



Frequently Asked Questions About the California Public Records Act

Do I have to submit a Public Records Act request in writing? No, but we recommend it. It helps to create a record of your request.

Who can make a Public Records Act request? Anyone can. This includes individuals, organizations and companies. There is no residency requirement, meaning anyone regardless of where they live may request records. In fact, you can request records anonymously, meaning you have a right to request records without disclosing your identity, although if you do not provide contact information such as an anonymous email address, an agency may not be able to communicate with you to help with your request, and it may not be able to provide you with information about any costs that might be necessary to obtain copies of records.

What government agencies are subject to the Public Records Act? All state and local agencies, with few exceptions for entities like the California Legislature, the courts and judicial agencies, which are subject to their own access requirements, as outlined in the handbook. All public colleges and universities, including their police departments. California law enforcement agencies at all levels, such as sheriff's offices and police departments. This includes district attorneys.

How long does the government have to respond to my request? By statute, agencies have 10 calendar days to respond to you. Unfortunately, at that time, it may respond by telling you the agency may need more time to locate, review and produce the records. Officials can give themselves one 14-day extension for "unusual circumstances," which is narrowly defined.

What if I need help from the government agency to make my request? When submitting a request, we recommend you note that the government has a duty to assist you. California law requires agencies to "assist the member of the public to identify records and information that are responsive to the request or to the purpose of the request." You can read about that requirement [here](#).

How much can the government charge for records? You generally have a right to inspect most records – i.e., go into a government office and look at them – at no cost. You also have the right to make your own copies using your own devices, such as scanning or photographing the records. If you want the agency to make copies of records, it can charge you for "the direct cost of duplication," or in some circumstances a specialized "statutory fee" for certain records. It cannot generally charge for time spent searching for, reviewing or redacting records.

Can I request electronic versions of records? If a record exists in an electronic format, the government must provide it to you in that format.

What if my request is denied? First, review the reasons the agency provided for denying you access to the records. If you make a request in writing, it is required to cite the reason – the specific statutory exemption – for denying your request. If it did not do that, demand in writing that it do so. If you disagree with the determination, you should push back and try to change the agency's position. You can contact our free Legal Hotline for information. Ultimately, you can bring a lawsuit, typically starting in Superior Court.