Kentucky Department for Libraries & Archives: Public Records Division Electronic Records Program Overview

by Charles Robb

Current Administrative Setup

The Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives (KDLA) is organized in four units, one of which is the Public Records Division. The statutorily defined function of the division is to work with state and local agencies to ensure creation and preservation of adequate documentation of agencies' functions, policies, decisions, procedures, and essential transactions, as well as information which protects the legal and financial rights of government and of individuals affected by agency activities. The division performs this function by establishing standards, procedures, and administrative regulations for recording, managing, preserving, and reproducing public records, irrespective of medium, and by working with agency officials and their designated representatives to create and maintain active continuing programs for the efficient management of public records. In the establishment of records schedules, PRD functions as the executive agent of the State Archives and Records Commission, which has sole legal authority to determine records retention and dispositions.

The Public Records Division, in turn, is comprised of five branches: State Records, Local Records, Archival Services, Micrographics, and Technology Analysis and Support (TAS). The TAS branch was created in November, 1991, in order to form a center of expertise which could ensure that information technologies enhance rather than diminish the Archives' capacity to secure and make accessible adequate documentation. TAS provides technical support to the division's use of automated tools and techniques, furnishes technical analysis and assistance to division branches on electronic records disposition analysis, scheduling, imaging technology, and access questions. It also oversees the division's document preservation services. The branch supports the efforts of the State and Local Records Branches in the appraisal and scheduling of electronic systems, as well as the Archival Services Branch, whose primary responsibility has been internal holdings management. The branch was and is small; it is managed by the author; its technical component includes a network development specialist, a computer operations analyst senior, a computer operations analyst, and an entry level archivist position whose focus is exclusively computerized records. The latter position is currently empty and frozen, due to budgetary constraints which are impacting state government in Kentucky broadly.

Program History and Key Elements

Public Records Division activities in the area of electronic records management were organically related to program development and expansion which occurred throughout the

last two decades. During that period, the public records program has been an aggressive and proactive one both where records management and archival administration are concerned. The program took advantage of a series of federal grants which included NHPRC grants that funded SPINDEX database construction, processing of the papers of Kentucky governors, and establishment of the first local records re-grant program of its kind in the country. Records management staff had scheduled approximately 7,800 series of records between 1971 and the early 1980s . A new library-archives facility was constructed in 1983, which provided what seemed like a capacity to grow forever, as well as modern micrographics and preservation facilities.

In the course of appraisal and scheduling efforts in the early 1980s, however, records management staff were increasingly aware that many series they encountered were parts of electronic systems, and that they had inadequate expertise to address retention of the electronic portions of those systems. The State Archives and Records Commission therefore established a task force in 1983 to develop a strategy for addressing the problems posed by electronic records. The Machine-Readable Records Task Force included SARC members, legislative liaisons, preservationists, and, very critically, representatives of the state's central computing agency, the Department of Information Systems (DIS). During the Task Force's deliberations, the idea of using data dictionary software owned by DIS to assist scheduling of electronic records was discussed, and this led to a $143,000 Machine-Readable Records Project funded by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), which was implemented from 1985-1988.

As the MRR project proposal was being drafted, the Kentucky Information Systems Commission (KISC), was established by the legislature, as a multi-agency body charged with overseeing computing across state government. KDLA was represented on that commission from its inception; former state archivist Lewis J. Bellardo was vice-chair during the Commission's first two years, during which time the MRR project began. State Librarian James A. Nelson has served as a commission member for the past seven years, and Public Records Division staff have served on various workgroups and committees of KISC during the same period.

The major components of the MRR project were: 1) joint construction of a central data dictionary by DIS and KDLA; 2) development of policies and procedures for scheduling/managing electronic records; and 3) development of a general schedule for electronic records. The data dictionary was to provide an inclusive inventory of electronic systems and files and be built so that it could trigger migration of files to indefinite and/or permanent storage as files were scheduled. It was originally planned that a systems analysis would be hired for the MRR project. Instead a planning group, composed of records management staff, archivists, and DIS technical staff, completed a functional requirements statement concerning KDLA's needs of the data dictionary. Meanwhile, DIS altered the schedule for the dictionary's construction, so that it was up and running before the planning group was able to articulate the functions it should support.

The result of planning being out of sync with dictionary development was a 1986 recommendation by DIS that our agency construct an automated tool to function with the data dictionary, the Public Records Management System (PRMS). This system was planned as a comprehensive life-cycle management database which would combine descriptions of manual and electronic files along with disposition instructions. PRMS is an index to public records and state publications of value to the public, and to state and local agencies. Unfortunately, financial support for this system was never directly provided at the level initially requested, which has meant that it is still not fully networked throughout state government. As this is written, however, a follow-up requirements analysis is being planned which will examine different software and networking options for the PRMS database, and references to the system as a public records index are present in language being proposed by a KISC workgroup on information policy. This means that despite its present limitations, there remains strong commitment to growth of this KDLA-maintained database as a management tool.

Nearly contemporaneous with PRMS development was implementation of statewide information resource planning required by KISC. As a partial result of the MRR grant's providing public records staff with an opportunity to explain public records management functions to DIS and KISC members, PRD staff participation in the IRP planning process was extensive from its beginning. Agencies have been asked to address records management and archival issues since the biennial planning cycles began in 1986.

