



Open Government

Wisconsin Public Records Law

*Revised by Philip J. Freeburg, J.D., Local Government Educator,
University of Wisconsin-Division of Extension, Local Government Center
Updated by Daniel Foth, Local Government Specialist, April 2019*

Policy of Access

Local governments keep a variety of records dealing with citizens, businesses, and government activities. To further the goal of having an informed public, Wisconsin's policy is to give the public "the greatest possible information regarding the affairs of government. . ."¹ Accordingly, the Public Records Law (Wis. Stat. §§ 19.32-19.37) must "be construed in every instance with a presumption of complete public access, consistent with the conduct of government business." The statute further provides that "denial of public access generally is contrary to the public interest, and only in an exceptional case may access be denied."²

What is a Public Record?

A public record is a "record" of an "authority."

Items covered

A "record" is defined as "any material on which written, drawn, printed, spoken, visual or electromagnetic or electronically generated or stored data is recorded or preserved, regardless of physical form or characteristics, that has been created, or is being kept by, an "authority" (defined below). The term record includes, "but is not limited to, handwritten, typed, or printed pages, maps, charts, photographs, films, recordings, tapes, optical disks, and any other medium on which electronically stored data is recorded or preserved."³ A website maintained by a public official about government business is also a public record, and access cannot be restricted.⁴ Record also includes emails and other correspondence sent to an elective official.⁵

Items not covered

The term "record" "does not include drafts, notes, preliminary computations and like materials prepared for the originator's personal use, or prepared by the originator in the name of a person for whom the originator is working..." This exception is narrowly interpreted. If a draft or other

preliminary document is used as if it were a final document, it is not excluded from the definition of record.⁶ Therefore, a so-called draft report used to determine policy, notes circulated outside the chain of the originator's supervision, as well as notes used to memorialize a governmental body's activity, or used to communicate information, are records under the law. Notes used solely to refresh the originator's memory, even if used at a later time, although arguably a document used in government, still are not records.⁷

"Record" does not include materials that are the personal property of the record custodian, and do not relate to the custodian's office. Consistent with that, the Wisconsin Supreme Court has determined that solely personal emails of public employees are not public records.⁸ However, the attorney general's office advises that if any part of an email sheds light on governmental functioning, then it is subject to disclosure.⁹

Materials to which access is limited by copyright, patent, or bequest are not public records, although in certain situations copyrighted material may, under the fair use doctrine, be considered a public record.¹⁰ Likewise, published materials of an authority available for sale, and published materials available for inspection in a public library are not records.¹¹

"Authority." This term is broadly defined in the law to include state and local offices, elective officials, agencies, boards, commissions, committees, councils, departments, and public bodies created by the constitution, statutes, ordinances, rules or orders.¹²

Local governing bodies, offices, elective officials and their committees, boards, and commissions are covered. An "elective official" is an individual who holds an office that is regularly filled by the vote of the people.¹³ However, when an elective official leaves office they are no longer an "authority."¹⁴ Authority also includes governmental corporations, quasi-governmental corporations, a local exposition district, a long-term care district, any court of law, and nonprofit corporations that receive more than 50% of their funds from a county, city, village, or town, and provide services related to public health or safety to those units. Other factors are applied on a case-by-case basis when determining if a corporation is a quasi-governmental entity, such as whether it performs a governmental function, degree of government access to its records, express or implied representations of government affiliation, and extent of government control of the corporation.¹⁵ Finally, subunits of the above are also authorities.¹⁶

Management & Destruction of Records; Requested Records

Every public officer is the legal custodian of the records of his or her office.¹⁷ The statutes provide standards for retaining records and also provide procedures and timetables for transferring obsolete records to the Wisconsin Historical Society, or for destroying them. Tape recordings of meetings of local governmental bodies, made solely for the purpose of making minutes, may not be destroyed sooner than 90 days after the minutes of the meeting have been approved and published (if the body publishes its minutes).¹⁸

The otherwise legal destruction of records cannot be used to undermine a person's public records request. No record may be destroyed until after a request to copy or inspect has been granted, or

until at least 60 days after the date of denial of such request (90 days in the case of a request by a committed or incarcerated person).¹⁹ The right to destroy a record is also not permitted if access to the record is being litigated. The records retention law, Wis. Stat. § 19.21, is not a part of the Public Records Law, and provides no remedy for a requester seeking destroyed records, such as deleted emails.²⁰ Also, it is not a prohibited destruction of a requested public record if only an identical copy is destroyed.²¹

What is a Local Public Office?

"Local Public Office" is a term used in Public Records Law provisions concerning an authority's posting requirement and a requester's right of access to job applications, and to other records with personally identifiable information. Local public office covers elected officers of local governmental units; a county administrator, administrative coordinator, or a city or village manager; appointed local officers and employees who serve for a specified term; and officers and employees appointed by the local governing body, executive, or administrative heads who serve at the pleasure of their appointing authority.²² The term also includes appointed offices or positions in which an individual serves as head of a department, agency, or division of the local governmental unit.

Local public office does not include persons who perform only clerical or ministerial tasks (i.e. jobs with duties involving little or no discretion), such as non-supervisory clerical support positions or manual laborers. Independent contractors are also not considered a local public office.²³ Thus, contracted municipal assessors are not subject to the law.²⁴ However, local governments may not avoid responsibilities under the Public Records Law by contracting for collection, maintenance, and custody of public records and directing document requesters to that contractor.²⁵ Also, the term local public office does not include any "municipal employee" as defined under Wis. Stat. § 111.70(1)(i), the municipal employment relations law.

