved because of historical value and which may be destroyed after a specified period. The ADAH Records Management Section serves as support staff for the SRC and assists state officials with records management and preservation.

The SRC consists of nine members, six of whom serve ex officio. The ex officio members include the Director of the Department of Archives and History, who serves as the SRC Chair; the Chief Examiner of the Department of Examiners of Public Accounts; the Attorney General; the Secretary of State; the Commissioner of the Department of Revenue; and the Director of the Department of Finance.



The remaining three members are appointed from postsecondary institutions and include appointees from the University of Alabama and Auburn University and a Governor’s appointee from one of Alabama’s historically black colleges and universities.

The SRC meets twice per year to review the records management activities of state government, vote on the adoption of new or revised **Records Disposition Authorities (RDAs)**, and consider records management policies for Alabama government. In promulgating RDAs, the Commission provides the guidance and authority necessary to undertake records destruction and preservation activities in Alabama.

## RECORDS DISPOSITION AUTHORITY

The Records Disposition Authority (RDA) is a document that establishes **disposition** requirements by designating records as either temporary records, which may be destroyed after a specified **retention** period, or permanent records, which must be preserved in perpetuity. The RDA identifies state agency records that must be maintained permanently and provides legal authority to destroy temporary records.

All state agencies are required to have an approved RDA. The SRC has approved more than 175 state agency RDAs, which may be found on the “Manage Records” section of the ADAH website ([www.archives.alabama.gov](http://www.archives.alabama.gov)). The Records Management Section works with six to eight agencies annually, creating or revising agency RDAs.

RDA's indicate when temporary records are eligible for destruction, but agencies may opt to retain records for longer than the timeframe specified in the RDA. Reasons for delayed destruction of temporary records could include litigation, ongoing reference value, or the batching of destruction for cost efficiency.



## RECORDS RESPONSIBILITIES

State agencies have core responsibilities for implementing the RDA:

- Maintaining documentation about the destruction of eligible agency records in accordance with the agency's approved RDA
- Preserving and transmitting to the ADAH those agency records designated in the agency's approved RDA as permanent
- Completing the Annual RDA Implementation Report

In addition to these three responsibilities, every state agency should designate a **records liaison**. This individual coordinates with the ADAH on records management responsibilities and promotes compliance with records management law within the agency.

Records training and guidance are available from the ADAH's Records Management Section.

## STATE AGENCY RECORDS DESTRUCTION

### When may I destroy records?

State agencies may destroy temporary records once the records have satisfied the agency RDA's minimum retention requirements. The agency must also ensure that no litigation hold, audit, or other special circumstance prevents the destruction of otherwise eligible temporary records. Agency staff may not legally destroy records not represented in the RDA.

### How do I request permission to destroy records?

State agencies are not required to receive preapproval from the ADAH to destroy temporary records. An approved RDA constitutes your legal authorization to dispose of eligible records. However, state agencies must document destruction and submit this documentation with the Annual RDA Implementation Report.

State agencies may set internal policies about who is authorized to approve destruction and how records destruction should be conducted. Contact your records liaison to determine your agency's policies.





## How do I document the destruction of temporary records?

Records liaisons are responsible for maintaining agency **destruction documentation**. A template State Government Records Destruction Notice is available in the “Manage Records” section of the ADAH website ([www.archives.alabama.gov](http://www.archives.alabama.gov)). The form includes all mandatory fields of information; however, state agencies may create their own forms if they wish. The form must include the following information:

- Name of state agency and department/program unit
- **Record series** title as shown on RDA
- Retention as shown on RDA
- Inclusive dates
- Date that the records were **audited**, if applicable
- Format (e.g., paper, electronic, microfiche)
- **Volume**
  - Total cubic feet for paper records
  - Total bytes for electronic records
- Destruction method
- Printed name, title, and signature of authorizing official
- Date signed

## How should temporary records be destroyed?

The destruction of obsolete temporary records should be *irreversible*. Sensitive paper records should be incinerated, shredded, or otherwise destroyed so that the records are unreadable.

Sensitive records may include:

- (1) Personally identifiable information, or PII** (e.g., Social Security numbers and driver's license numbers)
- (2) Consumer information** (e.g., credit card numbers and bank account numbers)
- (3) Restricted information** (e.g., student records and medical records)

To destroy sensitive electronic records, consider options such as overwriting, degaussing for magnetic media, or physically destroying storage media. For non-sensitive electronic records, deletion may suffice. Coordinate with your office's IT staff to determine best practices.

