

**Portal to Compliance:  
A Qualitative Analysis of Online  
Public Record Request Services in Major U.S. Cities**

National [REDACTED]  
Freedom [REDACTED]  
Of [REDACTED]  
Information [REDACTED]  
Coalition [REDACTED]

**September 2019**

## Introduction

The public's right to access public records is essential to the preservation of our democratic society. Its importance was cited among the list of grievances in our Declaration of Independence, and today its administration by public institutions is being revolutionized by new technology – specialized software and websites are changing the way journalists, citizens and government officials exercise and administer the right to open government.

Many local and state government agencies are beginning to use online portals as their primary tool for public records request administration.

Early findings and anecdotal evidence shows that, if deployed and administered based on the features and functionality, online public record requests portals can save time and money and increase efficiency and responsiveness to request, process and disseminate public records.

These portals, depending on software choice and implementation, give the government agency and requestor one or more of the following features:

- **Centralization:** The ability to make, manage and fulfill public records requests through both conventional and online means using the same software platform.
- **Integration:** An improved ability to track and message between and among public agencies and with the requestor throughout the request and fulfillment process (as opposed to email or conventional forms of communication).
- **Proactive disclosure** for agencies to publish public records when they are created and the ability for the public to easily research and obtain those records through a central database. This includes a log of all previously-made requests, known as "release to one, release to all," and a repository of past and current popularly requested public records.
- An automated tracking solution for the requestor and the agency to follow a request cycle without having to contact the agency or requestor for updates.
- Improved budgeting and administration of this important public service by capturing internal "costs" from output data. This could include the number of public record requests, internal time to fulfill requests, accounting of fees collected from requestors, and legal costs and fines (if applicable).

- Increased transparency and accountability with the ability to make public records more readily available to anyone, not only to the requestor, and providing a "window" into the administrative functions of this important government responsibility, and creating metrics for better fiscal management.

When these capabilities exist, the public and the agency get the benefit of the most transparent request process that technology allows. But after a survey of the most populous U.S. metropolitan areas, and a look at recent academic literature on the subject, the National Freedom of Information Coalition (NFOIC) has found that these features are not all widely adopted.

Of the top 50 most populous metro areas, 66 percent implement some form of online public records portal. Of the top 30 metro areas, 77 percent offer a messaging platform. Only 23 percent maintain a publicly searchable repository of previously-made requests. Only 20 percent publish documents permanently and publicly in a "release to one, release to all" fashion.

The implementation of these new digitized Freedom of Information (FOI) processes at the state and local level can make for faster processing times, but it is important not to confuse FOI portal technology for an effective FOI administrative process, which relies more on people than technology. Portals should be viewed as an administrative tool and the means to greater transparency. Portal effectiveness can be determined by:

- Implementation of key administrative features.
- Quality of state open government laws and their practice.
- Training, education and diligence of the staff who manage the portals and fulfill the request process.

Ultimately, people processes are a critical component to successful implementation.

### Benefits of Portals

- **Centralization brings cost and time saving benefits.** Agencies report increases in efficiency despite increases in the number of requests.
- **Request tracking bolsters compliance with statutory deadlines.** Internal tracking allows for easier prioritization of near-past due requests, allowing for better prioritization.
- **Increased access and ease of use for the requestor.** Making requests online is easier and faster for most requestors.

### Drawbacks of Portals

- **Reluctance or inability for some requesters to make the digital leap.** The digital request method favors the tech-savvy.
- **System limitations, like the lack of mobile access or online payment.** GovQA has a mobile app. NextRequest does not. Both can process payments online.
- **Greater potential for abuse.** Ease of use increases vulnerability for vengeful or “vexatious” requests.

## How records portals got their start

Every company in the vendor space for digital FOI solutions at the state or local level has a different origin and offerings. Here are the major players:

- AINS provides a FOI software solution called FOIAXpress to 85 percent of federal government agencies and is the software provider behind FOIA.gov.
- GovQA entered the market in 2008 as it was investigating citizen engagement tools. In 2016, GovQA acquired GovHelper and its flagship product, FOIAView, which helps agencies stay compliant with public records laws. GovQA’s public records compliance portal has since been implemented in more than 1,000 public sector agencies
- NextRequest evolved from an existing records request system in Oakland, Calif., called RecordTrac, which was created by Code for America Fellows in

2013. Since then, NextRequest has been among the most popular solutions in the FOI software vendor arena. All but one of the NextRequest users in the Top 50 metro areas publishes documents in a “release to one, release to all” fashion.

