

Freedom of Information Commission

At a Glance

COLLEEN M. MURPHY, *Executive Director/General Counsel*
Mary E. Schwind, *Managing Director/Associate General Counsel*
Thomas A. Hennick, *Public Education Officer*
Established – 1975
Statutory authority – CGS Section 1-200 et. Seq.
Central office – 18-20 Trinity Street,
Hartford, CT 06106
Number of employees – 13
Recurring operating expenses – \$1,479,544
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 ensure that all public agencies comply with the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

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 2016-2017

The Commission continued its efforts to efficiently tackle its heavy volume of contested cases, placing emphasis on its ombudsman program as it had done the previous year. In 2016, staff resolved 566, or more than 63%, of the 890 cases, without a hearing. The remaining 324, or 36%, either went to a hearing, are scheduled for a hearing or may be resolved short of a hearing.

Nonetheless, the continuing heavy proliferation of formal complaints makes accomplishing such efficiencies a formidable task. In 2016, the Commission received 890 formal complaints, only 51 fewer than the all-time record of 941 formal complaints received in 2014. As of August 31, 2017, the Commission was on pace for more than 775 complaints for the calendar year. Prior to 2006, the highest number of complaints ever received by the Commission was 676 in 2000. The Commission now averages more than 800 formal complaints a year, with 807 in calendar year 2008, 792 in 2009, 806 in 2010, 719 in 2011, 730 in 2012, 810 in 2013, 941 in 2014, 899 in 2015 and 890 in 2016.

In other matters of interest:

- The Commission's most critical accomplishment may well have been its ability to function effectively. As it was for many agencies, budget adjustments caused by the ongoing state fiscal crisis made day-to-day operations particularly difficult for the second straight fiscal year. The operating budget of \$1,479,544 which forced staff layoffs made it increasingly difficult to protect the public's right to know. These cuts came in spite of increased volume in both complaints and demands from the public for other services like general questions and public workshops. The Commission was (and remains) extremely concerned that the nearly 15 percent reduction in its budget will have a detrimental impact on the Commission's ability to carry out its core services and responsibilities, and that it will curtail the right of the citizens of Connecticut to open and accountable government. Compounding the problem is the lack of budgetary certainty as of August 31, 2017.
- The Commission has continued to receive a growing number of requests for speakers and workshops as part of its educational programs. The annual FOI Conference drew 167 attendees in April. The Commission has provided an average of 115 speakers a year at a variety of venues over the past five years. This represents an increase of 35-40 speaking engagements since 2007. A total of 120 speaking programs were offered in 2016. Between 115 and 120 are anticipated for 2016.
- The Commission continued to expand its community outreach program aimed at the state's minority communities. Several presentations were made targeting Spanish-speaking citizens at various festivals and events. The program features Spanish-language videos and literature and is being distributed statewide.
- The Commission expanded the use of the educational video "The Government Belongs to the People" in 2017. The video offers insight into the rich history of Freedom of Information in Connecticut as well as examples of the need for open and accessible government. The video, completed in 2012, is now being shared with citizens and public officials throughout the state.
- The Commission remains in constant dialogue with the Legislature about all proposed legislation that could impact the people's right to know. During the regular legislative session, the Commission monitored 164 bills. A total of 101 received public hearings and FOI Commission staff prepared statements for and/or testified on 15 of those bills. As of August 31, 2017, 27 bills became public acts.

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 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;
- Expand and broaden community outreach program; and
- Refine and expand training program for advisory board members and agency liaisons.

Information Reported as Required by State Statute

The Commission is committed to equal employment opportunities for all.