# TRANSMITTAL OF PERMANENT PAPER AND ELECTRONIC RECORDS

The ADAH serves as the official repository for state agency permanent records. Transferring permanent records to the ADAH will ensure that these records are preserved and help provide access to agency employees and researchers for decades to come.

Most permanent records listed in an agency's RDA are eligible to be transferred to the ADAH for preservation. When an agency is no longer actively referencing permanent paper records, they should be transmitted to the ADAH. Permanent electronic records can be transmitted at any time.

State agencies initiate the permanent records transmittal process by contacting the ADAH Records Management Section. Records Management archivists will work with agency staff to transfer records and are available to answer questions during the process.

Agencies must arrange records systematically (by date, alphabetical, numerical, etc.) and draft a transmittal form. The transmittal form details which records are being transferred from an agency to the ADAH. It documents the end of the agency's responsibility for preserving the records and makes them easier to access in future searches.



# ACCESS TO STATE AGENCIES' RECORDS AT THE ADAH

## **What happens to permanent records after they are transmitted to the Archives?**

When a state agency transfers permanent records to the ADAH, trained archival staff assume responsibility for preserving the records in secure and environmentally stable storage areas in perpetuity. Once transmitted, the records will not leave the custody of the ADAH.

## **Who can access permanent records at the Archives?**

State agencies and the general public can access most permanent records in the ADAH's collections.

## **Which permanent records cannot be accessed at the Archives?**

The majority of permanent records are open to public inspection; however, records may be closed for differing lengths of time for various reasons, such as legal requirements, security concerns, and the presence of personally identifiable information (PII). These restrictions may exist for both paper and electronic records.

## **How do I access my state agency's permanent paper records that have been transferred to the Archives?**

While you cannot remove items from the Archives, permanent paper records are available for review and copying in the Research Room during business hours. State agency staff may submit a request to the ADAH Reference Section about receiving copies or scans of needed records if they cannot come in person.







### **How do I access my state agency's permanent electronic records?**

Many permanent electronic records are available in our Electronic Records Collections on the ADAH website. Please note that processing is required before electronic records can be made available online, so transmitted material will not appear online immediately. If you have questions about permanent electronic records transmittal and access, contact the ADAH Records Management Section.

### **Does the ADAH store state agency temporary records?**

The ADAH operates a **State Records Center**, a separate facility that provides secure storage and retrieval services to state agencies for temporary records. See the State Records Center section of this booklet for additional information.



# ANNUAL RDA IMPLEMENTATION REPORT

By January 15th of every year, each state agency, district attorney's office, public college, and public university in Alabama is legally required to submit an Annual RDA Implementation Report for the previous fiscal year to the ADAH. The Annual RDA Implementation Report form is available on the ADAH's "Manage Records" webpage and emailed to records liaisons in October.

As part of the Annual RDA Implementation Report, agencies must submit documentation of temporary records destruction. Besides reporting on records management activities, agencies are asked to transfer specific permanent electronic records, such as newsletters, annual reports, rosters, and meeting files. The ADAH Records Management Section analyzes and reports on agency compliance to the State Records Commission.

The Examiners of Public Accounts can cite agencies for noncompliance with Annual RDA Implementation Report requirements.

## STATE RECORDS CENTER

### **What is the State Records Center?**

In addition to accepting permanent historical records to facilitate research and tell the story of Alabama for generations to come, the ADAH operates a separate facility dedicated to providing storage and retrieval services for temporary paper records still in use by state agencies. The State Records Center has provided these services to state agencies since 1989.



## **Why would my agency store temporary records at the State Records Center?**

State agencies are required to maintain records for the designated timeframe specified in their RDA. However, space constraints can make this obligation difficult for some agencies to meet. The State Records Center offers a secure records storage alternative.

## **How much does it cost to store records at the State Records Center?**

The State Records Center charges a flat rate per box per month. State agencies receive quarterly invoices by mail and pay using STAARS, the Alabama state government accounting system. Agencies do not incur charges for records retrieval, delivery, or destruction.

## **How do I store records at the State Records Center?**

Once your state agency has identified the temporary records you want to transfer, contact the State Records Center at 334-277-9898 to begin the process. State Records Center staff will coordinate with you regarding logistics.

