

Rights & Responsibilities:

The Rights of Requesters and the Responsibilities of the Western Virginia Regional Jail (WVRJ) under the Virginia Freedom of Information Act

The Virginia Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), Va. Code §§ 2.2-3700 *et seq.*, guarantees citizens of the Commonwealth and representatives of the media access to public records held by public bodies, public officials, and public employees.

A public record is any writing or recording—regardless of whether it is a paper record, an electronic file, an audio or video recording, or any other format—that is prepared or owned by, or in the possession of a public body or its officers, employees or agents in the transaction of public business. All public records are presumed to be open, and may only be withheld if a specific, statutory exemption applies.

It is the policy of FOIA to promote an increased awareness by all persons of governmental activities. In furthering this policy, FOIA requires that the law be interpreted liberally, in favor of access, and that any exemption allowing public records to be withheld must be interpreted narrowly.

Your FOIA Rights

- You have the right to request to inspect **or** receive copies of public records, or both.
- You have the right to request that any charges for the requested records be estimated in advance.
- If you believe that your FOIA rights have been violated, you may file a petition in general district or circuit court to compel compliance with FOIA. Alternatively, you may contact the FOIA Council for a nonbinding advisory opinion.

Making a Request for records from the Western Virginia Regional Jail

- You may request records by U.S. Mail, fax, e-mail, in person, or over the phone. FOIA does not require that your request be in writing, nor do you need to specifically state that you are requesting records under FOIA.
 - From a practical perspective, it may be helpful to both you and the person receiving your request to put your request in writing. This allows you to

create a record of your request. It also gives us a clear statement of what records you are requesting, so that there is no misunderstanding over a verbal request. However, we cannot refuse to respond to your FOIA request if you elect not to put it in writing.

- Your request must identify the records you are seeking with "reasonable specificity." This is a common-sense standard. It does not refer to or limit the volume or number of records that you are requesting; instead, it requires that you be specific enough so that we can identify and locate the records that you are seeking.
- Your request must ask for existing records or documents. FOIA gives you a right to inspect or copy **records**; it does not apply to a situation where you are asking general questions about the work of the WVRJ, nor does it require the WVRJ create a record that does not exist.
- You may choose to receive electronic records in any format used by the WVRJ in the regular course of business.
 - For example, if you are requesting records maintained in an Excel database, you may elect to receive those records electronically, via e-mail or on a computer disk, or to receive a printed copy of those records
- If we have questions about your request, please cooperate with staff's efforts to clarify the type of records that you are seeking, or to attempt to reach a reasonable agreement about a response to a large request. Making a FOIA request is not an adversarial process, but we may need to discuss your request with you to ensure that we understand what records you are seeking.

To request records from the WVRJ, you may direct your request to the WVRJ's FOIA Officer:

**Deputy Superintendent David Cox
5885 West River Road, Salem, VA 24153
(540) 378-3700
David.Cox@wvarj.org**

The Western Virginia Regional Jail's Responsibilities in Responding to Your Request

- The WVRJ must respond to your request within five business days of receiving it. "Day One" is considered the day after your request is received. If your request is received after business hours, it will be treated as having been received the following day. The five-day period does not include weekends or holidays.

- The reason behind your request for public records from the WVRJ is irrelevant, and you do not have to state why you want the records before we respond to your request. FOIA does, however, allow the WVRJ to require you to provide your name and legal address.
- FOIA requires that the WVRJ make one of the following responses to your request within the five-day time period:
 - 1) We provide you with the records that you have requested in their entirety.
 - 2) We withhold all of the records that you have requested, because all of the records are subject to a specific statutory exemption. If all of the records are being withheld, we must send you a response in writing. That writing must identify the volume and subject matter of the records being withheld, and state the specific section of the Code of Virginia that allows us to withhold the records.
 - 3) We provide some of the records that you have requested, but withhold other records. We cannot withhold an entire record if only a portion of it is subject to an exemption. In that instance, we may redact the portion of the record that may be withheld, and must provide you with the remainder of the record. We must provide you with a written response stating the specific section of the Code of Virginia that allows portions of the requested records to be withheld.
 - 4) We inform you in writing that the requested records cannot be found or do not exist (i.e., we do not have the records you want). However, if we know that another public body has the requested records, we must include contact information for the other public body in our response to you.
 - 5) If it is practically impossible for the WVRJ to respond to your request within the five-day period, we must state this in writing, explaining the conditions that make the response impossible. This will allow us seven additional working days to respond to your request, giving us a total of 12 working days to respond to your request.
- If you make a request for a very large number of records, and we feel that we cannot provide the records to you within 12 working days without disrupting our other organizational responsibilities, we may petition the court for additional time to respond to your request. However, FOIA requires that we make a reasonable effort to reach an agreement with you concerning the production of the records before we go to court to ask for more time.

