



POLICY DIRECTIVE

Policy:	DOC 1.1.19 PUBLIC INFORMATION REQUESTS
Effective Date:	01/31/2024 Page 1 of 7
Last Revised:	04/24/2026
Signature:	/s/ Eric Strauss, Director

I. POLICY

The Department has established this policy to promote consistency and efficiency in responding to public information requests and fees and costs charged for fulfillment. In all record productions, the Department will honor the right to know and the right of individual privacy guaranteed by the Montana Constitution and comply with other pertinent statutes, regulations, privileges, and judicial decisions.

II. APPLICABILITY

All Department divisions, facilities, and programs.

III. DEFINITIONS (see Glossary)

IV. REQUIREMENTS

A. Department and Office of Public Information Requests

1. The Department has entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Department of Administration, Office of Public Information Requests (OPIR).
2. OPIR was established to support executive branch agencies in responding to public information requests.
3. OPIR and the Department are responsible for reviewing records and removing or redacting any information that may contain confidential or privileged information prior to production to the requester.
4. OPIR counsel shall provide the Department with legal advice and assistance in production of responsive public information; however, the Department retains final authority regarding the response to each request for Department records.
5. The Department is subject to 2-6-1006, MCA. The statute requires agencies to respond to public information requests within specified times. To comply timely with the statute, the Department shall comply with the following procedures.

B. Department Process for Accepting Public Information Requests

1. The Department must establish a designated contact for public information requests. The Department has designated OPIR as its public information request contact.
 - a. The Department will:
 - 1) provide a button or link on the Department home page to the Department's "Request Public Information" web page;
 - 2) post OPIR's contact information and link to OPIR's website on the Department's "Request Public Information" web page; and
 - 3) provide OPIR a primary and alternate contact to work with OPIR in responding to public information requests; these Department employees will be the primary and backup contact for OPIR staff for public information purposes.

2. All requests for Department public information **must** be made to OPIR, either through the DOA website, opir.mt.gov/records-request, by email to [publicrecords\(at\)mt.gov](mailto:publicrecords(at)mt.gov), or by other method specified by OPIR. All requests must be submitted in writing. If a public information request is not submitted to OPIR as required by this section, the Department and OPIR are not required to respond within the timeframes established in 2-6-1006, MCA.
3. A public information request must be made utilizing OPIR's website or request form. The requester must:
 - a. include their name and contact information, including complete mailing address, phone number, and email address (if any); and
 - b. provide all information in required sections of the OPIR website or form.
4. Public information requests are public information, and the requester must identify the requestor and any organization on whose behalf a request is filed. Anonymous record requests will not be accepted, and any person seeking to make an anonymous request will be directed to provide the required information. If the required information is not provided, OPIR will request the required information and will not begin fulfillment of the request until it is provided.
5. If a public information request is sent to a Department employee, the employee will redirect the request to OPIR. The employee shall not fulfill the public information request. If a request is sent to a Department email address, the request will be forwarded to [publicrecords\(at\)mt.gov](mailto:publicrecords(at)mt.gov). Paper requests for public information will be scanned by the Department employee and emailed to OPIR at [publicrecords\(at\)mt.gov](mailto:publicrecords(at)mt.gov).
6. Once OPIR routes the request back, if the info is readily available, the Department may provide access to and copying of public information. The Department staff member will be present during the examination and copying of any public information documents (*see IV.F and IV.G below*).

C. Department Process for Responding to Public Information Requests

1. Section 2-6-1006, MCA separates public information requests into different categories.
 - a. For purposes of this policy, a request for "a single, specific, clearly identifiable, and readily available public record," as provided in 2-6-1006(3)(a)(ii), MCA, is considered a simple request.
 - b. Other requests are considered complex requests.
 - c. "Requests pertaining only to a specified person or property, including requests for applications, vital records, licenses, permits, or registrations," as provided in 2-6-1006(3)(a)(ii), MCA, will be managed according to the Department's established statutes, rules, policies, procedures, and practices for handling requests for those documents.
2. Classifying Requests
 - a. Upon receipt of a properly filed public information request, OPIR will review the request and consult with the Department to determine whether it is a simple public information request, a complex public information request, or a request pertaining only to a specified person or property.
 - 1) The Department and OPIR will make the classification determination within 3 working days.
3. Acknowledging Requests
 - a. Upon receipt of a properly filed public information request, after the classification determination is made but no more than 5 working days from receipt of the request, OPIR will acknowledge receipt of the request to the requester and copy the Department on the acknowledgment.
 - 1) A properly filed public information request is a request made in compliance with IV.B above.