- Smartsheet’s development of work management software began in 2006 when it first developed a user interface based on spreadsheets that can create alerts, schedules and track data. Smartsheet has since developed multiple products, including a portal that can be used for public records administration. Smartsheet can also integrate time tracking for employees and staff.
- JustFOIA is a software solution provided by MCCi, which has been providing tech solutions to public sector agencies since the 1950s. According to MCCi, it is the top public sector solutions provider in the world.
- SeamlessDocs, which was founded in 2011, provides software that recognizes fields on paper or digital forms of all file types, reducing needless data entry.

These software providers, along with others on the market, provide more than a records request solution – the software can generally be paired with open data portal software from other solution providers so that information from several different databases and sources can be returned in public record searches. This is due to software providers being able to use compatible Application Programming Interfaces (APIs), which is the code that acts as an intermediary, allowing different applications and programs to communicate with one another.

This list is by no means exhaustive – there are FOI solutions providers operating at levels ranging from the city level to the federal level, and some federal agencies use their own online FOIA processes unlike most of the federal government.

Local governments also use self-developed software to handle public records requests.

New York City’s Department of Records and Information Services’ (DORIS) OpenRecords Portal began as a public collaborative computer programming project in 2015 and is built on open source code. The OpenRecords portal was selected by the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government as a 2017 Innovations in American Government Awards Bright Idea winner.

Variety among FOI processes and solution providers is not in itself a problem, said Corinna Zarek, a senior tech policy fellow at Mozilla and former Deputy U.S. Chief Technology Officer at the White House. “There are a variety of approaches to open government and transparency,” Zarek said, adding that it matters more that there is an effective and robust FOI program rather than a universal standard.

