

Public Welfare Case Records: A Study of Archival Practices

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THE MODERN FEDERAL-STATE WELFARE SYSTEM, established by the public assistance titles of the 1935 Social Security Act, has generated an enormous number of individual case files on welfare applicants and recipients. Public welfare files offer the potential for documenting a stratum of society which has traditionally been poorly represented in written sources. The historical value of these records results from the fact that the case method, as employed in contemporary public welfare systems, has remained essentially investigatory since its origin among the late nineteenth-century charity organization societies. The societies' "friendly visitors" sought to diagnose and treat poverty as a character defect rather than as a social problem, and this approach led to the creation of individualized profiles of recipients, which documented their habits, attitudes, and lifestyles as well as their economic needs. Although case records have developed differently in other fields of social welfare, they have retained their investigatory character in public assistance programs; and, until the early 1970s, they continued to combine normative judgments and objective information.¹

Contemporary public welfare records vary in content and quality, but they consistently provide information regarding each client's name, age, residence, income, and employment history. Depending on a variety of factors including type of program, local or state policy, duration of assistance, and the extent of social services provided, public welfare case files contain a wide range of quantitative and anecdotal information on the personal adjustment, family dynamics, and social functioning of the record subject. The descriptive and impressionistic data found in case files is of special value because it is typically based on contacts with the recipient in his own environment as well as on office interviews. In addition, local public welfare agencies frequently serve as referral sources and focal contacts for other service organizations; and their records often contain information from schools, clinics, rehabilitation programs, private charities, and other community agencies.

¹ Philip Klein, *From Philanthropy to Social Welfare* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1968), pp. 147-59.

Despite the wealth of potential resource material included in public welfare case records and other social welfare files, a review of the literature indicates that archivists have been slow in recognizing their value. Prior to 1970, the few published articles on social welfare case files suggest either that the information they contain is too sensitive for research use or that it is of limited historical value. Instead, emphasis is placed on establishing schedules to dispose of inactive case files.² Beginning with a 1974 article by Virginia Stewart, however, archivists have accorded more attention to the preservation of social welfare case records.³

Twentieth-century public welfare records have not yet received specific attention and, perhaps more surprisingly, they have not been utilized by historians. This study is an exploratory effort to identify current practices and principal problems among state archives regarding the accessioning of public welfare case records. The study is based on a questionnaire which was sent to all state archivists in October 1978, follow-up telephone interviews and correspondence with selected states, and a review of state statutes. Four questions provided a focus for the study:

1. Do state archivists perceive public welfare case records as having value as research materials?
2. Do state archives accession public welfare case records?
3. What are the primary problems that public welfare case records present for archives?
4. Can practicable solutions be developed to deal with the problems?

The study is restricted to federal-state categorical income maintenance programs—Aid for Dependent Children, Aid for the Aged, Aid for the Blind, Aid for the Disabled, and Medical Assistance. These programs were selected because together they represent the largest segment of welfare expenditure, they are universal among the states, and they are of long standing. Aid for the Aged and Aid for the Blind were established in 1935; Aid for the Disabled was created in 1950. All three programs were superseded by the federally administered Supplemental Securities Income program in 1974. Aid for Families with Dependent Children, established in 1935, and Medical Assistance, enacted in 1972, have remained active programs.⁴

² See Vaughn D. Bornet, "The Manuscripts of Social Welfare," *American Archivist* 23 (January 1960): 33–48; Virginia Lake, "Pioneering in the Control of Medical-Clinical Case Records," *American Archivist* 24 (July 1961): 303–7; and James F. Gill and Thornton W. Mitchell, "Ohio—Disposition of Medical Records in State Mental Hospitals," *American Archivist* 26 (July 1963): 371–78. The latter article suggests limited provision for research use of case files.

