

Alabama Electronic Records Program Status Report

by Deborah Skaggs

During the last five years, staff members of the Alabama Department of Archives and History (ADAH) have tried to establish new institutional frameworks for the archival management of electronic records. We have served on national professional committees dealing with this issue, participated in staff development programs on electronic records, and worked to promote a mechanism within state government to address information policy and information resource management. Finally, we have also begun to restructure state archival programs to meet the implications of new information technologies.

NATIONAL PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES

Department staff members have participated in national professional activities relating to information policy issues. Alabama Department of Archives and History Director, Ed Bridges, has been involved in several initiatives concerning the archival preservation of electronic records and the incorporation of this issue within state government information policies. Dr. Bridges served as Vice Chairman of the Information Policy Subcommittee of the Organizational Planning and Control Committee of the Council of State Governments (CSG). One project grant proposal from this CSG committee was a comprehensive study of state records laws to develop a clearer legal definition of public records, which includes those in electronic format. Although the grant offer broke down in a disagreement over indirect costs, the project will be continued in modified form by Ed Bridges and Tom Mills, New York Archives and Records Administration, as a Bentley Library Fellowship project begun during the summer of 1993.

The National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators (NAGARA) has provided a forum for government archivists to work collectively to redefine the way we think about archives, which has been a result of changes in government itself where information systems are key factors in these changes. NAGARA's Committee on Information Technology provides a continuing structure for the profession to address these issues. Three ADAH staff members have served on this committee since its establishment in 1988.

For five years NAGARA has sponsored, with the assistance of grant funding, the Institute on Advanced Archival Administration held at the University of Pittsburgh School of Library and Information Science. Ed Bridges, Deborah Skaggs, Assistant Director for Records Management, Tracey Berezansky, Electronic Records Project Archivist, and Alden Monroe, Assistant Director for Collections Management have attended the Pittsburgh Institute. The Institute provided these staff members with an educational opportunity to build our staff capabilities in dealing with electronic records issues. Probably the most significant impact of the Institute has been working with colleagues who are also grappling with restructuring their archival programs.

INTERNAL DEPARTMENT ACTIVITIES

Strategic planning has been one curriculum component of the Pittsburgh Institute. Institute planners recognized that restructuring a government archival program for current and future information technologies requires a new understanding of our traditional view of the mission of an archives as well as government itself. The use of long-range planning provides a mechanism for rethinking the role of the archives in this changing environment.

Although the Department of Archives and History has conducted short-term operational planning activities for a number of years, all staff members have participated in strategic planning activities during the last four years. The department's strategic plan reflects the staff's changing philosophy of how the department carries out its mission and, consequently, a redefinition of the records management program. During the 1980's, the department established a traditional state government records management program designed after federal and state government models of the 1950's and 1960's. Significant recent accomplishments of the program include the revival of the State Records Commission and legislation creating the Local Government Records Commission, the approval of general records schedules for numerous state and several local functions, the development of records schedules for individual state and local agencies, the establishment and operation of a State Records Center, and a substantial expansion of the imaging assistance program. Staff members have worked with local officials, encouraging them to maintain archival and temporary records according to nationally recognized records storage guidelines.

Despite considerable effort, the department's activities have affected only a fraction of records created and maintained by government agencies. In today's information and administrative environment, staff members of the Alabama Department of Archives and History recognize that they cannot directly reach into each government office to ensure the preservation of all historically valuable material. The department must promote systems that encourage public officials to manage their records in a manner consistent with the long-term needs of their agencies, which includes the preservation of documentation of continuing value. Through these support efforts the department can help individual state agencies and local governments better meet their responsibilities to Alabama citizens for preserving important government records.

With the new strategies stated in the plan, the department faces a number of transitional issues. The State Records Commission, in particular, will need to endorse and support the rationale for redesigning the program. Currently Records Management staff members are working to assist the Commission by defining policies and procedures that foster an awareness by state and local officials of their responsibilities for the proper management of records. Staff will also need to develop new procedures for agencies relating to records scheduling and implementation.

Overall, the Records Management Division will be shifting its role to one of monitoring, assisting, and coordinating the work of state and local agencies in meeting their legal responsibilities for records administration, rather than seeking to do directly all the records management work for the agencies. In making this change of emphasis, the department is recognizing a fact that has always been a reality of the records management effort -- that government officials in each agency are ultimately the ones who are responsible for the management of their agencies' records. The Department of Archives and History needs to expand and improve services to support public officials in meeting their records responsibilities.

The strategic plan commits the department to the goal of promoting and participating in the development of state and local government information resource management coordination structures. Specific objectives under this goal seek to raise the visibility of the archival function and the issues of archival preservation in state government information resources management guidelines and procedures. Another objective reflects the plan's overall philosophy regarding the department's work with public officials. This objective recognizes the Records Management Division's responsibility for developing mechanisms to define and promote better awareness of public agencies' responsibilities in managing their own records.

Finally within the department, staff members are continuing to develop their capabilities in dealing with information systems by evaluating the Department of Archives and History's computer system with the purpose of implementing a long-overdue systems' upgrade. Network accessibility, especially to other state agencies, is a department priority of an upgraded system.

