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Peter F. Neronha

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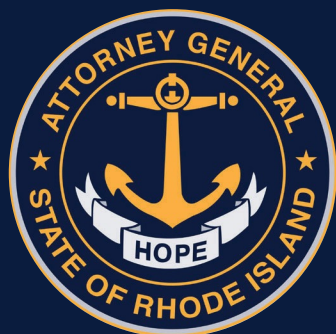


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25th Annual Open Government Summit



Your guide to the Access to Public Records Act & Open Meetings Act



Attorney General
Peter F. Neronha



ATTORNEY GENERAL
PETER F. NERONHA

July 28, 2023

Dear Open Government Summit Attendee:

Thank you for participating in the 25th annual Open Government Summit. This event provides an important opportunity to learn more about the value of transparency in state and local government.

Whether you are attending as a practitioner, a member of the public, or both, you play a vital role in promoting accountability and public trust in government. When government decisions are debated openly and made available for inspection, the public becomes more engaged, better informed, and more deeply invested in its community. Further, public access to government records as a concept can help keep government officials honest and preempt deception, or worse.

Inevitably, there will be forks in the road. For practitioners, there will be times when you will need to exercise informed judgment to determine whether information should be made publicly available or withheld when necessary to protect an important interest. The question shouldn't just be whether you *could* withhold, but rather, whether you *should* withhold. It is my hope that today's summit provides clarity and confidence when you reach that inflection point.

Contained in this booklet are training materials from today's event, including copies of applicable laws and recent findings made by our Office. Please reach out to us at any time with questions, or to schedule an open government training for your organization or in your community:

opengovernment@riag.ri.gov
401-274-4400

You can also access a variety of resources on the Open Government page of our website, including a video recording of this year's Open Government Summit.

Thank you for your interest and commitment to ensuring that state and local government are open and accessible to the people of Rhode Island.

Sincerely,

Peter F. Neronha
Attorney General

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SECTION I



ACCESS TO PUBLIC RECORDS ACT

Access to Public Records Act Findings - 2023

PR 23-01 **Neily v. Nuestro Mundo Charter School:**

The Complainant alleged that the School failed to respond to her APRA request. The School responded to the Complaint by providing the Complainant with the records she initially requested. The School did not challenge that it was a public body subject to the APRA, and it is undisputed that its response to the Complainant's APRA request was tardy. It is also undisputed that the School eventually provided the Complainant with the records she sought. Accordingly, injunctive relief was not appropriate, nor were we presented with evidence of a willful and knowing, or reckless violation.

VIOLATION FOUND

PR 23-02 **Caldwell v. Rhode Island College:**

The Complainant alleged RIC violated the APRA when it stated that no records responsive to the Complainant's request existed. RIC provided undisputed evidence that it did not maintain records responsive to the Complainant's request. Accordingly, we found no violation.

PR 23-03 **Solas v. Town of South Kingstown:**

The Complainant alleged the Town violated the APRA when it failed to respond to a verbal request she made over the telephone to a staff member of the Town Clerk's Office. Based upon the undisputed evidence, the Complainant failed to follow the Town's posted and promulgated APRA procedures when making her request. Accordingly, we found no violation.

PR 23-04 **Winston v. Warwick Police Department:**

The Complainant alleged that the Department violated the APRA by improperly making redactions to a Department policy and procedures manual and by failing to provide all documents responsive to his request for documents pertaining to himself and his neighbor. The Department argued that it never received a request for the latter, but it provided the relevant documents as part of its Response to the Complaint. The Department further argued that the Complainant never submitted prepayment relative to his request for the manual. Although the record demonstrated the same and indicated that the manual was obtained by the Complainant by alternate means, this Office nevertheless conducted an *in camera* review of the unredacted manual and found that any redactions made to it were appropriate. As to the remaining documents, this Office declined to determine whether the Department's failure to provide the same amounted to an APRA violation, as the documents had been provided to the Complainant and the initial non-production, even assuming it violated the APRA, did not amount to a willful and knowing or reckless violation of the APRA. Consequently, we found no APRA violation or need for injunctive relief.

PR 23-05

Lapierre v. Woonsocket Housing Authority:

The Complainant filed six (6) complaints alleging that the WHA violated the APRA by failing to timely respond to her request, by failing to completely respond to her request, by assessing prepayment in connection with another request, and by invoking a twenty (20) business day extension to respond to a request. Based upon the record before us, we determined the WHA violated the APRA in three (3) instances by failing to timely respond to the Complainant's request or by failing to indicate that it did not maintain any additional responsive documents beyond those that were already provided. We also requested that the WHA provide supplemental submissions regarding two (2) Complaints and address whether the violations found were willful and knowing, or reckless.

VIOLATION FOUND

PR 23-05B

Lapierre v. Woonsocket Housing Authority:

This Office had previously concluded that the WHA violated the APRA in numerous ways when responding to the Complainant's six (6) APRA requests. This Office issued a finding directing the WHA to address whether its violation should be considered willful and knowing, or reckless, and seeking additional information on outstanding issues. After receiving the parties' supplemental submissions, this Office determined that injunctive relief was necessary, as the WHA had failed to provide adequate responses to two (2) requests. Given the nature and extent of the violations and based upon the record before us, we further directed the WHA to take additional remedial measures. So long as the WHA complied with the directives in the supplemental finding, this Office would not file a lawsuit for a willful and knowing, or reckless violation of the APRA.

VIOLATION FOUND

PR 23-06

Travis v. City of Central Falls:

The Complainant alleged that the City violated the APRA when it sought a twenty (20) business day extension to respond to Complainant's APRA request and cited "extensive research" as the justification. The City provided significant documentary evidence as to the difficulty in searching for and retrieving the requested records, and although the City likely could have explained the extension in a more particularized manner, the City's actions were justified based on the clear need for additional time in order to fulfill the request. Based on the undisputed evidence before us, we found that the City did not violate the APRA when it extended the time to respond to Complainant's APRA request.

PR 23-07

Sherman v. Office of the Governor:

The Complainant alleged that the Office of the Governor violated the APRA by improperly withholding and redacting records in response to his APRA request for records pertaining to the ILO Group. The Office of the Governor argued that while it produced a large number of documents in response to the request, those it withheld were exempt from public disclosure pursuant to R.I. Gen. Laws §§ 38-2-2(4)(A)(I)(a), 38-2-2(4)(E), 38-2-2(4)(K), and 38-2-2(4)(M). The withheld documents were provided to this Office for an *in camera* review, along with a

privilege log. After reviewing the filings and the *in camera* records, this Office determined that the Office of the Governor improperly withheld four total records. Three of these records were withheld while being produced concurrently to the Complainant. One document was not exempt under R.I. Gen. Laws §§ 38-2-2(4)(A)(I)(a) and (E), as asserted. This Office directed the Office of the Governor to produce these four documents, and requested a supplemental filing concerning its search for responsive records (and why that search failed to locate certain responsive records). Finally, we found that two withheld documents may constitute final work product, and therefore did not meet the asserted exceptions. The Office of the Governor was directed to either produce these two records or explain in a supplemental filing why they constituted “drafts.”

VIOLATION FOUND

PR 23-08

Sinapi v. Department of Behavioral Health, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals:

The Complainant submitted an APRA request to BHDDH seeking various documents related to a specific healthcare services entity. Complainant alleged BHDDH violated the APRA by failing to timely respond to the request, failing to state that no reasonably segregable portion of the documents was available and by issuing a “blanket denial” pursuant to R.I. Gen. Laws §§ 38-2-2(4)(S) and 40.1-24, *et seq.* BHDDH conceded the first two allegations, thus we determined BHDDH violated the APRA by failing to timely respond to the request and by failing to state that the documents were not reasonably segregable. Based on the record before us, including our *in camera* review, we found that BHDDH did not violate the APRA when it denied Complainant’s request pursuant to R.I. Gen. Laws §§ 38-2-2(4)(S) and 40.1-24-12. We did not find injunctive relief appropriate, nor were we presented with sufficient evidence that the violations found were willful and knowing, or reckless.

VIOLATION FOUND

PR 23-09

Gonzalez v. RI Department of Corrections:

The Complainant submitted two (2) APRA complaints against the DOC. First, the Complainant alleged that DOC violated the APRA by providing a “far from adequate” response to Part (A) of his request and by failing to respond to Part (B). Based upon the record before us, we found that the DOC created a document using its electronically stored data to respond to Part (A) of Complainant’s request and did not violate the APRA. We did, however, conclude that the DOC violated the APRA by failing to respond to Part (B) of the request. In connection with the Second Complaint, the Complainant sought numerical and/or statistical data related to a specific DOC employee. The DOC withheld all responsive records pursuant to R.I. Gen. Laws § 38-2-2(4)(A)(i)(b) on the grounds that disclosure of the information would constitute a “clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy.” The Complainant alleged that the DOC violated the APRA by withholding these records in full. Based upon the record before us, we determined that additional information and argument from the DOC was necessary to determine whether the numerical data requested by the Complainant would fall within the ambit of

Exemption (A)(i)(b). We did not find injunctive relief to be appropriate, nor were we presented with evidence of a willful and knowing, or reckless violation.
VIOLATION FOUND

PR 23-10 **Davis v. Town of Exeter:**

The Complainant alleged that the Town violated the APRA when it withheld a letter sent by DEM in connection with a formal enforcement action pursuant to the following exemptions: R.I. Gen. Laws §§ 38-2-2(4)(A)(i)(a), (E), (K), (P) and (S). Based upon the record before us, including our *in camera* review of the subject letter, we determined that the letter was not protected by the attorney-client privilege and/or the attorney-client relationship as it was prepared for, and shared with, an unrelated third-party government agency. Nor did the letter constitute a “preliminary draft” or “work product” within the ambit of Exemption (K) as it was undisputed that the letter was a final communication sent between the Town and a third-party (DEM). Finally, the Town did not provide sufficient evidence that the letter constituted an “investigatory record” within Exemption (P). Having determined that none of the asserted exemptions applied, we found that the Town violated the APRA and directed the Town to provide the withheld letter to the Complainant. We were not presented with sufficient evidence of a willful and knowing, or reckless violation.
VIOLATION FOUND

PR 23-11 **Lefoley v. Rhode Island Department of Health:**

The Complainant alleged that RIDOH violated the APRA by denying his request for certain records related to a complaint he filed against an assisted living facility pursuant to R.I. Gen. Laws § 38-2-2(4)(P), arguing that the records pertained to an ongoing investigation. The Complainant did not dispute RIDOH’s argument that the requested records pertained to an incident which was still under investigation at the time when the request was denied. Based on the record, including our *in camera* review of the withheld records, we found that RIDOH’s decision not to disclose the requested records did not violate the APRA.

