

Frequently Asked Questions – Department of State Records

What is a Record?

Record means all information under the control of the Department, including information created, stored, and retrievable by electronic means, regardless of physical form or characteristics, made in or received by the Department and preserved as evidence of the organization, functions, policies, decisions, procedures, operations or other activities of the Department or because of the informational value of the data contained therein. It includes records of other Government agencies that have been expressly placed under the control of the Department upon termination of those agencies. It does not include personal records created primarily for the personal convenience of an individual and not used to conduct Department business and not integrated into the Department's record keeping system or files. It does not include records that are not already in existence and that would have to be created specifically to meet a request (see 22 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), section 171.11(e)).

What kinds of records can I obtain from the U.S. Department of State?

Through the FOIA and Executive Order 13526, you may request access to records that are both created or obtained by the Department and also under the Department's control at the time a request for these records is submitted. Department of State records document (1) the formulation and execution of U.S. foreign policy and (2) the administration and operations of the Department of State and its missions abroad. For information on Department of State records go to the Department of State Records Disposition Schedules, the Foreign Affairs Manual (FAM), and the Foreign Affairs Handbook (FAH).

Also, through the Privacy Act, you may request access to records about yourself, if you are a U.S. Citizen or permanent resident alien, that are kept in name-retrievable form by the Department of State. These records include, for example, visa, consular, passport, and – for current or former employees of the Department of State – personnel, medical, security, and administrative records. For information on name-retrievable records, see Privacy Impact Assessments (PIAs) and Systems of Records Notices (SORNs).

Does the Department of State keep all of its Records?

No. Records no longer needed by an office, are destroyed or retired in accordance with a Records Disposition Schedule approved by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

Permanent records are records appraised by NARA as having sufficient historical or other value to warrant continued preservation beyond the time they are needed for administrative, legal, or fiscal purposes. These records are retired to the Department's records storage facility and transferred to the Federal Records Center and eventually transferred to NARA, which is responsible for providing access to the public.

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Temporary records are approved by NARA for disposal, either immediately or after a specified retention period. These records are destroyed either in the office or after they have been retired. By law, no records can be destroyed without an approved Records Disposition Schedule.

What is a Records Disposition Schedule?

A records disposition schedule identifies categories of records created and maintained by the Department, whose final disposition has been approved by NARA. The schedule provides mandatory instructions for what to do with records (and non-record materials) no longer needed for current business.

When are Department of State records transferred to the National Archives?

Permanent records must generally be reviewed, declassified (if appropriate under Executive Order 13526) and transferred to the National Archives when 25 years of age. These records then become the property of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

Are all records released when they become 25 years old?

No. Certain categories of information may be protected from disclosure beyond 25 years, for example, information which would cause an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy, privileged information, trade secrets, commercial and financial information, and national security information required to be kept classified.

What is "classified" information?

Information about the national defense or foreign relations of the United States which requires protection against unauthorized disclosure may be "classified" under the terms of Executive Order 13526. The Executive Order provides general restrictions on access to classified information, including the general requirement of security clearance and a need to know the information.

How are Department of State records organized?

Department of State records are organized into three basic file series: the Central Foreign Policy file, Post files, and Lot files. The Central Foreign Policy file contains all telegrams sent or received by the Department of State and selected internal memoranda, written correspondence, diplomatic notes, congressional correspondence, memorandums of conversations and documents from other agencies. Post files are the records of U.S. Embassies, consulates and other diplomatic missions abroad. Lot files are collections of records generated by offices in the Department of State.

What is the official filing system for Department of State's records?

The Department's official filing system, called Traffic Analyses by Geography and Subject (TAGS) and Terms, provides an easy to use, subject-oriented means to store and find information.