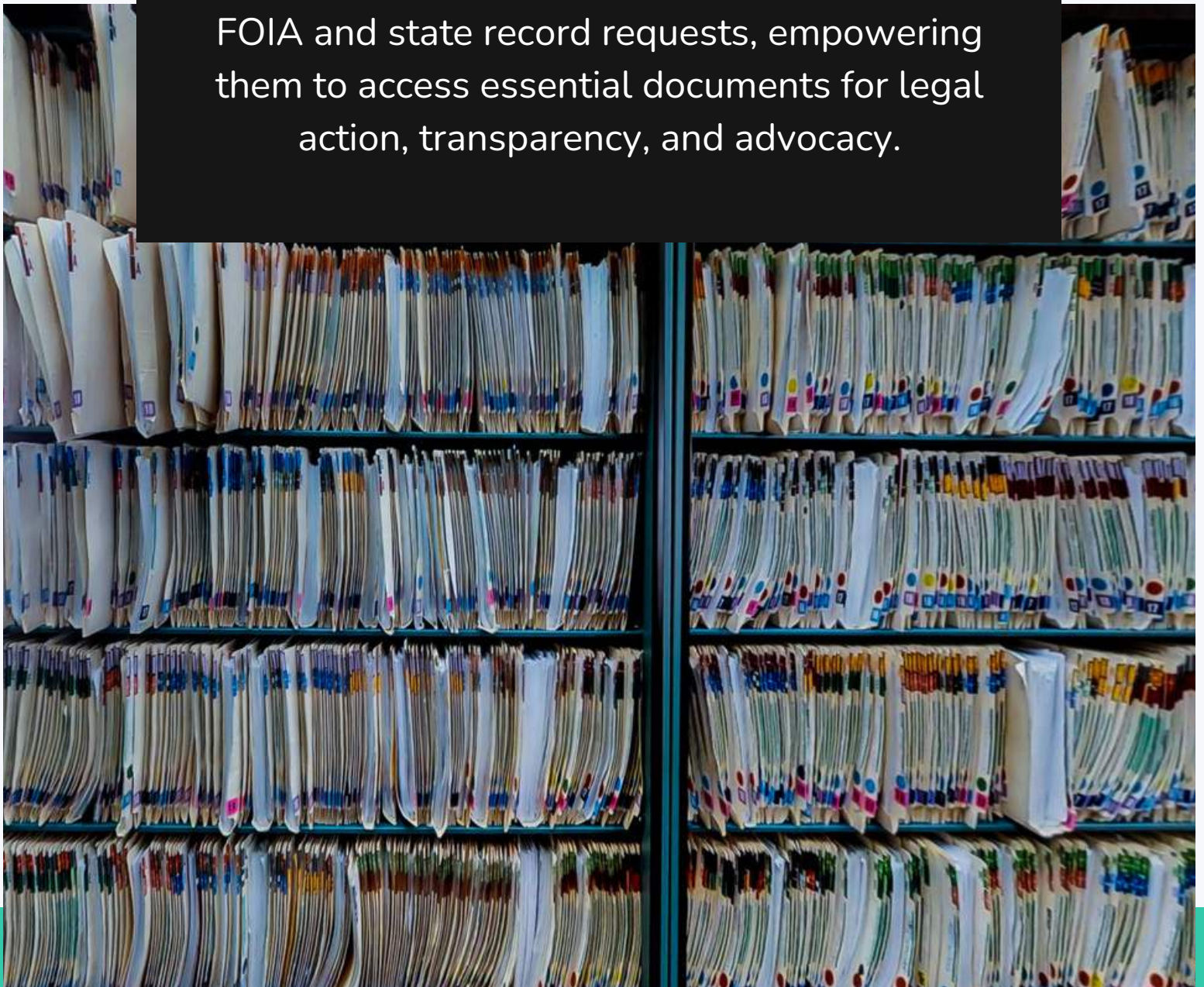


# UNSILENCED

## A SURVIVOR'S GUIDE TO WRITING STATE AND FOIA RECORD REQUESTS

A step-by-step guide for TTI survivors to write FOIA and state record requests, empowering them to access essential documents for legal action, transparency, and advocacy.



