



# Washington State Auditor's Office Performance Audit Description

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## Trends in Public Records Requests in State and Local Governments

### Overview

State and local government organizations are expected to comply with laws that guarantee people have full access to public records. Prompt cooperation with requests helps maintain public confidence in government. Since the state's Public Records Act was established in 1973, technological advances such as computers, cell phones and email have generated even more public records, many of which exist only electronically. Governments have also seen a corresponding growth in the volume and complexity of public records requests. Responding to these requests can absorb considerable staff time, but the Public Records Act does not allow them to charge requesters for the time and costs incurred in preparing records – paper or otherwise – for release.

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

### Scope and objectives

In response to the Legislature's request, the State Auditor's Office will conduct a study in which we will survey state and local governments in Washington to collect information about public records requests. The survey will be administered at no cost for state agencies and local governments. Research and interviews with other states will also help us identify leading practices in the efficient management of records requests and associated costs 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.

### *The study will seek to answer the following questions:*

- What costs do state and local governments incur when responding to paper and electronic public records requests? In addition to costs, we will identify:
  - The nature and volume of public records requests governments receive today
  - Changes in the nature and volume of public records requests, and the impact of those changes for state and local governments
  - The resources budgeted for responding to public records requests, and the resources actually used to meet records requests
- What leading practices could governments use to effectively manage public records, respond to requests, and make public information more accessible?
- What cost recovery methods do other states use for providing public records?

September 1, 2015

Timing – We estimate audit results will be released in fall 2016..