³ Stewart and more recent writers have focused primarily on the problems of confidentiality and access: Virginia R. Stewart, "Problems of Confidentiality in the Administration of Personal Case Records," *American Archivist* 37 (July 1974): 387–98; Alex Ladenson, "Legal Problems in Administering Confidential Case Records," *SAA Newsletter* (May 1978): 10–11; Peter Gillis, "The Case File: Problems of Acquisition and Access from the Federal Perspective," *Archivaria* 6 (Summer 1978): 32–39. An exception is G. J. Parr's article "Case Records as Sources for Social History," *Archivaria* 4 (Summer 1977): 122–36. In addition, one session of the 1978 annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists was devoted to institutional case records, and three papers were presented: Thomas E. Mills, "Lunacy, Law, and Social Policy: Appraising Records of the Institutionalized Insane"; Ira R. Berlin, "Forgotten Births: The Maxwell Street Dispensary Maternity Patient Records"; David Ladanye, "Archival Retention of Correctional Facility Inmate Case Files."

⁴ Edward T. Weaver, "Public Assistance and Supplemental Securities Income," *Encyclopedia of Social Work*, 17th ed., vol. 2, pp. 1121–35.

Survey Results

Forty-six of the fifty state archives responded to the questionnaire, yielding a return rate of 92 percent. Seven archives—Delaware, Georgia, Idaho, Massachusetts, Nevada, South Dakota, and Wisconsin—currently accession public welfare case records, and eight archives indicated that they plan to begin accessioning them in the future. Three of the eight—Florida, Maryland, and New York—reported specific plans to begin accessioning within two years. In spite of the small number of state archives actually accessioning or planning to accession welfare case records, a large majority of the archivists completing the questionnaire considered public welfare case files as having research value, especially in the areas of sociology, quantitative history, and social work. (See Table 1.) This response distribution indicates a wide discrepancy between the perceived value of public welfare case records and actual state practices.

Table 1: *Discrepancy Between Perceived Value of Public Welfare Case Records and State Practices*

Perceived Value of Public Welfare Case Records	Does your archives accession any public welfare case records?			Total
	Accessions	Plans to Accession	Does Not Accession	
Have Value	6	8	21	35 (76%)
Do Not Have Value	0	0	4	4 (9%)
Uncertain of Value	1	0	6	7 (15%)
Total	7 (15.2%)	8. (17.4%)	31 (67.4%)	46 (100%)

The major reasons cited for the discrepancy between archival perceptions and archival practice were confidentiality and bulk, and in states which do not accession public welfare files these two problems were seen as the primary prohibiting factors. A third impediment cited by non-accessioning states was lack of legal control by the archives over inactive case files. (See Table 2.) These three primary problems, confidentiality, bulk, and lack of legal control, will be considered in order of priority.

Confidentiality Restrictions

Confidentiality restrictions were cited as the most significant barrier to the accessioning of case files, and a review of current federal and state public welfare statutes substantiates this response. Since the inception of the welfare programs, federal regulations have required that state plans for public assistance include provisions for restrictions of disclosure of client information, and current federal confidentiality guidelines for state plans occupy two pages of the *Code of Federal Regulations*.⁵ Although voluminous, federal regulations contain many exceptions

⁵ Office of the Federal Register, *Code of Federal Regulations*, Vol. 45: *Public Welfare* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1977), pp. 25–27.

Table 2: *Perceived Problems of Accessioning Public Welfare Case Records Vs. Reasons for Not Accessioning*

Problems in Accessioning Public Welfare Case Records	Perceived as Primary Problem (N=46)	Primary Reason for Not Accessioning (N=39)
Confidentiality Restrictions	35 (76%)	14 (36%)
Bulk/Space Considerations	15 (33%)	11 (28%)
Lack of Staff Expertise	1 (2%)	3 (8%)
Other (write-ins):		
Lack of Legal Control	1 (2%)	6 (15%)
Low Priority/Scheduled for Disposal	0 (-)	5 (13%)
Total Responses	52*	39

* Six respondents gave two responses.

and, in practice, state confidentiality provisions vary widely in content and are further modified by administrative procedure and rulings.

