



REBECCA OTTO
STATE AUDITOR

STATE OF MINNESOTA

OFFICE OF THE STATE AUDITOR

SUITE 500
525 PARK STREET
SAINT PAUL, MN 55103-2139

(651) 296-2551 (Voice)
(651) 296-4755 (Fax)
state.auditor@osa.state.mn.us (E-mail)
1-800-627-3529 (Relay Service)

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Records Management for Volunteer Fire Relief Associations

By Rebecca Otto, State Auditor

Minnesota's volunteer fire relief associations are governmental entities that receive and manage public money, and therefore must follow state guidelines governing the retention of government records. Until recently, a relief association did not have the authority to destroy records, unless that association had received specific individual approval from the Records Disposition Panel. For local government entities such as relief associations, the Records Disposition Panel consists of the attorney general, the state auditor, and the director of the Minnesota Historical Society.

A few years ago, a General Records Retention Schedule for Volunteer Fire Relief Associations was approved by the Records Disposition Panel. Relief associations that adopt the general schedule and notify the Minnesota Historical Society that they have adopted it may now destroy certain types of records after a specified length of time.

What is a General Records Retention Schedule?

A records retention schedule is a written list of types of records that an organization may have in its possession or control with a corresponding time period for which each type of record must be retained. Because organizations that have similar activities and responsibilities oftentimes have similar types of records, a general records retention schedule may be developed for use by multiple organizations. A general records retention schedule meets the legal requirements for the type of organization for which it was created. Many organizations, including counties, cities, and towns, choose to adopt a general records retention schedule instead of creating and obtaining approval for their own individual schedule.

For example, types of records on the general records retention schedule include bank statements, which must be retained for six years, and ballots, which must be retained for 22 months unless the election is contested. Some types of records are essential to the operations of a relief association and must be retained permanently. Examples of records

on the general records retention schedule that must be retained permanently include bylaws and articles of incorporation.

How Do We Use The Schedule?

A relief association can choose to adopt the General Records Retention Schedule for Volunteer Fire Relief Associations, modify that general schedule to create a unique customized schedule, or develop its own individualized records retention schedule. Unless a relief association chooses one of these options, the association must permanently retain all of its records.

If a relief association chooses to modify the general records retention schedule and thus create its own schedule, the association must submit the proposed schedule to the Records Disposition Panel for approval before the schedule may be used. Relief associations that adopt the General Records Retention Schedule should notify the Minnesota Historical Society that it has adopted the general schedule before destroying any records pursuant to the general schedule.

After a relief association has adopted a schedule (and notified the Historical Society of its adoption or obtained approval from the Records Disposition Panel, as necessary), the association can destroy records identified on the schedule after they have been maintained for the length of time required by the schedule.

A record or log that lists all records that have been disposed of should be maintained. The log should identify the record, the category governing its retention, the date on which it was created, and the date on which it was destroyed.

Where Can We Find Additional Information?

The General Records Retention Schedule for Volunteer Fire Relief Associations, along with instructions and a form for use in notifying the Historical Society that a relief association has adopted the schedule, are available on the Historical Society's website at www.mnhs.org. Once there, select the "Preservation" menu option and then choose the "Minnesota State Archives" link. Choose "Records Retention Schedules" from the right menu list, and then scroll down to the "General Records Retention Schedule for Minnesota Firefighters Relief Associations" heading.

Helpful information about records management for relief associations is provided in two Statements of Position on the Office of the State Auditor website. Go to www.auditor.state.mn.us. Choose the "For Local Officials" menu option, and then select "Statements of Position." Statements entitled "Records Management for Fire Relief Associations" and "Retention of Records for Volunteer Firefighter Relief Associations" are posted under the "Pensions" heading.