Public records provisions on posting and personally identifiable information also apply to a "state public official."²⁶

Legal Custodians (Wis. Stat. § 19.33)

In general

The legal custodian maintains public records and has the duty to make decisions regarding access to the records.²⁷ Specific statutes outside of the Public Records Law may establish record-keeping duties. For example, local clerks are designated as records custodians.

Elective officials

The Public Records Law provides, in general, that elective officials are the custodians of the records of their offices, unless they have designated an employee of their staff to act as custodian. Chairpersons and co-chairpersons of committees and joint committees of elective officials, or their designees, are the custodians.

Other custodians; designations

If one authority (other than an elective official, committee, or joint committee of elective officials) appoints another authority, or provides administrative services for the other authority, the parent authority may designate the legal custodian for such other authority.

State and local authorities (other than elective officials and their committees and joint committees), under the Public Records Law, must designate custodians in writing, and provide their names and a description of their duties to all employees entrusted with records under the supervision of the custodian. If the statutes do not designate a custodian, and the authority has not designated one, the highest ranking officer and the chief administrative officer, if any, are the authority's custodian.

Records in a public building

The legal custodian of records kept in a public building must designate one or more deputies to act in his or her absence. This requirement does not apply to members of any local governmental body, such as a county board supervisor.

Office Hours & Facilities; Computation of Time

Posted notice required - Wis. Stat. § 19.34(1)

Each authority must adopt and prominently display a notice describing its organization, the times and locations at which records may be inspected, the identity of the legal custodian, the methods to request access to or copies of records, and the costs for copies. If the authority does not have regular office hours at the location where records are kept, its notice must state what advance notice is required, if any, to inspect or copy a record.²⁸ The posted notice must also “identify each position of the authority that constitutes a local public office or a state public office” (see “What is a Local Public Office?” above).²⁹

This posting requirement, however, does not apply to members of the legislature or to members of any local governmental body, such as a county board supervisor.

Hours - Wis. Stat. § 19.34(2)

An authority with regular office hours must, during those hours, permit access to its records kept at that office, unless otherwise specified by law. If the authority does not have regular office hours at the location where the records are kept, it must permit access upon 48 hours written or oral notice. Alternatively, an authority without regular hours at the location where records are kept may establish a period of at least two consecutive hours per week for public access to records, and may require 24 hours advance written or oral notice of intent to inspect or copy a record within the established access period.

If a record is at times taken from the location where it is regularly kept, and inspection is allowed at the location where the record is regularly kept upon one business days' notice, inspection does not have to be allowed at the occasional location.

Computation of time - Wis. Stat. § 19.345

Under the public records provisions in Wis. Stat. §§ 19.33-19.39, when the time in which to do an act (e.g. provide a notice) is specified in hours or days, Saturdays, Sundays and legal holidays are excluded from the computation.

Facilities - Wis. Stat. § 19.35(2)

The authority must provide a person who is allowed to inspect or copy a record with facilities comparable to those used by its employees to inspect, copy, and abstract records during established office hours. The authority is not required to provide extra equipment or a separate room for public access. The authority has the choice of allowing the requester to photocopy the record or providing a copy itself.³⁰ In order to protect the original, the custodian may refuse to allow the requester to use his or her own photocopier to copy the record.³¹

Priority and Sufficiency of Request

Response to a public records request is a part of the regular work of the office. An authority must, “as soon as practicable and without delay,” fill a public records request or notify the requester of the decision to deny the request, in whole or in part, and the reasons for that decision.³² In some cases, the custodian may delay the release of records to consult legal counsel. Specified time periods apply for giving notice of the intended release of certain records containing personally identifiable information about employees and individuals who hold public office (see “Personally Identifiable Information” below).

A request must reasonably describe the record or information requested.³³ A request is insufficient if it has no reasonable limitation as to subject matter or length of time represented by the request. For example, a request for a copy of 180 hours of audio tape of 911 calls with a transcription of the tape and log for each transmission was a request a court decision found without reasonable limitation that may be denied.³⁴ Although filling a request may involve a large volume of records, at some point a broad request becomes so excessive that it may be rejected.³⁵

Form of Request & Response; Separation of Information

A request may be either oral or written.³⁶ If a mailed request asks that records be sent by mail, the authority cannot require the requester to come in and inspect the records, but must mail a copy of the requested record, assuming that it must be released and any required prepayment of fees (see “What Fees May Be Charged” and “Limitations on Access” below) has been made.³⁷ Also, a response that requires unauthorized costs or conditions is considered a denial even though the response does not use words like “deny” or “refuse.”³⁸

A request that is granted seldom presents a problem. However, denials of requests must be made in accordance with legal requirements. An oral request may be denied orally, unless a demand for a written reply is made by the requester within five business days of the oral denial.³⁹

The request must be in writing before an action to seek a court order or a forfeiture may be started. A written request must receive a written denial that must state the reasons for the denial.

