

# **Rights & Responsibilities:**

## **The Rights of Requesters and the Responsibilities of Warren County Department of Social Services under the Virginia Freedom of Information Act**

The Virginia Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), located in § 2.2-3700 et seq. of the Code of Virginia, 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.

The policy of FOIA states that the purpose of FOIA is 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 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 Warren County Department of Social Services**

- 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 to not 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 Warren County Department of Social Services, nor does it require Warren County Department of Social Services to create a record that does not exist.
- You may choose to receive electronic records in any format used by Warren County Department of Social Services 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 Warren County Department of Social Services, you may direct your request to DeAnna Cheatham, Director. She can be reached at: 465 W 15<sup>th</sup> St. Suite 100, Front Royal, VA 22630, (office) - (540) 635-3430 ext. 3332, (fax) – (540) 635-8451 or e-mail at [deanna.e.cheatham@dss.virginia.gov](mailto:deanna.e.cheatham@dss.virginia.gov). You may also contact her with questions you have concerning requesting records from Warren County Department of Social Services. In addition, the Freedom of Information Advisory Council is available to answer any questions you may have about FOIA. The Council may be contacted by e-mail at [foiacouncil@dls.virginia.gov](mailto:foiacouncil@dls.virginia.gov), or by phone at (804) 225-3056 or [toll free] 1-866-448-4100.**

## **Warren County Department of Social Services' Responsibilities in Responding to Your Request**

- Warren County Department of Social Services must respond to your request within five working days of receiving it. "Day One" is considered the day after your request is received. The five-day period does not include weekends or holidays.
- The reason behind your request for public records from Warren County Department of Social Services is irrelevant, and you do not have to state why you want the records before we respond to your request. FOIA does, however, allow Warren County Department of Social Services to require you to provide your name and legal address.
- FOIA requires that Warren County Department of Social Services 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 (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 Warren County Department of Social Services 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. All charges for the supplying of requested records shall be estimated in advance at the request of the citizen as set forth in subsection F of § 2.2-3704 of the Code of Virginia.
- You may have to pay for the records that you request from Warren County Department of Social Services. 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.
- 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, Warren County Department of Social Services 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 Warren County Department of Social Services:

- Personnel records concerning employees and officials of Warren County Department of Social Services
- Records of contracts which Warren County Department of Social Services has entered into

If you are unsure whether Warren County Department of Social Services has the record(s) you seek, please contact DeAnna Cheatham, Director. She can be reached at: 465 W 15th St. Suite 100, Front Royal, VA 22630, (office) - (540) 635-3430 ext. 3332, (fax) – (540) 635-8451 or e-mail at [deanna.e.cheatham@dss.virginia.gov](mailto:deanna.e.cheatham@dss.virginia.gov).

### **Commonly used exemptions**

The Code of Virginia allows any public body to withhold certain records from public disclosure. Warren County Department of Social Services commonly withholds records subject to the following exemptions:

- Personnel records (§ 2.2-3705.1 (1) of the Code of Virginia)
- Records subject to attorney-client privilege (§ 2.2-3705.1 (2)) or attorney work product (§ 2.2-3705.1 (3))
- Vendor proprietary information (§ 2.2-3705.1 (6))
- Records relating to the negotiation and award of a contract, prior to a contract being awarded (§ 2.2-3705.1 (12))

### **Policy regarding the use of exemptions**

*State any written policy your agency may have regarding when statutory exemptions will be invoked to withhold records. For example:*

- The general policy of Warren County Department of Social Services is to invoke the personnel records exemption in those instances where it applies in order to protect the privacy of employees and officials of Warren County Department of Social Services.
- The general policy of Warren County Department of Social Services is to invoke the contract negotiations exemption whenever it applies in order to protect Warren County Department of Social Services' bargaining position and negotiating strategy.

- The general policy of Warren County Department of Social Services is to invoke the following statutes to protect legally protected information:
  - (i) The following information contained in a public record is excluded from the mandatory disclosure provisions of this chapter but may be disclosed by the custodian in his discretion, except where such disclosure is prohibited by law. Redaction of information excluded under this section from a public record shall be conducted in accordance with § [2.2-3704.01](#).
  - (ii) Health records, except that such records may be personally reviewed by the individual who is the subject of such records, as provided in subsection F of § 32.1-127.1:03. Where the person who is the subject of health records is confined in a state or local correctional facility, the administrator or chief medical officer of such facility may assert such confined person's right of access to the health records if the administrator or chief medical officer has reasonable cause to believe that such confined person has an infectious disease or other medical condition from which other persons so confined need to be protected. Health records shall only be reviewed and shall not be copied by such administrator or chief medical officer. The information in the health records of a person so confined shall continue to be confidential and shall not be disclosed by the administrator or chief medical officer of the facility to any person except the subject or except as provided by law. Where the person who is the subject of health records is under the age of 18, his right of access may be asserted only by his guardian or his parent, including a noncustodial parent, unless such parent's parental rights have been terminated, a court of competent jurisdiction has restricted or denied such access, or a parent has been denied access to the health record in accordance with § [20-124.6](#). In instances where the person who is the subject thereof is an emancipated minor, a student in a public institution of higher education, or is a minor who has consented to his own treatment as authorized by § [16.1-338](#) or [54.1-2969](#), the right of access may be asserted by the subject person. For the purposes of this chapter, statistical summaries of incidents and statistical data concerning abuse of individuals receiving services compiled by the Commissioner of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services shall be disclosed. No such summaries or data shall include any information that identifies specific individuals receiving services.

- (iii) Reports, documentary evidence and other information as specified in §§ [51.5-122](#), [51.5-141](#), and [63.2-104](#).
- (iv) Investigative notes; proprietary information not published, copyrighted or patented; information obtained from employee personnel records; personally identifiable information regarding residents, clients or other recipients of services; other correspondence and information furnished in confidence to the Department of Social Services in connection with an active investigation of an applicant or licensee pursuant to Chapters 17 (§ [63.2-1700](#) et seq.) and 18 (§ [63.2-1800](#) et seq.) of Title 63.2; and information furnished to the Office of the Attorney General in connection with an investigation or litigation pursuant to Article 19.1 (§ [8.01-216.1](#) et seq.) of Chapter 3 of Title 8.01 and Chapter 9 (§ [32.1-310](#) et seq.) of Title 32.1. Information from the records of completed investigations shall be disclosed in a form that does not reveal the identity of complainants, persons supplying information, or other individuals involved in the investigation.
- (v) Information acquired (i) during a review of any child death conducted by the State Child Fatality Review team established pursuant to § [32.1-283.1](#) or by a local or regional child fatality review team to the extent that such information is made confidential by § [32.1-283.2](#); (ii) during a review of any death conducted by a family violence fatality review team to the extent that such information is made confidential by § [32.1-283.3](#); or (iii) during a review of any adult death conducted by the Adult Fatality Review Team to the extent made confidential by § [32.1-283.5](#) or by a local or regional adult fatality review team to the extent that such information is made confidential by § [32.1-283.6](#).
- (vi) Information and statistical registries required to be kept confidential pursuant to §§ [63.2-102](#) and [63.2-104](#).
- (vii) The names and addresses or other contact information of persons receiving transportation services from a state or local public body or its designee under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act, (42 U.S.C. § 12131 et seq.) or funded by Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) created under § [63.2-600](#).