



pennsylvania

OFFICE OF OPEN RECORDS

The Mission of the Office of Open Records is to enforce the state's Right-to-Know Law and to serve as a resource for citizens, public officials and members of the media in obtaining public records of their government. As part of that mission, the Office of Open Records has established a short "**Citizens' Guide**" that will provide a basic overview of the Right-to-Know Law.

Agencies are reminded to ensure that citizens are provided access to records to which they are entitled. Equally important, the Office of Open Records reminds citizens to use good judgment in seeking records from the public body and not use this law to harass or overburden a public body from performing its other functions. The Office of Open Records reminds both citizens and agencies that when the law takes effect in January, the process initially may not be seamless. The Office of Open Records encourages patience and a spirit of cooperation among all parties.

As always, if you have any questions or need more information please contact the Office of Open Records at (717) 346-9903 or openrecords@state.pa.us.

PRESUMPTION OF OPENNESS: Records are Public Unless....

The most significant change to the Right-To-Know Law is that all records are presumed to be public records unless disclosure is barred by: 1) state or federal law or regulation, or judicial order; or 2), privilege, e.g., attorney-client, doctor-patient, or 3) one of the exceptions in Section 708 of the Right-to-Know Law.

The burden is now 100 percent on the Agency to establish why the record is not available.

WHO IS SUBJECT TO THE LAW: Agencies Must Comply

Commonwealth Agencies: Any office, department, authority or other parts of the executive branch, state-affiliated entities, independent agencies, and includes the Governor, Attorney General, Auditor General and the Treasury Department.

Local Agencies: Any political subdivision, intermediate unit, or charter, public trade or vocational school [or] any local, intergovernmental, regional or municipal agency, authority, council, board commission or similar governmental entity.

Legislative Agencies: The Senate, House of Representatives and many committees and commissions like the Capitol Preservation Committee, the IRRC, Center for Rural Pennsylvania, the Legislative Reapportionment Commission, and Legislative Audit Advisory Commission to name a few. For a complete list, see Section 102.

Judicial Agencies: Any entity or office of the unified judicial system, like Magisterial District Judges

WHAT IS COVERED BY THE LAW: Records, not Questions

Make sure when you file a RTK request, you are seeking **records** and not just asking questions. The law governs release of **records**.

A record is defined as “any information regardless of its physical form or character that documents a transaction or activity of an agency **AND** is created, received, or retained pursuant to law **OR** in connection with a transaction, business or activity of an agency.”

Records can take many forms, including papers, letters, maps, books, tapes, photographs, film or sound recordings, information stored or maintained electronically and a data-processed or image-processed documents. Note that e-mails can also be a form of public records, subject to any exceptions.

EXCEPTIONS: Protects Certain Information From Disclosure

The law contains 30 exceptions, cited in Section 708, that permit an Agency to withhold records. An Agency may deny release of a record if it falls within one of the 30 exceptions designed to protect information that is confidential or may jeopardize safety or investigations. Types of records that can be withheld include records related to personal or public security, DNA/RNA records, autopsy records, social security numbers, personal financial information, *personal email* addresses, marital status, identity of a covert law enforcement officer, home address of judges or law enforcement, confidential source records, victim information.

HOW TO FILE A REQUEST

A citizen can file a Right-to-Know request in four ways. You can submit your request by:

1. Fax
2. Electronic mail
3. In person
4. U.S. Mail

When submitting a request to the Agency, always retain a copy for your file. A copy of this RTK request would be necessary if you should need to file an appeal to our office upon denial.

The first thing a citizen should do to file a RTK request is check with the local or Commonwealth Agency to determine the Open Records Officer (each Agency must have one) and whether the Agency has a Right-to-Know request form. You can always use the Uniform Request Form available on our website to file a request. Address your request to the Open Records Officer. Some Agencies use the term “Right-to-Know Officer.”

You should make sure that your request for records is **specific and concise**. Identify as specifically as you can the records you want, so that an Agency can quickly locate them and determine whether they are public record.

Please be advised that if you send an e-mail request or file a request in person it does not speed-up the time that that an Agency has to respond to your request. An Agency has five business days to respond to a request, whether you place the request in person or by mail.

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THE AGENCY

An Agency has **five business days** to respond in writing to: 1) grant the request, 2) deny the request (citing the legal basis for denial/partial denial) or 3) invoke a 30-day extension for certain reasons.

The clock starts the day after the request is received during regular business hours.

Acceptable grounds for a 30-day extension includes: off-site location of records, staffing limitations, need for legal review or redaction, complex request, or requester did not pay applicable fees as required, or failed to follow Agency policy.

If an Agency does not respond to a request in the allotted time, the request is deemed denied, and you have the right to file an appeal with the Office of Open Records.

HOW TO FILE AN APPEAL?

If an Agency denies a record, or a portion of a record, the requester can file an appeal with the Office of Open Records.

The appeal must be submitted to the Office of Open Records within 15 business days of the mailing date of the Agency’s response. Appeals should be sent to the Office of Open Records, Commonwealth Keystone Building, 400 North St., 4th Floor, Harrisburg, PA 17120-0225. They may also be submitted via facsimile to 717-425-5343 or via email to openrecords@state.pa.us as a Microsoft Word or PDF attachment.

All appeals must be in writing and shall include the following information that may be submitted using the Appeals Forms found on <http://openrecords.state.pa.us>:

- A copy of the Right-to-Know Request
- A copy of the denial letter submitted by the Agency
 - If the agency does not respond in writing within five business days, the request is “deemed denied” and can be appealed.
- State the grounds you believe the record is a public record
- Address any grounds that the Agency raised in its denial

The Office of Open Records will only docket an appeal and assign an appeals officer when all of this information has been received.

When the Office of Open Records receives the appeal, it has 30 days to respond from the date of receipt of the appeal to issue a Final Determination.

The Office of Open Records may conduct a hearing (which is a non-appealable decision). It may decide the case on the basis of the information filed with the Office. It may seek additional information from the involved parties. In most cases, the Office of Open Records will issue a Final Determination based on information provided to our Office without conducting a hearing.

When the Office of Open Records issues a Final Determination it is binding on the Agency. If the Agency or the requester want to appeal the ruling of the Office of Open Records, the appeal must be filed with the appropriate court within 30 days of the mailing of the Final Determination by the Office.

FEES

The fee for a standard 8 1/2 x 11 black and white document is 10 cents to 25 cents per page.

- Postage fees may not exceed the actual cost of mailing.
- If an Agency offers enhanced electronic access it can establish user fees that must be approved by the Office of Open Records.
- An Agency cannot charge for the time it takes to redact a document or the legal review needed to determine if a document is a public record.
- An Agency may require pre-payment if the fees are expected to exceed \$100.

PENALTIES

The law provides a civil penalty of up to \$1,500 if an Agency denies access to a public record in bad faith and up to \$500 per day when an Agency does not promptly comply with a court order to release records under the act.

ATTORNEYS FEES

If a court holds that records were denied based on an unreasonable interpretation of law, or in bad faith, an Agency can be required to pay attorneys' fees. ***Remember*** -- if your RTK request is deemed frivolous by the court, you can be required to pay attorneys' fees.