The denial must also inform the requester that he or she may file a lawsuit called a “mandamus” action (or request the district attorney or attorney general to file such action) in the local circuit court. Further, the denial must include that the court action will review the custodian’s denial of access and a court order may be granted to release the record (see “Enforcement and Penalties” below).⁴⁰

If a record contains both information that is subject to disclosure and information that is not, the information that may be disclosed must be provided and the confidential information deleted.⁴¹

Form of Record

Photocopies

Many requested records can be photocopied. The authority may either provide a photocopy of such record to the requester or allow the requester to make the copy (as noted above under “Facilities”).⁴² If the form of the record does not permit photocopying, the requester may inspect the record, and the authority may permit the requester to photograph the record.⁴³ If requested, the authority must provide a copy that is substantially as readable as the original.

Audio Recordings

For audio recordings, the authority may provide a copy of the recording, substantially as audible as the original, or a transcript.⁴⁴ When an audio recording or handwritten record would reveal a confidential informant’s identity, the authority must provide a transcript, if the record is otherwise subject to inspection.⁴⁵ A requester has a right to a copy of a video recording that is as substantially as good as the original.⁴⁶

Digital records

An authority must provide relevant data from digital records in “an appropriate format.” It is not necessary for a requester to examine the exact information in an authority’s electronic database. This is because the data may be at risk of damage or unwitting exposure of confidential information by complete access to the database. For example, providing property assessment information for all properties in the database as PDF documents satisfied a request for all property data from the digital record without allowing access to the entire electronic database.⁴⁷

Putting records into comprehensible form

If the record is in a form not readily comprehensible, the requester has the right to information assembled and reduced to written form, unless otherwise provided by law.⁴⁸ Except to put an existing record into a comprehensible form, the authority has no duty to create a new record by extracting and compiling information.⁴⁹ However, the custodian does have to separate information that may be disclosed from that which is being withheld.⁵⁰

Published records; restrictions on access

A record that has been published, or will be promptly published and available for sale or distribution, need not be otherwise offered for public access.⁵¹ Note that the definition of record above does not include published materials of an authority available for sale and published materials available for inspection at a public library.⁵²

Protecting records from damage

Reasonable restrictions may be placed on access to protect irreplaceable or easily damaged original records.⁵³

What Fees May Be Charged?

Fees that do not exceed the “actual, necessary and direct” cost of reproduction or transcribing a record, and mailing or shipping it, may be charged to a requester of public records, unless another fee is set or authorized by law.⁵⁴ The authority may reduce or waive fees if that is in the public interest. The Wisconsin Department of Justice, Office of Open Government issued an Advisory Opinion on August 8, 2018 that revised its prior 15¢ per page recommended cost. The DOJ determined its actual cost of black and white and color per page copy at 0.0135¢ and 0.0632¢ respectively. The OOG advises local government to re-evaluate their reproduction costs and amend their Open Records Notice policy using Using an actual copy-machine contract costs and paper.

Further, the OOG suggests, as a best practice, for an Authority to itemize all expenses, including, but not limited to, copying, postage and location costs. Local Governments can utilize the DOJ Published Fee Schedule as a guide.

A higher cost would be justified where a statute provides otherwise or a higher cost can be justified.⁵⁵ As an example of a statute providing for a different fee, the register of deeds may charge \$2 for the first page and \$1 for additional pages for copies of records under Wis. Stat. §59.43(2)(b). Also, the register, with the approval of the county board, may enter into a contract for the provision of records in electronic format at a price set as provided under Wis. Stat. § 59.43(2)(c).⁵⁶

A copy fee may include a charge for the time it takes a clerical worker to copy the records on a copy machine, but remember it is recommended that the fee not exceed 25¢ per page.⁵⁷ Costs associated with locating a record may be passed on to the requester only if the location costs are \$50 or more. The OOG recommends that locating costs should be charge based on the lowest cost employee who can perform the necessary locating and reviewing task. This may mean separating out the costs for the different duties required to locate (computer expert) versus review (administrative) a located record. Computer programming expense required to respond to a request also may be charged.⁵⁸

Prepayment of fees may be required only if the fee exceeds \$5. However, if the requester is a prisoner who has failed to pay any fee charged for a previous request, the authority may require prepayment of both the previous and current fee. The cost of a computer run may be imposed as a copying fee, but not as a location fee.⁵⁹ The cost of separating confidential parts of a record from the parts to be released may not be charged.⁶⁰

Inspection of Public Records

Any requester has a right to examine a public record unless access is withheld according to law. As noted above, the presumption is that public records are open. Access to a public record, in accordance with Wis. Stat. §§ 19.35(1)(a) & 19.36(1), may be denied when:

- A state or federal law exempts the record from disclosure.
- The courts have established a limitation on access. This is known as a “common law exemption.”
- The harm to the public interest from disclosure outweighs the public interest in inspection. This requires the custodian to perform the “balancing test” (see “Limitations on Access under the Common Law” below), often with the advice of legal counsel. The balancing test is also a common law doctrine.