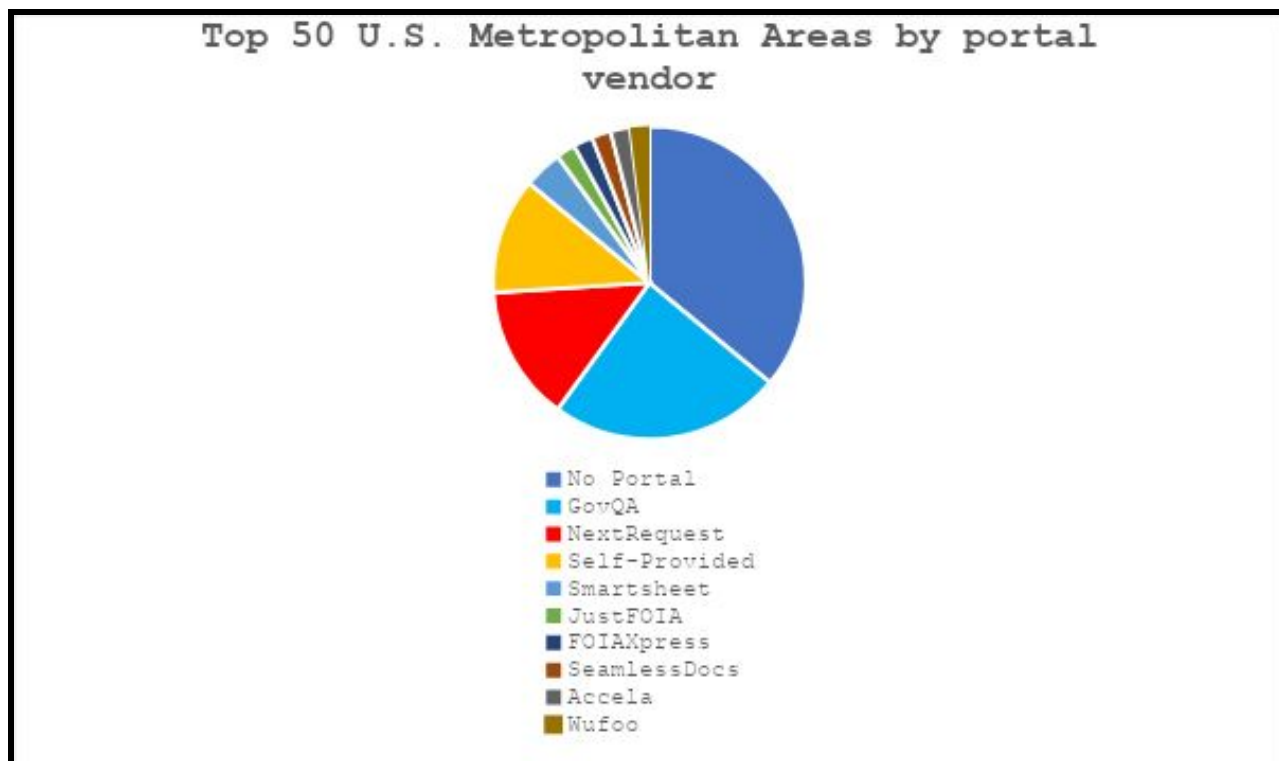


Figure 1 — Top 50 most populous U.S. metropolitan areas and their use of public records request software as of June 2019.

## What is pushing state and local governments to make the switch?

There are both push and pull factors in the adoption of digital FOI practices in state and local government.

Records request portals can be used to fix glaring systemic problems, like chronic untimeliness or unresponsiveness, turning crisis into opportunity. One push factor is litigation and lawsuits resulting from deficient public records administration. Compliance with looming statutory deadlines is another reason governments are looking to software solutions.

In California, a Santa Clara County civil grand jury found that the City of Palo Alto was in violation of the state's public records statute in 2014 after a land use scandal turned sour – the city had been allowing a developer to use land originally zoned for conservation as a construction staging area. It was later revealed that the city met with the developer behind closed doors to discuss property dealings. Residents complained that requests for records about the dealings were ignored.

“The City of Palo Alto does not consistently respond to requests for public records in a timely manner,” according to a county report. The city's previous system for tracking non-routine requests let some requests slip through the cracks, never catalogued internally.

A grand jury recommended the city overhaul its system for providing requests in light of the systemic issues, and the city opted for third party records request portal software.

Using an online public records portal has fixed the issue for Palo Alto, city officials say. They cite the software's consolidated tracking ability as the reason for a now near-perfect response rate. The city fulfilled 98.5 percent of the 455 requests in 2018 within the 10-day allotted statutory window. That's a large increase from 2014, when the city was completing 90 percent of the 125 total requests within the allotted time window. In short, responsiveness increased despite nearly a 3.5 times increase in workload.

FOI administration in the City of New Orleans was understaffed, under-resourced and ready for a solution to their request problems, particularly after it was the subject of negative press coverage and a lawsuit in 2015 related to its lackluster response times to public records requests, as well as anomalies between the requests the city said it completed and what it actually provided to requestors.

New Orleans now administers an open records portal. Mitch Landrieu, who was mayor when the portal was implemented, was optimistic about it in 2016: “With the launch, we are improving how we track and respond to public records requests and giving the public even more access.”

Today, local governments often fall behind statutory mandated response times. This may be caused by a lack of evidence-based decision making on the part of state legislators when crafting the state's transparency laws that provide too little time for local government to reasonably respond. In California, the deadline to respond to a California Public Records Act (CPRA) request is 10 days – barring unavailability of the records or the personnel that need to be consulted regarding the records; the deadline can be reasonably extended up to 14 days.

## Potential efficiency, cost savings are attractive to governments

The saying goes that “if something isn’t measured, it isn’t managed.” Another reason state and local public agencies are looking at portals is potential increased efficiency and cost savings. There is a realization that online portals not only make the records request process faster, but allow for metrics and new data generation with digitized implementation of public records request administration.

“The automated workflows set up in our portal have decreased the amount of time spent following up with staff to ensure the City responds in a timely manner to each request,” said David Carnahan, Palo Alto Deputy City Clerk, in an email. Palo Alto uses GovQA.

A workflow is the pass-along from one record reviewer to another.

A public records request has a lifecycle: Once received, it must usually “flow” through several departments before being fulfilled, usually a county or city attorney’s office, which reviews and redacts documents to ensure that no exempted information or private document gets disclosed to the public. The software allows for a FOI officer managing requests to pass along tasks or documents for redaction without resorting to email or other means, and all requests and tasks appear side by side under one roof. Once a task is completed it can be quickly forwarded back to the employee who needed the document, sent to be fulfilled to the requestor, or sent elsewhere as needed.

The workflow processes within the software are customizable and give the government administrator of the system better control over where the request is sent and who revises the request.