## **Who has access to documents at the State Records Center?**

The State Records Center is a secure facility solely accessible to archival staff. Only individuals preauthorized by a state agency can request access to documents held at the State Records Center. Access can be provided through regular deliveries in the Montgomery area.

## **What happens to records held at the State Records Center when their retention period expires?**

State Records Center staff will handle destruction on state agencies' behalf as the records become eligible based on their authorized retention schedules. Staff will never destroy records without first receiving written approval from the respective agency.

# RDA CREATION AND REVISION

## Why does my agency need an RDA?

The Examiners of Public Accounts require that state agencies have an approved RDA. Agencies that do not have an approved RDA may be cited. Additionally, state agencies may legally destroy records only if an RDA has been approved by the State Records Commission.

## What warrants an RDA revision?

Some existing state agency RDAs have not been revised since the early 2000s. Records and recordkeeping practices change over time as state agencies evolve. These changes may necessitate a revision of an agency's RDA. A state agency's RDA may need to be revised for any of the following reasons:

- The agency has experienced substantial changes in legislation that alter its record-keeping practices.
- The agency's scope of work has significantly changed.
- Federal or state record-keeping requirements have been updated.
- The agency is creating records not included in the currently approved RDA.

## What does not necessitate an RDA revision?

- Since the RDA was last approved, the agency has a new name or leadership.
- The agency has experienced changes that did not lead to the creation of new records.
- New records are being created, but the records fall within the scope of the existing series in the currently approved RDA.
- Some records in the currently approved RDA are no longer created.
- Records previously created in paper format are now created electronically.





### **How long does it take to create or revise an RDA once an agency makes a request?**

The State Records Commission approves six to eight RDAs annually. Because the Records Management Section can work with only three to four agencies at one time, the high demand for RDA development and revision creates a delay between when the request is submitted and when work begins. The active stage of work generally takes between six and twelve months, depending on the agency's size and complexity.

### **What are my agency's commitments when drafting the RDA?**

The process for creating or revising an RDA begins with the Records Management Section and the agency jointly setting a schedule with deadlines. The Records Management Section will handle most of the writing and research on your RDA. The agency is responsible for coordinating records survey meetings with each section or division, answering questions about record-keeping practices, reviewing and commenting on the draft RDA, and signing the completed RDA upon its approval by the State Records Commission.

### **I think my agency's RDA needs to be revised. What should I do?**

Contact the Records Management Section to inquire about creating or revising an RDA.



# PAPER RECORDS PRESERVATION

State agencies that maintain critical or permanent paper records in the office should store them to guard against damage. Light, heat, humidity, water leaks, and pests are common threats to paper records. Ensure that the storage location for paper records meets the following conditions:

## **Security**

Access to the storage site is restricted to approved staff members only. In addition, the site is protected against unauthorized use and theft.

## **Climate Control**

The storage location temperature ranges from 65 to 75 degrees Fahrenheit, and the humidity ranges from 45 to 55 percent, without-rapid variation or fluctuation. The climate-control system is not turned off at night or over weekends.

## **Environmental Protection**

The storage site is serviced regularly for pest control. Ideally, records should be stored on metal shelves. The upper shelves are clear of light fixtures, ducts, and overhanging water pipes. If this is not possible, records should not be placed on upper shelves. Likewise, records should not be placed directly on the floor.

## **Supervision**

The storage site is monitored regularly to check for hazards such as fire, flooding, leaks, and pests.



# ELECTRONIC RECORDS MAINTENANCE

## **How long should I keep electronic records?**

The content of a record, rather than its format or storage location, determines retention requirements.

For example, a staff accountant may maintain routine accounting records by writing each transaction by hand in a ledger book or by typing the transactions into a spreadsheet or financial system. Regardless of the format (ledger book, spreadsheet, or financial system), these records must be maintained and accessible for their entire retention period. This is because RDAs are format-neutral.

In short, the same retention requirements apply regardless of a record's format, whether it is maintained on paper, electronically, in an email, or on microfilm.

## **How do I store electronic records?**

The most significant risk in preserving electronic records is not saving them in the proper location.

Records should be saved in locations that multiple employees can access and use, rather than locations tied to individual employees. These account-specific locations, such as computer desktops, "My Documents" folders, or OneDrive, are often deleted after employees leave.