# SPONSORS



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Survivor resources were developed to empower survivors, educate stakeholders, and drive meaningful change in our fight for justice and the protection of vulnerable youth. We invite our supporters to show their support through sponsoring these innovative and essential resources through scanning this QR code, clicking [HERE](#)



At Unsilenced, we are proud to partner with sponsors who are as committed as we are to creating meaningful change for survivors of institutional abuse. As a nonprofit, these sponsorships allow us to continue offering vital resources—like survivor guides, attorney directories, support groups, and educational tools—completely free to those who need them. Every sponsorship directly supports the creation, distribution, and availability of these tools, ensuring that survivors have access to the support they deserve. We are deeply thankful for the support that helps us stay focused on our mission of empowering survivors and advancing justice.

# STATE RECORD REQUESTS



State record request laws, often referred to as "sunshine laws" or "open records laws," are powerful tools that give you the right to access public records from state government agencies. As a survivor of the Troubled Teen Industry (TTI), you may want to use state record requests to gain transparency about the programs and facilities where you were sent as a teenager. This information can help uncover records related to operations, incidents, policies, and any potential violations while you were in the facility. Using state record requests, survivors can expose institutions that often operate without accountability. Unsilenced maintains an online program archive to hold these documents, ensuring that people can see them and make better-informed decisions for youth. If your request is fulfilled and you wish to contribute to the program archive, you can submit them to Unsilenced.

## WHAT IS A STATE RECORD REQUEST?


A state record request is a formal, written request to a state agency asking for access to information or records. Under state laws, agencies must provide the information you request unless it falls under specific exemptions (e.g., privacy concerns, ongoing investigations).

For survivors of the TTI, a state record request might help you access documents such as:

- Records of complaints, reports, violations, or investigations related to the facility
- Policies and procedures regarding treatment, discipline, or care
- Information on any state funding or contracts associated with the facility
- Staff training records or qualifications
- Incident reports or investigation findings

## DID YOU KNOW?

- Most states have a specific deadline by which agencies must respond to your request, typically ranging from 5 to 30 business days, depending on the state.
- Each state has its own public records law (often called Sunshine Laws), so the process, fees, and response times can differ significantly depending on where you file your request.



# STEPS TO WRITING AND SUBMITTING A STATE RECORD REQUEST



## Identify the Agency

First, you need to determine which state agency may hold the records you are seeking. Common state agencies involved in TTI facilities may include:

- **State Department of Health and Human Services** for issues involving healthcare and child welfare.
- **State Child Protective Services (CPS)** or its equivalent for reports or investigations involving abuse or neglect.
- **State Department of Education** for any education-related programs, or placements that were placed by school districts.
- **State Attorney General's Office or State Department of Justice** for records of investigations or criminal activity.



## Be Specific About the Information You Want

In your request, it's essential to be clear and precise. The more specific your request, the easier it will be for the agency to locate the records. Include details like:

- Name of the facility
- Timeframe of your stay (or the time period you are interested in)
- Types of documents you're looking for (e.g., investigations, contracts, complaints, funding reports)

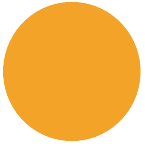
### Example of a Clear Request

*"I am requesting any and all records from the [Name of Agency, e.g., State Department of Education] related to [Name of Facility] in [Location] from [Year] to [Year]. Specifically, I am seeking documentation regarding complaints, investigations, funding, or reports related to child abuse, neglect, or improper treatment of residents during that time period."*



## Write the Request

Your state record request should be formal but straightforward. Below are links to templates you can use and customize



## **Submit the Request**

Once your request is written, you can send it to the appropriate state agency. Most state agencies allow record requests to be submitted by mail, email, or through an online portal. Double-check the specific agency's website for instructions on how they accept requests.



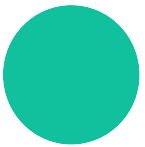
## **Track Your Request**

After you submit your request, the agency will typically send you an acknowledgment with a tracking number. State agencies may have varying deadlines, but many are required to respond within a specific number of business days, often ranging from 5 to 30 days.



## **Follow-Up if Needed**

If you don't hear back within a reasonable timeframe, you can follow up with the agency using your tracking number. Some requests take longer due to the nature of the documents being reviewed or redacted for privacy concerns, but you are entitled to check the status of your request.