Richard Truong, information technology director of systems in the Office of the Los Angeles City Clerk, advised that before adopting a software solution, local governments should take a look at their internal records request processes. “The most important thing is to have a (functional) workflow within the department first,” he said. Truong added that requests are often complex, and requests can be overly broad, lacking specificity and directed at multiple departments. That leaves record custodians to figure out the logistics. The workflow of complicated requests within the software can be made to mirror a proven workflow already in place outside of it.

“I have stripped a lot of the original (workflow) configuration because it was way too complicated. It originally contained 360-plus workflow pieces and now I have it down to 130-plus,” said Desiree Williams, Public Records Coordinator for Pasco County, Fla., in an email. Pasco County uses GovQA.



Williams added that the portal has helped her deliver requests faster and more efficiently through “tracking, automatic assignment for a workflow and responding by a centralized application rather than emails and excel logs.”

A survey of FOI officials in U.S. public jurisdictions using public records portals conducted by Assistant Professor Alexa Capeloto, John Jay College of Criminal Justice at the City University of New York, found that of 54 total respondents, 72 percent said portal use is “extremely easy” for staff. Additionally, 67 percent reported vast improvement of internal processes, and 22 percent reported that the internal process was “somewhat improved.” None said the portals were difficult to use.

Being as responsive as possible to requestors is only half the benefit of records request portals. Records request portal software can track the amount of time staff spends fulfilling requests so that administrative adjustments can be made accordingly.

Records request portals can also help local governments make more consistent replies and foster better relationships with watchdog groups, which often probe government transparency practices by filing multiple identical requests and monitoring for inconsistent responses. This was the case with the nonprofit news and information source The Lens in New Orleans, but the same is also true of the National Freedom of Information Coalition, which has helped audit state records request practices. Jennifer Snyder, Chief Sales Officer of GovQA, said that records request fulfillment software can notify employees of repeat requests so making consistent replies is easy to accomplish.

The software’s ability to steer requestors away from making a duplicate records request is another attractive feature for government. “In-line deflection” is the process by which requesters can see autocomplete results for records either previously provided or residing on an open data portal as they are describing the documents they seek. By showing these search results from the previous request library in combination with other subsequent deflection opportunities, users are steered away from making new requests. Therefore, fewer duplicate requests are filed, which results in fewer repeat searches by records custodians.

## **Variable pricing among products and vendors**

Snyder of GovQA also weighed in on the nuances that factor into pricing the portals for state agencies. Initially, some vendors thought that pricing based on number of requests would be most fair. After all, more requests going through the system

means more strain on the software, and an increase in the number of staff who would have to fulfill additional requests would increase training costs.

GovQA's fee structure is ultimately based on the number and types of additional features required for the particular government or agency. For a health department managing private health information, additional security and redaction services are necessary. For a state in which a processing fee can be charged for copying or mailing, the addition of modules that can securely handle financial information must be implemented, which will increase the cost of the software.

Snyder said GovQA's fee structure also considers the size of the population serviced by the government agency. Variable pricing is a good thing for some small counties with limited budgets who would otherwise be turned away by the prohibitive cost of the full suite of features. Base model services across the board can be inexpensive enough not to require solicitation of bids through an RFP and may only require minor budgetary adjustments. Features vary from vendor to vendor, but most base model software still has all the essential reporting tools for gathering time and tracking request data.

Washington D.C.'s current online records portal through FOIAXpress comes at the cost of purchasing individual licenses for each agency using the solution. While the software is cloud-enabled, the licensing fee structure (among other factors) makes the system more expensive than other software options. There is an additional cost for paying a contractor to implement the software across government systems.

Because some records request software is a "commercial, off-the shelf" (COTS) product that is ready to be used at the time of purchasing, a Request for Proposal (RFP) may not be a necessary step in acquiring the software, but this varies by jurisdiction. A RFP was not necessary for the City of Los Angeles when they first implemented their portal, purchasing an enterprise, city-wide option for a \$103,000. Divided among the city's 40 departments, the cost per department is just \$2,575 annually. The City of Los Angeles uses NextRequest.

Capeloto's survey of FOI officials using public records portals found that 29 of 54 respondents reported use of a public records portal decreased the time to fulfill a request. Meanwhile, 21 said costs are about the same as without a portal, and 13 reported a decrease in costs. Fourteen did not know whether there was any change, likely due to not having a baseline to make comparisons.

## **A cultural shift toward capturing costs of FOI administration**

An important question to ask to determine the benefits of records portals is how do they impact the practice of FOI administration and government transparency?

