



When Disaster Strikes, Will Your Vital Records Be Safe?

By Cadence Group

No one knows for sure how many medical, legal, financial, and personal records were swept away by Hurricane Katrina. Consider the grim picture painted by news stories of what happened when there was no safe storage, backup, or recovery plan for vital records in the following professional and personal settings.

Medical Records

Close to a million people displaced by Hurricane Katrina now lack medical records, making it difficult for clinicians working in disaster medical centers to treat them. With paper records destroyed or unavailable, doctors have no idea what drugs or treatments Katrina evacuees should be taking.

Legal Records

An estimated 5,000 to 6,000 lawyers (one-third of all lawyers in Louisiana) have lost their offices, libraries, computers, client files and clients who are now scattered across the U.S.

Additionally, the Louisiana State Supreme Court, the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals building, the New Orleans city and district courts in as many as eight parishes/counties plus three circuit courts and law enforcement offices in those areas, as well as Louisiana state bar offices and the state disciplinary offices were all under some level of water and all had evidence ruined. Because most legal files are kept in basements or lower floors of courthouses, only a few feet of standing water can ruin this evidence.

Business Records

Throughout the Gulf Coast, small business owners are facing the enormous task of putting their companies back together including reconstructing lost or ruined business records. Owners who didn't have their records backed up at a remote location or who were unable to take their books with them will have to pull together as much information as they can find. In the short term, they will need this data to apply for Small Business Administration disaster loans. In the long term, they will need those records for tax returns and any future financing sought.

Banking Records

Financial institutions may have fared the best in terms of records protection, as they are required to have extensive contingency plans for all types of disruptions to operations, including natural disasters. Thus, banks and other financial institutions should have backup systems of records and other built-in duplications housed in safe locations so that financial records can be reconstructed and restored.



Family Records

The destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina may be the biggest single loss of family records ever to take place in the United States. Some of the more fortunate families may have had backup documents kept with relatives or friends outside the area, or in safe deposits boxes that may have survived even if not yet accessible.

However, many families will have to reconstruct their financial lives. After the family's living situation is stabilized, experts advise seeking the help of government, employers, banks, relatives, and friends in putting their financial houses back in order.

The Case for E-Records

The lasting effects of Hurricane Katrina powerfully demonstrate the need for electronic records. There's already a working case in point in the healthcare industry. Even though the New Orleans VA Medical Center flooded, electronic medical records for 50,000 patients of that hospital and surrounding veterans' outpatient clinics survived and are now available to any VA physician at any VA hospital nationwide.

On September 1, a Department of Veterans Affairs computer specialist was flown from New Orleans carrying backup tapes of all the records, which had been re-entered into computers in Houston by the next night. "It took the VA about 100 hours to transfer electronic health records for all its patients in the South, while it will take thousands of hours for the private sector to reconstitute paper medical records," said Francois de Brantes, health care initiatives program leader for General Electric's Corporate Health Care and Medical Services.

"We've learned a lot about what we lack as a nation with the Katrina disaster – we lack the essentials," Daniel Martich, a doctor who heads up the electronic medical records initiative at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, told attendees of the recent *InformationWeek* Fall Conference. Among those essentials, Martich says, are electronic lists of the medications, allergies, and immunizations that would help emergency medical personnel provide more rapid treatment during a crisis.

Better records would also help save \$300 billion a year now lost to errors, misdiagnosis, and unnecessary duplication of tests resulting from inadequate access to information as stated by Leslie McCombs, the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center's senior director of special projects. In comparison, the healthcare industries of Canada and England are 12 to 18 months ahead of the United States in implementing electronic records keeping, and they continue to make progress on reducing that waste, according to Dan Drawbaugh, CIO for the Pittsburgh Medical Center.

What You Can Do To Be Prepared

It doesn't take a hurricane to destroy your records. It can be a fire, flood, or broken pipes. You can also lose vital records when someone destroys the wrong records or purges them too soon. But, you can take steps today to protect your critical business, medical and legal records from a catastrophic loss. Here are ten things you can do immediately.

1. **Get a professional needs assessment.** Don't spend a penny on hardware or software solutions until you get an objective needs assessment of your current records processes from an unbiased records management (RM) consulting firm. The firm will focus on identifying areas of risk associated with records in all formats and recommend actions to reduce those risks. The consulting firm will also make recommendations for the following:
 - ▶ Increasing access to information
 - ▶ Controlling the growth of materials taking up valuable office space
 - ▶ Reducing operating costs
 - ▶ Minimizing litigation risks
 - ▶ Safeguarding vital information
 - ▶ Supporting better management decision making
 - ▶ Ensuring regulatory compliance
2. **Move critical records to offsite storage.** Start cataloging and organizing your records and move the ones not needed for day-to-day operations to offsite storage facilities. You may need the help of a records manager to properly identify and store these records.
3. **Consider digital storage formats.** Look into the feasibility and cost of converting vital records to digital format. Again, you may need the advice of a records management professional.
4. **Create retention schedules.** Set up records retention schedules that comply with industry best practices as well as federal and state regulations.
5. **Choose storage locations wisely.** Never store records in a basement or attic. Select a secure offsite storage facility where your records will be safe.
6. **Prevent water and heat damage.** Do not store records near water pipes or air conditioning. Never store records near a heat source.
7. **Control the climate.** The ideal climate for records storage is between 65 and 70 degrees F and 55 percent relative humidity.
8. **Avoid light damage.** Store records away from natural and ultraviolet light sources. Paper is fragile and can easily be damaged by light, heat, and moisture in the air.
9. **Stay away from adhesives.** Do not use scotch tape or any commercial non-archival adhesive tape on paper records. You may use special adhesive strips to repair holes and tears in paper. Remove paper clips and staples and unfold any creases in paper records before storing them.
10. **Back up computer files.** Establish a schedule for backing up critical computer files frequently and all files periodically. Consult best practices in your industry for recommended frequencies. Store backup files in a secure offsite facility.

Conclusion

Records management is not a glamorous topic, and until the overwhelming destruction of Hurricane Katrina occurred, most businesspeople never even thought about their records management needs. Recent events have put a spotlight on the problems and heartache caused by not protecting your vital records from damage and loss.

Every business or program must set well-defined objectives for records management that will add value to the bottom line or toward the achievement of the organization's goals and objectives. Start today to safeguard the records that are vital to your organization's survival.

For more information about records management solutions, please contact Cadence Group at 404-874-0544, ext. 0 or by email at info@cadence-group.com.

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This article was prepared by Cadence Group, a woman-owned research and information management company headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia. www.cadence-group.com

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