

# Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

## **VSARA's First Year**

A year ago July 1<sup>st</sup> the Vermont State Archives and Records Administration (VSARA) was launched. It has been, within the current economic climate, an interesting year for launching anything. Still, as our first anniversary approaches, significant progress has been made.

The expansion of our authorities to include records management necessitated drafting a new mission statement based on our statutory mandates found in 3 V.S.A. §117. The new statement emphasizes our record management responsibilities and allows us to prioritize our efforts within a context of dwindling resources. A personally difficult decision was to drop archival management down the priority list, largely because of the pressing need to modernize and standardize record management practices. The statement is at <http://vermont-archives.org/about/mission/mission.htm>.

Within records management it was clear that we had to forge active partnerships with agencies to assist them in meeting legal requirements for having a current and comprehensive records management program. With consolidation we therefore created a record analyst unit under the direction of Tanya Marshall. The hiring of Scott Reilly and Katie Sherman as record analysts marked a move to professionalize records management by requiring formal records training.

A Targeted Assistance Program (TAP), modeled after a similar program at the National Archives and Records Administration, was created as the vehicle for working with agencies. Agencies formally agree to participate in TAP through a memorandum of understanding and commit to forming a TAP team including the agency record officer, business office, and legal counsel. This required defining the duties of agency record officers and having agencies assign a staff person as record officer or as record liaisons. A series of workshops were given to increase awareness of record management benefits. The record analysts help agency TAP teams identify what records they produce or acquire and identify legal requirements governing those records in order to determine how long they have to be retained as well as whether the public records were open or exempt from disclosure.

TAP also required developing a suite of tools to support a consistent approach to creating agency records management programs. One key tool is VCLAS which provides a common vocabulary for describing functions, activities and records. Under the old system agencies identified records in an ad hoc, idiosyncratic manner so that common activities/records across agencies lacked a common nomenclature. In an extreme, but not uncommon, approach agencies might simply identify records as "miscellaneous," "historical," or simply "old files." That obviously made it impossible to know what records were in any series thus described.

One product of VCLAS is the ability to create general schedules that agencies can use to develop consistent record series titles/retention periods for records commonly found in offices. Three general schedules have already been approved. Agency specific record series are also developed through TAP with the Professional Responsibility and Labor Relation boards being the first entities to have approved schedules.

There are numerous TAP efforts under way, with several more pending signed agreements. The Vermont Municipal Clerks and Treasurers' Association requested a memorandum of understanding form and we will begin a TAP with them as soon as the form is signed. We look forward to working with the VMCTA in creating new schedules for municipal clerk and treasurer records.

The collaborative effort with the Enterprise Project Management Office within the Department of Information and the Attorney General's office, known as the Information Strategies Taskforce on Archives, Records and Technology (iSTART), continues though the consolidation has streamlined that work. The goal is to establish best practices that among other things will allow digital records to be managed as digital records, eliminating requirements to print out or microfilm the records. Another goal is to build recordkeeping rules into the implementation of enterprise technologies; without those rules the likely result would be to re-create the record management problems experienced under the old paper-based system.

There have been many difficult decisions as the new program took shape. It was decided to drop the reformatting section. Though the reformatting/microfilm staff were able and dedicated, a careful analysis of the unit revealed a host of issues. There was a perpetual backlog of filming projects; for example approximately 88 percent of the record series at the record center scheduled to be filmed



had not had any filming done in three years or more. Several semi-active records series were routinely filmed, requiring re-filming or the physical scratching off of images every time the files were changed. Conversation with several agencies revealed that they were only filming the records because their often out of date disposition orders required them to do so. The fact that the records were often unmanaged meant that transitory records were intermingled with records with longer retentions and unnecessarily filmed. Combined with aging film equipment and the need to control what came into the record center rather than focusing on managing what was already here, our analysis supported this necessary, but nonetheless, difficult decision.

In March the Archives staff at Redstone moved to Middlesex uniting all of VSARA's staff at one location. The renovated reference room was opened, new policies and procedures put in place, and the workflow has improved. Requests for birth, death or marriage records as well as agency requests for files are now addressed in two days (walk in vital record requests are handled immediately). Genealogy requests are also usually handled within two days, but no more than a week.

The capital bill contains money to complete construction of new vault areas and other work that will allow us to complete the move to Middlesex (currently some archival records remain at Redstone and are available only by appointment). The work should be done by the end of this year.

So this has been an exciting, if occasionally exhausting, year. It could not have been done without a great staff willing to identify and implement new procedures. I hope anyone who is interested will stop by and enjoy the new reference room. For those who may want to know more about what we are doing go to the managing records section of our website at: <http://vermont-archives.org/records/>.