Limitations on Access Under the Common Law; The Balancing Test

The statute provides that common law principles (i.e. the law developed in published court decisions) on the right of access to records remain in effect.⁶¹ For example, the common law provides an exception to public access to a district attorney’s prosecution files.⁶² Most importantly, the common law has created the concept of the balancing test to weigh the competing public interests in making the disclosure decision. In a 2008 case, the court ruled that the above common law exception for records in the custody of the district attorney’s office does not allow another custodian, in this case the sheriff’s department, to withhold the same record held by the district attorney’s office, although the sheriff’s department may withhold the record for a sufficient policy reason after applying the balancing test.⁶³

The Balancing Test

Often, no statutory provision or common law ruling answers the question of whether access to a public record may be denied. When the custodian has some doubt about whether to release the record, the balancing test must be performed. Under the common law, public records may be withheld only when the public interest in nondisclosure outweighs the public interest in disclosure.⁶⁴ Essentially, any reasons for nondisclosure must be strong enough to outweigh the strong presumption of access.⁶⁵ The custodian must state specific policy reasons for denying access; a mere statement of a legal conclusion is inadequate.⁶⁶ In explaining the denial, it may be helpful to cite statutory provisions (such as the Open Meetings Law exemptions, if applicable) that indicate a public policy to deny access, even if these provisions may not specifically answer the access question.

Before refusing a request in an unclear situation, or granting a request that may invade a person’s privacy or damage a person’s reputation, the custodian should consult the county corporation counsel or municipal attorney. The attorney general’s office may also be consulted (see “Resources,” below). The statute on personally identifiable information clarifies many such matters (see “Personally Identifiable Information” below).

Using Open Meetings Law exemptions in the balancing test

The statutory exemptions under which a governmental body may meet in closed session under Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1) of the Open Meetings Law indicate public policy, but the custodian must still engage in the balancing test and may not merely cite such an exemption to justify nondisclosure.⁶⁷

These exemptions include the following: deliberating concerning a quasi-judicial case; considering dismissal, demotion, licensing, or discipline of a public employee; considering employment, promotion, compensation, or performance evaluation of a public employee; considering crime prevention or crime detection strategies; engaging in public business when competitive or bargaining reasons require closure; considering financial, medical, social, or personal histories or disciplinary information about specific persons which would be likely to have a substantially adverse effect on the person's reputation if disclosed, and conferring with legal counsel for a governmental body on strategy for current or likely litigation.

Examples of Statutory Limitations on Access

Records requested by prisoners & committed persons - Wis. Stat. § 19.32

The definition of “requester” itself results in a limitation on access. Requester does not include any person who is committed or incarcerated unless the person requests inspection or copies of a record that contain specific references to that person, or to his or her minor children, if the physical placement of the children has not been denied to the person. Release of records to a committed or incarcerated person is subject to the same rules regarding records that are otherwise accessible under the law.

Certain law enforcement investigative records - Wis. Stat. § 19.36(2)

Access to these records is limited where federal law, as a condition for receipt of federal aid, provides limitations.

Computer programs; trade secrets - Wis. Stat. §§ 19.36(4) & (5)

The computer program itself is not subject to inspection and copying, although the information used as input is subject to any other applicable limitations. (see also “Digital records” above, under the heading “Forms of Records”)

Identities of applicants for public positions - Wis. Stat. § 19.36(7)

Records that would reveal the identities of job applicants must be kept confidential if the applicants so request in writing. However, the identities of final candidates to local public office may not be withheld. A final candidate is an individual who is one of the five most qualified applicants, or a member of the final pool if that is larger than five. If there are fewer than five candidates, each one is a final candidate.

Identities of law enforcement informants - Wis. Stat. § 19.36(8)

Information that would identify a confidential informant must be deleted before a requester may have access to the record.

Employee personnel records & records of public officers (see below) - Wis. Stat. §§ 19.36(10)-(12)

Financial identifying information - Wis. Stat. § 19.36(13)

Personally identifiable data that contains an individual's account or customer number with a financial institution (such as credit card numbers, debit card numbers, and checking account numbers) may not be released, unless specifically required by law.

Ambulance records - Wis. Stat. § 146.50(12)

Records made by emergency medical technicians and ambulance service providers are confidential patient healthcare records, although certain information on the run is open to inspection.

Patient healthcare records - Wis. Stat. §§ 146.81-146.84

Law enforcement officers' records of children & adult expectant mothers - Wis. Stat. §§ 48.396 & 938.396.

Public library user records - Wis. Stat. § 43.30.

Certain assessment records

Personal property tax returns are confidential, except that they are available for use before the board of review.⁶⁸ Property tax income and expense information, used in property valuation under the income method, are confidential.⁶⁹ Real estate transfer returns are also confidential, with specified exceptions.⁷⁰

Personnel files - Wis. Stat. § 103.13

An employer (whether a government or non-government employer) must allow an employee to inspect his or her personnel documents, at least twice a year, within seven working days after the request is made. The employee may submit a statement for the file that disputes information in it. If the employee and employer cannot agree to a correction, the statement must be attached to the disputed portion of the record and included with the record when released to a third party. Exceptions to the employee's right to inspect include the following records: investigations of possible criminal offenses; letters of reference; test documents, other than section or total scores; staff management planning materials, including recommendations for future salary increases and other wage treatments, management bonus plans, promotions and job assignments, and other comments and ratings; personal information that would be a "clearly unwarranted invasion" of another person's privacy; and records relevant to a pending claim in a judicial proceeding between the employee and employer.