PR 23-12 **Pontarelli v. Department of Children, Youth and Families:**

The Complainant alleged that DCYF violated the APRA when it withheld all documents responsive to his request for redacted Family Court decisions ordering placement of a child in the care of a DCYF residential care facility. Complainant alleged that DCYF shared these records with state and municipal education agencies and was therefore “estopped” from claiming confidentiality. Based upon the record before us, including numerous state and federal statutes related to these types of records, we found that DCYF did not violate the APRA by withholding these records in full, and any disclosure of placement information by DCYF to education agencies was permitted by law and further governed by federal confidentiality protections for education records.

- PR 23-13** **Greichen v. Narragansett Police Department:**
The Complainant alleged that the Department violated the APRA when it denied his request for Department records relating to an incident report filed with the Department involving the Complainant, a third party, and a minor child. The Department denied the Complainant's request on the grounds that disclosure of the requested records would constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy. After conducting an *in camera* review, this Office found that disclosure of the requested record would implicate a privacy interest and that we were not presented with evidence of a public interest that would outweigh the privacy interest implicated. Accordingly, we found no violation.
- PR 23-14** **Patrie v. North Scituate Fire Department:**
The Complainant alleged that the Department failed to respond to his APRA request. The Department responded to the Complaint by providing the Complainant with a singular document that was responsive to his request. The Department conceded that it is subject to the APRA, and it is undisputed that it failed to respond to the Complainant's APRA request. It is also undisputed that the Complainant is now in possession of the record he sought. Accordingly, injunctive relief was not appropriate, nor were we presented with evidence of a willful and knowing, or reckless violation.
VIOLATION FOUND
- PR 23-15** **Brailsford v. City of Pawtucket:**
The Complainant questioned whether the City's APRA response was untimely because it was sent after business hours on the tenth business day after the request was submitted. The undisputed evidence revealed that the request was not submitted in accordance with the City's APRA procedures, and we found no violation.
- PR 23-16** **Mulholland v. Town of South Kingstown:**
The Complainant alleged that the Town failed to timely respond to her APRA request and the Town conceded the same. The Complainant is now in possession of the records she sought. Accordingly, injunctive relief is not appropriate. We were not presented with evidence of a willful and knowing, or reckless violation. Nonetheless, we requested submission of evidence within thirty (30) days demonstrating that the Town now has a procedure in place for processing APRA requests.
VIOLATION FOUND
- PR 23-17** **Ahlquist v. Office of the Governor:**
The Complainant alleged that the prepayment estimate for completing his APRA requests violated the APRA. Given the circumstances of this case, we concluded that the prepayment estimate did not violate the APRA.

- PR 23-18** **Cobro v City of Providence:**
The Complainant asserts that the City violated the APRA by prematurely closing her APRA request after only responding to part of it. The record evidences that the City promptly re-opened the request once the error was brought to its attention and substantively responded to the entirety of the APRA request within the deadlines provided by the APRA. Accordingly, we found no violation.
- PR 23-19** **Davis v. Town of Exeter:**
The Complainant alleged that the Town violated the APRA by withholding records responsive to his request for emails between Town employees concerning his plot under the deliberative process privilege encompassed within Exemption (E). Based upon the record before us, including our *in camera* review, we determined that the Town improperly withheld these emails and directed the Town to produce the same to the Complainant within ten (10) business days of the issuance of the finding. The Complainant also alleged that the Town failed to produce a second email forwarding a “curb cut” permit to the Deputy Town Clerk; however, the Town provided undisputed evidence that no such email existed. Accordingly, we found the Town violated the APRA in connection with the Complainant’s first allegation, but not the second. We did not find sufficient evidence of a willful and knowing, or reckless violation.
VIOLATION FOUND
- PR 23-20** **Martinez v. Department of Human Services:**
The Complainant alleged that DHS’s prepayment estimate violated the APRA. Based on the circumstances of this case, we did not find that the estimate violated the APRA.
- PR 23-21** **McBurney v . City of Pawtucket:**
The Complainant alleged that the City failed to properly respond to his APRA request. We determined that the City did not violate the APRA because the request was not submitted in accordance with the City’s APRA procedures.
- PR 23-22** **Doe v. City of Cranston:**
The Complainant alleged that the City violated the APRA by failing to provide a specific type of consultant’s report in response to his request. The City provided undisputed evidence in affidavit form that it did not have the specific document Complainant sought, and that the Complainant was provided with all documents the City maintained that were responsive to his request. Accordingly, we found no violation.
- PR 23-23** **Richer v. North Smithfield Zoning Board:**
The Complainant alleged that the Board failed to timely respond to his APRA request. We found that the Board violated the APRA because the evidence established that the Board failed to provide a written response within the time prescribed by the APRA, and we were not presented with clear evidence that the Complainant had indicated that no response was necessary. We did not find the

violation to be willful and knowing or reckless, but did require the Board to take steps to respond to the APRA request in accordance with the APRA.
VIOLATION FOUND

PR 23-24

Arocho v. CCRI:

The Complainant alleged that CCRI improperly redacted two emails in response to her request for emails between a URI employee and a CCRI employee. Based on our *in camera* review, we determined that the redacted emails were not responsive to the Complainant's request, as framed. Because CCRI strictly construed the request as seeking emails between the URI employee and the CCRI employee (not to include preceding communications between separate individuals which appeared earlier in an email chain), and because the burden is on the requester to properly frame the request, we found no violation. Additionally, there was no evidence that the Complainant attempted to clarify this request with CCRI prior to filing the Complaint.

PR 23-25

Connell v. Smithfield Public School:

The Complainant alleged that the SPS violated the APRA by "over-redacting" emails responsive to his request for all the emails of a Smithfield School Committee member. SPS argued that the responsive emails fell within R.I. Gen. Laws § 38-2-2(4)(M) as "correspondence of or to elected officials *** in their official capacity" and thus the redactions to the contents of the emails were appropriate. Based upon the undisputed evidence presented, we found no violation.

PR 23-26

Casazza v. Smithfield Public Schools:

The Complainant alleged the SPS violated the APRA by "over-redacting" emails responsive to his request for all emails of a Smithfield School Committee member. SPS argued that the responsive emails fell within R.I. Gen. Laws § 38-2-2(4)(M) as "correspondence of or to elected officials *** in their official capacity" and thus the redactions to the contents of the emails were appropriate. Based upon the undisputed evidence presented, we found no violation.

PR 23-27

Novak v. Town of Coventry:

The Complainant initially alleged that the Town failed to timely respond to his APRA request, then subsequently alleged that the Town should have received his request earlier than claimed and improperly asserted an extension. In a supplemental filing, the Complainant additionally alleged that he was not in possession of all requested records. This Office found that, based on the record, there was insufficient evidence that the Town received the request prior to the date attested to in its filings. We also found that the Town's basis for asserting an extension complied with the statute. As to the allegation that the Complainant did not receive all requested records, we found that injunctive relief and/or civil fines were not appropriate because the Complainant is now in possession of the missing records and because there was no evidence of a willful and knowing or reckless APRA violation on the part of the Town.

PR 23-28

Solas v. South Kingstown School Committee:

The Complainant alleged the Committee failed to timely respond to her APRA request. The Committee conceded to its untimely response, stating that it was due to locating additional documents responsive to the request which delayed the response. It is undisputed that the Committee has now provided the Complainant with the records sought. Accordingly, injunctive relief was not appropriate, nor were we presented with evidence of a willful and knowing, or reckless violation.
VIOLATION FOUND

PR 23-29

Izzo v. Department of Administration:

The Complainant alleged that DOA violated the APRA by withholding a list of email addresses of municipal board and commission members who participated in a voluntary training program and by failing to respond to her request for an administrative appeal. DOA argued that the email list in question consisted mostly of personal email addresses, and that release of the list would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy. DOA also conceded that although it drafted a response to the Complainant's request for an administrative appeal, it sent the response to an incorrect email address and was not alerted to this error because it did not receive "a bounce back email from Outlook." This Office concluded that release of the personal email addresses would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy under R.I. Gen. Laws § 38-2-2(4)(A)(b). However, after conducting an *in camera* review of the withheld record, we determined that the personal email addresses could have easily been redacted from the record because the total number of email addresses on the list was slight. We thus found that DOA violated the APRA for failing to produce a reasonably segregable portion of the record and for failing to respond to the Complainant's request for an administrative appeal. We determined that DOA should provide the Complainant with the withheld record (with appropriate redactions) within ten business days. We found insufficient evidence of a willful and knowing, or reckless violation.
VIOLATION FOUND

PR 23-30

Zurier v. Office of the General Treasurer:

The Complainant alleged that the Treasurer violated the APRA by denying his request for specific quarterly reports related to an ERSRI investment fund pursuant to Exemption (B), which exempts "[t]rade secrets and commercial or financial information obtained from a person, firm, or corporation which is of a privileged or confidential nature." R.I. Gen. Laws § 38-2-2(4)(B). The Complainant also alleged the Treasurer violated the APRA by failing to provide a *Vaughn Index* in connection with the denial. Based upon the record before us, including our *in camera* review of the withheld documents and the relevant state and federal law, we determined that the Treasurer did not violate the APRA by withholding the records. Additionally, we found no violation in connection with the Treasurer's refusal to provide a *Vaughn Index* as it had satisfied its burden under the APRA by providing the "specific reasons for the denial." R.I. Gen. Laws § 38-2-7(a).