Software such as Microsoft Teams allows robust collaboration, but these environments do not guarantee that the records are maintained. As a result, employees should ensure that records exchanged in Teams are also stored elsewhere.

Agencies should use shared storage with an organizational structure that all staff understands. This not only enables the ongoing accessibility of records after an employee leaves an agency but also facilitates collaboration among staff.

Once records are appropriately stored, IT staff can perform regular backups. A backup secures agency data against user error, file corruption, network breach, or physical disaster. Backups should be routinely tested and meet industry best practices.

### How do I preserve electronic records?

State agencies must ensure that electronic records remain accessible and readable for their entire retention period.

For records to remain accessible over time, it may be necessary to **migrate** electronic records from one system to another.

Records may need to be moved from an old computer to a new one, from one server or cloud to another, or from one database to another. Just as the heyday of the compact disc (CD) has come and gone, today's electronic software systems, storage devices, and file formats will also become **obsolete**.

When considering options for a record-keeping system, ease of migration should be a key factor. Use caution when selecting proprietary formats or systems. Migrating records takes time and resources. To preserve the long-term integrity of electronic records, speak to your IT staff members about plans for migrating or converting all records to upgraded systems as technology continues to evolve.



## May I scan and toss?

Scanning or digital imaging offers convenient solutions for storing, locating, and accessing records. Once records are scanned, however, can the paper versions be destroyed?

State offices may digitize permanent paper records to increase accessibility, but the original paper records should be preserved.

When properly stored, paper records can be accessible for centuries with very little maintenance. By comparison, electronic records require frequent maintenance, including integrity monitoring and data migration, to remain accessible. To better preserve permanent records and their historical value, permanent paper records should be retained in their original format. Most permanent paper records can be transmitted to the ADAH for preservation.

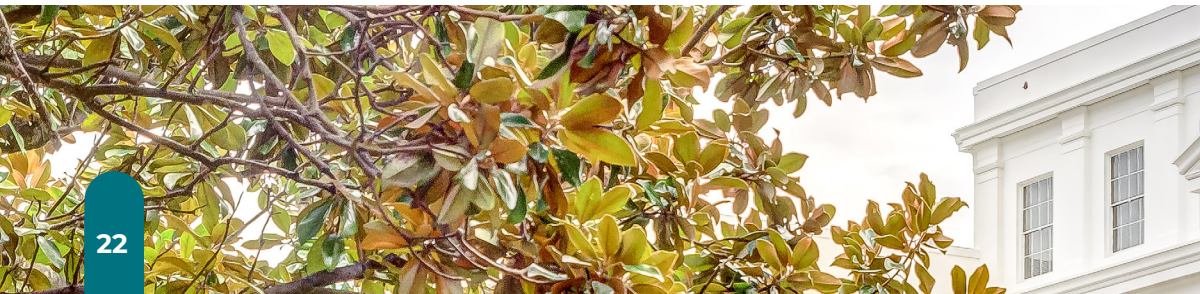
On the other hand, temporary paper records need not be retained in their original format. State offices may digitize temporary records and then destroy the paper originals which are now duplicates. Offices that “scan and toss” must ensure that the digitized records remain accessible and readable for the entire retention period specified by the RDA (Code of Alabama 1975 § 8-1A-12).





## How should I manage a digitization project?

- (1)** Consult with legal counsel to ensure that audit requirements or expected litigation will not require the original documents to be maintained.
- (2)** Ensure that any records eligible for destruction have been destroyed before digitization begins. There is no reason to spend time or money digitizing records that do not need to be maintained.
- (3)** Establish quality-control standards for file naming and image quality. Verify the accuracy and consistency of scans. Ensure all files and pages are accounted for.
- (4)** Save scanned images in stable and high-quality file formats. For documents, a resolution of 300 PPI in TIFF or PDF/A (the archival-quality version of PDF) formats is a good choice. Contact the ADAH for recommendations for other document types.
- (5)** Familiarize yourself with how **metadata** will work for your project. Metadata (or “data about data”) describes important characteristics of a file, such as a file’s creation date, destruction eligibility date, and creator. If storing digitized files in a document management system or database, you should be able to indicate retention and other information using metadata or tags. A project’s success hinges on high-quality metadata so include as much as possible.
- (6)** If digitization is outsourced to a vendor, ensure that the purchase order or contract includes detailed requirements for quality control, file format, metadata creation, and storage medium.