It is easy to understand that a potential benefit of records portals is providing the tools government needs to increase efficiency and responsiveness. But the portals are also helping identify long term trends, which cannot be done without data. In Washington state, for example, new statutory reporting requirements are pushing governments to report their records request data. The Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee (JLARC) report publishes the data submitted by state agencies on public records request metrics. A new Washington statute requires agencies with public records costs that exceed \$100,000 to report to JLARC on a variety of performance metrics including information on cost, staff time, and response time. Reporting is voluntary for agencies that spend less than the \$100,000 threshold.

Records portals throughout Washington state were retrofitted and overhauled to meet the new reporting requirements, according to Snyder of GovQA. Data from the portals will allow more states to follow Washington's lead on compiling data and issuing yearly audits or reports, much like that which is done at the federal level, where the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requires annual reports from individual federal agencies summarized by the Department of Justice (DOJ) in a consolidated report.

Early evidence from a comparative perspective between Brazil and the U.S. supports the idea of increased formalization from records portal software and response rates by public agencies. Results from a Brazilian study point to a sharp increase in government response rates when requests are submitted through an ATI-specific platform, like a transparency or information portal. (ATI stands for "Access to Information," the parallel to "Freedom of Information" or FOI in the U.S.)

Data suggest that for requests sent through a designated ATI channel – a list of designated email addresses or one designated email address that receives requests, as distinct from a records portal. The odds of response are 115 percent higher compared to a non-designated channel, and for those sent through an ATI-specific platform, the response rates are 258 percent higher. The increase in responsiveness was shown to be strongest at the municipal level, where use of a records portal showed a 380 percent increase in responsiveness.

When asked about what caused the marked response increase, the report's author, Gregory Michener (*Gauging the Impact of Transparency Policies*), anecdotally suggested the system creates an electronic paper trail that can track when the request was made, who is responsible for its fulfillment and when the request is fulfilled. That type of accountability seems to encourage the public employee or agency to respond more quickly than requests made without those electronic metrics.

## A journalist's perspective

Records request software and a public catalog of previous requests adds a new dynamic to investigative reporting and local journalism. With increased transparency and adoption of the "release to one, release to all" protocol (keeping a repository of previously requested documents), journalists who don't keep a close eye on their reporting methods may inadvertently tip their hands to stories they are working on.

Under older, email-centric records request processes, journalists could request important records without announcing to the public that they were seeking them. By submitting requests through email exchanges with the city clerk, for example, the only people who knew which records were getting requested and fulfilled were the requestor and government, at least for awhile. Now all of that information can be made public more quickly. Even the requests made directly to the records custodians via email can end up on the portal as the custodian then opens and fulfills the request using the software.

"A smart strategy is to monitor the listed requests," said Joey Flechas, an investigative reporter for The Miami Herald who is a frequent user of the city's records portal. Journalists and bloggers can identify what stories and investigations are being worked on and who is working on them by keeping tabs on the list of fulfilled requests. Flechas says he is even the subject of some records requests from parties who want to know what he knows – the party files a public records request for "a list of all requests filed by Joey Flechas." He added that the lack of anonymity with the software "cuts both ways," as he can also see what other people are requesting and has an interest in knowing what others are researching.

"The only truly anonymous way to get records would be to walk down to city hall and submit a piece of loose-leaf paper with no name on it," he said.

Flechas says he goes "the source route" to get a record more surreptitiously – emailing the person who he knows already has custody of the record and with whom he has worked before. By exchanging a few emails, Flechas uses his rapport with city officials to gain access to the document without having to use the portal. Nevertheless, the emailed request is still subject to public records disclosure, and the official may still use the portal to input the request.

This more traditional way of getting public records, especially in-person requests for records, is beginning to go extinct. David Price, editor and co-publisher of the Palo Alto Daily Post, laments the change.

“People don't have to go to the counter anymore,” Price said. “If you're afraid of face-to-face interaction with other human beings, then the portal is good. ... As a reporter, I liked going over to City Hall and talking to people, hearing the gossip.”

But what concerns Price most is the ability of Palo Alto city government to “sit” on the request for the full amount of time allotted by law.

“When we had a less formal, face-to-face system, most of the time you'd get the records immediately,” he said. “With an online portal, the city can take advantage of the state open records law that gives the government 10 days to respond to a request. So now every request is delayed by at least 10 days, if not longer.”

