

## Records Storage and Maintenance

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### Policy:

All official records generated by the Skagit County Coroner's Office will be kept indefinitely and stored as archives in an electronic database.

- Transitory documents are not retained and only kept in the file until the case is officially closed.

Immediate family may have access to the official reports including the investigative report, toxicology report and autopsy/consultation report.

- Prior to distribution of any record by the Coroner's Office, a *Request for Release of Report Form* must be completed along with a copy of the requestor's government issued photo identification.
- If there is question or concerns involving the relationship of the family member requesting reports, then proof of relationship will be required to obtain these records.

Coroner records will not be released until the case is officially closed.

Skagit County Coroner's Office records are maintained electronically and by hard copy also known as a physical case file. After 1 year, the physical case file is released to the Skagit County Records Department to be uploaded into the Laserfiche database.

### Electronic data file

When a death is reported to the Skagit County Coroner's Office, a unique case file number is assigned to the case and the information regarding the death is entered into a relational database under the assigned case file number.

The Skagit County Coroner's Office uses MDI Log for its case management system. The database maintains all decedent information, including any information that is related to the death, which includes, but is not limited to the following: decedent demographics, investigation information, jurisdictional decision, examination type, the cause and manner of death, investigative reports, property and or evidence release forms, body release forms and information, court-related activities (when applicable), toxicology and laboratory forms, photographs, funeral home release forms, and records requests forms.

- All historical and current decedent-related photos-ID, scene, body exam or autopsy, and x-rays are stored in an electronic format on the county secured server.

## Records Storage and Maintenance Cont.

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The RCW pertaining to Record Retention and Release is as follows:

An agency is not required to retain every record it ever created or used. The state and local records committees approve a general retention schedule for state and local agency records that applies to records that are common to most agencies.<sup>1</sup> Individual agencies seek approval from the state or local records committee for retention schedules that are specific to their agency, or that, because of particular needs of the agency, must be kept longer than provided in the general records retention schedule. The retention schedules for state and local agencies are available at [www.secstate.wa.gov/archives/gs.aspx](http://www.secstate.wa.gov/archives/gs.aspx).

Retention schedules vary based on the content of the record. For example, documents with no value such as internal meeting scheduling e-mails can be destroyed when no longer needed, but documents such as periodic accounting reports must be kept for a period of years (are archived at the County Auditors Office). Because different kinds of records must be retained for different periods of time, an agency is prohibited from automatically deleting all e-mails after a short period of time (such as thirty days). While many of the e-mails could be destroyed when no longer needed, many others must be retained for several years. Indiscriminate automatic deletion of all e-mails after a short period may prevent an agency from complying with its retention duties and could complicate performance of its duties under the Public Records Act. An agency should have a retention policy in which employees save retainable documents and delete non-retainable ones. An agency is strongly encouraged to train employees on retention schedules.

The lawful destruction of public records is governed by retention schedules. The unlawful destruction of public records can be a crime. RCW [40.16.010](#) and [40.16.020](#).

An agency is prohibited from destroying a public record, even if it is about to be lawfully destroyed under a retention schedule, if a public records request has been made for that record. RCW [42.17.290](#)/42.56.100. Additional retention requirements might apply if the records may be relevant to actual or anticipated litigation. The agency is required to retain the record until the record request has been resolved. An exception exists for certain portions of a state employee's personnel file. RCW [42.17.295](#)/42.56.110.

Note: <sup>1</sup>An agency can be found to violate the act and be subject to the attorneys' fees and penalty provision if it prematurely destroys a requested record. See *Yacobellis v. City of Bellingham*, 55 Wn. App. 706, 780 P.2d 272 (1989).