Personally Identifiable Information

In 1991, the legislature created provisions in the Public Records Law to help preserve the privacy of individuals. Generally, a person who is the subject of a record with personally identifiable information has greater access to that record than is otherwise available under the Public Records Law and may seek corrections to the information contained in the record. Legislation also created a subchapter on "personal information practices." This section covers the legislation that was designed to provide clarification on access to certain records containing personally identifiable information, primarily related to records of employees and local public officers.

Definitions - Wis. Stat. § 19.32

“Personally identifiable information” means “information that can be associated with a particular individual through one or more identifiers or other information or circumstances.”⁷¹ Refer to the following exceptions for what this term does not include. A “person authorized by the individual” means a person authorized in writing by the individual to exercise the rights to access records with personally identifiable information; the individual’s parent, guardian, or legal custodian, if the individual is a child; the guardian of an individual adjudicated incompetent in this state; or the personal representative or spouse of a deceased individual.⁷²

Right to inspect: exceptions - Wis. Stat. § 19.35(1)(am)

In addition to a requester’s general right to inspect public records under Wis. Stat. § 19.35(1)(a)(above), a requester, or a person authorized by that individual, has the right to inspect and copy any record containing their own personally identifiable information that is maintained by an authority. However, this right of access does *not* include the following records:

- **Investigations, etc.** Any record with information collected or maintained in connection with a complaint, investigation, or other circumstances that may lead to an enforcement action, administrative proceeding, arbitration proceeding or court proceeding, or any record collected or maintained in connection with any such action or proceeding.⁷³
- **Security issues.** Any record with personally identifiable information that, if disclosed, would:
 - Endanger an individual’s life or safety.
 - Identify a confidential informant.
 - Endanger the security of specified facilities and institutions, including correctional, mental health and other secured facilities, centers for the developmentally disabled and for the care of sexually violent persons.
 - Compromise the rehabilitation of a person incarcerated or detained in one of the facilities listed above.
- **Record series.** Any record that is part of a record series, as defined in Wis. Stat. § 19.62(7), that is not indexed or arranged so that the authority can retrieve it by use of an individual’s name, address or other identifier.

Contractors’ records - Wis. Stat. §§ 19.36(3)

The general right to access records of a contractor produced under a contract with an authority under Wis. Stat. § 19.36(3) does not apply to personally identifiable information.

Responding to requests - Wis. Stat. § 19.35(4)(c)

The authority must follow a specific procedure when it receives a request from an individual, or a person authorized by the individual, to inspect or copy a record with personally identifiable information pertaining to the individual. In these cases, the requester generally has a right to inspect and copy a record.⁷⁴ However, this right does not extend to some situations and records (see “Right to inspect; exceptions” and “Contractors’ records,” above).

The authority must first determine whether the requester has a right, under the general Public Records Law, to inspect or copy the record containing personally identifiable information. If the requester has such a right, the authority must grant the request. This determination may involve the balancing test that is explained above.

If the authority determines that the requester does not have the right to inspect or copy the record under the general Public Records Law, then the authority must determine whether the requester has the right to inspect or copy the record under the specific provisions of the law applicable to personally identifiable information, and grant or deny the request accordingly.

If the requested record contains information pertaining to a record subject (i.e. a person who is the subject of personally identifiable information in public records) other than the requester, or other than the record subject in a situation where the request is by a person authorized by that record subject, the provisions of Wis. Stat. § 19.356 on notice to a record subject apply (see the section below on “Personally Identifiable Information on Employees, Local Public Officers & Other Records Subjects”).

Correction of personally identifiable information - Wis. Stat. § 19.365

An individual or person authorized by the individual may challenge the accuracy of personally identifiable information pertaining to the individual in records to which they have access by notifying the authority in writing of the challenge. The authority must then either correct the information or deny the challenge. If the challenge is denied, the authority must notify the challenger of the denial and allow the individual, or person authorized by the individual, to file a concise statement with the disputed portion of the record, setting forth the challenge to the information. Only a state authority is required to give reasons for a denial of a challenge. The challenge provision does not apply to records transferred to an archival depository, or when a specific state or federal law governs challenges to the accuracy of the record.

Personal information practices - Wis. Stat. §§ 19.62-19.80

Wis. Stat. § 19.65 provides that an authority must develop rules of conduct for employees who collect, maintain, use, provide access to or archive personally identifiable information, and must ensure that these persons know their duties relating to protecting personal privacy.

Wis. Stat. §§ 19.65-19.80 also have provisions concerning the accuracy of data collection and the sales of names or addresses. An authority that maintains personally identifiable information that may result in an adverse determination against an individual’s rights, benefits, or privileges, must collect the information directly from the individual, or verify the information to the greatest extent possible, if obtained from another person.

Also, an authority may not sell or rent a record containing an individual's name or address of residence, unless specifically authorized by state law.⁷⁵

Personally Identifiable Information on Employees, Local Public Officers & Other Record Subjects

The release of records affecting the privacy or reputational interests of public employees is covered in Wis. Stat. § 19.356. Under this statute the rights apply only to limited sets of records. The statute's procedure for notice and review now applies to four categories of records relating to employees, local public officers, and other record subjects:

- Records of "record subjects" (i.e. persons who are the subject of personally identifiable information in public records) that, as a general rule generally, do not require notice prior to allowing access.
- Records of employees and other record subjects that may be released under the balancing test only after providing the record subject with notice of impending release of the record and the right to judicial review prior to release of the record.
- Records of local public officers that may be released under the balancing test only after providing notice to the record subject of the impending release of the record and his or her right to augment the record.
- Records of employees and local public officers that are generally closed to access.

