

Thoughts on a State Records Program

HOWARD P. LOWELL

"Archives! Who needs them?!" This comment was attributed to a consultant working under the direction of a team of businessmen charged with recommending efficiencies and economies in the operations of a state government in New England. The team recommended abolishing the state archives and records management program as a "marginal luxury" of state government.¹

Officials in that state disregarded this recommendation, but the attitude that government records programs are a "marginal luxury" still exists among some governmental decision makers and many members of the public. It reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of government records in society. It also reveals a shortcoming of government archivists who fail to articulate the role of government records and the need for an active state records program.

That state archives and records management programs are under-supported, not fully utilized, and misunderstood is documented by Edwin C. Bridges in his analysis of reports on state archives programs from the initial round of the NHPRC-funded state historical records assessment and reporting projects.² Analysis of reports from the second round of these projects does nothing to refute his conclusion that "American state archives are in an impoverished condition and are

currently unable to provide adequate care for their records."³ "The image of state records administrators that emerges from these reports," writes Bridges, "is of a small, haggard band of defenders surrounded by forces that threaten to overwhelm them and desperately struggling just to survive."⁴ His use of the cliché, "the cycle of poverty," aptly describes conditions in many state programs.

If this is the situation, then why have a state records program anyway? Is it a "marginal luxury?" In times of fiscal constraint, can a state afford to support its state archives program? What is the role of records in state government?

The answer to this last question is the key to answering the others. It is to this question that archivists must thoughtfully respond so that government decision makers, the citizens who elect them, and the bureaucracy that serves them, can vividly understand the reasons to support a state archives and records management program.

"Government is the one institution that in one way or another, at one time or another, touches the lives of every single individual within its jurisdiction. It not only affects the lives of all citizens, but inherent in that contact between government and citizen is a complex interdependence of rights and obligations, of mutual responsibility and accountability."⁵ The

¹Samuel S. Silsby, Jr., *Public Policy and Government Archives Administration*, Information Bulletin No. 2 (Augusta: Maine State Archives, 1974), 1-5.

²Edwin C. Bridges, "Consultant Report: State Government Records Programs," in *Documenting America: Assessing the Condition of Historical Records in the States*, ed. by Lisa B. Weber (Albany: National Association of State Archives and Records Administrators, 1983), 1-18.

³Bridges, "State Government Records Programs," 1.

⁴*Ibid.*, 12.

⁵"Principles for State Archives and Records Management Agencies" adopted by the National Association of State Archives and Records Administrators, 22 July 1977, *American Archivist* 42 (January 1979): 106-08.

records of government are essential to this interdependence of government and citizen. Records are at the core of all operations in every agency. They document the principles and experience on which government is based. They contain the information that allows the government to function. They provide officials with current critical data for making decisions and administering programs, and provide a linkage to past operations. In addition, they document the delivery of services, show legal responsibilities of the government and the governed, and protect the rights of citizens. Government records contain information on the management and expenditure of public funds. They help ensure the accountability of government and its officers. Records also document the historical development of the government itself, and the community, state, and people it serves. A state records program serves as a trustee to the citizens of the state, to impartially care for their records.

Pragmatically, a state records program also produces substantial cost savings while creating safeguards to ensure the legal disposition of records no longer required for daily government operations. The information in state records is a valuable resource and should be managed as such. The program for state records is fully as important an administrative service as other administrative functions that manage state resources such as budgeting, auditing, personnel services, and physical facilities. As state governments continue to produce records at exponentially increasing rates, and apply new information technologies, the systematic management of government records becomes even more crucial to efficient, effective, economical, and responsive public administration.

A records program in the private sector is often viewed as a "profit center" contributing to the overall economic well-

being of a business. A sound, professional records program that supports all state operations should be viewed in the same way. State government records programs do produce significant, proven cost savings and cost avoidances. In periods of declining public revenues and cutbacks even in essential state services, records management efforts divert monies previously used for "housekeeping" activities to those that directly relate to agency missions. This argument should seem attractive to those concerned with the costs of government bureaucracy.

A state records program should include the administration of archival records as an integral component. State archives provide evidence of the responsibilities, decisions, and transactions of state government across the years. State archives, however, are more than an administrative resource to the government. They are an essential cultural and usable resource that belongs to the people. State archives are preserved for the people as a whole, for whatever use they may wish to make of them, whether to research the history of the state, to prove title to land, to establish age for social security qualification, to determine land-use policy, or to establish legal precedent.

The challenge for state records administrators, and indeed all archivists knowledgeable about the benefits of a sound records program, is to affirm these benefits through not only words but programs. A strong state archives program can be a positive argument for support of other archival programs in the state. A weak state program provides no model for other archivists to use when arguing for support of historical manuscripts or university archives programs. Indeed it becomes a "model" to overcome.

Why a state records program? The answer is inescapable: Programs to manage and make accessible the records that government creates and to provide for con-

tinued preservation of those with enduring values as archives are fundamental to government administration in a democratic society. But to whom have archivists addressed this answer, and how often? How do existing records programs mirror cardinal canons of representative democracy and good public administration?

Reflecting on the reasons some state records programs succeed while others stagnate, H. G. Jones places the responsibility on the person in charge of the state

program to develop a firm philosophical foundation for its existence, to articulate that philosophy often and well, and to translate that philosophy into action.⁶ In many states, the challenge of transforming words into effective actions still remains. The benefits of doing so, however, are significant—to the state archives and records management program, to the state government, and to the citizens for whom they exist. That is the essence of the challenge.

⁶H. G. Jones, "The Pink Elephant Revisited," *American Archivist* 43 (Fall 1980): 473–83.