

TIPS FOR SALVAGING WATER-DAMAGED LAW OFFICE RECORDS

Following a hurricane or other flooding event, many lawyers will face specific challenges getting their practices back up and running. In some cases, salvaging water-damaged client files and other essential business records will be a key part of that recovery.

To help attorneys whose law offices are affected by flood waters, the State Bar of Texas Archives Department has some tips for salvaging water-damaged law office records.

Please be advised that these recommendations are a brief outline specifically targeted to business records. If you need additional guidance, or have any questions or concerns about recovering electronic media, photographs, books, or framed artworks and certificates, please contact the State Bar's archivists directly at **(800) 204-2222, ext. 1311**, or **archives@texasbar.com**, and we'll point you toward resources specific to your needs.

1. Safety first.

- If sewage or chemicals have contaminated records, call in a disaster recovery professional. Don't attempt to handle contaminated records on your own.
- When dealing with mold, wear proper protective gear, such as gloves, goggles, and masks.

2. Pick your battles.

Depending on the extent of damage, you may not be able to salvage all of your hard copy records. Instead of trying to save everything, focus your energy on the following types of records:

1. Unique records that have no existing, accessible digital copy.
2. The records that are most vital for getting your practice back in operation, serving your current clients, and fulfilling your obligations to previous clients. Some examples:
 - Current client files
 - Master copies of client documents, such as:
 - Wills
 - Agreements
 - Settlements
 - Corporate documents
 - Essential business records, such as:
 - Partnership agreements
 - Leases
 - Major equipment records (e.g. warranties, maintenance agreements)

3. Freeze moldy records to stop mold growth.

If safety concerns keep you away from your office for an extended period of time, there is a good chance wet law office records will have turned moldy by the time you reach them. As soon as possible, discard and remove non-essential records that are exhibiting mold growth to prevent mold from spreading unnecessarily to your essential business records and client files.

Freezing is the best way to stop mold growth until you're able to dry and clean moldy records.

If you only have a small amount of affected records, you can freeze them yourself:

- Use a frost-free kitchen freezer or chest freezer that can

maintain a temperature at or below 0 degrees Fahrenheit.

- Remove damaged records from folders.
- Wrap short (about 1-inch thick) stacks of damaged records in wax paper or freezer paper.
- Tape shut and label each wax paper wrapper.
- Stack wrapped records flat in the freezer.
- Leave records frozen for at least a few weeks. Only remove them from the freezer when you're ready to air-dry them or have them professionally vacuum freeze-dried.

Air-drying frozen records:

- Work with one small batch from the freezer at a time, as air-drying takes up quite a bit of space.
- Dry your records in a climate-controlled indoor location.
- Keep relative humidity at or below 55 percent.
- Use fans to keep air circulating throughout the room. (Do not point fans directly at drying records.)
- Cover tables, uncarpeted floors, or other flat surfaces with paper towels or clean, unprinted newsprint.
- Remove stacks of records from their wax paper wrapping and lay out on top of the covered surfaces.
- Carefully separate the frozen records from each other as they thaw. If one piece of paper resists being separated from another, the records are still frozen. Allow them to thaw longer before attempting to separate.

- Records may take several days to fully air-dry.
- If dried records are in physically poor condition, you may want to consider photocopying or scanning them after they're dry and discarding the damaged original.

4. Professionally freeze dry large amounts of wet records.

If left frozen long enough (several weeks to a few months), paper records will eventually dry. Many disaster recovery companies offer freezing services, which are ideal if you need to restore a greater volume of records. See the end of this flyer for a list of some vendors that provide document-freezing services in Texas.

To prepare wet records for professional freeze-drying:

- Leave records in their original folders, if possible.
- Pack folders into banker's boxes.
- Completely fill each box.
- Insert a sheet of wax paper or freezer paper between every couple folders.

5. Air-dry small amounts (100 or fewer folders) of damp or slightly wet records.

- If possible, dry your records in a climate-controlled indoor location, keeping relative humidity at or below 55 percent.
- Use fans to keep air circulating throughout the room. (Do not point fans directly at drying records.)
- Cover tables, dry uncarpeted floors, or other flat surfaces with paper towels or clean, unprinted newsprint and lay

records out to dry in a single layer on top of the covered surfaces.

- If you do not have enough room to lay records out to dry in a single layer, you can lay out records in stacks, inserting a layer of paper towel or clean, unprinted newsprint every 15 to 20 sheets. Replace the wet paper towel or newsprint frequently for faster drying.
- Records may take several days to fully air-dry.
- If dried records are in physically poor condition, you may want to consider photocopying or scanning them after they're dry and discarding the damaged original.

6. Onsite electronic records are not necessarily destroyed.

After flooding, files on computers or external hard drives may be salvageable if the hard drive is intact. Completely dry the hardware and take it to a computer professional to see if information can be retrieved.

7. Don't overlook dry records.

Do not overlook dry records that have survived in a flooded room or building. Dry records will be susceptible to mold growth if not removed to a dry location.



DOCUMENT RECOVERY VENDORS

The following vendors are recommended by the Northeast Document Conservation Center and listed for convenience. This should not be considered an endorsement from the State Bar of Texas.

Belfor—

<https://www.belfor.com/en/us/recovery-services/document-restoration>

BMS Cat—

<https://www.blackmonmooring.com/disaster-recovery/document-media-recovery/>

Polygon —

<http://www.polygongroup.com/en-US/services/document-recovery-solutions/>

OTHER TEXAS DOCUMENT RECOVERY VENDORS

The following vendors are listed for convenience. This should not be considered an endorsement from the State Bar of Texas.

Electronic Restoration Services —
<http://ers-us.com/>

Knight Restoration Services —
<http://www.knightrestoration.com/document-recovery.html>

Paul Davis Restoration —
<https://pauldavis.com/>

Roadrunner Restoration —
<https://roadrunnerrestoration.com/services/restoration/>

Specialty Restoration of Texas —
www.specialtyrestorationoftexas.com/document-media-recovery.htm