

Understanding Government Records Management: A Guide for Colorado Open Records Act (CORA) Requesters

This guide is intended to help Colorado Open Records Act (CORA) requesters better understand how government agencies manage records. Government records are managed under retention schedules that determine what records are kept, how long they must be retained, and when they may legally be destroyed.

Understanding these basic concepts can help requesters make more effective requests and better understand agency responses.

Do Government Agencies Keep Every Record Forever?

No. Most government records are kept only for the period required by a retention schedule. After that retention period expires, records may legally be destroyed. Only certain records are designated as permanent.

What Is a Retention Schedule?

A retention schedule is an official records management document that identifies categories of records and establishes the minimum amount of time those records must be kept before they may legally be destroyed.

The [Colorado State Archives](#) publishes general retention schedules for state agencies, municipalities, counties, school districts, and special districts. Government entities may also develop agency-specific schedules for records not fully addressed by general schedules.

Why Retention Schedules Matter to Requesters

Retention schedules are one of the best tools for understanding what types of records an agency is expected to maintain and how long those records are typically retained.

They can help requesters:

- identify relevant categories of records,
- understand how long records are generally kept,
- and better understand “no responsive records” responses.

Many government records today are maintained within electronic systems and specialized software applications rather than traditional paper files or standalone documents. Retention

schedules generally identify categories of records but typically do not identify every system, database, or location where those records may exist.

Are Retention Schedules Public?

Yes. Retention schedules are public records and may themselves be requested under CORA.

Some agencies post schedules online; others provide them upon request.

Reviewing a retention schedule before filing a CORA request can often help narrow requests and improve search results.

Is It Legal for Agencies to Destroy Records?

Yes — if destruction occurs in accordance with a retention schedule.

If records were legally destroyed before a CORA request was received, the agency generally has no obligation to recreate them.

As a result, a “no responsive records” response may sometimes mean records were destroyed according to schedule and no longer exist. However, it may also mean:

- the records never existed,
- another agency maintains the records,
- or the request was too broad or unclear.

Understanding retention schedules can help requesters better evaluate these responses.

Tips for More Effective CORA Requests

- Consider requesting the agency’s retention schedule first to better understand what records may exist and how long they are typically retained.
 - Be specific about dates, departments, subjects, and record types.
 - File requests promptly, since some records may be legally destroyed after applicable retention periods expire.
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Understanding how agencies manage records can help requesters make more informed CORA requests and better understand agency responses when records cannot be located.

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