

Metering Water, Monitoring Filters & Managing Records

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Over the last several years, the State Archives (SA) has received and funded some grant applications to automate the reading of water meters and to monitor water and sewer filtration systems. Although to some, these proposals do not appear to have anything to do with managing records, they do improve the ways in which records are created and maintained. For example, remote reading of water meters is typically faster and more accurate than doing it manually. Traditional obstacles faced by human meter-readers such as bad weather, snarling dogs, overgrown bushes, and accurately and consistent readings from little dials with a flashlight are largely eliminated. Water use data generated by these meters, as well as, the invoices and reports created from the data, are legally considered records. Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition (SCADA) systems used for continuous monitoring and reporting of water and sewer filtration systems generate data and reports that are also legal records. With these and other technologies, records creation, maintenance and reporting are an integral part of the system functions, which they support.

State Archives grants for these systems are made possible by the Local Government Records Management Improvement Fund (LGRMIF), which was begun in 1990 to help local governments establish records program or new program components. Fund revenues are generated by fees collected by county clerks and the New York City Register for the recording of deeds and mortgages and for the assignment of index numbers for certain court cases. Although a wide range of records projects are eligible for funding under LGRMIF, applications for SCADA systems and automated meter reading are obviously technology-based. For such proposals to succeed, it is important to understand that LGRMIF does not support technology projects as such, but it does fund records management projects that have a technology focus. Aside from the cost savings, efficiencies and other benefits that can be achieved, these systems are unlikely to be funded by LGRMIF unless they are explained and justified as electronic records creation and maintenance systems. Unfortunately, some proposals for automated meter reading and filter monitoring systems have been denied funding, primarily for this reason. For people who know water and or sewer systems, but who are unfamiliar with records management concepts and language, this does pose something of a challenge. With some effort and information, however, you can overcome this challenge.

Whether you choose to write the proposal yourself or to hire a grant writer, a successful LGRMIF technology implementation proposal must answer the following questions:

1. What are the basic steps in the proposed new system and at what points in that process are records and information created and/or accessed? By whom and for what purpose? How does this compare to and improve upon the existing system? What laws or regulations mandate this information?

2. What are the specific records series that will be created and maintained by the proposed system? Usually, these will be similar to existing paper-based records, although some will likely be eliminated altogether.

3. How long are you legally required to retain the records that will be generated by the new system? This can be easily determined by consulting the State Archives MU-1 Retention schedule. (See especially the Environmental Health section). The legal retention period for a record largely determines how that record will be managed.

4. How will you maintain intelligible access to these records during their scheduled lifetime? Rapid obsolescence of software and hardware make it difficult to maintain access to e-records, especially those that must be retained for longer or indefinite periods. Keeping software updated, refreshing and/or migrating data, and converting to analogue media can all help to sustain needed access to e-records.

5. How will you ensure the security of the records created by this system? Most systems allow an administrator to identify all users and determine their access rights to the program. Virus protection software and back-up policies and procedures also help to protect against the loss of record information.

The State Archives makes available a number of resources to help you prepare a successful grant application. We offer many workshops and publications on records management, all free of charge. A current workshop schedule and all publications are available at www.archives.nysed.gov. Anyone interested in applying for an LGRMIF grant next year should attend a Grant Information Session, which are offered each year in the fall. We also maintain nine regional offices throughout the state, each one staffed by an advisory officer who will be happy to discuss a prospective application with you. Contact information for all of our regional offices is also available on the State Archives website. The grant application deadline for the 2007-2008 cycle has not yet been set, but it will not be before December 1st, 2006, so there is plenty of time to take advantage of these resources and to prepare a successful application. Good luck! ♣