

ATTENTION CONSCIENTIOUS COMMUNITY RESEARCHERS



ETHICS ETHICS

*Applying to community
documentation and Participatory Action
Research (PAR)*

- Always explain who you are with, the objectives of the project and why this is important for the short term as well as long term.
- Always respect the person and their wishes.
- Establish trust.
- Explain options for confidentiality and anonymity.
- Really listen, respond positively to the answers, nodding, encouraging, and letting them know that you are being sensitive.
- Be open-minded. Try to keep your personal opinions from influencing how the person answers questions.
- Relay a sense of caring.
- Strive for honesty in all communications. Honestly report data, results, methods and procedures, and publication status. Do not fabricate, falsify, or misrepresent data. Do not deceive the public.
- Avoid careless errors and negligence; carefully and critically examine your own work. Keep good records of research activities.
- Involve the people in identifying and acting on their own problems by putting into context the issue of a community in historical social justice struggles and providing incentives for participating in research. Share the results with the participants after research is done.
- Do not negate the experience of the community affected by the situation.
- Hand out information pamphlets in advance in order to educate community members before surveying.
- Identify resources in the community and engage community members in developing tools. Teach the community to engage in the whole process themselves.
- Realize people's role of expertise as people affected firsthand by injustice, therefore positioned to articulate the best solutions.
- Remember that the community determines the use of the information.
- When involved in community documentation, ASK, do not ASSUME or ANALYZE.
- Establish accountability between the researcher and the researched.
- Strive to promote social good and prevent social harms through research, public education, and advocacy.

YOUR RIGHT TO KNOW

Applying to secondary sources

"The powerful have to be watched, and we are the watchers."

Data collection and information access is inherently a tool for democracy and a weapon of authority.

The federal Freedom of Information Act and state Open Records Laws can be successfully used to get government agencies to hand over information you need (and have every right to). Whether you want to see your school district's budget or find out the demographics of who is locked up in your local juvenile hall, you are talking about getting hold of government agency records. Filing public records requests is fun and easy and often an essential step in mounting an effective campaign!

Freedom of Information Act, a.k.a. FOIA, first passed by the U.S. Congress in 1966, applies only to federal agencies (like the Defense Department or the U.S. Postal Service.) It requires them to collect, prepare, and release certain records for public review. Requests, always made in writing, must be responded to in writing and in a timely manner-usually 10 working days. You typically pay for copies and postage. All rejections must be explained in writing, citing the legal exemption and explaining the reason for denial.

Open Records Laws are state and local versions of FOIA. These laws apply to most nonfederal agencies in the state, including school boards, city governments, and cops. Check your state or city's specific laws.

Tips for Getting the Public Records You Want

- Increasingly, public agencies are putting records online. What you think you might have to fight for could be a mouse click away.
- If it's documents you're seeking, keep in mind that most agencies charge copying fees. And some charge search fees. So don't ask for everything in the agency's files when what you really want is a one-page document.
- In many states, you can ask that fees be waived because there is a public interest in the information being made public.
- Learn about the agency, and how it keeps its records. Often, you can determine what you want by visiting the agency and asking to see the records.
- Most of the time, your initial contact will be with a clerk who has no interest in putting a barrier in your way. A polite request that produces the documents instantly is preferable to a potentially arguable demand.
- Learn about your state's laws, and how to formally request documents. But try to get what you need without filing a formal request. Very often, FOIAs end up in the hands of government lawyers. That means delays, even when the agency agrees to give you the records.
- Be specific and narrow when you make a formal request. If, for instance, you are seeking all documents about a particular agency's decision, don't just ask for documents "in the files." Remember that you are most often entitled as well to relevant emails and inter-agency correspondence.
- If the agency does not respond to your request within the time allowed by law, write a follow-up letter. And if that doesn't produce the records, take quick advantage of your state's appeal process.

For Sample letters see: <http://www.nfoic.org/sample-foia-letters#foireq>

Freedom of Information Act [Request](#) Letter

Freedom of Information Act [Appeal](#) Letter

Freedom of Information Act [FOIA Letter Requesting a Fee Waiver](#)



Everyone has the right to request information held by public sector organizations under the Freedom of Information Act. ANY person can make a request for information under the Act – there are no restrictions on your age, nationality, or where you live. We are conditioned to think that we cannot be expert researchers or that we do not have the authority to access particular information. However, this is false and we must not be fooled. We must use our knowledge to solve problems that are meaningful to our daily lives in order to take charge of our own learning and participate actively in community building.

🖨️ Visit The Data Center's website at http://www.datacenter.org/research/web_res.htm to find Public Record search engines and FOIA resources!

Defend YOUR right to know! File a public records request today!

Compiled by DataCenter intern, Sylvia Aguinana March 2009