
Developing Records Retention Schedules: How Are Records Retention Periods Determined?

Purpose: Provide guidance to state agencies and local government entities on what factors Washington State Archives considers when determining the retention periods for public records.

The Archives (along with the State and Local Records Committees) considers each of the following factors when determining how long a type of public record needs to be kept:

1. Agency Business Need

The State Archives consults with representatives from different government agencies to determine the amount of time they need access to certain records in order to fulfill specific work functions. If you have any feedback to provide on the retention periods set for your agency's records, please contact us at recordsmanagement@sos.wa.gov or (360) 586-4901.

2. Laws or Standards

Sometimes the laws or professional standards that govern an agency or sector will mandate the retention period of certain records. The State Archives includes citations of these statutes or standards in the records series descriptions whenever possible.

3. Statutes of Limitations

Statutes of limitations govern the amount of time a party has to take legal action after an event has occurred. Government agencies need to retain certain types of records for the entirety of these time periods in case litigation ensues. Common retention periods based on statutes of limitations in Washington State include:

- **3 years:** Records documenting personal injury or injury to property (RCW 4.16.080)
- **6 years:** Records documenting contracts/written agreements, financial transactions, or construction/alteration of improvements upon real property (RCW 4.16.040 & 4.16.310)
- **10 years:** Records documenting the ownership of real property (RCW 4.16.020)

4. Audit Examination Periods

The State Auditor's Office requires government agencies to retain certain financial and operational records for auditing examinations. The amount of time these records need to be available for examination can vary from one to six years depending on the category of the agency, type of audit, and agency risk assessment.

**Additional advice regarding the management of public records is available from
Washington State Archives:**

**www.sos.wa.gov/archives
recordsmanagement@sos.wa.gov**