

Findings and Recommendations from the 2025 Oregon Public Records Transparency Survey

APPROVED Prepared and reviewed by the Public Records Advisory Council Survey Subcommittee

Introduction

In 2025, the Public Records Advisory Council conducted a statewide survey of Oregon public bodies to understand how agencies manage public records requests, what challenges they face, and what improvements could strengthen transparency. The responses represent a sample cross-section of state agencies, cities, counties, special districts, and educational institutions.

Agencies were asked about request volumes, staffing, timeliness, resources, training, and their experience interacting with requestors. The survey also included open-ended questions where respondents described obstacles, needs, and recommendations.

This report summarizes the major themes and provides recommendations to guide the Public Records Advocate, state legislators and policymakers, and individual public bodies.

Major Findings

1. Staffing and Time Constraints Are the Most Universal Challenge

Across agency sizes, the most common theme was insufficient staffing dedicated to public records work. Many agencies rely on one coordinator who also performs other full-time duties.

“There is one public records coordinator for the agency whose job is divided into other duties as well.”

High-volume agencies in particular noted that email searches, legal review, and complex redactions take substantial time.

Agencies reported that when they cannot meet statutory timelines, it is because of limited capacity.

Misunderstanding WHAT a PUBLIC RECORD IS; is a two-way street. SEE BOTTOM OF PAGE. And the significant barrier is governmental entities not wanting to disclose, understaffed, no chain of authority, inconsistencies of....personal and prejudicial bias of WHO misunderstands/ what to charge that requester/ stating requesters items are not public records. There needs to be a standardized Definition with NOEXCEPTIONS

2. Public Understanding of the Records Process Is a Significant Barrier

Many agencies reported that requestors misunderstand:

- what qualifies as a “public record,” Anything that comes before the governing body whether action is taken or is informational, is a public record
- that agencies are not required to answer questions or create records, and
- why legal review and redactions take time.

“There is a serious lack of understanding of what a record is and what the PRR process can do for them....There is also a sincere problem with the culture of immediacy.”

Agencies emphasized that public frustration often stems from unrealistic expectations or lack of clarity about the legal process.

3. Digital Tools and New Software Improve Efficiency

Several respondents reported significant improvements after implementing:

- centralized request-tracking systems,
- modernized email search tools,
- digital redaction software, and
- dedicated public portals for submitting requests.

These tools reduce staff burden and help smaller agencies keep up with deadlines.

A public record is any information or document created, owned, used, or retained by a government agency that relates to the public's business, making it accessible to the general public to ensure transparency, with examples like court records, meeting minutes, licenses, property deeds, emails, text messages, photos, and financial reports. These records, whether physical or digital, are essential for accountability and can include vital statistics like birth and marriage records, police reports, and legislative documents, all available through requests under laws like the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

Key Characteristics

Government-Related: Pertains to the functions, activities, or business of public bodies.

Broad Scope: Includes various formats, from paper documents and photos to emails, texts, and social media content.

Transparency & Accountability: Designed to allow citizens to monitor government operations.

4. Complexity of Public Records Law Affects Both Staff and the Public

Agencies noted that their own staff struggle to stay up-to-date on exemptions, retention rules, and statutory requirements.

“Complexity of public records laws, leading to limited understanding among both the public and City staff.”

The law's complexity amplifies the time required to process requests, increasing the need for training and central resources.

5. Survey Design Challenges Limited Some Responses

Some agencies expressed difficulty completing the survey itself. Issues included:

- Questions requiring numeric answers when text explanations were needed
- Substantial staff time required
- Inconsistent internal tracking across decentralized departments
- Difficulty estimating statistics when data is not centrally recorded

“This survey took an estimated 40 hours of staff time across multiple departments.”

This suggests that the next survey may need redesign for clarity and flexibility.

6. Agencies Proposed Concrete Solutions

Common themes included:

Centralization

Some agencies want centralized units for records processing to improve expertise, consistency, and timeliness.

“DOC would benefit from truly centralizing this work... This would allow the work to be done by people who are able to focus on just this work.”

More Training

Eleven agencies explicitly requested additional training opportunities for staff and elected leaders.

One suggested short, on-demand video modules rather than live training through Workday.

Public Education Resources

Some asked for a statewide “requestor education” resource to reduce confusion and improve the quality of incoming requests.

“A state public records requesters resource page or handout to point people to when they are struggling to tailor a broad request or navigate the process.”

Recommendations

The recommendations below are grouped by audience:

1. **Public Records Advocate (PRA Office)**
2. **State Government**
3. **Individual Agencies**

1. Recommendations for the Public Records Advocate

A. Advertise Existing Resources and Create Public Education Materials

- Publish a statewide “How to Make a Public Records Request” guide.
 - This document already exists through a 2019 effort at Open Oregon, a chapter of the National Freedom of Information Coalition. The PRA has already added it to the website here: [Public Records Resources](#).
- Produce short videos explaining: [Add Power Point Presentation.pdf for download for markup notes](#)
 - what a public record is,
 - how exemptions and redactions work,

Include some form of accreditation in an after the fact review -

FOR EXAMPLE: under certain federal grant applications there are Review Modules, after reviewing the Module there is a link that downloads a form attesting to the fact that states that the undersigned has reviewed the Module

- why timelines vary,
- what agencies can and cannot do.
- Provide templates for agencies to embed these resources on their websites.
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B. Follow Up to Offer Training to the 11 Agencies

- Offer services to the 11 agencies that identified training as an area of need

C. Improve Future Survey Design

- Add a reminder that most questions are optional.
- Allow both numeric and text responses where appropriate.
- Press release on agencies that didn't respond.
- Send reminders on completing the survey.