4. Requests Pertaining Only to a Specified Person or Property
 - a. A “request pertaining only to a specified person or property” refers to a request for specific information about a specific person or property that the Department has a duty to maintain in the ordinary course of the Department’s business.
 - 1) To the extent the Department collects applications or vital records or issues licenses, permits, or registrations under a statutory duty or incidental to running a program authorized by statute, requests for these types of records about a specific person (individual or entity) or property should be handled by the Department.
 - 2) The Department is not required to use the processes set forth in this policy but should follow the Department’s established processes for providing such information.
5. Simple Public Information Requests
 - a. Definition. A simple public information request is a request:
 - 1) that does not require any clarification or additional information from the requester;
 - 2) for a single, specific, clearly identifiable, and readily available public record that is easily accessible.
 - b. Upon receipt of a properly filed simple public information request, OPIR will:
 - 1) work with the Department to classify the request;
 - 2) acknowledge the request; and
 - 3) send the response to the requester within 5 working days of acknowledgment of the request and copy the Department on the response.
 - c. The Department will assist OPIR in fulfilling requests by:
 - 1) retrieving records that are in the sole possession or control of the Department; and
 - 2) advising OPIR whether any confidential material needs to be redacted before the records are provided to the requester.
 - d. If the request was submitted through the OPIR website or email, the response will be sent to the requester by email or secure file transfer.
 - 1) The Department and OPIR may agree with a requester to transmit the response by another method; however, the requester must pay the cost, if any, of the alternate method of transmission before the response is sent.
 - e. If the request was submitted on paper, the response will be mailed unless otherwise instructed. Any mailing or copying costs must be paid in advance by the requester.
6. Complex Public Information Requests
 - a. All requests that are not requests pertaining only to a specified person or property or simple public information requests are considered complex public information requests.
 - b. Unless OPIR and the Department determine that responding to a request is not feasible within 90 days, OPIR and the Department will respond to all complex public information requests within 90 days as follows:
 - 1) Upon receipt of a properly filed complex public information request, OPIR will:
 - a) work with the Department to classify the request;
 - b) acknowledge the request;
 - c) conduct a preliminary search of enterprise systems to assist in estimating the time and effort involved in responding to a request;
 - d) ask the Department to perform an initial search of Department systems and other locations where records may be stored to assist in estimating the time and effort involved in responding to a request;
 - e) collaborate with the Department to:
 - (1) develop an estimate of the time it will take to respond to the request and the cost of collecting and preparing the response; and
 - (2) determine whether further clarification of the request is necessary; and
 - f) prepare and send the cost estimate and requested clarification, if any, to the requester.

- 2) Upon receipt of the estimated cost from the Department and clarification from the requester, if any, OPIR will:
 - a) collect the estimated cost from the requester and instruct the Department to begin its search;
 - b) search enterprise systems to gather responsive records;
 - c) review any responsive records to determine whether a record is confidential or otherwise privileged and redact any such materials, noting the reasons why records are redacted; and
 - d) notify the Department when OPIR has completed search, review, and redaction.
 - 3) Upon receipt of the estimated cost and clarification from the requester, if any, the Department will:
 - a) search Department systems and other locations where records may be stored to gather responsive records;
 - b) review any responsive records to determine whether a record is confidential or otherwise privileged and redact any such materials, noting the reasons why records are redacted; and
 - c) notify OPIR when the Department has completed search, review, and redaction.
 - 4) When both OPIR and the Department have completed search, review, and redaction, they will share their results with each other and review all collected materials to make a final determination regarding which records must be provided in response to the request.
 - a) The final determination will be made by the Department, and the Department will provide OPIR a written explanation of the reasons any records must be withheld as provided in 2-6-1009(1), MCA;
 - 5) OPIR will provide the requester the records determined to be responsive, subject to any withholding or redaction the Department has determined are necessary.
 - a) If records are withheld, OPIR will communicate to the requester the Department's written explanation of the reasons records were withheld.
 - 6) OPIR and the Department of Administration will transfer funds collected from the requester for the Department of Corrections portion of the cost of providing records.
- c. If the Department and OPIR determine 90 days is not feasible for a response, the Department will instruct OPIR to send written notice to the requester:
- 1) that the response requires longer than 90 days; and
 - 2) explain the reasons it may take the Department up to 6 months (from the date of the initial acknowledgment) to provide the Department's response. See 2-6-1006(3)(b)(i)(B), MCA.

D. Estimating Costs and Fees Associated with Requests for Public Information

1. The Department charges a fee for fulfilling all public information requests.
 - a. The fee shall include the cost of the time required to collect information and the actual costs directly incident to fulfilling each request. See 2-6-1006(1)(c), MCA.
2. For complex public information requests, OPIR will prepare and send a written cost estimate to the requester.
 - a. The cost estimate will inform the requester that a request may be closed without further response if the estimated costs are not paid within 30 days.
3. The cost of time spent by the Department and OPIR employees will be computed based on each employee's salary and benefits. Time will be billed in quarter (0.25) hour increments.
 - a. Employees are required to record and report all time and expenses associated with fulfilling public information requests to the Department and OPIR.
4. The estimate shall include the cost of:
 - a. staff member's time to search, identify and gather the potential items in a preliminary search;
 - b. preparing the estimated cost and time for response;

