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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 that govern the destruction of records. Until recently, a relief association did not have authority to destroy records, unless that association had received specific individual approval from the Records Disposition Panel. The Records Disposition Panel is a state panel consisting of the attorney general, the state auditor, and the director of the Minnesota Historical Society.

We are pleased to announce that a General Records Retention Schedule for Volunteer Fire Relief Associations has been approved by the Records Disposition Panel, and that relief associations that adopt the general schedule and notify the Minnesota Historical Society 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 instructions on how long 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.

How Do We Use The Schedule?

A relief association can choose to adopt the new general records retention schedule, modify the general schedule to create a unique customized schedule, or develop its own individualized records retention schedule. If a relief association chooses none of these options, the association must permanently retain all of its records.

If a relief association chooses to modify the general records retention schedule or to create its own schedule, the association must submit the proposed changes to the Records Disposition Panel for approval before the customized 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 using the general schedule.

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

Where Can We Find Additional Information?

The general records retention schedule, 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 "State Archives" link in the bottom right corner under the "Products and Services" heading. Choose "Records Retention Schedules" from the left 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.