

Freedom of Information Commission

At a Glance

COLLEEN M. MURPHY, *Executive Director/General Counsel*

Paula S. Pearlman,

Managing Director/Associate General Counsel

Russell Blair,

Director of Education and Communications

Established – 1975

Statutory Authority – CGS Section 1-200 et. Seq.

Central Office – 165 Capitol Ave., Hartford, CT 06106

Number of Employees – 18

Recurring operating expenses – \$1,761,199

Organizational structure – Commission

Mission

To ensure citizen access to the records and meetings of all public agencies in Connecticut in support of the public's right to know.

Statutory Responsibility

To administer and enforce the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act.

Public Service

The Commission holds hearings and renders decisions on citizen complaints alleging denial of access under the FOIA. It also conducts educational programs and prepares literature for public officials and the general public.

Improvements/Achievements 2023-2024

With a full complement of administrative and support staff, the Commission made significant progress in reducing the time between when complaints are filed and cases are docketed, leading to quicker resolutions for those seeking redress on alleged FOIA violations.

The 683 formal complaints the Commission received in 2023 represented a 13% increase from the year prior but remained in line with historical averages. Over the past five years, the Commission has averaged 689 formal complaints.

The Commission continued its efforts to efficiently tackle its heavy volume of contested cases, placing emphasis on its ombudsman program as it had done in previous years. Again in 2023, more than two-thirds of cases were resolved without a hearing. The remaining either went to a hearing, are scheduled for a hearing or may be resolved short of a hearing.

While the Commission by statute must hear and decide appeals within a year of their filing, that requirement was suspended during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in cases that were filed more than a year ago and have yet to be resolved. The Commission has prioritized resolving those matters, and just a small number remain open.

In other matters of interest:

- The Commission maintained a robust schedule of outreach programs in 2023, hosting a total of 97 workshops in all corners of the state. Sessions were offered both remotely and in person, based on the needs of the public agencies. Through August 31, 2024, the Commission has conducted 82 workshops. The Commission hosted its annual conference on October 20, 2023, at The Riverhouse in Haddam, with a record 248 attendees from state and municipal agencies at the first such event held since 2019. The conference was recorded and rebroadcast by CT-N to reach an even larger audience. The Commission in 2023 also sent representatives to the Council on Governmental Ethics Laws' annual conference in Kansas City, where they participated in several panel discussions.
- Connecticut's citizens and public officials continue to rely on the Commission for its advice and expertise on all matters related to the FOIA. In any given week, the Commission answers more than 100 calls or emails. Many questions remain focused on newer provisions in the law that allow for agencies to conduct remote or hybrid meetings. An increased focus on police accountability and state laws governing police body cameras has also led to an uptick in calls and emails from both requesters and police departments dealing with law enforcement records.
- The Commission remains in constant dialogue with the Legislature about all proposed legislation that could impact the people's right to know. During the 2024 legislative session, the Commission monitored 57 bills. A total of 55 received public hearings and FOI Commission staff prepared statements for and/or testified on 12 of those bills.
- The Commission's Executive Director served on the Connecticut Artificial Intelligence Working Group, advocating for transparency requirements when government uses AI in its decision-making processes. The working group submitted its findings to the Legislature for consideration.

Reducing Waste

The Commission is committed to regular reviews of its current operating procedures aimed at reducing waste and increasing efficiency.

Strategic Planning

- Hear and resolve contested cases in a timely fashion;
- Settle contested cases informally through ombudsman program;
- Defend the Commission through staff counsel in court appeals;
- Conduct workshops, provide speakers, publish Commission reports and other literature;
- Develop public policy positions with regard to issues of information accessibility, especially as they relate to such matters as emerging information technologies;
- Render declaratory rulings of general applicability under the FOIA; and
- Expand and broaden community outreach program.

Information Reported as Required by State Statute

The Commission is committed to equal employment opportunities for all.