General rule regarding notice & judicial review - Wis. Stat. § 19.356(1)

An authority is not required to notify a record subject prior to allowing access to a record containing information on the person, except as authorized in Wis. Stat. § 19.356 (see following), or as otherwise provided by statute. Additionally, the record subject is not entitled to judicial review prior to release of the record. Of course, a specific statute concerning access may apply, and the authority may need to conduct the balancing test. The statute goes on to provide when notice and an opportunity for judicial review are required prior to the release of records.

When notice to employee/record subject is required; opportunity for judicial review - Wis. Stat. §§ 19.356(2)-(8)

The authority must provide written notice to the record subject, as specified in the statute, prior to releasing any of the three following types of records containing personally identifiable information pertaining to the record subject, if the authority decides to allow access to the record. The authority, in its notice, must specify the requested records and inform the record subject of the opportunity for judicial review. The notice must be served on the record subject within three days of deciding to allow access; service is accomplished by certified mail or by personal delivery. The records requiring notice prior to release are as follows:

- **Disciplinary matters.** A record containing information relating to an employee that is created or kept by the authority, and is the result of an investigation into a disciplinary matter involving the employee, or the possible employment-related violation by the employee of a statute, ordinance, rule, regulation, or policy of the employee's employer.

- The attorney general’s office interprets this provision to be limited to disciplinary matters or possible employment-related violations by an employee of the employer, in which the record was prepared by the employer, rather than by another entity.⁷⁶ In addition, if a private employer is involved, the attorney general’s office reasons that the private employee may block access to the record, as noted below under “Records of other employers.”
- **Subpoenas; search warrants.** A record obtained by the authority through a subpoena or search warrant. Note that this provision does not limit its applicability to employees; it applies in general to any record subject to whom the record pertains.⁷⁷
- **Records of other employers.** A record prepared by an employer other than an authority, if the record contains information relating to an employee of that employer, “unless the employee authorizes the authority to provide access to that information.” The attorney general interprets this provision to mean that an authority may not release personally identifiable information pertaining to the employee of a private employer unless the employee consents.⁷⁸

The requirement of notice prior to release of the above information does not apply to the release of the information to the employee or to the employee’s representative under Wis. Stat. § 103.13, relating to an employee’s access to his or her own personnel records; nor does the notice requirement apply to release of the information to a collective bargaining representative.

Within 10 days of service of the notice of the intended release of the records, the record subject may start a court action to have the access to the records blocked. The statute provides a procedure for expedited judicial review of the authority’s decision to release records, and provides that the records may not be released within 12 days of sending a notice or during judicial review periods.

When notice is required to persons holding local public office; opportunity for comments - Wis. Stat. § 19.356(9).

A different approach applies to the release of records with personally identifiable information pertaining to a person who holds a “local public office” (e.g. a governing body member, elected or appointed officer, or department head) or a “state public office” (e.g. a municipal judge). Under this procedure, the authority must inform the record subject within three days of the decision to release the records to the requester. This notice is served on the officer by certified mail or personal delivery, must describe the records intended for release, and the officer’s right to augment the record. The officer (unlike an employee under the previous heading) who is the record subject does *not* have the right of judicial review. Instead, the officer who is the record subject has the right to augment the record that will be released to the requester with his or her written comments and documentation. This augmentation of the record must be done within five days of receipt of the notice.

Employee/officer records generally closed to public access.

- Employee records closed to public access - Wis. Stat. § 19.36(10). An authority is generally prohibited from releasing the records listed below. However, this general prohibition on release does not apply if another statute specifically authorizes or requires release. Further, the prohibition on release does not apply to an employee, or his or her representative accessing the employee's personnel records under Wis. Stat. § 103.13, or to a collective bargaining representative for bargaining purposes, or pursuant to a collective bargaining agreement. The employee records that are not generally open to public access are as follows:
 - *Addresses, telephone number, social security number*. Information concerning an employee's home address, home email address, home telephone number, and social security number, unless the employee authorizes the authority to provide access to such information.
 - *Current criminal/misconduct investigations*. Information relating to the current investigation of a possible criminal offense or possible misconduct connected with an employee's employment, prior to disposition of the investigation.⁷⁹
 - *Employment examinations*. Information pertaining to an employee's employment examination, except an examination score, if access to that score is not otherwise prohibited.
 - *Employee evaluations*. Information relating to one or more specific employees used by an authority or the employer for staff management planning, including performance evaluations, recommendations for future salary adjustments or other wage treatments, management bonus plans, promotions, job assignment, letters of reference, or other comments or ratings relating to employees.

Local public officers' records closed to public access - Wis. Stat. § 19.36(11)

- As with employees, certain records on individuals holding a local public office, as broadly defined, may not generally be released to the public. However, this general prohibition on release does not apply if another statute specifically authorizes or requires release. The prohibition on release also does not apply to a local public officer who is an employee accessing his or her personnel records under Wis. Stat. § 103.13. The records on local public officers that may not generally be open to public access are as follows:
 - *Addresses; telephone number; social security number*. Information concerning the individual's home address, home email address, home telephone number, and social security number, unless the individual authorizes the authority to provide access to such information.
 - *Exceptions*. This prohibition on release, however, does not apply to the release of the home address of an individual who holds an elective public office, or who, as a condition of employment as a local public officer, is required to reside in a specific location. This exception allows the public to verify that its elected officials and other officers or high-level employees (who fill a position that falls under the definition of "local public office") subject to residency requirements in fact live in the community or otherwise meet the applicable requirement.