PR 23-31 **Hanson v. RI Department of Corrections:**

The Complainant alleged the DOC violated the APRA when it denied his request for CCTV footage of a “wedding ceremony” that occurred in the maximum security visiting room of the ACI, citing, *inter alia*, personal privacy reasons. Based on the record before us, including our *in camera* review of the footage, we determined that the privacy interest implicated by disclosure of the records outweighed any public interest in disclosure and that the DOC’s denial of the APRA request was permissible under these circumstances.

PR 23-32 **Richer v. Town of North Smithfield:**

The Complainant alleged that the Town violated the APRA by withholding records in response to his request for certain legal opinions issued by the solicitor. Based on our *in camera* review, we determined that the withheld records fell within the ambit of Exemptions (A)(I)(a), (E), and (K), and were thus permissibly withheld. Accordingly, we found no violation.

PR 23-33 **Lapierre v. Woonsocket Housing Authority:**
OM 23-05

The Complainant alleged that the WHA violated the OMA when it did not provide proper notice of the nature of the business to be discussed and/or acted upon in connection with an agenda item related to a subpoena by HUD during its September 22, 2022 meeting. The Complainant also alleged that the WHA violated the APRA when it failed to provide her with the “supporting documents” for that agenda item. Based on the totality of the evidence before us, we determined that the agenda item in question did not adequately notify the public as to the nature of the business to be conducted. We did not find the violation to be willful or knowing, and we did not find injunctive relief to be necessary given that the discussion occurred in open session and the WHA took no action on that item. We did not find an APRA violation as the WHA provided undisputed evidence that no documents related to this agenda item were submitted, presented, or voted upon at the meeting.

PR 23-34 **Alba v. Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management:**

The Complainant submitted two (2) APRA complaints against DEM related to the “Lighthouse Inn” property in Narragansett. The Complainant alleged that the DEM violated the APRA by failing to provide him with a “19 Year Lease” (per his first request) and a “month to month lease” (per his second request). He also alleged that DEM violated the APRA by failing to respond to his request for an administrative appeal in each instance. DEM stated that after conducting a reasonable search, it concluded that it did not possess either a “19 Year Lease” or a “month to month lease.” Because the undisputed evidence in the record presented to us supported DEM’s assertions that it had conducted reasonable searches, and because the Complainant’s own statements indicated that no responsive records exist, we found no violation. Additionally, we found no violation as to the alleged failure of DEM to respond to the Complainant’s requests for administrative appeals because the Complainant filed his first Complaint before the statutory timeframe to respond to his request had elapsed and because, in the second instance, the record indicated that DEM responded to his request in a timely manner.

PR 23-35 **Durand v. Scituate Police Department and Scituate School Committee:**
The Complainant filed two separate, but related APRA requests to the Department and the Committee seeking any police reports and other documents involving a specific Scituate School District employee and a specific incident. Both the Department and the Committee denied Complainant's requests for, *inter alia*, personal privacy reasons. The Complainant filed complaints against the Department and the Committee alleging that these public bodies violated the APRA by denying his requests. Based upon the record before us, including our *in camera* review of the withheld police incident reports, we determined that the privacy interests implicated in the records outweighed any public interest in disclosure and the privacy interests could not be effectively resolved by redaction. Accordingly, we found no violations.

PR 23-36 **Caldwell v. Department of Administration:**
The Complainant alleged that DOA violated the APRA by failing to respond to his APRA request within the deadline set forth by the APRA. DOA conceded that it did not respond to the request within the timeframe provided by the APRA but argued that the request was unclear and that the Complainant eventually received what he requested after DOA reached out for clarification. Based upon the record before us, we determined that DOA violated the APRA by failing to respond to Complainant's request within ten business days. We found insufficient evidence of a willful and knowing or reckless violation and did not find a need for injunctive relief.
VIOLATION FOUND

PR 23-37 **GoLocalProv v. City of Central Falls:**
The Complainant alleged that the City violated the APRA by failing to provide all responsive records within the deadline required by the APRA. We determined that the City violated the APRA by failing to timely provide all responsive records, but concluded that injunctive relief was not appropriate because the City produced additional responsive records (albeit belatedly) and there was no specific evidence that the City maintained additional responsive records that had still not been provided. This Office also declined to pursue civil penalties.
VIOLATION FOUND

PR 23-38 **Donelan v. City of Providence:**
The Complainant alleged that the City violated the APRA by failing to provide him with a police report. The City provided undisputed evidence that the Complainant's request did not seek a police report, but rather the "basic information" of the driver of the motor vehicle that struck his client. Based upon the undisputed record, the City provided the "basic information" to the Complainant via email outside of the APRA process, as the police report associated with the incident was unquestionably a draft at the time the Complainant's request was submitted. Accordingly, we found no violation.

PR 23-39

Farinelli v. City of Pawtucket:

The Complainant sought emails between a Pawtucket City Councilmember and the Chief of Police and a copy of the Chief of Police's calendar for the previous six-months. The Complainant alleged that the City violated the APRA by withholding all records responsive to her request for emails and by "overly redacting" the Chief's calendar. Based upon the undisputed evidence presented, as well as our *in camera* review, all responsive emails fell within the ambit of Exemption (M), which broadly exempts all correspondence of/to elected officials in their official capacities. As such, we did not find a violation in connection with the City's withholding of emails. In regard to the Complainant's request for the Chief of Police's calendar, this Office conducted an *in camera* review of the calendar and determined that the City did not provide a sufficient argument regarding three (3) categories of redactions for this Office to determine that the redactions were appropriate. Accordingly, we determined that the City violated the APRA by redacting some of the information contained in the Chief's calendar. We directed the City to either provide the Complainant with a copy of the Chief's calendar in partially-unredacted form, or to submit a supplemental filing to this Office articulating with specificity why these redactions were necessary and appropriate under the APRA.

VIOLATION FOUND

PR 23-40

Caldwell v. Department of Administration:

The Complainant alleged that DOA violated the APRA by failing to provide the names of the financial institution(s) that received funds from DOA pursuant to two purchase orders. DOA produced copies of the purchase orders but asserted that the banking information the Complainant sought was exempt from disclosure as the confidential financial information of a third party, Rhode Island College (RIC). Our Office contacted RIC, which provided evidence indicating that the Complainant had made a similar APRA request to RIC and that RIC had responded by identifying its bank of record. We found it unnecessary to determine whether DOA had violated the APRA because our Office found no need for injunctive relief because Complainant had obtained the information he sought. We found insufficient evidence that any violation would be willful and knowing or reckless.

PR 23-41

Solas v. Providence Public School District:

The Complainant alleged that the District violated the APRA when it failed to respond to a request for records she made via email to a District employee. Based upon the undisputed evidence, the Complainant failed to follow the District's posted and promulgated APRA procedures when making her request. Accordingly, we found no violation.

PR 23-42

Solas v. Woonsocket Public School District:

The Complainant alleged the District failed to respond to her APRA request. The District conceded its untimely response and provided a response, with documents, to the Complainant at no charge. Accordingly, we found that the District violated the APRA but determined that injunctive relief was not appropriate as the

Complainant has now received a response to her request. Nor were we presented with sufficient evidence of a willful and knowing, or reckless violation by the District.

VIOLATION FOUND

PR 23-43

Schupp v. DOR:

The Complainant requested certain forms submitted from 2018 to the present and alleged that DOR violated the APRA by withholding the requested forms in their entirety pursuant to Exemptions O and S. This Office determined that DOR violated the APRA by failing to state that no reasonably segregable portion of the requested forms was available. We directed DOR to provide a supplemental response as described in the finding and will determine whether any injunctive or other relief is necessary after reviewing the supplemental submission.

PR 23-44

Hanson v. Rhode Island Department of Corrections:

The Complainant alleged that the DOC failed to respond to an APRA request he submitted in November seeking the names of certain DOC dental staff. The DOC provided undisputed evidence that it did not receive any such request from the Complainant in November or any time thereafter until it received notice of the Complaint. The DOC responded to the Complainant's request and provided responsive documents for part of the request but indicated that it did not have documents responsive to the remainder of the request. The Complainant did not dispute the DOC's assertion that it did not have documents responsive to the entirety of his request. Therefore, based upon the record before us, we found no violation.

PR 23-45

Farinelli v. City of Pawtucket:

The Complainant alleged that the City violated the APRA by failing to timely respond to her request. The City conceded the violation, attributing the same to the staff member responsible for responding being out of the office. Accordingly, we found that the City violated the APRA. Injunctive relief was not appropriate as the City provided undisputed evidence that it promptly responded to the Complainant's request after further inquiry from the Complainant and advised the Complainant that no responsive records existed. Nor were we presented with evidence that the violation was willful and knowing, or reckless.

VIOLATION FOUND

PR 23-46

Langseth v. Buttonwood Beach Association:

The Complainant, arguing that the BBA is subject to the APRA, alleged the BBA violated the APRA by failing to respond or failing to properly respond to three (3) APRA requests. Based upon the record before us, we concluded the BBA is not a "public body" for purposes of the APRA and therefore did not violate the APRA when responding (or failing to respond) to Complainant's requests for documents.

PR 23-47

The Public's Radio v. City of Woonsocket:

The Complainant alleged that the City violated the APRA when it failed to timely respond to four (4) APRA requests. Despite repeated requests from this Office to provide a substantive response to the Complaint, the City failed to do so and, consistent with our precedent, we drew an adverse inference against the City when reviewing the Complaint. Based upon the undisputed record before us, we found that the City violated the APRA by failing to timely respond to the Complainant's requests. We determined that injunctive relief was appropriate and directed the City to respond to all four (4) requests at no charge to the Complainant. We also requested supplemental submissions addressing whether the violations found were willful and knowing, or reckless.