- c. gathering information;
 - d. reviewing information; and
 - e. providing information.
5. If a requester does not agree to pay the estimated cost, the Department is not required to provide information.
 6. A requester will not be billed for the Department's time spent conducting the preliminary search or preparing the cost estimate, unless the requester chooses to refine their request as provided in IV.E below.
 7. OPIR shall notify the requester that:
 - a. payment of the estimated costs must be made prior to the documents being gathered; and
 - b. the final cost of production may exceed the initial estimate invoice and may include legal review fees.
 8. If the costs of fulfilling the request exceed the initial estimate paid, an additional estimate must:
 - a. be provided to the requester; and
 - b. inform the requester that continued work on fulfillment of the information request will cease until the additional fees/cost are paid.
 9. Requesters will have 30 days from the date a cost estimate or revised cost estimate is sent to pay the estimated cost or refine their request as provided in IV.E below.
 - a. If a requester does not pay the estimated cost or refine their request within 30 days, the request will be closed without further response.
 10. The Department and OPIR are not required to alter or customize public information to provide it in a form specifically for the needs of the requesting person.
 - a. If the Department agrees to customize a records request response, the cost of the customization may be included in the fees charged by the Department to the requester.
 11. Upon fulfillment of a request, if the Department or OPIR determine the estimated costs collected from the requester exceed the actual cost of fulfillment, a refund will be issued to the requester.
 12. The Department and OPIR shall not show bias or favoritism in requesting fees and costs from requesters.
 - a. Fees and costs are applicable to all public information requests whether made by a citizen, student, the media, a business, or non-profit or for-profit organization.

E. Refinement and Clarification of a Request

1. OPIR or the Department may ask for more information about a request or request clarification if:
 - a. it is not clear what the requester is seeking,
 - b. the requester has not provided all of the required information necessary to submit a request, or
 - c. the Department cannot perform an information search without additional information.
2. OPIR may request clarification or refinement of a request if:
 - a. it is not clear what the requester is seeking; or
 - b. when OPIR or Department employees have reason to believe the search may produce more than 1,000 results.
3. A person requesting public information may decline a request for clarification.
 - a. If the requester refuses to clarify a request, OPIR or the Department will perform the search to the best of its ability based on the information provided.

- 1) The actual cost of conducting the search must be included in the cost estimate provided to the requester.
4. When OPIR or the Department request more information, clarification, or refinement of a request, the Department's response time is suspended until the requester clarifies, refines, or responds to the request for additional information:
 - a. if the requester does not respond within 30 days, the request will be closed without further action; and
 - b. when requesting additional information, clarification, or refinement, OPIR will notify the requester that the request will be closed without further action if the requester does not respond within 30 days.
5. When OPIR receives additional information, clarification, or refinement, it will conduct a search using the additional information or clarification.
 - a. OPIR and the Department will prepare an estimate as provided in IV.D above and notify the requester.
 - b. The requester may clarify or further refine the request as provided above; however, OPIR and the Department may charge an additional fee for each clarification or refinement.
 - 1) OPIR and the Department may require payment of this fee prior to initiating the clarified or refined search.

F. Confidentiality, Privacy, and Legal Review

1. All materials provided in response to public information requests may be subject to review by the Department or OPIR legal counsel.
 - a. Legal review protects individuals' privacy, ensures compliance with confidentiality requirements, and safeguards individual and facility safety.
2. The "right to know" affords persons the right to examine documents of public bodies or agencies of state government, "except in cases in which the demand of individual privacy clearly exceeds the merits of public disclosure."
3. Judicial decisions have established that agencies must review information before it is produced to determine whether the information should be protected under an individual's right of privacy or another applicable confidentiality provision or privilege.
 - a. Such review and analysis typically requires involvement of legal counsel.
4. The Department and OPIR legal counsel will perform legal review of public information prior to release to determine whether they include "confidential information."
5. Under 2-6-1002(1), MCA, "confidential information" means information that is accorded confidential status or is prohibited from disclosure as provided by applicable law. The term includes information that is:
 - a. constitutionally protected from disclosure because an individual privacy interest clearly exceeds the merits of public disclosure;
 - b. related to judicial deliberations in adversarial proceedings;
 - c. necessary to maintain the security and integrity of secure facilities or information systems owned by or serving the state; and
 - d. designated as confidential by statute or through judicial decisions, findings, or orders.

G. Examination of Records

1. When information is readily available for inspection and copying, the Department may make it available for direct public inspection and examination.
 - a. In such cases, the Department shall protect and maintain the integrity of the original records.
 - b. Department employees must supervise the examination and copying of such records.

H. Fee Schedule

GENERAL CHARGES

Per page (photocopying)	\$0.25 per page + cost of postage
Identifying, gathering, reviewing, redacting, and preparing information for release	Employee hourly wages and benefits x actual time (in ¼ hour increments)
Initial search	Actual cost. If the initial request is not fulfilled, the requester is not obligated to pay the initial search cost.
Second and subsequent searches	\$50. If the request was refined after an initial search, there is a \$50/search fee for each subsequent search.

V. CLOSING

Questions about this policy should be directed to the Department's Communications Director.

VI. REFERENCES

- A. *Mont. Const. Art. II, 9; Mont. Const. Art. II, 10*
- B. §§ 2-6-1002; 2-6-1006, 2-6-1009, MCA