In a review of the public welfare statutes of twenty-three of the states included in the sample, two broad approaches to confidentiality emerged. The most prevalent pattern is to restrict access to administrative use and to other government functions (e.g., audit review, court process, investigation of fraud). The second approach is to restrict the case files themselves to administrative and governmental functions but to permit public review of the names, addresses, and amount of assistance of welfare recipients under specified conditions and with the proviso that the information not be used for commercial or political purposes.⁶ It would seem that archives in states whose statutes reflect the second approach might have more leeway in negotiating to provide researchers with access to case records. However, the many statutory and administrative exceptions to the general principle limits the value of such generalizations. The Maryland statute, for example, limits disclosure of case record information to administrative use, but provision is made for statistical summaries of the information to be made available to researchers.⁷

A more instructive method of considering confidentiality is to examine responses among states that accession case records. Statutes pertaining to the disclosure of public welfare information vary widely among these seven states, ranging from restriction of their use to administrative purposes to the establishment of specific provisions for research access. Georgia's statute represents the ideal from the archival point of view; it provides that private researchers may use confidential, classified, or restricted records when "(1) the researcher is qualified to per-

⁶ Public welfare statutes were reviewed for Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, California, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Massachusetts, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, and Wisconsin. See Privacy Protection Study Commission, *Privacy Law in the States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1977) for citations on state public welfare confidentiality statutes.

⁷ *Annotated Code of Maryland* (1976), Article 88A, 6.

form such research; (2) the research topic is designed to produce a study that would be of potential benefit to the State or its citizens; and (3) the researcher will agree in writing to protect the confidentiality of the information contained in the records." In accordance with further provisions of the statute, the Georgia Department of History and Archives requires that in order to use public welfare case records, researchers must obtain permission from the source agency and must agree not to reveal personal identifiers. The other end of the confidentiality spectrum is represented by Delaware, whose statute limits access to modern public welfare records (ca. 1918 to the present) to administrative functions.⁸ The Delaware Bureau of Archives accessions all welfare records in the state and, because research use is prohibited, seals them. The archives is currently seeking legislation that would impose a statute of limitations on confidentiality restrictions.⁹

In four of the five remaining states, research access to case records held in the state archives is controlled by the source agency. In Wisconsin, for example, the Records Disposal Authorization, which schedules the transfer of case records to the archives, specifies that researchers must obtain written permission from the Department of Health and Social Services before using the records. The Idaho state archives does not have a formal agreement specifying access provisions, but it is believed that researchers could obtain permission to use welfare files by contacting the welfare agency.¹⁰ Finally, South Dakota's procedure represents a somewhat different approach to access. At the time that confidential records are transferred to the Archives Resource Center, the source agency is expected to specify criteria for access. The center staff then reviews research requests to determine if they represent a legitimate research interest and applies the criteria, including any restriction, without further consultation with the source agency.¹¹

Two states which do not accession case records, Minnesota and Michigan, have taken noteworthy approaches in dealing with access to personal records. In Minnesota, public records that contain identifiable personal information have been restricted under emergency classification since the passage of privacy legislation in 1975. The Minnesota Division of Archives and Manuscripts plans to begin accessioning public welfare case files but has not acted yet both because of uncertainty over their future accessibility and because of a lack of resources. In the interim, the division has followed two courses. First, it has requested that county welfare boards preserve a sample of case files. Second, it has lobbied actively for new legislation which would establish a timetable for opening public records to researchers and would allow the archives to declassify the records.¹²

The Michigan experience relates to mental health records, but it has direct application to all social welfare case files. Michigan statutes provide that mental health records may be used for legitimate research, but no provision is made for their transfer to the state archives. Accordingly, the state archives negotiated with the Department of Mental Health for transfer of the records and developed a

⁸ *Georgia Code, Annotated* (1975), Title 40-813c; *Delaware Code, Annotated* (1974), Title 31, 1101.