## **Appeal if Needed**

If your request is denied or partially denied, or if you are dissatisfied with the agency's response (such as excessive fees or delays), you have the right to appeal the decision. Filing an appeal ensures the agency reconsiders your request and addresses any mistakes or oversights.

# HELPFUL TIPS FOR WRITING STATE RECORD REQUESTS



## BE CLEAR AND SPECIFIC

The more detailed your request, the better the chances the agency will locate the exact records you need.



## KNOW THE FEES

Some agencies may charge for processing large requests. You can ask for a fee waiver if your request is in the public interest, especially if you're seeking records to expose issues related to the troubled teen industry.

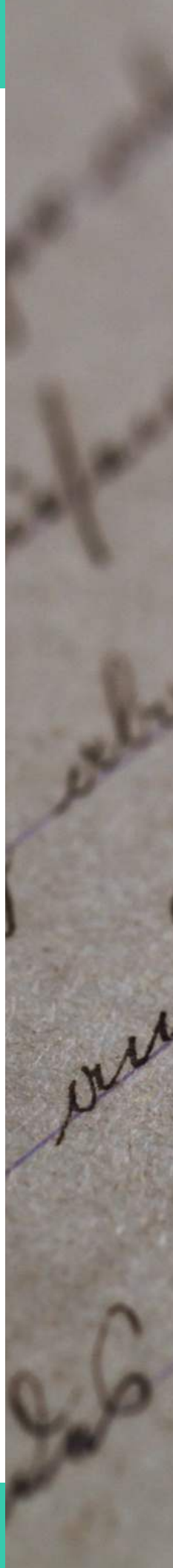


## BE PATIENT

State record requests can take time, particularly if the records are complex or need to be reviewed for exemptions (like privacy or law enforcement reasons). Follow up politely if there are delays.

## WHAT IF MY REQUEST IS DENIED?

If your request is denied, the agency must explain why. You can appeal the decision, often through a simple appeal process that involves submitting a written explanation of why the denial was improper. You may also consider consulting legal counsel or advocacy groups for support.



# Steps to Writing and Filing an Appeal

If your state record request is denied or partially denied, or if you are dissatisfied with the agency's response (such as excessive fees or delays), you have the right to appeal the decision. Filing an appeal ensures the agency reconsiders your request and addresses any mistakes or oversights.



**Review the Denial:** Carefully review the reasons provided for the denial of your request. The agency is required to explain which exemptions (if any) were applied and why certain documents were withheld or redacted.

**Submit an Appeal Letter:** Write and submit a formal appeal letter. Your appeal should reference the original request number, detail the reasons for the denial, and explain why you believe the decision was incorrect or unjustified (e.g., if an exemption was applied too broadly).

**Be Specific:** If your request was denied based on an exemption, explain why the information you're seeking should not fall under that exemption. If your fee waiver was denied, explain how your request serves the public interest.

**Include Supporting Information:** Any additional information that can support your claim (such as relevant news articles or public interest justifications) can help strengthen your appeal.

**Send the Appeal to the Right Authority:** Appeals must be submitted to the state agency's appeal officer or another designated official. Be sure to follow the agency's instructions on how to file an appeal, including any deadlines (often 30–60 days from the date of the initial denial).

**Await the Response:** The agency typically has a specific number of business days to respond to your appeal, which can vary by state. If your appeal is granted, the requested documents will be released, and any associated fees may be waived or reduced.

Filing an appeal can help ensure that agencies comply with state transparency laws, allowing you to gain access to the information you need to hold institutions accountable.

# How to Tailor Your Request for TTI-Specific Information

Each state's sample letter will need to be slightly modified to reflect your specific request related to the Troubled Teen Industry. Here's how you can tailor your letter:

**Be Specific About the Facility:** Make sure to include the name and location of the facility you are requesting information about, along with the timeframe you are interested in (e.g., the years you attended or the years of particular concern).

**Example:** *"I am requesting records related to [Facility Name] in [Location] from [Year] to [Year]. Specifically, I am seeking documents related to any complaints, investigations, or violations concerning abuse or neglect at this facility during that period."*

**Specify the Types of Records:** You'll want to be as clear as possible about the types of documents you are seeking, such as incident reports, staff training policies, or government funding related to the facility.

