

# **Rights & Responsibilities:**

## **The Rights of Requesters and the Responsibilities of The Office of the Attorney General of Virginia (hereinafter the “Office”) under the Virginia Freedom of Information Act**

The Virginia Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), located in § 2.2-3700 et seq. of the Code of Virginia, guarantees citizens of the Commonwealth, representatives of newspapers and magazines with circulation in the Commonwealth, and representatives of radio and television stations broadcasting in or into the Commonwealth during the regular office hours of the custodian of records, access to public records held by public bodies, public officials, and public employees.

A public record is any writing or recording—regardless of whether it is a paper record, an electronic file, an audio or video recording, or any other format—that is prepared or owned by, or in the possession of a public body or its officers, employees, or agents in the transaction of public business. All public records are presumed to be open, and may only be withheld if a specific, statutory exemption applies.

The policy of FOIA states that the purpose of FOIA is to promote an increased awareness by all persons of governmental activities. In furthering this policy, FOIA requires that the law be interpreted liberally, in favor of access, and that any exemption allowing public records to be withheld must be interpreted narrowly.

### **Your FOIA Rights**

- In order to have the right to request documents under FOIA, you must be a citizen of the Commonwealth of Virginia, representative of a newspaper or magazine with circulation in the Commonwealth, or a representative of a radio or television station broadcasting in or into the Commonwealth during the regular office hours of this Office. If you qualify under FOIA:
  - You have the right to request to inspect **or** receive copies of public records, or both.
  - You have the right to request that any charges for the requested records be estimated in advance. As of July 1, 2022, public bodies must notify the requester in writing that the public body may make reasonable charges not to exceed its actual cost incurred in accessing, duplicating, supplying, or searching for requested records and inquire of the requester whether he would like to request a cost estimate in advance of the supplying of the requested records.

- If you believe that your FOIA rights have been violated, you may file a petition in district or circuit court to compel compliance with FOIA. Alternatively, you may contact the FOIA Council for a nonbinding advisory opinion.

## **Making a Request for Records**

- You may request records by U.S. Mail, fax, email, in person, or over the phone - FOIA does not require that you use any particular method to convey your request. FOIA also does not require that your request be in writing, nor do you need to state that you are requesting records pursuant to FOIA.
  - From a practical perspective, it may be helpful to both you and the person receiving your request to put your request in writing. This allows you to create a record of your request. It also gives us a clear statement of what records you are requesting, so that there is no misunderstanding over a verbal request. However, we cannot refuse to respond to your FOIA request if you elect to not put it in writing.
- Your request must identify the records you are seeking with "reasonable specificity." This is a common-sense standard. It does not refer to or limit the volume or number of records that you are requesting; instead, it requires that you be specific enough so that we can identify and locate the records that you are seeking.
- Your request must ask for existing records or documents. FOIA gives you a right to inspect or copy **records**; it does not apply to a situation where you are asking general questions about the work of this Office, nor does it require this Office to create a record that does not exist.
- You may choose to receive electronic records in any format used by this Office in the regular course of business.
  - For example, if you are requesting records maintained in an Excel database, you may elect to receive those records electronically, via email, on a computer disk or flash drive, or to receive a printed copy of those records.
- If we have questions about your request, please cooperate with staff's efforts to clarify the type of records that you are seeking, or to attempt to reach a reasonable agreement about a response to a large request. Making a FOIA request is not an adversarial process, but we may need to discuss your request with you to ensure that we understand what records you are seeking.

**To request records from this Office, you may direct your request to the Office of General Counsel's FOIA inbox, which can be reached at [FOIA@oag.state.va.us](mailto:FOIA@oag.state.va.us); (804)786-2071; 202 North 9<sup>th</sup> Street, Richmond Virginia 23219; fax: (804)786-1991.**

In addition, the Freedom of Information Advisory Council is available to answer any questions you may have about how FOIA works. The Council was created in the legislative branch of state government to issue opinions on the operation and application of FOIA, to publish educational materials, and to provide training about FOIA. However, please be aware that the Council is not a records repository and does not process records requests on behalf of other public bodies, nor is the Council an investigative or enforcement agency. The Council may be contacted by email at [foiacouncil@dls.virginia.gov](mailto:foiacouncil@dls.virginia.gov), or by phone at (804) 698-1810 or toll-free at 1-866-448-4100.