VIOLATION FOUND

PR 23-48

Cicione v. Town of Warren:

The Complainant alleged the Town violated the APRA when it denied a five-part APRA request concerning the "Warren Gateway" project. The Town issued a blanket denial, stating that the request was overbroad and vague. The Town did not assess a prepayment cost or otherwise communicate to the requestor, nor did it state that there were no documents responsive to the request. We found that the Town violated the APRA by failing to provide responsive records without specifically citing to the applicable APRA exemptions justifying the denial (with the exception of correspondence of members of the Town Council, exempt under R.I. Gen. Laws § 38-2-2(4)(M)). The Town also failed to respond to the Complainant's request for an administrative appeal. We determined that the injunctive relief was appropriate and directed the Town to respond to the request at no charge to the Complainant. We also requested a supplemental submission addressing whether the violations found were willful and knowing, or reckless.

VIOLATION FOUND

PR 23-49

Santoro v. Town of West Warwick:

The Complainant submitted an APRA request to the Town seeking the "background investigation packet" that the Town's Police Department compiled on Complainant. The Complainant contends the Town violated the APRA in responding to his request by: (1) failing to timely respond, as he did not receive the Town's mailed response within the 10-business day period, (2) when the Town's Solicitor denied his request rather than the Town's APRA representative and, (3) by denying his request in its entirety. Based upon the record before us, we determined the Town's response was postmarked within the 10-business day period. We also determined that, based on the evidence (including our *in camera* review), the privacy interests implicated by disclosing the investigation report outweighed any public interest. Therefore, the Town did not violate the APRA by denying the request. We did find, however, that the Town's Solicitor is not listed in this Office's records as an APRA-certified employee of the Town pursuant to R.I. Gen. Laws § 38-2-3.16 and thus lacked authority to process and respond to the Complainant's APRA request. We did not find evidence of a willful and knowing,

or alternatively reckless, violation, nor did we find injunctive relief appropriate.
VIOLATION FOUND

PR 23-50 **Gregg and Sherman v. Rhode Island Office of the Governor:**

The Complainants alleged that the Governor’s Office violated the APRA by withholding an email that asserted allegations of misconduct against two senior state employees related to an official work trip. The Governor’s Office asserted that the withheld email is exempt from disclosure based on the exemptions related to investigatory records and the privacy balancing test. For the reasons set forth in the finding, this Office concluded that the cited exemptions do not apply and that the Governor’s Office is required to disclose the requested email (potentially with redactions to third-party information). We did not find the violation to be willful and knowing or reckless.

VIOLATION FOUND

PR 23-51 **The Providence Journal v. Rhode Island Office of the Governor:**

The Complainant alleged that the Governor’s Office violated the APRA by withholding a record showing individuals who have been assigned a “preferred” license plate since January 1, 2021. The Governor’s Office asserted that the requested record is exempt from disclosure pursuant to the Driver’s Privacy Protection Act (“DPPA”), its Rhode Island equivalent, and the balancing test. This Office determined that the DPPA and its state equivalent apply and as such the Governor’s Office did not violate the APRA by withholding the requested record.

PR 23-52 **Rourke v. City of Providence:**

The Complainant alleged the City violated the APRA when it failed to timely respond to her request within the ten (10) business day period. We find that the City violated the APRA. We do not find the City’s APRA violation to be willful and knowing, or reckless. Nevertheless, this finding serves as notice to the City that its conduct violated the APRA and may serve as evidence in a future similar situation of a willful and knowing, or alternatively reckless, violation.

VIOLATION FOUND

CHAPTER 38-2

ACCESS TO PUBLIC RECORDS

38-2-1. **Purpose.** – The public’s right to access to public records and the individual’s right to dignity and privacy are both recognized to be principles of the utmost importance in a free society. The purpose of this chapter is to facilitate public access to public records. It is also the intent of this chapter to protect from disclosure information about particular individuals maintained in the files of public bodies when disclosure would constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy.

38-2-2. **Definitions.** – As used in this chapter:

- (1) “Agency” or “public body” means any executive, legislative, judicial, regulatory, or administrative body of the state, or any political subdivision thereof; including, but not limited to, any department, division, agency, commission, board, office, bureau, authority, any school, fire, or water district, or other agency of Rhode Island state or local government which exercises governmental functions, any authority as defined in section 42-35-1(b), or any other public or private agency, person, partnership, corporation, or business entity acting on behalf of and/or in place of any public agency.
- (2) “Chief administrative officer” means the highest authority of the public body
- (3) “Public business” means any matter over which the public body has supervision, control, jurisdiction, or advisory power
- (4) “Public record” or “public records” shall mean all documents, papers, letters, maps, books, tapes, photographs, films, sound recordings, magnetic or other tapes, electronic data processing records, computer stored data (including electronic mail messages, except specifically for any electronic mail messages of or to elected officials with or relating to those they represent and correspondence of or to elected officials in their official capacities) or other material regardless of physical form or characteristics made or received pursuant to law or ordinance or in connection with the transaction of official business by any agency. For the purposes of this chapter, the following records shall not be deemed public:
 - (A) (I) (a) All records relating to a client/attorney relationship and to a doctor/patient relationship, including all medical information relating to an individual in any files;

(b) Personnel and other personal individually-identifiable records otherwise deemed confidential by federal or state law or regulation, or the disclosure of which would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 552 et. seq.; provided, however, with respect to employees, and employees of contractors and subcontractors working on public works projects which are required to be listed as certified payrolls, the name, gross salary, salary range, total cost of paid fringe benefits, gross amount received in overtime, and any other remuneration in addition to salary, job title, job description, dates of employment and positions held with the state municipality, or public works contractor or subcontractor on public works projects, employment contract, work location, and/or project, business telephone number, the city or town of residence, and date of termination shall be public. For the purposes of this section "remuneration" shall include any payments received by an employee as a result of termination, or otherwise leaving employment, including, but not limited to, payments for accrued sick and/or vacation time, severance pay, or compensation paid pursuant to a contract buy-out provision. For purposes of this section, the city or town residence shall not be deemed public for peace officers, as defined in § 12-7-21, and shall not be released.

(II) Notwithstanding the provisions of this section, or any other provision of the general laws to the contrary, the pension records of all persons who are either current or retired members of any public retirement systems as well as all persons who become members of those retirement systems after June 17, 1991 shall be open for public inspection. "Pension records" as used in this section shall include all records containing information concerning pension and retirement benefits of current and retired members of the retirement systems and future members of said systems, including all records concerning retirement credits purchased and the ability of any member of the retirement system to purchase retirement credits, but excluding all information regarding the medical condition of any person and all information identifying the member's designated beneficiary or beneficiaries unless and until the member's designated beneficiary or beneficiaries have received or are receiving pension and/or retirement benefits through the retirement system.

(B) Trade secrets and commercial or financial information obtained from a person, firm, or corporation which is of a privileged or confidential nature.

(C) Child custody and adoption records, records of illegitimate

births, and records of juvenile proceedings before the family court

- (D) All records maintained by law enforcement agencies for criminal law enforcement and all records relating to the detection and investigation of crime, including those maintained on any individual or compiled in the course of a criminal investigation by any law enforcement agency. Provided, however, such records shall not be deemed public only to the extent that the disclosure of the records or information (a) could reasonably be expected to interfere with investigations of criminal activity or with enforcement proceedings, (b) would deprive a person of a right to a fair trial or an impartial adjudication, (c) could reasonably be expected to constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy, (d) could reasonably be expected to disclose the identity of a confidential source, including a state, local, or foreign agency or authority, or any private institution which furnished information on a confidential basis, or the information furnished by a confidential source, (e) would disclose techniques and procedures for law enforcement investigations or prosecutions, or would disclose guidelines for law enforcement investigations or prosecutions or (f) could reasonably be expected to endanger the life or physical safety of any individual. Records relating to management and direction of a law enforcement agency and records or reports reflecting the initial arrest of an adult and the charge or charges brought against an adult shall be public
- (E) Any records which would not be available by law or rule of court to an opposing party in litigation
- (F) Scientific and technological secrets and the security plans of military and law enforcement agencies, the disclosure of which would endanger the public welfare and security.
- (G) Any records which disclose the identity of the contributor of a bona fide and lawful charitable contribution to the public body whenever public anonymity has been requested of the public body with respect to the contribution by the contributor
- (H) Reports and statements of strategy or negotiation involving labor negotiations or collective bargaining
- (I) Reports and statements of strategy or negotiation with respect to the investment or borrowing of public funds, until such time

as those transactions are entered into

- (J) Any minutes of a meeting of a public body which are not required to be disclosed pursuant to chapter 46 of title 42.
- (K) Preliminary drafts, notes, impressions, memoranda, working papers, and work products, including those involving research at state institutions of higher education on commercial, scientific, artistic, technical or scholarly issues, whether in electronic or other format; provided, however, any documents submitted at a public meeting of a public body shall be deemed public.
- (L) Test questions, scoring keys, and other examination data used to administer a licensing examination, examination for employment or promotion, or academic examinations; provided, however, that a person shall have the right to review the results of his or her examination.
- (M) Correspondence of or to elected officials with or relating to those they represent and correspondence of or to elected officials in their official capacities.
- (N) The contents of real estate appraisals, engineering, or feasibility estimates and evaluations made for or by an agency relative to the acquisition of property or to prospective public supply and construction contracts, until such time as all of the property has been acquired or all proceedings or transactions have been terminated or abandoned; provided the law of eminent domain shall not be affected by this provision.
- (O) All tax returns.
- (P) All investigatory records of public bodies, with the exception of law enforcement agencies, pertaining to possible violations of statute, rule, or regulation other than records of final actions taken provided that all records prior to formal notification of violations or noncompliance shall not be deemed to be public
- (Q) Records of individual test scores on professional certification and licensing examinations; provided, however, that a person shall have the right to review the results of his or her examination.
- (R) Requests for advisory opinions until such time as the public body issues its opinion

- (S) Records, reports, opinions, information, and statements required to be kept confidential by federal law or regulation or state law, or rule of court.
- (T) Judicial bodies are included in the definition only in respect to their administrative function provided that records kept pursuant to the provisions of chapter 16 of title 8 are exempt from the operation of this chapter.
- (U) Library records which by themselves or when examined with other public records, would reveal the identity of the library user requesting, checking out, or using any library materials.
- (V) Printouts from TELE -TEXT devices used by people who are deaf or hard of hearing or speech impaired.
- (W) All records received by the insurance division of the department of business regulation from other states, either directly or through the National Association of Insurance Commissioners, if those records are accorded confidential treatment in that state. Nothing contained in this title or any other provision of law shall prevent or be construed as prohibiting the commissioner of insurance from disclosing otherwise confidential information to the insurance department of this or any other state or country; at any time, so long as the agency or office receiving the records agrees in writing to hold it confidential in a manner consistent with the laws of this state.
- (X) Credit card account numbers in the possession of state or local government are confidential and shall not be deemed public records
- (Y) Any documentary material, answers to written interrogatories, or oral testimony provided under any subpoena issued under Rhode Island General Law § 9-1.1-6.
- (Z) Any individually identifiable evaluations of public school employees made pursuant to state or federal law or regulation
- (AA) All documents prepared by school districts intended to be used by school districts in protecting the safety of their students from potential and actual threats.