**Example:** *"I am requesting access to records of any investigations or complaints related to the facility's treatment of residents, as well as any state contracts, funding, or grants provided to the facility."*

**Request a Fee Waiver:** If you believe the information is of public interest (such as exposing abuse or lack of transparency in the Troubled Teen Industry), you can request a waiver of any fees associated with processing your request.

**Example:** *"I request a waiver of all fees, as the disclosure of this information is in the public interest and will contribute significantly to public understanding of the practices and operations of institutions within the Troubled Teen Industry."*

**Follow State-Specific Procedures:** Each sample letter includes references to the specific laws and response times for each state. Be sure to follow the guidelines outlined for your state to ensure your request is processed appropriately.





## Sample State Record Request

Each state has its own public records laws, which allow you to request access to records from state agencies regarding institutions and facilities within the Troubled Teen Industry (TTI). These laws, often referred to as sunshine laws, vary from state to state, meaning the process for requesting records and the details you need to include in your request will differ based on your location.

To help you navigate these differences, we have provided links to the [National Freedom of Information Coalition's](#) sample letters tailored to each state's public records law. You can use these templates to request access to records such as:

- Records of complaints, reports, violations, or investigations related to the facility
- Policies and procedures regarding treatment, discipline, or care
- Information on state funding, grants, or contracts associated with the facility
- Staff training records or qualifications
- Incident reports or investigation findings



# State-By-State Examples

- [Alabama Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Alaska Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Arizona Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Arkansas Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [California Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Colorado Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Connecticut Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Delaware Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Florida Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Georgia Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Hawaii Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Idaho Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Illinois Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Indiana Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Iowa Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Kansas Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Kentucky Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Louisiana Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Maine Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Maryland Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Massachusetts Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Michigan Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Minnesota Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Mississippi Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Missouri Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Montana Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Nebraska Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Nevada Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [New Hampshire Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [New Jersey Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [New Mexico Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [New York Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [North Carolina Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [North Dakota Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Ohio Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Oklahoma Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Oregon Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Pennsylvania Sample FOIA Request](#)

- [Rhode Island Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [South Carolina Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [South Dakota Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Tennessee Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Texas Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Utah Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Vermont Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Virginia Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Washington Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [West Virginia Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Wisconsin Sample FOIA Request](#)
- [Wyoming Sample FOIA Request](#)





# FOIA RECORD REQUESTS

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) is a powerful tool that gives you the right to access records from federal government agencies. As a survivor of the Troubled Teen Industry (TTI), you may want to use FOIA requests to gain transparency about the facilities where you were sent as a teenager. This information can help uncover records related to operations, incidents, policies, and any potential violations while you were in the facility. Using FOIA, survivors can shine a light on institutions that often operate without accountability. Unsilenced maintains an online [program archive](#) to hold these documents to ensure people can see them and make better-informed decisions for youth. If your request is fulfilled and you wish to contribute to the program archive, you can [submit](#) them to Unsilenced.

## WHAT IS A FOIA REQUEST?

A FOIA request is a formal, written request to a federal agency asking for access to information or records. Under this law, federal agencies must provide the information you request unless it falls under specific exemptions (e.g., classified information, privacy concerns).

For survivors of the TTI, a FOIA request might help you access documents such as:

- Records of complaints, reports, violations, or investigations related to the facility
- Policies and procedures regarding treatment, discipline, or care.
- Information on any government funding or contracts associated with the facility
- Staff training records or qualifications
- Incident reports or investigation findings

## DID YOU KNOW?

### Search Fees Waiver

If an agency takes longer than 20 business days to respond, they are not allowed to charge search fees. For certain requesters, like journalists or nonprofit organizations, duplication fees may also be waived in some cases.



# STEPS TO WRITING AND SUBMITTING A FOIA REQUEST



## Identify the Agency

First, you need to determine which federal or state agency may hold the records you are seeking. Common federal agencies involved in TTI facilities may include:

- **Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)** for issues involving healthcare and child welfare.
- **Office of Civil Rights (OCR)**
- **Department of Education (DOE)**
- **Department of Justice (DOJ)** or **Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)** for records of investigations or criminal activity.