⁹ Edward Heite, Delaware Bureau of Archives, telephone interview, 16 December 1978.

¹⁰ M. Gary Bettis, Idaho State Archives, telephone interview, 20 November 1978.

¹¹ Dennis F. Walle, South Dakota Archives Resource Center, letter, 18 April 1979; *South Dakota Compiled Laws, Annotated* (1976), 1-18c-9.

¹² Sue E. Holbert, Division of Archives and Manuscripts, Minnesota Historical Society, telephone interview, 15 December 1978.

contractual agreement, to be signed by researchers and by the two agencies, which provides a model for other archives. After research and input by the staff of both the archives and the Department of Mental Health, the agreement was drafted by an attorney in the Office of Hearings and Legislation which, like the archives, is under the Department of State. The agreement attempts to balance the client's right to privacy with the researcher's need for information and contains specific provisions: the researcher agrees (1) not to reveal identifiable personal information about the record subject, (2) to allow any notes or writings based on his research to be reviewed by the archives before dissemination, (3) to pay damages of \$1,000 for violating provisions of the agreement, and (4) to indemnify and hold harmless the state and its agencies for any costs or damages which may accrue from the use of the records.¹³

In Michigan, as in several other states, permission to use confidential case records is based on the demonstration of legitimate purpose by the researcher. However, it is difficult, and perhaps impossible, to establish the objective and comprehensive criteria needed to determine legitimate research use. The Michigan archives deals with this problem through an initial screening interview and consultation with the source agency. Through an initial interview the state archivist ascertains the research objectives of researchers requesting permission to use mental health case records. The interview is intended to screen out researchers who are seeking information on individual subjects or who do not have a clearly formulated research proposal. Research requests that are approved by the archives are then forwarded to the Department of Mental Health for review and approval. Researchers denied access to mental health case records may appeal the decision under the provisions of Michigan's 1975 Freedom of Information Act.¹⁴

The Michigan agreement has not been tested in the courts, but the combination of an initial screening interview, concurrence by the source agency, and a contractual agreement provides extensive safeguards against the misuse of confidential case records, while allowing access for research. Alex Ladenson, legal counsel to the Society of American Archivists, states that a signed provision for indemnifying the agency for damages serves to transfer legal liability from the archives to the user of confidential records.¹⁵

State archives that accession case records rely on agreements with the source agency to obtain them, instead of on statutory authority, and research access is regulated by the source agency. This pattern will probably remain dominant both for states currently accessioning case records and states that begin accessioning them in the future. When combined with a contractual statement prohibiting the release of personal identifiers, it meets the needs of the archives, the researcher, and the source agency representing welfare recipients. However, among states like Delaware and Minnesota, which must seek legislative revisions in order to allow researchers access to case records, the recommendations of the federal Privacy Protection Study Commission offer impetus for change. The commission's report recommends that Congress enact for state public assistance plans guide-

¹³ Contractual Agreement for the Release of Confidential Mental Health Records for Legitimate Research Purposes, Michigan State Archives, n.d.

¹⁴ David J. Olson, Michigan State Archives, telephone interview, 13 April 1979; letter, 8 May 1979.

¹⁵ Ladenson, "Legal Problems in Administering Confidential Case Records," p. 11.

lines that would include provisions for the disclosure of individual case records to researchers. These recommendations pertain to active case records and, if enacted, would enable but not require states to allow research use.¹⁶ However, the recommendations should serve to enhance the receptivity of states to opening closed case records to researchers.