Enforcement & Penalties

The Public Records Law provides for forfeitures, court orders, actual and punitive damages to enforce the law. Wis. Stat. § 19.37.

Court order to allow access

A person who has made a written request for access to a public record may bring an action for a writ of mandamus asking the court to order release of withheld information. This procedure does not require following the notice-of-claim law applicable prior to many lawsuits against the government. In contrast to the procedure under the Open Meetings Law, a person seeking release of a public record does *not* have to initially refer the matter to the district attorney. However, the person may request the district attorney or the attorney general to seek mandamus. A committed or incarcerated person has no more than 90 days after denial of a record request to begin an action in court challenging the denial.

A requester who prevails, in whole or substantial part, may receive reasonable attorney fees, actual costs, and damages of at least \$100. The costs and fees must be paid by the authority or the governmental unit of which it is a part, and are not the personal liability of the custodian or any other public official. A committed or incarcerated person, however, is not entitled to the minimum \$100 damages, although the court may award damages. Also, in a request for personally identifiable information under Wis. Stat. § 19.35(1)(am) there is no minimum recovery of \$100 in damages. Instead, actual damages may be recovered if the court finds that the authority acted in a willful or intentional manner.

The law also provides for the award of punitive damages to the record requester if the court finds that the authority or legal custodian arbitrarily and capriciously denied or delayed their response, or charged excessive fees. However, punitive damages may only be awarded as part of a mandamus action to compel delivery of records, not as a separate claim for violation of the Public Records Law after documents were released.⁸⁰

Forfeiture. The district attorney or the attorney general may seek a forfeiture penalty against an authority or records custodian who arbitrarily and capriciously denies or delays response to a records request or charges excessive fees. The statute provides for a forfeiture of not more than \$1,000 along with the reasonable costs of prosecution.

Reference & Advice

Officials who have questions on the Public Records Law should contact their local government's attorney. Also, any person may contact the Wisconsin Attorney General (the Wisconsin Department of Justice) to request advice on the Public Records Law.⁸¹

Refer to Wis. Stat. §§ 19.31-19.39 for the specific wording of the law. The Wisconsin Department of Justice has an Office of Open Government, with a web page containing many resources on the Public Records Law, including the *Wisconsin Public Records Law, Compliance Outline (2018)*, a link to the statute, and other materials. Find it at <https://www.doj.state.wi.us/office-open-government/office-open-government> or search "Wisconsin Department of Justice Open

Government.”

Also available on UW-Extension’s Local Government Center (LGC) website (<http://lgc.uwex.edu>), is information on new developments in Public Records Law, upcoming programs, and other resources.

Information on public records management and destruction may be found on the websites of the Wisconsin Historical Society and the Public Records Board of the Wisconsin Department of Administration. Go to www.wisconsinhistory.org and enter “Local Government Records Program” in the search box. This links to the *Wisconsin Municipal Records Manual* and other information of interest. At www.doa.state.wi.us, enter “Public Records Board” (search without quotation marks).

Acknowledgements

Thanks to reviewers David Hinds, Professor Emeritus University of Wisconsin-Extension, Jennifer Bock, Wisconsin Counties Association.

Copyright © 2018 and 2019 by the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System doing business as the Division of Cooperative Extension of the University of Wisconsin-Extension. All Rights Reserved.

Endnotes

¹ Wis. Stat. §19.31.

² *Ibid.*

³ Wis. Stat. § 19.32(2).

⁴ See the *Compliance Guide*, p. 3, cited above under “Reference & Advice”. Opinion of Att’y Gen. to Gail Peckler-Dziki, OAG 6-09 (December 22, 2009).

⁵ *John K. MacIver Inst. for Pub. Policy, Inc. v. Erpenbach*, 2014 WI App 49.

⁶ *Fox v. Bock*, 149 Wis. 2d 403 (1989); 77 *Op. Att’y Gen.* 100, 102-03 (1988).

⁷ *Voice of Wis. Rapids, LLC v. Wis. Rapids Pub. Sch. Dist.*, 2014 WI App 53.

⁸ *Schill v Wis. Rapids Sch. Dist.*, 2010 WI 86. ¶137.

⁹ Memorandum from J.B. Van Hollen, Attorney General, to Interested Parties (July 28, 2010), available online at <https://www.doj.state.wi.us/sites/default/files/dls/memo-ip-schill.pdf>

¹⁰ *Zellner v. Cedarburg School District*, 2007 WI 53, ¶¶ 25-31, 56.

¹¹ Wis. Stat. §19.32(2).

¹² Wis. Stat. §19.32(1).

¹³ Wis. Stat. § 19.32(1bd).

¹⁴ *AG-Seiser and Bunge Informal Correspondence, October 4, 2010.*

¹⁵ *State v. Beaver Dam Area Development Corp.*, 2008 WI 90, ¶¶44-45, 66, 72-75, 78.

¹⁶ Wis. Stat. § 19.32(1).

