



Washington State Auditor's Office

Performance Audit Division

New Study on Trends in Public Records Requests

Local and state governments are all expected to comply with laws that guarantee people have full access to public records, indeed prompt cooperation with requests helps maintain public confidence in government. The definition of a public record is very broad but it doesn't address the many types of records now common thanks to modern technology, which only exist electronically.

At the same time, government organizations have reported a significant growth in the volume and complexity of public records requests. Fulfilling these requests can absorb considerable staff time, but the Public Records Act of 1973 does not allow them to charge requesters for electronic records or the time and costs incurred in preparing records – paper or otherwise – for release. (Although the law does permit charges for making paper copies under certain circumstances.)

To account for changes in the volume and nature of the public records requests, the Legislature is considering revising the Public Records Act. Before they proceed, legislators want more information and have asked the State Auditor's Office to conduct a study "to establish an accurate cost estimate for providing paper and electronic copies of records."

Coming this fall: Our survey will ask about your government organization's experiences

The Performance Audit team at the State Auditor's Office is preparing a survey of every state agency and local government organization in Washington, in order to collect information about the nature, volume and the associated costs of public records requests. We will also conduct research and interviews with other states to help us identify leading practices in the efficient management of records requests and expenses states allow government organizations to recover.

In addition to helping policy makers revise the Public Records Act, our results can help governments in the efficient management of public records requests.

What does this mean to your organization?

This fall you will receive notification that the survey is ready to begin and who should respond to our request. The survey will be available online for a limited period of time, so we will ask you to complete it promptly.

Note that participating in the survey does not affect your current audit schedule or audit results. The information you provide will only be used for the Performance Audit team's study of public records requests.

What is a public record?

The Public Records Act, established in 1973, defines a public record as: "any writing containing information relating to the conduct of government or the performance of any governmental or proprietary function prepared, owned, used, or retained by any state or local agency regardless of physical form or characteristics."

"Writing" means handwriting, typewriting, printing, photostating, photographing, and every other means of recording any form of communication or representation including, but not limited to... magnetic or punched cards, discs, drums, diskettes, sound recordings, and other documents..."

Technology has made photostats and punch cards obsolete, but computers, cell phones and email have all added new ways to communicate – and create public records.

Where can I get more information?

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