Bulk/Space Considerations

Bulk was cited as the second major obstacle in the accessioning of public welfare files, and the extent of the problem is apparent when one examines state records schedules. A 1971 Wisconsin Records Disposal Authorization reveals an annual accumulation of 50 cubic feet for Aid for the Blind and Aid for the Disabled case files. Oregon's 1963 Record Inventory and Schedule for Aid for Families with Dependent Children records indicate that they are generated at a rate of approximately 200 cubic feet per year. Georgia's 1973 Records Disposition Standard for Vocational Rehabilitation files (which include Aid for the Disabled and Aid for the Blind records) show an annual rate of accumulation of 900 cubic feet. However, despite the immense numbers of case files available to state archives, bulk presents a more tractable problem than does confidentiality.

The archivist has two alternatives for dealing with bulk; he may reduce the number of records through sampling, or he may reduce the size of the records through microfilming. The survey shows that most of the archives that accession public welfare case records follow the former course. Five archives use sampling procedures, one microfilms all records, and one preserves all case records in their original format. The reaction among state archivists to the sampling of public welfare case records tends to correspond to the practices each employs. The sampling techniques used by the five archives that sample case files vary in sophistication and accuracy, but archivists in these states tend to present sampling as the most practicable solution to the problem of bulk. Archivists who do not sample or do not accession case records raise questions concerning the accuracy and validity of sampling. Two impediments to the accurate sampling of case records are their heterogeneity and the value of linking different case records pertaining to the same individual. When transferred from source agencies, the case records of different public welfare programs seem typically to be interfiled together. Small samples taken from a heterogeneous body of records reduces the probability of obtaining a representative profile of specific groups (e.g., Aid for the Aged recipients) within the population. Sampling also reduces the possibility of linking case records on recipients who receive assistance sporadically in the same program category or successively in different categories.¹⁷

Microfilming eliminates the problem of bulk while preserving complete documentation, and it is the best solution for state archives that have the requisite financial resources. The costs of preparing collections for microfilming and for the filming itself would vary widely according to the condition of the records and

¹⁶ Privacy Protection Study Commission, *Personal Privacy in an Information Society* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1977), pp. 476-77.

¹⁷ See James K. Benson, "Sampling Techniques in Archival Management and Quantitative Research" (unpublished report prepared for the Minnesota Historical Society, Summer 1976).

the techniques used. The Delaware Bureau of Archives and Records, the only state archives that microfilms case records, does not have figures available on the total costs of the operation. However, their costs for producing an original and a user copy of reel microfilm containing 2,400 frames (a reduction ration of 27:1) is \$55.88.¹⁸ Applying this figure to an Erie County, New York, study which found that filming active Aid for Families with Dependent Children files requires an average of 170 microform frames, an average cost of \$3.96 per file can be estimated for microfilming AFDC records.¹⁹ Although this estimate can not be generalized to other program categories or to AFDC files outside of New York, it does suggest that the technical costs of microfilming case records are relatively high.

Microfilming public welfare case records is probably too costly a procedure for many state archives, but microfilm may still represent a feasible solution to the problem of bulk. Federal guidelines permit state welfare agencies without adequate storage facilities to use microforms of active case files as the record copy.²⁰ Archivists in several states indicated that the state welfare agency currently produces microform copies of case records, typically in the form of jacketed microfiche which can be updated. This development, while solving the problem of bulk, may have mixed results; state welfare agencies which microfilm records, having solved their own storage problems, may be less receptive to transferring inactive files to the archives.

Although the archivist has more leeway in dealing with bulk than in coping with confidentiality restrictions, the techniques most readily available—sampling and microfilming—both include drawbacks. An alternate course is to select significant information from each file and then to select a random sample of complete files for preservation. By pulling out and preserving summaries of quantitative and demographic information from each case file, the archivist can both retain linkages between different records on the same individual and protect against the possibility of a non-representative random sample. These summaries are available in case records in the form of face sheets and application forms. The Ohio Department of Public Welfare, for example, uses a standardized Case Status Sheet (Form DPW 2151) for all categorical assistance programs. The status sheet contains the recipient's name, address, living arrangement, program category, amount of grant, itemized budget including all resources, and demographic information on all members of the caseload. Successive face sheets report any changes in the case at a minimum of one year intervals.²¹ Application forms contain different and more detailed information than face sheets, including residency, employment and financial background, marital status, and medical history. The fact that the mean number of questions required of applicants to Aid for Families with Dependent Children programs during the period 1974 to 1976 was 246 provides an indication of the comprehensive nature of application forms.²² Together, the two

¹⁸ Edward Heite, telephone interview.