38-2-3.

Right to inspect and copy records — Duty to maintain minutes of meetings — Procedures for access. —

- (a) Except as provided in § 38-2-2(4), all records maintained or kept on file by any public body, whether or not those records are required by any law or by any rule or regulation, shall be public records and every person or entity shall have the right to inspect and/or copy those records at such reasonable time as may be determined by the custodian thereof.
- (b) Any reasonably segregable portion of a public record excluded by subdivision 38-2-2(4) shall be available for public inspection after the deletion of the information which is the basis of the exclusion. If an entire document or record is deemed non-public, the public body shall state in writing that no portion of the document or record contains reasonable segregable information that is releasable.
- (c) Each public body shall make, keep, and maintain written or recorded minutes of all meetings.
- (d) Each public body shall establish written procedures regarding access to public records but shall not require written requests for public information available pursuant to R.I.G.L. section 42-35-2 or for other documents prepared for or readily available to the public.

These procedures must include, but need not be limited to, the identification of a designated public records officer or unit, how to make a public records request, and where a public record request should be made, and a copy of these procedures shall be posted on the public body's website if such a website is maintained and be made otherwise readily available to the public. The unavailability of a designated public records officer shall not be deemed good cause for failure to timely comply with a request to inspect and/or copy public records pursuant to subsection (e). A written request for public records need not be made on a form established by a public body if the request is otherwise readily identifiable as a request for public records

- (e) A public body receiving a request shall permit the inspection or copying within ten (10) business days after receiving a request. If the inspection or copying is not permitted within ten (10) business days, the public body shall forthwith explain in writing the need for additional time to comply with the request. Any such explanation must be particularized to the specific request made. In such cases the public body may have up to an additional twenty (20) business days to comply with the request if it can demonstrate that the

voluminous nature of the request, the number of requests for records pending, or the difficulty in searching for and retrieving or copying the requested records, is such that additional time is necessary to avoid imposing an undue burden on the public body

- (f) If a public record is in active use or in storage and, therefore, not available at the time a person or entity requests access, the custodian shall so inform the person or entity and make an appointment for the person or entity to examine such records as expeditiously as they may be made available
- (g) Any person or entity requesting copies of public records may elect to obtain them in any and all media in which the public agency is capable of providing them. Any public body which maintains its records in a computer storage system shall provide any data properly identified in a printout or other reasonable format, as requested.
- (h) Nothing in this section shall be construed as requiring a public body to reorganize, consolidate, or compile data not maintained by the public body in the form requested at the time the request to inspect the public records was made except to the extent that such records are in an electronic format and the public body would not be unduly burdened in providing such data
- (i) Nothing in this section is intended to affect the public record status of information merely because it is stored in a computer.
- (j) No public records shall be withheld based on the purpose for which the records are sought, nor shall a public body require, as a condition of fulfilling a public records request, that a person or entity provide a reason for the request or provide personally identifiable information about him/herself.
- (k) At the election of the person or entity requesting the public records, the public body shall provide copies of the public records electronically, by facsimile, or by mail in accordance with the requesting person or entity's choice, unless complying with that preference would be unduly burdensome due to the volume of records requested or the costs that would be incurred. The person requesting delivery shall be responsible for the actual cost of delivery, if any.

38-2-3.1.

Records required.— All records required to be maintained pursuant to this chapter shall not be replaced or supplemented with the product of a “real-time translation reporter.”

38-2-3.2. **Arrest logs.** – (a) Notwithstanding the provisions of subsection 38-2-3(e), the following information reflecting an initial arrest of an adult and charge or charges shall be made available within forty-eight (48) hours after receipt of a request unless a request is made on a weekend or holiday, in which event the information shall be made available within seventy-two (72) hours, to the extent such information is known by the public body:

- (1) Full name of the arrested adult;
- (2) Home address of the arrested adult, unless doing so would identify a crime victim;
- (3) Year of birth of the arrested adult;
- (4) Charge or charges;
- (5) Date of the arrest;
- (6) Time of the arrest;
- (7) Gender of the arrested adult;
- (8) Race of the arrested adult; and
- (9) Name of the arresting officer unless doing so would identify an undercover officer.

(b) The provisions of this section shall apply to arrests made within five (5) days prior to the request

38-2-3.16. **Compliance by agencies and public bodies.** – Not later than January 1, 2013, and annually thereafter, the chief administrator of each agency and each public body shall state in writing to the attorney general that all officers and employees who have the authority to grant or deny persons or entities access to records under this chapter have been provided orientation and training regarding this chapter. The attorney general may, in accordance with the provisions of chapter 35 of title 42, promulgate rules and regulations necessary to implement the requirements of this section.

38-2-4. **Cost.** – (a) Subject to the provisions of section 38-2-3, a public body must allow copies to be made or provide copies of public records. The cost per copied page of written documents provided to the public shall not exceed fifteen cents (\$.15) per page for documents copyable on

common business or legal size paper A public body may not charge more than the reasonable actual cost for providing electronic records or retrieving records from storage where the public body is assessed a retrieval fee.

- (b) A reasonable charge may be made for the search or retrieval of documents. Hourly costs for a search and retrieval shall not exceed fifteen dollars (\$15.00) per hour and no costs shall be charged for the first hour of a search or retrieval. For the purposes of this subsection, multiple requests from any person or entity to the same public body within a thirty (30) day time period shall be considered one request
- (c) Copies of documents shall be provided and the search and retrieval of documents accomplished within a reasonable time after a request. A public body upon request, shall provide an estimate of the costs of a request for documents prior to providing copies.
- (d) Upon request, the public body shall provide a detailed itemization of the costs charged for search and retrieval.
- (e) A court may reduce or waive the fees for costs charged for search or retrieval if it determines that the information requested 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 the commercial interest of the requester

38-2-5. Effect of chapter on broader agency publication — Existing rights — Judicial records and proceedings. — Nothing in this chapter shall be:

- (1) Construed as preventing any public body from opening its records concerning the administration of the body to public inspection;
- (2) Construed as limiting the right of access as it existed prior to July 1, 1979, of an individual who is the subject of a record to the information contained herein; or
- (3) Deemed in any manner to affect the status of judicial records as they existed prior to July 1, 1979, nor to affect the rights of litigants in either criminal or civil proceedings, including parties to administrative proceedings, under the laws of discovery of this state

38-2-7. Denial of access. — (a) Any denial of the right to inspect or copy records,

in whole or in part provided for under this chapter shall be made to the person or entity requesting the right in writing giving the specific reasons for the denial within ten (10) business days of the request and indicating the procedures for appealing the denial. Except for good cause shown, any reason not specifically set forth in the denial shall be deemed waived by the public body

- (b) Failure to comply with a request to inspect or copy the public record within the ten (10) business day period shall be deemed to be a denial. Except that for good cause, this limit may be extended in accordance with the provisions of subsection 38-2-3(e) of this chapter. All copying and search and retrieval fees shall be waived if a public body fails to produce requested records in a timely manner; provided, however, that the production of records shall not be deemed untimely if the public body is awaiting receipt of payment for costs properly charged under section 38-2-4
- (c) A public body that receives a request to inspect or copy records that do not exist or are not within its custody or control shall, in responding to the request in accordance with this chapter, state that it does not have or maintain the requested records

38-2-8.

Administrative appeals. — (a) Any person or entity denied the right to inspect a record of a public body may petition the chief administrative officer of that public body for a review of the determinations made by his or her subordinate. The chief administrative officer shall make a final determination whether or not to allow public inspection within ten (10) business days after the submission of the review petition.

- (b) If the custodian of the records or the chief administrative officer determines that the record is not subject to public inspection, the person or entity seeking disclosure may file a complaint with the attorney general. The attorney general shall investigate the complaint and if the attorney general shall determine that the allegations of the complaint are meritorious, he or she may institute proceedings for injunctive or declaratory relief on behalf of the complainant in the superior court of the county where the record is maintained. Nothing within this section shall prohibit any individual or entity from retaining private counsel for the purpose of instituting proceedings for injunctive or declaratory relief in the superior court of the county where the record is maintained
- (c) The attorney general shall consider all complaints filed under this chapter to have also been filed pursuant to the provisions of § 42-

46-8(a), if applicable.

- (d) Nothing within this section shall prohibit the attorney general from initiating a complaint on behalf of the public interest.

38-2-9.