¹⁷ Wis. Stat. § 19.21.

¹⁸ Wis. Stat. §19.21(7).

¹⁹ Wis. Stat. §19.35(5).

²⁰ *Gehl v. Connors*, 2007 WI App 238, ¶¶ 12-15.

- ²¹ *Stone v. Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin*, 2007 WI App 223, ¶¶ 11-27.
- ²² Wis. Stat. § 19.32(1dm).
- ²³ Wis Stat. §§ 19.32(1dm) & 19.42(7w).
- ²⁴ *WIREdata, Inc. v. Village of Sussex*, 2008 WI 69, ¶78.
- ²⁵ *WIREdata, Inc. at* ¶89.
- ²⁶ Wis. Stat. § 19.32(4).
- ²⁷ Wis. Stat. §§19.21&19.
- ²⁸ Wis. Stat. §19.34(2)(c).
- ²⁹ Wis. Stat. § 19.34(1).
- ³⁰ Wis. Stat. § 19.35(1)(b).
- ³¹ *Grebner v. Schiebel*, 240 Wis.2d 551 (Ct. App. 2001).
- ³² Wis. Stat. § 19.35(4).
- ³³ Wis. Stat. § 19.35(1)(h).
- ³⁴ *Schopper v. Gehring*, 210 Wis. 2d 209 (Ct. App. 1997).
- ³⁵ *Gehl v. Connors*, 2007 WI App 238, ¶¶ 17-24.
- ³⁶ Wis. Stat. §19.35(1)(h).
- ³⁷ Wis. Stat. §19.35(1)(h).
- ³⁸ *WIREdata, Inc. v. Village of Sussex*, 2007 WI App 22 ¶57; *application distinguished by WIREdata, Inc. v. Village of Sussex*, 2008 WI 69 ¶55 (*WIREdata II*).
- ³⁹ Wis. Stat. §19.35(4)(b).
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁴¹ Wis. Stat. § 19.36(6).
- ⁴² Wis. Stat. §19.35(1)(b).
- ⁴³ Wis. Stat. § 19.35(1)(f).
- ⁴⁴ Wis. Stat. §19.35(1)(c).
- ⁴⁵ Wis. Stat. § 19.35(1)(em).
- ⁴⁶ Wis. Stat. § 19.35(1)(d).
- ⁴⁷ *WIREdata, Inc. v. Village of Sussex*, 2008 WI 69, ¶¶ 97-98.
- ⁴⁸ Wis. Stat. §19.35(1)(e).
- ⁴⁹ Wis Stats. §19.35(1)(L).
- ⁵⁰ Wis Stats. § 19.36(6).
- ⁵¹ Wis. Stat. § 19.35(1)(g).
- ⁵² Wis. Stat. § 19.32(2).
- ⁵³ Wis. Stat. § 19.35(1)(k).
- ⁵⁴ Wis. Stat. §19.35(3).
- ⁵⁵ See the *Compliance Outline*, p. 62, cited above under “Reference and Advice”
- ⁵⁶ *Opinion of Att’y Gen. to John Muench, Barron County Corp. Counsel*, 1-03 (October 2, 2003).
- ⁵⁷ 72 *Op. Att’y Gen.* 150 (1983).
- ⁵⁸ *WIREdata, Inc. v. Village of Sussex*, 2008 WI 69, ¶107.
- ⁵⁹ 72 *Op. Att’y Gen.* 68 (1983).
- ⁶⁰ *Milwaukee Journal v. City of Milwaukee*, 2012 WI 65 ¶58.
- ⁶¹ Wis. Stat. § 19.35(1)(a).
- ⁶² *State ex rel. Richards v. Foust*, 165 Wis. 2d 429 (1991).
- ⁶³ *Portage Daily Register v. Columbia Co. Sheriff’s Department*, 2008 WI App 30, ¶¶ 15-22.

⁶⁴ Wis. Stat. § 19.35(1)(a); *State ex rel. Youmans v. Owens*, 28 Wis. 2d 672, 683 (1965).

⁶⁵ *Matter of Estates v. Zimmer*, 151 Wis. 2d 122 (Ct. App. 1989).

⁶⁶ *Village of Butler v. Cohen*, 163 Wis. 2d 819 (Ct. App. 1991).

⁶⁷ Wis. Stat. § 19.35(1)(a); *Zellner v. Cedarburg School District*, 2007 WI 53, ¶¶ 47-58.

⁶⁸ Wis. Stat. § 70.35(3).

⁶⁹ Wis. Stat. § 70.47(7)(af).

⁷⁰ Wis. Stat. § 77.265.

⁷¹ Wis. Stat. §§ 19.32(1r) & 19.62(5).

⁷² Wis. Stat. § 19.32(1m).

⁷³ *Seifert v. School District of Sheboygan Falls*, 2007 WI App 207, ¶¶ 35-36.

⁷⁴ Wis. Stat. § 19.35(1)(am).

⁷⁵ Wis. Stat. § 19.71.

⁷⁶ *Opinion of Att’y Gen. to James R. Warren*, OAG 1-06 (August 3, 2006).

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Zellner v. Cedarburg School District*, at ¶ 32-39.

⁸⁰ *The Capital Times Co. v. Doyle*, 2011 WI App 137.

⁸¹ Wis. Stat. § 19.39.