“This is a people problem, not a technology problem,” said NFOIC executive Director Daniel Bevarly. There is also the tendency of government employees to direct a public record petitioner to submit their request through the online portal even when requests can still be submitted to a public employee in person, by phone or by email. Instead, says Bevarly, the public employee “should accept the request and enter the requester's contact information in the portal if the jurisdiction uses one. ”

## **What makes records portals effective**

Ease of use of records portals is dependent on several factors, but perhaps none more so than the quality of government transparency laws and administrative practices. The records request process varies from state to state, and how easily one can get records still depends largely on the particularities of the FOI law in that state and the procedures for complying with those laws.

“We lack clear statutory guidance on a wide array of critical issues that would be of far greater assistance to all of us seeking to comply with the mandates of (Wisconsin's Open Records Law) than any software could ever be,” said Jim Owczarski, city clerk of Milwaukee, Wis.

Low thresholds for transparency, like merely providing for in-person inspection without charge or allowing documents to be provided to the requestor in hard copy or on a hard disk for a fee, can obviate the need for a FOI portal, making the software of limited consequence.

The trouble lies with a mismatch between a portal's capabilities and its implementation. For example, a request for records submitted through the New Orleans portal will ultimately end in a prompt to pay a fee for copying and mailing either in paper format or on a hard disk, or to inspect the records in person in accordance with state law. While their solutions provider, NextRequest, provides the capability of taking payments electronically through the software, New Orleans'

version of the portal prompts the requestor to submit payment by paper check or money order through U.S. mail. The New Orleans portal also does not state outright that records can be uploaded for review (it was only after the author of this paper messaged the city that they stated the records could be uploaded to the portal as well).

In those jurisdictions where online records portals are in use, NFOIC members have reported inefficiencies with third party portals. Fritz Mulhauser, with the D.C. Open Government Coalition, weighed in on D.C.'s efforts to increase responsiveness and manage an online portal. Mulhauser cited a lack of training with the technology as the chief problem facing D.C. petitioners, not the technology itself.

If there are any inefficiencies, he said, the public records portals are likely not the problem – it's the level of training and experience of staff behind them. Among the main issues were the portal's status tracker, which left the requestor in the dark for months without an update. The status tracker would remain "in progress" for up to six months. Without a clearer picture of what was happening to their request, a requestor could not be sure if any progress was being made.

A further review of Washington D.C.'s public records request process revealed practices that forced the requestor to either file multiple requests simultaneously or be bounced between agencies via email correspondence after filing a request. With some records request systems, the mistake of filing a request with the incorrect department or agency can be corrected by system administrators – they simply remove and add departments to the request. Filing a request to the wrong agency in D.C. is not solved so simply; the requestor will receive email responses referring him or her to different email addresses in different agencies. The requestor is asked to file a new request directed to the correct agency.

Practices like these are the result of statutory language aimed to make requests as specific as possible – Washington D.C.'s regulations provide that a request must be "directed to the particular agency," meaning the policy of closing out misdirected requests is not unlawful. The same is true for cities like Chicago where city departments each deal with requests independently and do not use portal software.

"Each City department is separate, so the implementation of (a records request software solution) would not likely be citywide," wrote Dana M. O'Leary, assistant chief counsel and FOIA officer for the Chicago City Clerk. The City of Chicago does not use portal software and handles public records requests by email.

Where the software is already in place, refiling after a misdirected request can artificially inflate the number of public records requests due to repeated filings to

different departments, rendering reporting statistics less useful. This is already occurring in Los Angeles, according to the city's technology director.

## NFOIC recommendations

The National Freedom of Information Coalition has identified nine recommendations for adopting and administering online public record request portals that can help public agencies improve performance of their FOI administration responsibilities:

1. **Implement required ongoing training and education for public record custodians.** Whether it's having better knowledge of their state open government laws and their FOI administrative policies or becoming more proficient in the use and instructions of their online records portal, government employees can be valuable resources to their agencies and to the public by helping direct requests to the correct agency to minimize delays due to incorrect or misdirected information. With any administrative practice utilizing new technology, developing professional standards and best practices are critical for successful implementation.
2. **Let requestors find the portal organically.** When someone requests records through other means outside the portal, they should not be denied and sent to make the request through the portal. In some states, like Florida, it is unlawful for a government agent to deny a records request due to the format of the request. According to Snyder of GovQA, it is better for staff to use the portal to make an initial filing on behalf of the requestor and provide them with a username and email with which they can view the documents once they have been released.
3. **Keep in contact with the requestor.** This is especially important for vague or voluminous requests. When notified of prohibitive costs of copying and processing fees, or if simply asked for clarification on what they seek, many requestors choose to further limit the scope of their request rather than make the agency go through unnecessary work that increases fees.