Jurisdiction of superior court. —

- (a) Jurisdiction to hear and determine civil actions brought under this chapter is hereby vested in the superior court
- (b) The court may examine any record which is the subject of a suit in camera to determine whether the record or any part thereof may be withheld from public inspection under the terms of this chapter.
- (c) Actions brought under this chapter may be advanced on the calendar upon motion of any party, or sua sponte by the court made in accordance with the rules of civil procedure of the superior court.
- (d) The court shall impose a civil fine not exceeding two thousand dollars (\$2,000) against a public body or official found to have committed a knowing and willful violation of this chapter, and a civil fine not to exceed one thousand dollars (\$1,000) against a public body found to have recklessly violated this chapter and shall award reasonable attorney fees and costs to the prevailing plaintiff. The court shall further order a public body found to have wrongfully denied access to public records to provide the records at no cost to the prevailing party; provided, further, that in the event that the court, having found in favor of the defendant, finds further that the plaintiff's case lacked a grounding in fact or in existing law or in good faith argument for the extension, modification, or reversal of existing law, the court may award attorneys fees and costs to the prevailing defendant. A judgment in the plaintiff's favor shall not be a prerequisite to obtaining an award of attorneys' fees and/or costs if the court determines that the defendant's case lacked grounding in fact or in existing law or a good faith argument for extension, modification or reversal of existing law.

38-2-10.

Burden of proof. — In all actions brought under this chapter, the burden shall be on the public body to demonstrate that the record in dispute can be properly withheld from public inspection under the terms of this chapter

38-2-11.

Right supplemental. — The right of the public to inspect public records created by this chapter shall be in addition to any other right to inspect records maintained by public bodies

- 38-2-12. Severability.** – If any provision of this chapter is held unconstitutional, the decision shall not affect the validity of the remainder of this chapter. If the application of this chapter to a particular record is held invalid, the decision shall not affect other applications of this chapter.
- 38-2-13. Records access continuing.** – All records initially deemed to be public records which any person may inspect and/or copy under the provisions of this chapter, shall continue to be so deemed whether or not subsequent court action or investigations are held pertaining to the matters contained in the records
- 38-2-14. Information relating to settlement of legal claims.** – Settlement agreements of any legal claims against a governmental entity shall be deemed public records
- 38-2-15. Reported violations.** – Every year the attorney general shall prepare a report summarizing all the complaints received pursuant to this chapter, which shall be submitted to the legislature and which shall include information as to how many complaints were found to be meritorious and the action taken by the attorney general in response to those complaints
- 38-2-16. 38 Studios, LLC investigation.** – Notwithstanding any other provision of this chapter or state law, any investigatory records generated or obtained by the Rhode Island state police or the Rhode Island attorney general in conducting an investigation surrounding the funding of 38 Studios, LLC by the Rhode Island economic development corporation shall be made available to the public; provided, however:
- (1) With respect to such records, birthdates, social security numbers, home addresses, financial account number(s) or similarly sensitive personally identifiable information, but not the names of the individuals themselves, shall be redacted from those records prior to any release. The provisions of § 12-11.1-5.1 shall not apply to information disclosed pursuant to this section.

SECTION II



OPEN MEETINGS ACT

Open Meeting Act Findings – 2023

ADV OM 23-01

In re Misquamicut Fire Department:

The Clerk of the Misquamicut Fire District sought guidance as to whether the Misquamicut Fire Department was required to adhere to the 2021 amendment to R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-7(b)(2), imposing additional minutes requirements on volunteer fire companies. Based upon the representation of the District that the Department is “under the supervision, control and jurisdiction” of the District, we concluded that the Department is exempt from the additional requirements outlined in subsection (b)(2) (except for discussions related to finances), noting that this opinion is limited to the very narrow issue presented and does not relieve the Department from other OMA provisions regarding minutes.

ADV OM 23-02

In re Foster Center Volunteer Fire Company:

Legal Counsel for the FCVFC sought guidance as to whether the FCVFC was a “public body” under the OMA and thus subject to its provisions. Based upon the representations of the FCVFC that it is, *inter alia*, a membership-controlled, 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation, as well as our precedent, we concluded that the FCVFC is not a “public body” within the meaning of the OMA.

ADV OM 23-03

In re East Greenwich School Committee:

Legal Counsel for the East Greenwich School Committee sought guidance as to whether a “Local Special Education Advisory Committee” (“SEAC”) constitutes a public body under the OMA and is thus subject to its provisions. Based upon the representations of the Committee that a SEAC is advisory in nature and is not required to conduct regular meetings, and based upon the composition of a SEAC’s membership (as well as our own precedent), we concluded that a SEAC is not a “public body” within the meaning of the OMA.

OM 22-34B

Greene v. Ashaway Fire District. Supplemental Finding:

This Office previously concluded that the Fire District violated the OMA when it failed to timely post meeting minutes on the Secretary of State’s website for various meetings over a three-year period. This Office issued a finding directing the Fire District to address whether its violation should be considered willful or knowing in light of its prior similar violation. *See Bock v. Ashaway Fire District*, OM 15-15. After receiving the parties’ supplemental submissions, this Office determined that injunctive relief was necessary as the Fire District located the minutes for several of the subject meetings. Accordingly, we directed the Fire District to post these meeting minutes on the Secretary of State’s website within ten (10) business days. Given the nature and extent of the violations and based upon the record before us, we further directed the Fire District to take additional remedial

measures. So long as the Fire District complies with the directives in this supplemental finding, this Office will not file a lawsuit for a willful or knowing violation of the OMA.

VIOLATION FOUND

OM 23-01 Fitzmorris v. Portsmouth Town Council:

The Complainant alleged that the Town Council violated the OMA when it did not provide proper notice of the nature of the business to be discussed and/or acted upon during an executive session at its September 14, 2020 meeting. Based on the totality of the evidence before us, we determined that the agenda item in question did not adequately notify the public as to the nature of the business to be conducted. We did not find the violation to be willful or knowing, and we did not find injunctive relief to be necessary given the passage of time between the meeting and the filing of the Complaint (and because the action taken on the agenda item occurred in open session at a following meeting).

VIOLATION FOUND

OM 23-02 Ahlquist v Providence City Council Finance Committee:

The Complainant took issue with the way links in the Committee's agenda notice presented certain data, contending that this violated the "spirit" of the OMA. Although public bodies are certainly encouraged to provide information and documents along with their meeting notices in order to provide additional information to citizens, nothing within the OMA requires public bodies to provide this additional information or to organize it in a certain way. Accordingly, we found no violation of the OMA.

OM 23-03 Solas v. South Kingstown School Committee:

The Complainant alleged that the School Committee violated the OMA by failing to timely post meeting minutes for three (3) meetings. The School Committee conceded the violation and attributed the same to a sudden change in staffing. The undisputed evidence revealed that the School Committee filed the missing meeting minutes shortly after the Complaint was filed. Accordingly, we found a violation. We determined that injunctive relief was not appropriate and there was insufficient evidence of a willful or knowing violation.

VIOLATION FOUND

OM 23-04 Dubois v. Woonsocket City Council:

The Complainant alleged that the Council violated the OMA by convening a meeting without providing proper notice. The Council asserted that it satisfied the OMA's notice requirements because the meeting in question was a continuation of a meeting from the night before, which had been properly noticed. We found that the OMA's notice requirements generally apply to all meetings and under the circumstances of this case, the Council did not provide any basis as to why it could not comply with the notice requirements when conducting its "continuation meeting." Accordingly, we found the Council violated the OMA. We did not find that the violation was willful or knowing or that there was a need for injunctive relief.

VIOLATION FOUND

OM 23-05
PR 23-33

Lapierre v. Woonsocket Housing Authority:

The Complainant alleged that the WHA violated the OMA when it did not provide proper notice of the nature of the business to be discussed and/or acted upon in connection with an agenda item related to a subpoena by HUD during its September 22, 2022 meeting. The Complainant also alleged that the WHA violated the APRA when it failed to provide her with the “supporting documents” for that agenda item. Based on the totality of the evidence before us, we determined that the agenda item in question did not adequately notify the public as to the nature of the business to be conducted. We did not find the violation to be willful or knowing, and we did not find injunctive relief to be necessary given that the discussion occurred in open session and the WHA took no action on that item. We did not find an APRA violation, as the WHA provided undisputed evidence that no documents related to this agenda item were submitted, presented or voted upon at the meeting.

VIOLATION FOUND

OM 23-06

Novak v. Coventry Town Council:

The Complainant alleged that the Council violated the OMA by failing to file annual notice of its regularly scheduled meetings for the 2022 calendar year on the Secretary of State’s website, failing to timely file meeting minutes for 15 meetings, and by failing to file minutes for five other meetings. Based on the record before us, including the lack of a substantive response from the Council regarding the allegations, we determined that the Council violated the OMA. Injunctive relief is not appropriate for the meeting minutes as all minutes have now been filed with the Secretary of State. Given the numerous violations found, we are seeking supplemental submissions from the parties as to whether the violations were willful or knowing.

VIOLATION FOUND

OM 23-06B

Novak v. Coventry Town Council:

This Office had previously concluded that the Council violated the OMA when it failed to timely post meeting minutes on the Secretary of State’s website for various meetings over an eight-month period and for failing to file annual notice of its regularly scheduled meetings for calendar year 2022. This Office issued a finding directing the Council to address whether its violation should be considered willful or knowing. After receiving the Council’s supplemental submission, this Office determined that injunctive relief was unnecessary, as the Council had posted all outstanding meeting minutes. Nor did we find sufficient evidence of a willful or knowing violation, as the Council attested that its errors were due to staffing issues and provided substantive information regarding the remedial measures for training and education on the OMA that the Council (and its staff) had taken and intends to take to prevent future similar violations.

VIOLATION FOUND

OM 23-07

Solas v. South Kingstown School Committee:

The Complainant alleged that the School Committee failed to file meeting minutes for its October 1, 2022 meeting. Based upon the undisputed evidence, the October 1, 2022 meeting was a meeting of the South Kingstown School Building

Committee, not the School Committee. Additionally, although a quorum of School Committee members were present at the October 1 Building Committee meeting, the attestations of the Committee members maintained that no collective discussion of School Committee business occurred between the School Committee members at this meeting. Accordingly, we found the School Committee did not violate the OMA.

