

# Vital Records



A Technical Report prepared by  
ARMA International and registered with ANSI  
March 12, 2017

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# Foreword

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ARMA International's relationship with the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) is long-standing, spanning three decades and embracing a comprehensive body of publications. In 1986, ARMA International was granted accreditation by ANSI as a standards developing organization, securing the right to develop and publish American National Standards. In 2002, ARMA International expanded its capabilities and received approval for the development and publication of ANSI-registered technical reports.

## Rationale

Currently, ARMA International's Standards Development Program activities include the development of systems, rules, reports, and/or procedures for information and records creation, structure, capture, organization/classification, search, access, retrieval, use, transmission, retention, storage, and disposition in paper and electronic formats. Topics related to archives/records and information management such as information governance, security, disaster recovery, legal/regulatory requirements, process quality improvement, and specific filing equipment, supplies, terminology, and applications/technologies are studied as well. Standards and technical reports may be developed in any of the aforementioned subject areas and may have broad, cross-industry applicability or unique, sector-specific relevance.

ARMA International's ANSI-approved Standards Development Program policy and procedures document is available at [www.arma.org/r2/standards-amp-best-practices/standards-development-process](http://www.arma.org/r2/standards-amp-best-practices/standards-development-process). ARMA International's Standards Development Program publications are available at [www.arma.org/r2/standards-amp-best-practices](http://www.arma.org/r2/standards-amp-best-practices).

This technical report provides state-of-the-art information for organizations' business continuity-related planning needs and vital records management, including applicable technological innovations, current industry practices, and timely bibliographic resources. It may complement the ARMA International Generally Accepted Recordkeeping Principles® and ISO 15489-1: 2016 *Information and documentation – Records management – Part 1 – Concepts and principles*. It is for use by records and information management practitioners, information governance professionals, and educators. It may also be of interest to archivists, records management consultants, and legal and information technology professionals.

The publication of this technical report, which has been registered with ANSI, has been approved by ARMA International, 11880 College Boulevard, Suite 450, Overland Park, Kansas 66210. This document is registered as a technical report according to the *Procedures for the Registration of Technical Reports* with ANSI. This document is not an American National Standard, and the material contained herein is not normative in nature.

Comments on the content of this document should be sent by e-mail to [standards@armaintl.org](mailto:standards@armaintl.org) or by mail to:

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Overland Park, Kansas 66210  
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## ► 1. Introduction – Scope and Purpose

Vital records can be referred to by many terms, including business-critical records, mission-critical records, and indispensable business records. Within the context of the U.S. government’s Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA,) vital records are termed “essential records.” As defined in the ARMA International *Glossary of Records Management and Information Governance Terms*, 5th Ed. (ARMA International 22-2016), a vital record is “a record that is fundamental to the functioning of an organization and necessary to the continuance of operations.”

Regardless of the phrasing used to describe them, these records need to be identified and managed through their inclusion in a comprehensive, fully functioning vital records program. Vital records are identified within the context of the organization’s critical business activities; they support those activities and are organized in records series within the business’s information systems.

The vital records program allows those records to be managed properly throughout their life cycle. Their loss from a disaster could result in increased personal danger for community safety responders, the disruption of essential services, loss of revenue, loss of or damage to reputation, exposure to unplanned expenses related to financial settlements, increased vulnerability to litigation, and loss of productivity due to gaps in information assets. When a man-made or natural disaster occurs, the program facilitates the recovery of its vital records to aid business resumption or continuity.

Vital records include any records, regardless of long-term or archival value, that are crucial to the functioning of an organization. As such, they are particularly important during and after a disaster. (In certain scenarios when a natural disaster can be predicted, such as a hurricane’s landfall, the time frame preceding that disaster can be critical, too.) Vital records also include those records involved in

the protection of the rights and interests of the organization and the individuals for whose rights and interests the organization bears responsibility.

Some industries or organizations use the term *vital record* for a specific type of document—usually a public record such as a birth or death certificate. Although the content in this publication does not uniquely address those types of documents, aspects of its guidance may apply to those records in certain circumstances.

The purpose of this technical report is to provide information useful in the development of a program to identify, manage, and recover vital records in organizations. This technical report also has advice for protecting vital records both inside and outside an organization's physical location, and for determining the impact that the loss of vital records may have on an organization. Accordingly, this publication discusses essential components of a vital records program, as well as the role of risk management. Seven [appendixes](#) and a [bibliography](#) are included. This publication does not address records that have migrated from vital status to another functional value.

## ► 2. Definitions

This section contains only those definitions essential for clarification of this technical report. Unless noted otherwise, the ARMA International *Glossary of Records Management and Information Governance Terms*, 5th Ed. (ARMA International 22-2016) contains these definitions, as well as other terms applicable to records and information management (RIM).

### **acetate film**

A safety film substrate used to produce microfilm.

### **acid-free**

Products that do not contain acids (i.e., with a pH level of 7.0 or greater).

### **air drying**

A records and information recovery process that uses air as a means to remove humidity, dampness, or wetness from media by drying under normal indoor environmental conditions (i.e., 70-75 degrees Fahrenheit, 40-55% relative humidity).

### **alkaline-buffered paper**

A paper that has a reserve of 3-5% alkaline substance added for the purpose of counteracting any acid that may be introduced into the paper later.

### **archival value**

A determination during appraisal that the item has continuing usefulness or significance in documenting the history of an entity.

*Also referred to as* historical value.

### **archives**

1. The noncurrent records created or received and accumulated by a person or organization in the course of the conduct of affairs and preserved because of their continuing or enduring value.
2. An institution or a division within an institution responsible for collecting, organizing, preserving, and providing access to records of enduring value.

### **archiving**

The action of moving inactive electronic records or data offline where they cannot be modified but remain available for use until they are eligible for destruction.

### **backfile conversion**

The conversion of paper or microfilm information to digital form.