The benefits of using messaging through the portal are especially important for requests for materials that are part of an active investigation or take longer to release. For example, police body camera footage in California can take more than a year to release, but statutory requirements mandate updating the requestor every 30 days if an active investigation delays release

of the footage. This requires a tool for maintaining a channel of communication with requestors.

4. **Provide easy access to a FOI/records officer or official.** Maintaining a records portal should benefit both requestors who have experience with records requests and those who do not. Many requestors will have questions specific to their request that can only be answered through interpersonal communication, whether by email or telephone. By providing employee contact information where requestors can solicit information pertaining to state law or the types of records that the agency maintains, broad or voluminous requests can be preemptively narrowed.
5. **Provide documents in native file format.** If the documents requested are spreadsheets, text messages, or emails, it is best to give the requester direct access to the files in the format in which they were created, or in the format in which they are stored, rather than convert them into PDF files for dissemination. While this seems like a no-brainer, many governments still practice PDF conversion of public records from their native file format. It has also required new legislation for state and local governments to comply with this best practice.

A possible exception to this is having to redact files, which when done properly through integrated redaction software, will return a PDF with the non-producible information “burned” from the document. This, however, is a needed change for the solution provider and not the public agency.

6. **Post in plain sight the state’s open government laws, the agency’s FOI policies and clear instructions for using the online portal.** Having a written policy to notify requestors of what kinds of documents and materials are producible under the state’s transparency laws can reduce confusion and friction as well as the number of requests submitted for private or otherwise exempted material. Clearly post a phone number or email address for help.
7. **Proactively publish popularly requested documents.** Proactive disclosure of public information is a best practice for any government agency. Consistently post popular documents like payrolls, budgets meeting agendas and minutes along with past requests and the information released to those requests. Some potential requests may be halted if the petitioner finds the information has been published from a prior request, saving time and money for government and the journalists or resident.

“Affirmative disclosure norms are especially immature,” said David Pozen, a law professor at Columbia University and government transparency expert.



While Pozen was talking about federal agencies, the same principles hold true at the state and local level. Department of Justice guidelines as early as 2009 call for agencies to "readily and systematically post information online in advance of any public request." The DOJ stated in proactive disclosure pilot assessment that when agencies make proactive disclosures, "they are enhancing transparency by ensuring that certain key information about the operations and activities of the government is readily and efficiently made available to all."

8. **Use portal features to their fullest extent, including payment and redaction services.** Agencies should understand the potential of their portal's features and functions in order to maximize their effectiveness to the user. Adopting a single solution can consolidate what had been multiple processes administered by many people.
9. **Provide for inter-departmental operability.** By having all government departments working on the same software, a requester has greater access to all levels of administration via one access point at the portal, rather than having to navigate separate processes across multiple departments. Collection, organization, management and reporting using a central system for public information is helpful and efficient – a quality sorely lacking in email-centric record request systems.

This is the direction the federal government is moving as well. The White House Office of Management and Budget asked agencies to finalize National FOIA Portal interoperability plans, making FOIA processes across executive agencies consistent and allowing requesters to access all agencies through FOIA.gov.

## ABOUT NFOIC

The National Freedom of Information Coalition protects your right to open government. Our mission is to make sure state and local governments and public institutions have laws, policies and procedures to facilitate the public's access to their records and proceedings.

We are a national nonprofit, nonpartisan organization of state and regional affiliates representing 35 states and the District of Columbia. Through our programs, services and national member network, NFOIC promotes press freedom, legislative and administrative reforms, dispute resolution, and litigation (when needed) to ensure open, transparent and accessible state and local governments and public institutions.

NFOIC is located at the University of Florida [College of Journalism and Communications](#) and works closely with its neighbor, the [Brechner Center for Freedom of Information](#).

For more, visit [www.nfoic.org](http://www.nfoic.org).

### Want to share this piece or cite it in your own research?

Chamberlin, Stephan. **"Portal to Compliance: A Qualitative Analysis of Online Public Record Request Services in Major U.S. Cities."** National Freedom of Information Coalition. 2019. <https://www.nfoic.org/white-papers-0>