STATE GOVERNMENT ACTIVITIES

A key to the success of implementing the department's strategic plan is to develop partnerships within state government. As witnessed in other states, a comprehensive information policy organizational structure is critical to the success of ensuring that the archival function is being considered in state government information resources management and information policy development. Alabama's Department of Finance, Data Systems Management Division (DSMD), has the legal authority to serve as a central coordinating body for information resources management and information policy development and implementation. Despite a recognition by many of the need for better statewide information resources coordination, Alabama state agencies have a long-established tradition of considerable independence. Consequently, the Finance Department has been reluctant to exercise its authority in this area.

During recent months, however, DSMD has been reorganized under a new director who recognizes the importance of developing structures for this responsibility. Archival issues are beginning to be included in discussions concerning these information management issues. DSMD has organized an advisory committee of seventeen agency information sys-

tems managers, the Director of the Department of Archives and History, and the head of the Legislative Budget Office. The committee, which has met monthly since last fall, is charged with communicating individual agency and collective state information systems' needs to DSMD and recommending program directions for DSMD. Subcommittees on Long-Range Planning, Disaster Recovery, Policy and Standards, Technology, and Personnel have been established. The Assistant Director for Records Management serves on the Long Range Planning Subcommittee.

Critical factors, however, may influence the success of the development of a state information structure. Continuity in leadership within DSMD and state agencies is critical. State government agencies must develop partnerships to accomplish a common vision and goals of effective and efficient statewide information systems. State government information managers would also benefit from studying models developed by other states to address broader information management issues, such as statewide information systems standards, information sharing, access, and the identification and preservation of the long-term retention electronic records.

On April 29, 1993, DSMD sponsored, with the assistance of the DSMD Advisory Committee, the Alabama TechnaCenter, and the Society of Alabama Archivists, a conference, "Policy Issues Relating to New Information Technology in State Government". The purpose of the conference was to bring together both information systems managers and program managers to think about the implications of new information technologies to state government. Conference speakers included David Bearman, Margaret Hedstrom, and Stephen Dooley, Commissioner of the Kentucky Department of Information Systems. The next morning Margaret Hedstrom and David Bearman led a follow-up session focusing on how information systems can be developed to ensure the proper documentation of government activity and the preservation and accessibility of these records.

The DSMD Advisory Committee has shown interest in developing standards for electronic imaging systems. In response to this interest, the Department of Archives and History led a session on electronic imaging at a recent Advisory Committee meeting. The program included a discussion of legal issues, guidelines from the NAGARA/NARA Optical Media Report, the State Records Commission's policy on the use of optical disks for permanent disk applications in Alabama government (Alabama Department of Environmental Management and the Shelby County Office of Probate).

Also in the area of electronic imaging, division staff is in the process of drafting a revision to the State Records Commission and Local Government Records Commission's policy on the use of optical disks for permanent records. The revision will be presented to the DSMD Advisory Committee for review before it is submitted to the Commissions. The technical leaflet revision will also include technical and administrative guidelines drawn from the NAGARA/NARA report and the NAGARA's Committee on Information Technology's report on states' imaging policies.

Because several state agencies and local governments are exploring the use of digital imaging and optical media storage and looking for guidance with the application of this new technology, the Department of Archives and History and the Alabama AIIM chapter hosted an Optical Imaging Seminar and Vendor Show on April 12, 1993. The seminar was a success with an attendance of nearly 300 individuals and at least nineteen vendors demonstrating their optical disk systems. The sessions included topics covering national standards and administrative guidelines, the Commissions' policy for the use of optical disk for permanent public records, legality issues, care and handling of the media, developing a request for proposal and invitation to bid, and a user panel discussion.

In addition to positioning ourselves to offer technical assistance relating to digital imaging and optical media storage to government agencies, department staff has made other strides in integrating electronic records into the work of the Records Management Division. Project staff recently completed the appraisal of the Department of Postsecondary Education information system. We had earlier completed records schedules for the agency's paper-based records systems. The agency's administrators fully supported the project, which was a pilot for division staff in the appraisal of an information system.

We are currently setting up a project with Governor Folsom's Office and DSMD to evaluate Text files created and maintained during former Governor Hunt's administration. Plans are to migrate the historical records to a system with greater indexing capabilities and to provide for the long-term retention and accessibility of these records.

To continue our work in determining the records requirements of information systems, the Records Management Division has been working on a proposed NAGARA cooperative appraisal project. The project has the potential of identifying information system records requirements for selected shared program activities that cut across federal, state, and if applicable, local government responsibilities. In further planning our work in this area, we want to focus on systems whose functions would result in the preservation and accessibility of key government records. We also recognize that we need to develop strategies to assure adequate descriptive systems for archival records regardless of their custody in state government.

CONCLUSION

Staff participation in national professional activities, our involvement with DSMD's Advisory Committee, and the experience gained from the appraisal of an automated information system have given the department momentum in restructuring the archival program. This work has also helped staff members to further clarify their understanding of the need to redesign the archives program to one of monitoring, assisting, and coordination the work of state and local agencies in meeting their legal responsibilities for records, which includes the identification and preservation of archival records. The department's strategic plan will be updated to reflect this evolving vision and related goals. We see ourselves progressing in this program restructuring, and we are committed to achieving it.