Costs

- A public body may make reasonable charges not to exceed its actual cost incurred in accessing, duplicating, supplying, or searching for the requested records. No public body shall impose any extraneous, intermediary, or surplus fees or expenses to recoup the general costs associated with creating or maintaining records or transacting the general business of the public body. Any duplicating fee charged by a public body shall not exceed the actual cost of duplication. If requested, charges for the supplying of requested records will be estimated in advance.
- You may have to pay for the records that you request from the WVRJ. FOIA allows us to charge for the actual costs of responding to FOIA requests. This would include items like staff time spent searching for the requested records, copying costs, or any other costs directly related to supplying the requested records. It cannot include general overhead costs. The WVRJ's current FOIA cost policy, which is subject to change or variation in appropriate circumstances, is:
 - 10¢ per page for each page copied or scanned at 8½" x 11", 8 ½" x 14", or 11" x 17".
 - \$10 for a CD-ROM or thumb drive, if requested.
 - \$5 per page for plat-sized copies.
 - Documents will normally be located and reviewed for responsiveness by their custodian. Time spent locating and reviewing documents will be charged in tenth-of-an-hour increments, and the charge will be determined by multiplying the time by the hourly rate of pay of the custodian.
 - Documents will normally be copied or scanned by an administrative assistant, whose time will be reckoned and charged in the same manner as the time of the custodian.
- If we estimate that it will cost more than \$200 to respond to your request, we may require you to pay a deposit, not to exceed the amount of the estimate, before proceeding with your request. The five days that we have to respond to your request does not include the time between when we ask for a deposit and when you respond.
- You may request that we estimate in advance the charges for supplying the records that you have requested. This will allow you to know about any costs upfront, or give you the opportunity to modify your request in an attempt to lower the estimated costs.
- If you owe us money from a previous FOIA request that has remained unpaid for more than 30 days, the WVRJ may require payment of the past-due bill before it will respond to your new FOIA request.

Types of records

The following is a general description of the types of records held by the WVRJ:

- Records relating to the names, salaries, and positions of personnel and officials of the WVRJ.
- Records relating to procurements of and contracts for goods and services by the WVRJ.
- Records relating to the DSS budget and revenues.

If you are unsure whether the WVRJ has the record(s) you seek, please contact the FOIA Officer.

Commonly used exemptions

The Code of Virginia allows any public body to withhold certain records from public disclosure. The WVRJ commonly withholds records subject to the following exemptions:

- Personnel records concerning employees and officials of the WVRJ, except for the positions, and salaries of individuals who earn more than \$10,000. Va. Code § 2.2-3705.1(1), § 2.2-3705.8(A).
- Requests made by incarcerated individuals are routinely denied. Va. Code § 2.2-3703(C).
- Internal working papers of the Superintendent. Va. Code § 2.2-3705.7(2).
- Documents compiled solely for use in closed session of the Board of Directors. Va. Code § 2.2-3705.1(5).
- Legal advice, work product, and memoranda of legal counsel. Va. Code § 2.2-3705.1(2) and (3).
- Records relating to incarcerated persons are a discretionary release which WVRJ often withholds. Va. Code § 2.2-3706(A)(2)(d).
- Criminal investigative records, except, as to felonies, (a) general description of activity reported; (b) date of crime alleged; (c) general location; (d) identity of investigating officer or point of contact; and (e) general description of injuries or objects stolen. Va. Code § 2.2-3706.

Policy regarding the use of exemptions

FOIA includes both discretionary and required exemptions. Required exemptions are, in effect, confidentiality requirements. The WVRJ's policy is to use those exemptions to the extent required by law. With regard to discretionary exemptions, it is the policy of the WVRJ to exercise them to the maximum extent when the issue is protection of the privacy and safety of our citizens and staff, but otherwise the custodian of the documents has the discretion to exercise them flexibly in accordance with the best interests of the WVRJ and the public.