The ABCs of Recordkeeping
An Introduction

All organizations rely on records and information to make decisions, evaluate processes, measure performance, and design products and services. In addition, records provide evidence of activities performed and can be used to show that an organization is in compliance with its legal requirements.

The basic steps for managing records are simple. To start, gather a team of dedicated staff members, assign a project manager, determine where and how you would like to document your work, and then begin. Remember, taking the first step is the hardest part!

"A" WHERE

Knowing where all the records for your organization reside is an important but simple first step. Keep a running list of filing cabinets, computers (and drive information if you are on a network), storage rooms and closets, and other places ***where*** your organization keeps records. Your organization is accountable for all records in your custody regardless of where they are physically located. Document every location and don't forget to include both paper and electronic record storage areas. Also, the age of the records does not matter!

"B" WHAT

Now that you have located all the places where your organization keeps records it is time to start listing ***what*** kinds of records your organization is responsible for managing. This step is commonly referred to as a record inventory. Begin by taking your list of record storage areas and inventorying the records stored in each area. You may want to list the records by their type (i.e. letter, permit, applications, etc.) to make the process easier and more efficient. A list of common record types is available on the Vermont State Archives website at: http://vermont-archives.org/records/vclas/

"C" WHY

The next step is to determine ***why*** your organization has the records that are listed in your record inventory. Perhaps your organization is required to create or receive some of the records by law (Federal or State). Or, maybe, the records are created or received for administrative or operational purposes. Whatever the reason may be, it is important to know the reasons ***why*** you have the records before you can make decisions on *who* is responsible for the records and *how* they need to be managed.

"D" WHO

Your record inventory and “why” analyses will likely show that your organization receives and creates records as the result of specific activities (i.e. a permitting activity, a monitoring activity, an administering activity). If your organization is divided into divisions or units, it may be very clear ***who*** in your organization is accountable, or should be accountable, for managing certain records generated to support a specific activity. Even if your organization is not divided into units, specific job titles or responsibilities should help you determine *who* is responsible for *what* records. This step is complete when the records listed in your organization’s record inventory have been assigned to the appropriate individuals and/or units.

“E” HOW

Now that records have been assigned to certain individuals or units within your organization, the task of determining ***how*** the records need to be managed can be started. For each individual or unit, it is best to begin this step by reviewing the information that has already been gathered about the records that have been assigned to you. Examine the records’ locations, inventories, and reasons *why* your organization has the records for accuracy and completeness. Add missing information and take the time to clarify any ambiguities. At this point, you will have a fairly good idea on how the records need to be managed from both a legal and administrative standpoint. It is best for each individual or unit to prepare a report or overview of the management needs upon completion of this step.

“F” WHEN

The last step for each individual or unit is to determine ***when*** the records can be moved, transferred, or destroyed. These decisions are based on understanding the management needs and *how* the records need to be managed from both a legal and administrative perspective. Records, for example, can be moved from active storage areas in inactive storages areas *when* they become inactive. Records that need to be retained permanently can be transferred to an organization’s archives or another archival repository *when* they are no longer needed for administrative reasons. Records that have met their legal and administrative needs and have no additional value may be destroyed *when* they are no longer needed.

CONGRATULATIONS! After all steps are completed your organization will have great documentation for your records management program. Gather everyone together to develop policies and procedures, and don’t forget to create a maintenance plan to ensure that your program is always up-to-date!