OM 23-08 **Drix v. Providence City Council Finance Committee:**

The Complainant alleged that the Committee violated the OMA by meeting outside of the public purview and by failing to properly notice a vote on ProvPort matters in its supplemental notice. Based on the totality of the evidence before us, we determined that the Committee did not convene a meeting outside of the public purview as contemplated by the OMA because a quorum of the Committee never formed and there was no evidence of a rolling quorum. We also determined that the agenda item in question did not adequately notify the public as to the nature of the business to be conducted because it did not indicate that the Committee would take any action on ProvPort matters. We did not find the violation to be willful or knowing, however, and we did not find injunctive relief to be necessary given the fact that the full Council tabled the ProvPort matters at its next meeting.

VIOLATION FOUND

OM 23-09 **Ivanov v. Tiverton Planning Board:**

The Complainant alleged the Board failed to timely file minutes for several meetings in 2022. The Board conceded the violations and outlined the steps it has taken to ensure these violations do not occur again. Based upon the record before us, injunctive relief was not appropriate, as all minutes have now been filed with the Secretary of State. Nor were we presented with sufficient evidence that the violations found were willful or knowing.

VIOLATION FOUND

OM 23-10 **Anonymous v. Coventry Town Council:**

The Complainant alleged the Council engaged in substantive discussions outside of a properly noticed public meeting about the appointment of a Town Solicitor and Interim Town Manager. The Council conceded that two Councilmembers and one Councilmember-elect had private conversations about these matters of Council business, but argued that, at the time, the Councilmember-elect had not been officially sworn into office (although he had been elected) and thus the OMA did not apply. Based upon the record before us, including this Office's prior findings and caselaw, we determined that members-elect of a public body are subject to the provisions and the OMA. Accordingly, the conversations between the three Councilmembers (including the Councilmember-elect) violated the OMA. We did not find sufficient evidence of a willful or knowing violation, but we directed the Council to take certain remedial steps related to the Council's actions taken based upon these private conversations.

VIOLATION FOUND

OM 23-11

Zonfrillo v. Narragansett Economic Development Committee:

The Complainant alleged that the Economic Development Committee (EDC) violated the OMA by engaging in a rolling quorum and discussing an item at a meeting without proper notice. We concluded that it was unnecessary to determine whether the EDC is a public body and whether it violated the OMA because even assuming the OMA applies and a violation occurred, no action took place as a result of the allegations. Accordingly, injunctive relief was not appropriate and we did not find any potential violation to be willful or knowing.

OM 23-12

Soscia v. Pawtuxet River Authority:

The Complainant alleged the PRA violated the OMA by failing to timely file minutes with the Secretary of State's website for numerous meetings occurring between July 13, 2020 and December 12, 2022. The PRA conceded the violations as an inadvertent oversight of the PRA clerk and outlined the steps it had taken since it became aware of the unfiled minutes to file the same with the Secretary of State's website and prevent future similar violations. Accordingly, the PRA violated the OMA. Based upon the record before us, injunctive relief is moot as all outstanding minutes have been filed. Nor did we find sufficient evidence of a willful or knowing violation.

VIOLATION FOUND

OM 23-13

Chiaradio v. Westerly School Committee and Westerly Town Council:

The Complainant alleged that the Committee and the Council violated the OMA when a quorum of the Committee and a quorum of the Council virtually met in private with the Westerly Anti-Racist Coalition ("ARC") on two occasions in 2020 and 2021. The Committee attested that a quorum of the Committee attended a Zoom meeting with the ARC in December 2020 but that no collective discussion amongst the Committee members took place. The Committee also attested that no quorum of Committee members attended the other meeting with the ARC during the relevant time period. The Council provided evidence that at no time during the relevant period did a quorum of Councilmembers attend a meeting with the ARC. Accordingly, based upon the evidence presented, we found no violations, but encouraged the Committee and the Council to be mindful of the stated purpose of the OMA and the optics of members meeting outside of the public purview.

OM 23-14

Bejma v. Providence School Board:

The Complainant alleged the Board violated the OMA by failing to report in open session a vote that it took during its November 22, 2022 executive session to send correspondence to the Providence School Superintendent, signed by three members of the Board's leadership. The Board provided an affidavit and evidence that no vote to send the correspondence to the Superintendent took place during the executive session meeting, that the decision to send the correspondence was made solely by the Board's leadership outside of the November 22, 2022 meeting, and that it was signed by less than a quorum of the Board's members. Accordingly, we found no violation.

OM 23-15 **Ephraim v. North Tiverton Fire District:**

The Complainant alleged that the District violated the OMA by: 1) including an inadequate agenda on its October 5, 2021 meeting agenda, and 2) failing to timely file the minutes for that meeting. We found that the District violated the OMA on both counts. We did not find the District's OMA violations to be willful or knowing and did not find injunctive relief to be appropriate.

VIOLATION FOUND

OM 23-16 **Reynolds v. Richmond Town Council:**

The Complainant alleged that the Council violated the OMA when a quorum (three members) of the Council: 1) had discussions prior to a January 19, 2023 meeting regarding appointing a replacement member to the Chariho Regional School Committee, and 2) had discussions prior to the January 25, 2023 meeting regarding hiring Attorney Joseph S. Larisa to represent the Council in connection with Rhode Island Supreme Court proceedings concerning the School Committee appointment. The Complainant also alleged that the Council violated the OMA by discussing an item at a February 9, 2023 meeting that was not posted on the agenda. For the reasons discussed in the finding, we determined that the Council did not violate the OMA as to all three counts.

CHAPTER 42-46

OPEN MEETINGS

42-46-1. Public policy. – It is essential to the maintenance of a democratic society that public business be performed in an open and public manner and that the citizens be advised of and aware of the performance of public officials and the deliberations and decisions that go into the making of public policy.

42-46-2. Definitions. – As used in this chapter:

(1) "Meeting" means the convening of a public body to discuss and/or act upon a matter over which the public body has supervision, control, jurisdiction, or advisory power. As used herein, the term "meeting" expressly includes, without limiting the generality of the foregoing, so-called "workshop," "working," or "work" sessions.

(2) "Open call" means a public announcement by the chairperson of the committee that the meeting is going to be held in executive session and the chairperson must indicate which exception of § 42-46-5 is being involved.

(3) "Open forum" means the designated portion of an open meeting, if any, on a properly posted notice reserved for citizens to address comments to a public body relating to matters affecting the public business.

(4) "Prevailing plaintiff" includes those persons and entities deemed "prevailing parties" pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1988.

(5) "Public body" means any department, agency, commission, committee, board, council, bureau, or authority, or any subdivision thereof, of state or municipal government or the board of directors of any library that funded at least twenty-five percent (25%) of its operational budget in the prior budget year with public funds, and shall include all authorities defined in § 42-35-1. For purposes of this section, any political party, organization, or unit thereof meeting or convening is not and should not be considered to be a public body; provided, however, that no such meeting shall be used to circumvent the requirements of this chapter.

(6) "Quorum," unless otherwise defined by applicable law, means a simple majority of the membership of a public body.

42-46-3. Open meetings. — Every meeting of all public bodies shall be open to the public unless closed pursuant to §§ 42-46-4 and 42-46-5.

42-46-4. Closed meetings. — (a) By open call, a public body may hold a meeting closed to the public upon an affirmative vote of the majority of its members. A meeting closed to the public shall be limited to matters allowed to be exempted from discussion at open meetings by § 42-46-5. The vote of each member on the question of holding a meeting closed to the public and the reason for holding a closed meeting, by a citation to a subdivision of § 42-46-5(a), and a statement specifying the nature of the business to be discussed, shall be recorded and entered into the minutes of the meeting. No public body shall discuss in closed session any public matter which does not fall within the citations to § 42-46-5(a) referred to by the public body in voting to close the meeting, even if these discussions could otherwise be closed to the public under this chapter.

(b) All votes taken in closed sessions shall be disclosed once the session is reopened; provided, however, a vote taken in a closed session need not be disclosed for the period of time during which its disclosure would jeopardize any strategy negotiation or investigation undertaken pursuant to discussions conducted under § 42-46-5(a).

42-46-5. Purposes for which meeting may be closed — Use of electronic communications — Judicial proceedings — Disruptive conduct. —

(a) A public body may hold a meeting closed to the public pursuant to § 42-46-4 for one or more of the following purposes:

(1) Any discussions of the job performance, character, or physical or mental health of a person or persons provided that such person or persons affected shall have been notified in advance in writing and advised that they may require that the discussion be held at an open meeting.

Failure to provide such notification shall render any action taken against the person or persons affected null and void. Before going into a closed meeting pursuant to this subsection, the public body shall state for the record that any persons to be discussed have been so notified and this statement shall be noted in the minutes of the meeting.

(2) Sessions pertaining to collective bargaining or litigation, or work sessions pertaining to collective bargaining or litigation.

(3) Discussion regarding the matter of security including but not

limited to the deployment of security personnel or devices.

- (4) Any investigative proceedings regarding allegations of misconduct, either civil or criminal.
 - (5) Any discussions or considerations related to the acquisition or lease of real property for public purposes, or of the disposition of publicly held property wherein advanced public information would be detrimental to the interest of the public.
 - (6) Any discussions related to or concerning a prospective business or industry locating in the state of Rhode Island when an open meeting would have a detrimental effect on the interest of the public.
 - (7) A matter related to the question of the investment of public funds where the premature disclosure would adversely affect the public interest. Public funds shall include any investment plan or matter related thereto, including but not limited to state lottery plans for new promotions.
 - (8) Any executive sessions of a local school committee exclusively for the purposes (i) of conducting student disciplinary hearings or (ii) of reviewing other matters which relate to the privacy of students and their records, including all hearings of the various juvenile hearing boards of any municipality; provided, however, that any affected student shall have been notified in advance in writing and advised that he or she may require that the discussion be held in an open meeting.