# TRAINING

The ADAH offers free consultation and training for state agencies across Alabama. Training can be held virtually or in person. The Records Management Section welcomes your phone calls and emails.

## **We provide assistance and training on the following topics:**

Records management

Transmittal of permanent records to the ADAH

Preservation and conservation

Digitization

Destruction of temporary records

Electronic records management

Visit the ADAH **“Manage Records”** webpage for more information on training opportunities.



# GLOSSARY

## **Annual Records Disposition Authority (RDA) Implementation Report**

This annual report about records management activities is required by law for all state agencies, district attorneys, and public colleges and universities.

### **Audit Date**

Some retention requirements in state RDAs depend on the records' audit date. The audit date is when records were made available for the audit, even if the records were not examined during the audit.

### **Destruction Documentation**

These forms document the destruction of eligible state government records and must be submitted to the ADAH Records Management Section each year as part of the Annual RDA Implementation Report.

### **Disposition**

Disposition refers to the actions taken once records are no longer needed to conduct government business. These actions may include destruction or transfer to the ADAH.

### **Metadata**

Metadata, or “data about data,” is information about or attributes of a record (for example, the record's creator or date created). Metadata helps users locate and manage records.

### **Migration**

Migration is the process of moving data from one information system, storage medium, or file format to another to ensure continued access.

## **Obsolete**

In technology, obsolete (similar to “outdated” or “antiquated”) means that something is no longer in widespread use and/or has been replaced by newer options. Reel-to-reel magnetic tape, for example, has become an obsolete technology.

## **Open Records**

Open records are government records to which access by the general public is not restricted based on privacy, confidentiality, security, or other reasons provided by statute. For more information on open records, see the Code of Alabama 1975 § 36-12-40.

## **Personally Identifiable Information (PII)**

Personally identifiable information (PII) can include, but is not limited to, names, Social Security Numbers, driver’s license numbers, addresses, and contact information.

## **Public Records**

Public records include “all written, typed, or printed books, papers, letters, documents, and maps made or received... in the transactions of public business” (Code of Alabama 1975 § 41-13-1). Public records may exist in many formats, including electronic records (Code of Alabama 1975 § 8-1A-12). Most public records are open for examination, but some are restricted by federal or state law.

## **Records Disposition Authority (RDA)**

This document approved by the State Records Commission establishes disposition requirements by designating state agency records as either temporary records, which may be legally destroyed after a specified period, or permanent records, which must be preserved in perpetuity.

## **Records Liaison**

This individual coordinates with the ADAH on records management responsibilities and promotes compliance with records management law within the agency.

## **Record Series**

A record series is a group or category of records identified by the Records Disposition Authority (RDA).

## **Retention**

Retention is how long records must be kept for administrative, legal, fiscal, historical, or other purposes. Retention periods are set for record series, but specific documents within the series may need to be kept longer if they are required for litigation or other circumstances. Most permanent records should be transferred to the ADAH.

## **State Records Center**

The State Records Center in Montgomery provides storage and retrieval services for Alabama state agencies. It provides a cost-efficient solution for the storage of records that are accessed only occasionally but are not yet eligible for destruction.

## **Volume**

The measurement used to describe the size of archival collections. The Alabama Department of Archives and History uses cubic feet to measure paper records and bytes to measure electronic records. A standard copy-paper box equals approximately one cubic foot.



# STAY INFORMED

The ADAH's records management blog, [For the Record \(fortherecordalabama.blog\)](https://fortherecordalabama.blog) provides updates, news, and guidance about records retention, disposition, and preservation.

## **CONTACT THE RECORDS MANAGEMENT SECTION**

If you have questions about the management of state government records or if you would like to schedule a site visit or training, contact Becky Hébert, State and Local Government Records Coordinator.



Becky Hébert  
State and Local Government Records Coordinator  
[Becky.Hebert@archives.alabama.gov](mailto:Becky.Hebert@archives.alabama.gov)  
334-353-5039



*Alabama* DEPARTMENT OF  
ARCHIVES & HISTORY

624 Washington Avenue  
Montgomery, AL 36106  
[archives.alabama.gov](http://archives.alabama.gov)



AlabamaArchives