¹⁹ James Wall, Archives Division, New York Office of Cultural Education, telephone interview, 12 December 1978.

²⁰ Code of Federal Regulations, Vol. 45: *Public Welfare*, p. 27.

²¹ Bonnie J. Winberg, Muskingum County (Ohio) Welfare Department, interview, 15 March 1979.

²² Toby H. Campbell and Mark Bendick, Jr., *A Public Assistance Data Book* (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 1977), pp. 182–83.

forms identify those who applied for assistance and why, provide a demographic profile of each member of the family, and record change over time. After pulling this information from each file, the archivist can preserve a randomly selected sample of complete case files containing narrative reports, verification forms, correspondence, and other material, for preservation.

Pulling application forms and status sheets from all case records would, of course, be time-consuming, and to be feasible it would require that the state welfare agency use standardized, easily recognized forms. Although standardized forms have characterized state welfare programs in recent years, earlier files may not include them, particularly in states that have highly decentralized, locally administered welfare programs (e.g., Wisconsin). A uniform arrangement in the files would not be essential, but would simplify the tasks involved.

Lack of Legal Control

The third problem area in accessioning case records is the state archives' lack of legal authority over inactive case records. The difficulties involved stem from the absence of statutory provisions for closed welfare records. Federal regulations specify that a single state agency must exercise control over active welfare files, but do not assign responsibility for closed files. Most state statutes similarly ignore inactive case files. State welfare agencies, through default, retain control over the disposition of case files that are no longer of value to them, and in three states the welfare agency has mandated that case records cannot be transferred to the state archives. Five other state archives, two that accession case files and three that do not, reported difficulties in obtaining inactive case files from welfare agencies and cited this as the major obstacle in accessioning.

Administrative problems in securing case records are particularly common in states with decentralized welfare programs. Federal regulations permit states either to administer categorical programs directly or to supervise locally administered programs; and despite a trend toward centralization, eighteen states still had locally administered programs in 1976.²³ Locally administered welfare programs present two potential problems for archives. First, the case records themselves may be less uniform due to the lack of centrally standardized requirements. The situation in Wisconsin, which has both a locally administered welfare program and a tradition of decentralized state government, reflects this problem. Until the last few years, county social service departments had not used uniform face sheets and application forms, thus precluding the combination of selection and sampling discussed above.

The second problem is that records controlled by local welfare boards may be less accessible to state archives than those controlled by a central state agency. Two of the respondents that accession welfare files, Massachusetts and Georgia, cited difficulties in securing case records from local agencies. The Massachusetts welfare system was locally administered until 1968, and the state archives' right to regulate the retention of local government records is questionable. In practice, some local welfare agencies have routinely transferred to the archives inactive case files, while others have destroyed them. Since the establishment of a state

²³ Social Security Administration, *Characteristics of State Plans for Aid to Families with Dependent Children*, 1976 ed. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1977), pp. iii, ix.

administered welfare system in Massachusetts, the archives has accessioned a sample of inactive case files from the local branches.

Georgia, which also has a policy of sampling welfare case records, has presented a different response to the problem of local control. The Vocational Rehabilitation files, which are state records, include Aid for the Disabled and Aid for the Blind case files, and a one cubic foot, random sample of Rehabilitation files is accessioned from each district office three years after the cases become inactive. In addition, the Georgia Department of Archives and History is currently collaborating with the records officer of the state welfare agency, which "has some degree of administrative supervision over the county offices," in an effort to obtain welfare case records from the local agencies.