Information resource plans (IRPs) are detailed overviews of agency computing as that relates to the primary programs and initiatives of agencies. IRPs include agency mission statements; strategic statements linking mission to automated applications; and project statements, which describe specific systems or systems related by common function and the budgets associated with their development or maintenance. Planning instructions require agencies to address scheduling of systems or data within the project descriptions, as well as that agency records officers participate in plan development. Plan review includes review by KDLA records management and TAS staff, along with that of DIS, legislative, and executive agency budget analysts.

TAS and State Records Branch staff have used the IRPs to supplement information already available from the data dictionary to build an inclusive list of systems being maintained by agencies, to analyze the systems according to the basic functions they perform, and to then set priorities for scheduling projects. Staff also use IRP review meetings held

with agency representatives to elaborate on the record keeping requirements that public records statutes impose on agencies, and of KDLA's role in that management process.[1]

TAS staff have also invested much time in special committee work initiated by KISC in the areas of information policy; the statewide information systems architecture delineating hardware, software, and telecommunication standards; statewide geographic information system development; computer security; and imaging. In each case, the public records program has benefitted significantly from the forum the Commission provides. Staff have identified the most significant electronic systems maintained by state government and have begun to articulate to agencies, if not solutions to the archiving of the information in them, the nature of the problem and of our authority and responsibility to intervene in the systems management function to effect at least some reasonable solutions. As an example, although KDLA has not issued regulations on electronic mail, staff participation in information policy development has allowed us to state our position in that area, and there is coming to be grudging acceptance of the fact that e-mail in Kentucky state government has record status. How we would capture it is another matter.

Success Factors/Obstacles to Progress

The successes of the Kentucky program are in part an outcome of early recognition by KDLA staff and members of the State Archives and Records Commission that electronic records management comprises a crucial part of what we are charged to do as an archival agency. This recognition led to implementation of the NHPRC grant, which in turn created an ongoing opportunity for archives staff to interact with other state agencies which must participate in that part of information resource management which public records management requires. In Kentucky, relationships with staff of the Department of Information Systems and the Kentucky Information Systems Commission particularly have played a critical role in obtaining additional legislative support and a presence at the table around which decisions about the functionality of systems can realistically be impacted by retention considerations, as well as public access requirements.

This does not mean that we are accomplishing the designing-in of functional requirements for electronic records, nor should it be understood to mean that we are accessioning sizable volumes of electronic records. The State Archives has yet to acquire the equipment needed to properly manage an electronic archives in the first place, and in the second, staff

1 In the last year, staff of the Kentucky Information Systems Commission have completed a networked system, the Plan Collection and Management System, which supports online creation, review, and analysis of agency IRPs. For their effort, KISC recently received a NASIRE innovation award. The system is of significance to the KDLA archival/records management effort because it can be directly used by our staff to monitor agency computing and also linked to PRMS. This means direct connection can be made between agency-created mission statements, electronic systems, and records schedules, and we are very excited about the opportunity it provides to make that connection visible to agency staff for the first time.

believe that the networking of agency systems is a real enough phenomenon that what might be called the Bearman view of distributed archives is distinctly possible. Archivists, wittingly or not, as well as all other information professionals, are going to be the beneficiaries of the linkages and information sharing enabled by this networking and the technical standards which it requires.

The extent to which KDLA's successes were dependent upon the central authority vested in DIS and KISC is also critical to recognize. This simplified our communications task substantially, since gaining a degree of credibility with powerful allies had a definite impact on adherence to guidelines we are providing or will provide.

Obstacles that remain also relate to role identification. Greater progress could have been made both during implementation of the KDLA MRR grant and subsequently if the strategic vision guiding activities could have been better articulated, and the author assumes some responsibility for this. Internally there were and still are differences of opinion and judgment concerning the priority electronic records should have versus the development of automated retrieval tools, the application of staff time to the processing backlog, etc. Internally there is still a noticeable desire to continue to apply old, proven techniques, be they records management or archival, to a radically changed environment.

The latter problem is exacerbated by the fact that techniques are connected to the ways in which archival and records management services have traditionally been promoted to state agencies, to researchers, and to our funding sources. The techniques for scheduling series, as one example, may readily be applied to the myriad report outputs of agency systems, and in fact there may be significant cost-benefits to agencies which address the mountains of paper that are accruing as a result of automation. There are times when our staff have capitalized on the cost benefits by scheduling the latter series rather than undertake the more difficult task of stepping back to assess the underlying functions performed by the system and whether we are rightly spending time addressing those functions in the first place. The expenditure of time involved in this obviously detracts from an already limited capacity to schedule systems with higher priority, and the overall effect is to diminish progress we would like to make vis a vis systems of greater documentary importance.

This suggests that archival programs, our own included, need to develop better consensus about strategic purposes than currently exists. It also suggests, in the opinion of the author, why certain changes are slow in coming. Be that as it may, however, progress in the Kentucky program has been based upon the opportunities which were afforded staff by a variety of circumstances. What the author believes to have been consistent about the overall approach is that we have steadily improved our capacity to secure documentation and positioned ourselves to take advantage of better ideas about how to do that as they became apparent to us.