## Be Specific About the Information You Want

In your request, it's essential to be clear and precise. The more specific your request, the easier it will be for the agency to locate the records. Include details like:

- Name of the facility
- Timeframe of your stay (or the time period you are interested in)
- Types of documents you're looking for (e.g., investigations, contracts, complaints, funding reports)

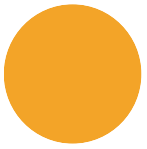
### Example of a Clear Request

*"I am requesting any and all records from the [Name of Agency, e.g., Department of Health and Human Services] related to [Name of Facility] in [Location] from [Year] to [Year]. Specifically, I am seeking documentation regarding complaints, investigations, funding, or reports related to child abuse, neglect, or improper treatment of residents during that time period."*



## Write the Request

Your FOIA request should be formal but straightforward. **Below** is a template you can use and customize:



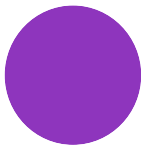
## Submit the Request

Once your request is written, you can send it to the appropriate agency. Most agencies allow FOIA requests to be submitted by mail, email, or through an online portal. Double-check the specific agency's website for instructions on how they accept FOIA requests.



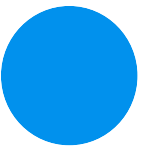
## Track Your Request

After you submit your request, the agency will typically send you an acknowledgment with a tracking number. Agencies are required by law to respond to FOIA requests within 20 business days, though it may take longer if the request is complex or involves a large number of records.



## Follow-Up if Needed

If you don't hear back within a reasonable timeframe, you can follow up with the agency using your tracking number. Some requests take longer due to the nature of the documents being reviewed or redacted for privacy concerns, but you are entitled to check the status of your request.



## Appeal if Needed

If your FOIA request is denied or partially denied, or if you are dissatisfied with the agency's response (such as excessive fees or delays), you have the right to appeal the decision. Filing an appeal ensures the agency reconsiders your request and addresses any mistakes or oversights.

# HELPFUL TIPS FOR WRITING FOIA REQUESTS



## REQUEST ELECTRONIC RECORDS

Ask for electronic versions of records whenever possible. This can speed up the process and reduce duplication fees, as digital files are easier to retrieve and share.



## CITE FOIA EXEMPTIONS

Familiarize yourself with FOIA exemptions ahead of time. If you anticipate certain information being withheld (e.g., for privacy or national security reasons), you can ask the agency to review and release non-exempt portions of the records.



## USE THE "REASONABLY SEGREGABLE" CLAUSE

If parts of your requested records are withheld under exemptions, you can ask the agency to release the non-exempt portions. Under FOIA, agencies are required to provide all "reasonably segregable" non-exempt information, even if some parts of the document are redacted.

## WHAT IF MY REQUEST IS DENIED?

If your FOIA request is denied or only partially fulfilled, you have the right to file an appeal with the agency that processed your request. In your appeal, you can challenge the reasons for the denial or redaction and request a more thorough review. If the appeal is unsuccessful, you may also seek judicial review in federal court.



# Sample FOIA Request

Agency Head [or Freedom of Information Act Officer]  
Name of Agency  
Address of Agency  
City, State, Zip Code

Re: Freedom of Information Act Request

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

This is a request under the Freedom of Information Act.

I request that a copy of the following documents [or documents containing the following information] be provided to me: **[identify the documents or information as specifically as possible]**.

1. Any investigations, complaints, or reports related to child abuse, neglect, or misconduct involving the facility during the period of **[Year]** to **[Year]**.
2. Documentation of any government funding, grants, or contracts provided to the facility.
3. Policies and procedures on staff training, incident handling, or resident care at the facility.
4. Records of disciplinary action or violations issued to the facility during this time frame. If possible, I would prefer to receive these records electronically.

In order to help to determine my status to assess fees, you should know that I am **[insert a suitable description of the requester and the purpose of the request from below]**.

- 1.a representative of the news media affiliated with the \_\_\_\_\_ newspaper (**magazine, television station, etc.**), and this request is made as part of news gathering and not for a commercial use.
2. affiliated with an educational or noncommercial scientific institution, and this request is made for a scholarly or scientific purpose and not for a commercial use.
3. an individual seeking information for personal use and not for a commercial use.
4. affiliated with a private corporation and seek information for use in the company's business.

**[Optional]** I am willing to pay fees for this request up to a maximum of \$\_\_\_\_\_. If you estimate that the fees will exceed this limit, please inform me first.