Machine-Readable Data: A Possible Future Solution

The development of computer technology capable of manipulating and analyzing large amounts of data has permitted researchers to utilize the information contained in case records, and has contributed to a reassessment by archivists of the value of social welfare case files. In addition, computerization is rapidly changing the nature of the documentation itself. Since the early 1970s, state welfare agencies have increasingly moved toward reducing their reliance on traditional case records by using automated data processing (ADP) equipment to handle individual case information.

Statistics are not available on the number of state welfare agencies which currently use ADP equipment to create and store case record information, but the Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services exemplifies the transition toward automation. Since 1977, social service agencies in four Wisconsin counties have had terminals providing on-line access to a central computer located in the department. County workers can enter applicant information into the computer which then determines eligibility and, if appropriate, opens a case. The application information is stored in machine-readable format instead of in a case record, and the computer tape is updated as necessary to reflect changes in the client's situation. The department projects that the remaining counties in Wisconsin will be included in the computer network by 1981.²⁴

The availability of information on individual welfare recipients in a machine-readable format has obvious benefits for researchers and archivists. It allows researchers to select and analyze pertinent information readily, to manipulate data, and to link and compare case files with other sources. For the archivist, computerized case record information provides solutions, or potential solutions, to the problems of bulk and confidentiality. Machine-readable data, whether stored on tapes, discs, or drums, obviously requires much less storage space than the equivalent information stored on hard copy. Computerization also allows the archives to replace personally identifiable case record information with codes, allowing for anonymity of record subjects while preserving the ability to link case files. In addition, computerization promises to increase centralization among welfare agencies, since the most cost-efficient systems are those in which a network of local terminals feed into a central computer. However, the preservation of machine-

²⁴ Tom Corbett, Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin-Madison, telephone interview, 3 November 1978.

readable records also requires an expertise not currently available in most state archives.

The survey reveals that among respondents that accession case records, none of the records accessioned are in machine-readable format. Wisconsin, however, has completed negotiations with the state Department of Health and Social Services concerning machine-readable case record information, and has written a schedule for transferring inactive machine-readable case files to the archives. Among states planning to begin accessioning case records, only Florida was influenced by computerization. The Florida Bureau of Archives and Records Management's decision to accession case files stems from both the perceived value of the records and an initiative by the state welfare agency to preserve computerized case files. Schedules have been written for the transfer of the computer tapes to the archives.²⁵

Accessioning machine-readable records requires provisions for processing, storing, and servicing the computer tapes; and the plans developed by the Archives Division of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin provide an instructive example. The plan has five major points. (1) Closed cases will be selected annually from the master data file by the Office of Information Systems of the Department of Health and Social Services. (2) Before transfer, the files will be processed through a computer program which replaces names and other personal identifiers with a unique code. The program will allow the computer to identify and link subsequent cases on the same client or members of the caseload. (3) The processed archives tapes will be transferred to the state archives with operational documentation after a five-year retention period. (4) Researchers will obtain permission to use the tapes from the Department of Health and Social Services. (5) The archives is currently negotiating with the Data and Program Library Service (DPLS) of the University of Wisconsin-Madison to store the tapes. DPLS would be responsible for servicing the tapes.²⁶ This type of arrangement, involving coordination between the archives, the source agency, and a third party with facilities to service and run computerized records, may become common as other state archives begin dealing with machine-readable data.

Conclusion

Although a large majority of state archivists recognize the research value inherent in public welfare case records, the problems they present have prevented most state archives from accessioning them. However the practices employed by the seven states currently accessioning case records indicate that the obstacles are not insurmountable, and computerization offers potential solutions to the most intransigent problems. Since many still active or recently closed case files were opened ten years or more ago, the further investigation of these potential solutions could result in increased accessibility to an important resource for documenting the nation's poor.

²⁵ John Stewart, Bureau of Archives and Records Management, Florida Department of State, telephone interview, 15 December 1978.

²⁶ Max Evans, Archives Division, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, interview, 29-30 November 1978.