




THE JAMAICA ARCHIVES



What is the connection you may ask between the Jamaica Archives, which preserves materials of historical value for posterity, and the access to information programme which is concerned with making available to the general public documents of current value? The connection is very close, so much so that in 2002 when the Access to Information Unit was established, it was placed within the Jamaica Archives & Records Department, a department of the Office of the Prime Minister.


There is of course an obvious connection between the two, in that records produced today become the archives of tomorrow, so the Archives would have an interest in any developments affecting government records or “documents” as they are defined in the ATI Act. However the connection goes deeper than mere ‘interest’, as the Jamaica Archives has been involved in the process since the beginning. The Government Archivist was in fact a member of the Wells Committee, which was established in 1995 to consider the components of a freedom of information law. When the decision was taken to proceed with the legislation, the Jamaica Archives in Ministry Paper # 43 of November 1998 Proposals for Access to Information Act was given responsibility to guide ministries and departments in preparing for the Act.

Why was the Jamaica Archives so heavily involved? The answer is simple, as the Government recognized very early that the effectiveness of the legislation depended on the availability and accessibility of records. Under the Archives Act of 1982, the Jamaica Archives and Records Department is responsible for advising government entities on the organization and protection of their records, so the Department had a vital stake in the legislation. At the time the Department through the Government Records Centre was promoting the concept of records management and it quickly realized that the pending new law could provide the necessary incentive for government entities to treat the subject of records management seriously. The Archives therefore under Ms Elizabeth Williams, the then Government Archivist, seized the opportunity it was given.

The Department began organizing workshops in records management and in freedom of information as the law was then called. The first workshop was held in 1996 at the Ministry of Finance and interestingly enough, I was one of the presenters in my then capacity as Director of the National Library of Jamaica. The Department through the Archives Advisory Committee, made representations to the Government for the appointment of records and information managers in government entities as part of a career path for records management personnel. The success of this ‘campaign’ can be seen from the fact that in 1996 there was only one (1) Records Manager (at the Ministry of Finance) and now all sixteen ministries (including the Cabinet Office) have records and information managers.


The Access to Information programme has been of great benefit to the Archives, as it has focused attention on the value and importance of records. In the area of records management the Department has made great strides in the past three (3) years chiefly as a result of the realization by government entities that they were woefully unprepared for the Act as far as the organization of their records were concerned. The growth in attendance at meetings of the Government Records and Information Managers Network, (G-RIM) which the Department initiated in 1997 to assist in the development of proper records and information management practices throughout the public sector attests to this growing emphasis on records management. From an attendance of fewer than 10 persons in the late 1990’s, over 30 persons now attend the monthly meetings of this voluntary network, which comprises records and information managers from ministries, departments and other entities in the public sector,

The challenge for the Archives now that the ‘novelty’ of the ATI Act has passed and the number of requests in some government entities is less than anticipated, is to try and ensure that the high level of commitment many government entities made to records management continues and that the unglamorous work of evaluating and listing the files etc.



continues. It is hoped that through these exercises, records of no further value will be identified for disposal and those of long term historic value will be identified for transfer to the Archives Unit of the Department in Spanish Town for permanent preservation.

The need to create a unified legal framework within which the public has a right to information is still a challenge within Jamaica today. Existing legislation has to be reconciled with the new regime provided under the Access to Information Act which creates a right for members of the public to access official documents held by Government Authorities. Legislation governing archiving is a critical piece of the framework that governs the right to information. Without proper defined processes for records creation and management, there will be no records to release under access to information regimes. Archive legislation often predates concepts of a general right of access to official records of the




materials. All official records no longer in current use and which have been adjudged by the Archives Advisory Committee as being worthy of permanent preservation for reference or historical purposes are preserved in the Jamaica Archives. Additionally, the Minister may, by order, direct that official records deposited in any place or custody shall be under the charge and control of the Archivist. Access to documents in the Jamaica Archives is determined by reference to a centralized existing archival database, rather than in response to a particular request. Public reading rooms are provided










Management (G-RIM) Network. This Network comprises Records Management practitioners across government. The G-RIM Network serves as a forum where issues relating to Records and Information Management are discussed, experiences shared and solutions sought with the aim of implementing these measures throughout government entities to ensure standardization of procedures and reduction of costs.

In addition to the Access to Information Act, there have also been some other developments which have caused and will further caused significant changes in the Jamaican reco



A meeting was held with Access to Information officers and civil society on January 30, 2006 with civil society organisations and Access officers from Government Ministries and Agencies to discuss some of the issues that have arisen in implementation of the Act and suggestions for dialogue and communication on issues to ensure a better working relationship.

The archival records of Edinburgh are many things; unique, irreplaceable, trivial, priceless, fascinating, boring, copious, dirty, delicate, robust, leather bound, centuries old, yesterdays, published, unknown, significant and voluminous. Above all they are a hugely significant memory and resource of inestimable worth to Edinburgh, its inhabitants and its visitors”. *Edinburgh City Archives*

“Any freedom of information legislation is only as good as the quality of the records to which it provides a right of access. Such rights are of limited use if reliable records are not created in the first place, if they cannot be found when needed, or if the arrangements for their eventual archiving or destruction are inadequate” s.61 Code of Practice on Records Management, Scotland.

Volume 6 of the Access to Information Newsletter will focus on Enforcement of the Right to Know and we are happy to announce that the Independent Jamaica Council for Human Rights and the Jamaican Bar Association will assist in its production. We are looking for persons or groups interested in working on Volume 7. Please tell us if you want the newsletter to focus on a specific theme for the month, or if you wish to submit information or articles. We welcome your input, and any information you care to share with us about your special interests.

Jamaicans for Justice is considering the possibility of setting up a list serve for this E-newsletter please give us your views on this and whether you believe this would be beneficial to the work to create this.

If you do not want to receive this e-newsletter please e-mail Carole Excell at cartercenterja@mail.infochan.com or call her at 755-3641. Again, we apologize for any cross postings, and are currently working on a database of e-mails to avoid future duplications.

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