

Pro Tips: Public Records Request

How to Make Effective Requests for Government Transparency
DogeDogsOfIndiana.com



DOGE Dogs of Indiana know that clarity and precision are key to getting the public records you need. Below are pro tips to help you streamline your request, avoid common pitfalls, and successfully navigate the process.

Identify the Right Agency

Before submitting a request, ensure you are contacting the correct agency. Consider:

- ✓ Who holds the records? Example: Health-related data → Department of Health, not the Governor's Office.
- ✓ What level of government? City, County, State, or Federal?
- ✓ Check agency websites—many list records they maintain and provide request instructions.

Example:

✗ **Bad Request:** "I want all records on election fraud." (Too vague, unclear which agency handles this information.)

✓ **Better Request:** "I request copies of all reports of alleged election fraud investigated by the Indiana Secretary of State's Election Division for the 2022 general election."

Be Specific: Avoid Broad or Vague Requests

Many denials happen because the request is too broad or asks for something that doesn't exist. Keep these tips in mind:

- ◆ Specify the department—Some agencies have multiple divisions, and records may be maintained separately.
- ◆ Use precise time frames—General requests like "all emails ever sent" are likely to be denied.
- ◆ Avoid requesting "databases"—If a database doesn't exist in the requested form, your request will be rejected. Instead, ask for reports, budgets, proposals, bids, or contracts.

Example:

✗ **Bad Request:** "Send me your entire database on public health complaints."

✓ **Better Request:** "I request copies of all public health complaints submitted to the Allen County Department of Health between January 1, 2023, and December 31, 2023, including complaint type and resolution status."

Know the Costs Before You Commit

- 💰 Public records can be free to inspect but may incur fees for copies.
- 💻 Request electronic copies to avoid unnecessary costs.
- 📄 If requesting hard copies, ask for a cost estimate before processing to avoid unexpected fees.

Example:

"If fulfilling this request incurs any costs, please notify me before proceeding with processing."

Denied? Don't Give Up! Reword & Try Again

- 🔄 Denials happen, but they don't mean the records are out of reach.
- ✓ Review the reason for denial—Sometimes, small wording changes make all the difference.
- ✓ Think like the agency—How do they categorize or store the information?
- ✓ Leverage DOGE Dogs' network—See what has worked for others or get tips from seasoned requesters.

Example:

✗ **Denied Request:** "I want all internal communications regarding water contamination."

✓ **Reworded Request:** "I request copies of emails between Allen County Department of Health officials regarding water quality alerts from June 1, 2023, to September 30, 2023."

Final Encouragement

Public records requests are a powerful tool for transparency and accountability. Be persistent, be strategic, and ensure accountability. When one agency is forced to answer, others take notice—making it clear that the people are watching and will not tolerate waste.

Stay engaged. Stay informed. Stay efficient.