

JAWS FOIA Tip Sheet

General Tips

- **Use FOIA as a last resort.** Agencies are flooded with FOI requests, so filing one can slow things down. First, peruse the agency's website for public data. Develop sources who can share the information. Try to find a records custodian who might be able to help get you the records without filing a request. Ask what is readily available. Only then, follow up with an official request for what you want.
- **Take an active role** by following on your requests via emails and phone calls to the designated FOI "agents."
- **Appeal, Appeal, Appeal.** Office of the Inspector General reports show that at the federal level journalists are more likely to get the information they want on appeal.
- **Get organized.** Some journalists use FOIA trackers, others set up a separate gmail address just for FOIAs.

Sample FOIA requests

- <http://www.nfoic.org/sample-foia-request-letters>
- <http://www.foiadvocates.com/samples/1.html>
- <http://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/IMG/SampleFOIAletter.pdf>
- <https://www.muckrock.com/questions/is-there-a-good-fbi-foia-request-sample-letter-603/>
- <https://firstamendmentcoalition.org/public-records-2/foia-sample-request-letter/>

Help Filing requests

- [Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press](#) has created a FOIA generator. If you fill out a few questions, it will create a request, appeal and complaint for you to print, sign and mail.
- [Society of Professional Journalists](#) has a guide with a great overview of FOIA laws and procedures.
- [National Freedom of Information Coalition](#) has more sample letters for FOIA and Privacy Act requests, appeals and amendments.
- [Student Press Law Center](#) provides a generator for state open records law requests.
- [Federal agency FOIA offices](#) provides a comprehensive list of federal FOIA offices.

Guides to Federal FOIA

- [FOIA wiki](#) is a great resource for all stages of FOIA, but especially at the appeal stage if you are looking for case law to cite.
- [FOI Center](#), located at the Missouri School of Journalism, possesses the world's oldest and most comprehensive FOI library.

- [The National Security Archive](#) has several open government guides and indexes.

Guides to state FOI laws

- [FOIA Advocates](#) offers .pdf copies of all 50 states' public records laws.
- [NFOIC state guide](#) supplies contact information, publications, form letters and updated resources on all 50 states' FOI processes.
- [Open Government Guide](#) includes each state's open records and open meetings laws.
- [How Open is Your State](#): Reveal from The Center for Investigative Reporting/ Milwaukee Journal Sentinel have created an easy-to-use database with links to each state's open government laws. Recently Muckrock redid the database and is updating it and adding features, which you can find [here](#).

Organizations that can help

- **Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press** may be able to litigate your FOI cases. By phone: 1-800-336-4243; By email: hotline@rcfp.org
- [Muckrock](#) has knowledgeable people on staff who can offer advice.
- **First Amendment Coalition**, a California-based organization that may be able to litigate your FOI cases and help out with FOI requests nationally, but likely can only litigate if in CA. Hotline: <https://firstamendmentcoalition.org/legal-hotline/>
- State affiliates of **American Civil Liberties Union**, whose protections for the Bill of Rights include extensive litigation and support for the First Amendment. <https://www.aclu.org/about/affiliates>
- **Society of Professional Journalists Forever Fund**, a legal defense fund that has a pretty easy application process, and whose support from several foundations is growing. <https://www.spj.org/firstamendmentforever.asp>

This sheet was developed by Amy Pyle, editor in chief at Reveal from the Center for Investigative Reporting; Vickie Baranetsky, general counsel at Reveal; and Miranda S. Spivack, independent journalist who is working for Reveal.

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