**[Optional]** I request a waiver of all fees for this request. Disclosure of the requested information to me is in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations or activities of the government and is not primarily in my commercial interest. **[Include a specific explanation.]**

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

**[Insert name]**



# Steps to Writing and Filing an Appeal

If your FOIA request is denied or partially fulfilled, or if you're unhappy with the agency's response (e.g., excessive fees or delays), you have the right to appeal. Filing an appeal ensures that the agency reviews its decision and considers any potential errors.

**Review the Denial or Response:** Carefully examine the agency's explanation for the denial or partial fulfillment. FOIA requires agencies to list the specific exemptions applied to withhold or redact records and provide a reason for excessive fees or delays.



**Prepare an Appeal Letter:** Draft a formal appeal letter that references the original FOIA request number. Clearly state why you believe the decision was wrong, focusing on misapplied exemptions, delayed responses, or fee issues.

**Challenge the Exemptions or Fees:** If an exemption was cited to deny your request, explain why the requested information should not be covered by that exemption. For example, argue that the public interest outweighs the reasons for withholding the information. If your fee waiver was denied, provide evidence of how your request serves the public good.

**Include Supporting Documentation:** Attach any additional materials that strengthen your case, such as news stories, public interest explanations, or evidence showing how the withheld information impacts transparency or public safety.

**Submit to the Correct Authority:** Send your appeal to the agency's designated FOIA Appeals Officer. Follow their specific submission guidelines, including deadlines (which are often 90 days from the initial response). Be sure to track your submission to confirm it was received.

**Wait for the Agency's Response:** Agencies typically have 20 business days to respond to your appeal. If your appeal is successful, you may receive the requested documents and possibly have fees reduced or waived. If denied, you may have the option to pursue legal action in federal court.

# Sample FOIA Appeal

Agency Head or Appeal Officer  
Name of Agency  
Address of Agency  
City, State, Zip Code



Re: Freedom of Information Act Appeal

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

This letter serves as an appeal under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552.

On [date], I requested documents under the Freedom of Information Act. My request was assigned the following identification number: \_\_\_\_\_. On [date], I received a response to my request in a letter signed by [name of official]. I appeal the denial of my request.

## [Optional- For Withheld Documents]:

The documents withheld in your response must be disclosed under FOIA because they do not fall under any valid exemption. Specifically, I believe the denial was improper under [cite specific FOIA exemption, e.g., Exemption 5 for deliberative process]. Disclosure of these documents is essential because [explain how the documents will contribute to public understanding or benefit survivors of institutional abuse, etc.]. As a survivor of the Troubled Teen Industry (TTI) and [insert program name], transparency into the operations and activities of these institutions is crucial in understanding the abuses and holding them accountable.

## [Optional- For Fee Waiver Denial]:

I am also appealing the decision to deny my request for a fee waiver. According to 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii), I believe I am entitled to a waiver of fees, as the disclosure of the requested documents is in the public interest and will contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations and activities of government. The request is not primarily in my commercial interest, and the information sought is vital for shedding light on the institutional child abuse in the Troubled Teen Industry.

## [Optional- For Review Costs]:

I am appealing the decision to require me to pay review costs. As outlined under 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A), I am not seeking the requested documents for commercial purposes but to support investigative work aimed at holding accountable institutions involved in abuse within the Troubled Teen Industry. Charging review costs in this case is inconsistent with the FOIA's focus on transparency and accessibility of government information for public benefit.

## [Optional- For Search Changes]:

I am also appealing the decision to impose search charges. As an advocate seeking information in connection with news gathering, I believe I am exempt from search fees under FOIA (5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(ii)(II)). The information requested is intended to inform the public about the lack of transparency in institutions within the Troubled Teen Industry.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter. I look forward to your response to this appeal within the statutory time frame.

Sincerely,

[Insert your name]



## CONCLUSION: USING PUBLIC RECORDS TO SEEK JUSTICE

Submitting FOIA and state record requests is a powerful way to gain access to information that may have been hidden. These requests allow you to uncover documents that expose how facilities operated and may provide vital evidence for your personal healing, legal cases, or efforts to hold institutions accountable. By using the tools outlined in this guide, you contribute to greater transparency within the Troubled Teen Industry and help expose systemic abuses that need to be addressed. Your persistence is a step toward justice, not only for yourself but for other survivors as well.