An agency that does not respond could be due to the convoluted questions; or questions that may not be applicable to/for that agency/department

2. Recommendations for State Government (Legislature, Governor, State CIO, Budget Offices)

A. Encourage a Transparency-First Mindset

- Reinforce to state agencies that any and all taxpayer funding is given with an expectation of transparency and accountability. Responding to public records requests is integral to the work of government, not an “additional” or “extra” task.
- Publicize the work of the PRA and the training opportunities This is not a second priority of any governmental entity and should be the 3rd Bullet with the 4th being indented
- Create grant opportunities or budget lines for agencies—especially small local governments—to hire or train public records coordinators. And should actually be placed under Point 1
- Create a “flex” option for an expert to come in or a mutual aid agreement with other local agencies when public interest spikes and a high volume of requests happen.

It is not the purpose
of State
Governmental
Entities to “Publicize”
but in fact to
“SUPPORT” the work

Insert a redirect link
for Dispute
Resolution /
Ombudsman PRA

B. Invest in Modern Record-Management Technology

- Incorporate “Transparency by Design” principles into software contracting — all government databases should be designed with public records requests in mind, such as offering a way to easily download data or easily redact exempt information. This is already partly in https://oregon.public.law/rules/oar_166-017-0015.

- Support development of statewide or regional request-tracking platforms.
- Provide shared software licenses for search tools, redaction systems, and digital storage.

THIS should be a common thread across the board: Agencies, Departments, Municipalities, Special Districts

C. Encourage or Mandate Centralized Public Records Functions

For agencies with decentralized structures (e.g., DOC, ODOT, large counties), the state should:

- Encourage consolidation of records processing into specialized **teams** ? ? Word Choice: categories, groups "Teams" implies a larger entity with multiple recorders handlers. What about small entities with less than 10 employees total
- Establish guidelines for when centralization is required to meet statutory timelines
- Provide financial support for transition efforts
- Create parity on efficient and transparent records request systems (such as DAS' system) across all state agencies and offer to local agencies to use

WHO pays to

D. Simplify the Public Records Statutes

THIS should be PRIORITY Number 1. After all isn't that what PRAC was tasked to do in addition to a standardized records fee

- The volume of exemptions and complexity of the law adds to staff time and public confusion.
- Consider fee reform and standards on what "actual costs" are applicable.
- Implement mandatory basic communication on request responses and reasons for fee waiver denial.

3. Recommendations for Individual Agencies

A. Invest in Internal Training

- Ensure all staff and elected officials receive training on a culture of transparency.
- Ensure staff with records responsibilities receive ongoing training, including through PRA-provided materials.

B. Improve Public Communication

- Clearly explain:
 - how to submit a request,
 - expected timelines,
 - what constitutes a public record,
 - fee policies and waiver criteria.

This is a standardize factor across the board not just with agencies

By separating between an Agency, Department, Local Government, a discriminate tiering application has been created. The purpose of PRAC IS TO GET EVERYBODY ON THE SAME PAGE - not have separate pages of compliances, mandates or purposes. There should be one standardized Records Request criterion. Given I am not a ONE-SIZE Fits all, the basic foundation is necessary for the application of implementation with very little room for deviation.

Transparent communication reduces frustration and lowers staff workload.

C. Adopt Digital Tools Where Possible

- Implement email search tools, request-tracking systems, and digital redaction software.
- Use PRA or state-supported platforms if cost is prohibitive.
- Adopt “Transparency by Design” contracting standards such as OAR 166-017-0015, which requires government records to be accessible and responsive to records requests.

D. Consolidate Internal Processes

- Where possible, centralize your agency’s records function rather than having each department track requests separately. Certain Records may be part of an internal audit and should be compartmentalized (until audit/review is completed) instead of dumped in a general processing unit
- Use standardized templates for acknowledgement letters, fee estimates, and “still processing” notices. This can not be truly implemented until PRAC creates and mandates an across-the-board-statewide standardize fee for records requests. This nonsense of the full hourly salary, half the hourly salary for the reviewer in addition to various tiered costs for records allows for run away and statewide disparate pricing

E. Track Data Consistently

This does not include catering to special interests such as the press - the exception would be non-profit, unless it is discovered that the press is using a non-profit to receive low or not cost records

- Even small agencies should maintain basic metrics (requests received, completed, timeframes, exemptions used) to identify trends and improve performance.

Conclusion

The 2025 survey reveals a system that is committed to transparency but strained by staffing limitations, legal complexity, and inconsistent resources across Oregon’s public bodies.

Agencies want to serve the public well, but they need practical tools, consistent training, and better-informed requestors to do so. This is a disclosure issue. It is also a shifting sands issues: Policy could be stated but the practical application is subject to personal preferences & bias towards individuals. These were the issues I came in on: 5 sheets of paper costing over 10 bucks.

With coordinated action by the Public Records Advocate, state government, and individual agencies, Oregon can significantly reduce processing times, improve public understanding, and strengthen the transparency that underpins public trust.

It is not JUST about the Public Understanding - it also includes: Goverment Interaction & treatment to the public; Removing prejudicially bias applications towards those individuals who tread too closely to the truth and those exposures . . .Public Trust is more than mere Transparency - For Example: We have a mayor that lives in the Urban Growth Boundary. The Charter states all elected/appointed city council members must live in the municipal city boundary limits and only those electors within the city limits can vote. UGB residents are not allowed to cast votes during municipal elections. If any resident of the city proper were to demand the mayor's resignation that mayor would send the goonie squad for dirty deeds done dirt cheap - I have facts to back this up.