### **This Office's Responsibilities in Responding to Your Request**

- This Office must respond to your request within five working days of receiving it. "Day One" is considered the day after your request is received. The five-day period does not include weekends, holidays or other days when this Office is closed for business.
  - The reason behind your request for public records from this Office is irrelevant, and you do not have to state why you want the records before we respond to your request. FOIA does, however, allow this Office to require you to provide your name and legal address.
  - FOIA requires that this Office make one of the following responses to your request within the five-day time period:
    - 1) We provide you with the records that you have requested in their entirety.
    - 2) We withhold all of the records that you have requested, because all of the records are subject to a specific statutory exemption. If all of the records are being withheld, we must send you a response in writing. That writing must identify the volume and subject matter of the records being withheld, and state the specific section of the Code of Virginia that allows us to withhold the records.
    - 3) We provide some of the records that you have requested, but withhold other records. We cannot withhold an entire record if only a portion of it is subject to an exemption. In that instance, we may redact the portion of the record that may be withheld, and must provide you with the remainder of the record. We must provide you with a written response stating the specific section of the Code of Virginia that allows portions of the requested records to be withheld.

- 4) We inform you in writing that the requested records cannot be found or do not exist (we do not have the records you requested). However, if we know that another public body has the requested records, we must include contact information for the other public body in our response to you.
  - 5) If it is practically impossible for this Office to respond to your request within the five-day period, we must state this in writing, explaining the conditions that make the response impossible. This will allow us an additional seven working days to respond to your request, giving us a total of 12 working days to respond to your request. In the case of criminal investigative files requested pursuant to § 2.2-3706.1 of the Code of Virginia, we are allowed an additional 60 working days to respond to your request, giving us a total of 65 working days to respond to your request.
- If you make a request for a very large number of records, and we feel that we cannot provide the records to you within 12 working days without disrupting our other organizational responsibilities, we may petition the court for additional time to respond to your request. However, FOIA requires that we make a reasonable effort to reach an agreement with you concerning the production of the records before we go to court to ask for more time.

## **Charges**

- A public body may make reasonable charges not to exceed its actual cost incurred in accessing, duplicating, supplying, or searching for the requested records. No public body shall impose any extraneous, intermediary, or surplus fees or expenses to recoup the general costs associated with creating or maintaining records or transacting the general business of the public body. Any duplicating fee charged by a public body shall not exceed the actual cost of duplication. Prior to conducting a search for records, the public body shall notify the requester in writing that the public body may make reasonable charges not to exceed its actual cost incurred in accessing, duplicating, supplying, or searching for requested records and inquire of the requester whether he would like to request a cost estimate in advance of the supplying of the requested records as set forth in subsection F of § 2.2-3704 of the Code of Virginia.
- You may have to pay for the records that you request from this Office. FOIA allows us to charge for the actual costs of responding to FOIA requests. This would include items like staff time spent searching for the requested records, copying costs, or any other costs directly related to supplying the requested records. Any charges cannot include general overhead costs.
- If we estimate that it will cost more than \$200 to respond to your request, we may require you to pay a deposit, not to exceed the amount of the estimate, before

proceeding with your request. The five days that we have to respond to your request does not include the time between when we ask for a deposit and when this Office receives your deposit.

- You may request that we estimate in advance the charges for supplying the records that you have requested. This will allow you to know about any costs upfront, or give you the opportunity to modify your request in an attempt to lower the estimated costs. The five days that we have to respond to your request does not include the time between when we send you the estimate and when you respond. If you do not respond within 30 days, then your request will be deemed to be withdrawn.
- If you owe us money from a previous FOIA request that has remained unpaid for more than 30 days, this Office may require payment of the past-due bill before it will respond to your new FOIA request.

### **Types of Records**

The following is a general description of the types of records held by this Office:

- Personnel records concerning employees and officials of this Office.
- Records of contracts which this Office has entered into.
- Records of memorandum and communications between this Office and client agencies.

### **Commonly Used Exemptions**

The Code of Virginia allows any public body to withhold certain records from public disclosure. The following non-exhaustive list is common exemptions this Office may use to withhold records:

- Personnel records (§ 2.2-3705.1 (1) of the Code of Virginia)
- Records subject to attorney-client privilege (§ 2.2-3705.1 (2)) or attorney work product (§ 2.2-3705.1 (3))
- Vendor proprietary information (§ 2.2-3705.1 (6))
- Records relating to the negotiation and award of a contract, prior to a contract being awarded (§ 2.2-3705.1 (12))
- Working papers and correspondence of the Attorney General (§ 2.2-3705.7(2))

- Criminal investigative files relating to an ongoing criminal investigation (§ 2.2-3706(C))

### **Policy Regarding the Use of Exemptions**

- The general policy of this Office is to invoke the personnel records exemption in those instances where it applies in order to protect the privacy of employees and officials of this Office.
- Due to this Office's status as the Commonwealth's law firm, the general policy regarding records with client agencies is to invoke exemptions whenever it may apply in order to safeguard attorney-client privileged communications and attorney work product.
- The general policy of this Office is to invoke the contract negotiations exemption whenever it applies in order to protect this Office's bargaining position and negotiating strategy.
- The general policy of this Office is to invoke the working papers and correspondence of the Attorney General exemption when it applies in order to allow this Office to properly and thoroughly deliberate important decisions.