Failure to provide such notification shall render any action taken against the student or students affected null and void. Before going into a closed meeting pursuant to this subsection, the public body shall state for the record that any students to be discussed have been so notified and this statement shall be noted in the minutes of the meeting.
 - (9) Any hearings on, or discussions of, a grievance filed pursuant to a collective bargaining agreement.
 - (10) Any discussion of the personal finances of a prospective donor to a library.
- (b) No meeting of members of a public body or use of electronic communication, including telephonic communication and tele-

phone conferencing, shall be used to circumvent the spirit or requirements of this chapter; provided, however, these meetings and discussions are not prohibited.

- (1) Provided, further however, that discussions of a public body via electronic communication, including telephonic communication and telephone conferencing, shall be permitted only to schedule a meeting, except as provided in this subsection.
- (2) Provided, further however, that a member of a public body may participate by use of electronic communication or telephone communication while on active duty in the armed services of the United States.
- (3) Provided, further however, that a member of that public body, who has a disability as defined in chapter 87 of title 42 and:
 - (i) cannot attend meetings of that public body solely by reason of the member's disability; and
 - (ii) cannot otherwise participate in the meeting without the use of electronic communication or telephone communication as reasonable accommodation, may participate by use of electronic communication or telephone communication in accordance with the process below.
- (4) The governor's commission on disabilities is authorized and directed to:
 - (i) establish rules and regulations for determining whether a member of a public body is not otherwise able to participate in meetings of that public body without the use of electronic communication or telephone communication as a reasonable accommodation due to that member's disability;
 - (ii) grant a waiver that allows a member to participate by electronic communication or telephone communication only if the member's disability would prevent the member from being physically present at the meeting location, and the use of such communication is the only reasonable accommodation; and
 - (iii) any waiver decisions shall be a matter of public record.

- (5) The university of Rhode Island board of trustees members, established pursuant to § 16-32-2, are authorized to participate remotely in open public meetings of the board if they are unable to be physically present at the meeting location; provided, however, that:
 - (i) The remote members and all persons present at the meeting location are clearly audible and visible to each other;
 - (ii) A quorum of the body is physically present at the noticed meeting location;
 - (iii) If videoconferencing is used to conduct a meeting, the public notice for the meeting shall inform the public that videoconferencing will be used and include instructions on how the public can access the virtual meeting; and
 - (iv) The board shall adopt rules defining the requirements of remote participation including its use for executive session, and the conditions by which a member is authorized to participate remotely.
- (c) This chapter shall not apply to proceedings of the judicial branch of state government or probate court or municipal court proceedings in any city or town.
- (d) This chapter shall not prohibit the removal of any person who willfully disrupts a meeting to the extent that orderly conduct of the meeting is seriously compromised.

42-46-6.

Notice. —

- (a) All public bodies shall give written notice of their regularly scheduled meetings at the beginning of each calendar year. The notice shall include the dates, times, and places of the meetings and shall be provided to members of the public upon request and to the secretary of state at the beginning of each calendar year in accordance with subsection (f).
- (b) Public bodies shall give supplemental written public notice of any meeting within a minimum of forty-eight (48) hours, excluding weekends and state holidays in the count of hours, before the date. This notice shall include the date the notice was posted, the date, time and place of the meeting, and a statement specifying the nature of the business to be discussed. Copies of the notice shall be maintained by the public body for a minimum of one year. Nothing contained herein shall prevent a public body, other than a school

committee, from adding additional items to the agenda by majority vote of the members. School committees may, however, add items for informational purposes only, pursuant to a request, submitted in writing, by a member of the public during the public comment session of the school committee's meetings. Said informational items may not be voted upon unless they have been posted in accordance with the provisions of this section. Such additional items shall be for informational purposes only and may not be voted on except where necessary to address an unexpected occurrence that requires immediate action to protect the public or to refer the matter to an appropriate committee or to another body or official.

- (c) Written public notice shall include, but need not be limited to posting a copy of the notice at the principal office of the public body holding the meeting, or if no principal office exists, at the building in which the meeting is to be held, and in at least one other prominent place within the governmental unit, and electronic filing of the notice with the secretary of state pursuant to subsection (f); however, nothing contained herein shall prevent a public body from holding an emergency meeting, upon an affirmative vote of the majority of the members of the body when the meeting is deemed necessary to address an unexpected occurrence that requires immediate action to protect the public. If an emergency meeting is called, a meeting notice and agenda shall be posted as soon as practicable and shall be electronically filed with the secretary of state pursuant to subsection (e) and, upon meeting, the public body shall state for the record and minutes why the matter must be addressed in less than forty-eight (48) hours in accordance with § 42-46-6(b) and only discuss the issue or issues which created the need for an emergency meeting. Nothing contained herein shall be used in the circumvention of the spirit and requirements of this chapter.
- (d) Nothing within this chapter shall prohibit any public body, or the members thereof, from responding to comments initiated by a member of the public during a properly noticed open forum even if the subject matter of a citizen's comments or discussions were not previously posted, provided such matters shall be for informational purposes only and may not be voted on except where necessary to address an unexpected occurrence that requires immediate action to protect the public or to refer the matter to an appropriate committee or to another body or official. Nothing contained in this chapter requires any public body to hold an open forum session, to entertain or respond to any topic nor does it prohibit any public body from limiting comment on any topic at such an open forum session. No public body, or the members thereof, may use this section to circumvent the spirit or requirements of this chapter.

- (e) A school committee may add agenda items not appearing in the published notice required by this section under the following conditions:
- (1) The revised agenda is electronically filed with the secretary of state pursuant to subsection (f), and is posted on the school district's website and the two (2) public locations required by this section at least forty-eight (48) hours in advance of the meeting in accordance with § 42-46-6(b);
 - (2) The new agenda items were unexpected and could not have been added in time for newspaper publication;
 - (3) Upon meeting, the public body states for the record and minutes why the agenda items could not have been added in time for newspaper publication and need to be addressed at the meeting; A formal process is available to provide timely notice of the revised agenda to any person who has requested that notice, and the school district has taken reasonable steps to make the public aware of this process; and
 - (4) The published notice shall include a statement that any changes in the agenda will be posted on the school district's web site and the two (2) public locations required by this section and will be electronically filed with the secretary of state at least forty-eight (48) hours in advance of the meeting in accordance with §42-46-6(b).
- (f) All notices required by this section to be filed with the secretary of state shall be electronically transmitted to the secretary of state in accordance with rules and regulations which shall be promulgated by the secretary of state. This requirement of the electronic transmission and filing of notices with the secretary of state shall take effect one (1) year after this subsection takes effect.
- (g) If a public body fails to transmit notices in accordance with this section, then any aggrieved person may file a complaint with the attorney general in accordance with § 42-46-8.

42-46-7.

Minutes. —

- (a) All public bodies shall keep written minutes of all their meetings. The minutes shall include, but need not be limited to:
- (1) The date, time, and place of the meeting;

- (2) The members of the public body recorded as either present or absent;
 - (3) A record by individual members of any vote taken; and
 - (4) Any other information relevant to the business of the public body that any member of the public body requests be included or reflected in the minutes.
- (b) (1) A record of all votes taken at all meetings of public bodies, listing how each member voted on each issue, shall be a public record and shall be available, to the public at the office of the public body, within two (2) weeks of the date of the vote. The minutes shall be public records and unofficial minutes shall be available, to the public at the office of the public body, within thirty five (35) days of the meeting or at the next regularly scheduled meeting, whichever is earlier, except where the disclosure would be inconsistent with §§42-46-4 and 42-46-5 or where the public body by majority vote extends the time period for the filing of the minutes and publiclstates the reason.
- (2) In addition to the provisions of subdivision (b)(1), all volunteer fire companies, associations, fire district companies, or any other organization currently engaged in the mission of extinguishing fires and preventing fire hazards, whether it is incorporated or not, and whether it is a paid department or not, shall post unofficial minutes of their meetings within twenty- one (21) days of the meeting, but not later than seven (7) days prior to the next regularly scheduled meeting, whichever is earlier, on the secretary of state's website. Except for discussions related to finances, the provisions of this subsection shall not apply to a volunteer fire company if the matters of the volunteer fire company are under the supervision, control, or jurisdiction of another public body.
- (c) The minutes of a closed session shall be made available at the next regularly scheduled meeting unless the majority of the body votes to keep the minutes closed pursuant to §§ 42-46-4 and 42-46-5.
- (d) All public bodies shall keep official and/or approved minutes of all meetings of the body and shall file a copy of the minutes of all open meetings with the secretary of state for inspection by the public within thirty-five (35) days of the meeting; provided that this subsection shall not apply to public bodies whose responsibilities are solely advisory in nature.
- (e) All minutes and unofficial minutes required by this section to be

filed with the secretary of state shall be electronically transmitted to the secretary of state in accordance with rules and regulations which shall be promulgated by the secretary of state. If a public body fails to transmit minutes or unofficial minutes in accordance with this subsection, then any aggrieved person may file a complaint with the attorney general in accordance with §42-46-8.

§ 42-46-8. Remedies available to aggrieved persons or entities.

- (a) Any citizen or entity of the state who is aggrieved as a result of violations of the provisions of this chapter may file a complaint with the attorney general. The attorney general shall investigate the complaint and if the attorney general determines that the allegations of the complaint are meritorious he or she may file a complaint on behalf of the complainant in the superior court against the public body.
- (b) No complaint may be filed by the attorney general after one hundred eighty (180) days from the date of public approval of the minutes of the meeting at which the alleged violation occurred, or, in the case of an unannounced or improperly closed meeting, after one hundred eighty (180) days from the public action of a public body revealing the alleged violation, whichever is greater.
- (c) Nothing within this section shall prohibit any individual from retaining private counsel for the purpose of filing a complaint in the superior court within the time specified by this section against the public body which has allegedly violated the provisions of this chapter; provided, however, that if the individual has first filed a complaint with the attorney general pursuant to this section, and the attorney general declines to take legal action, the individual may file suit in superior court within ninety (90) days of the attorney general's closing of the complaint or within one hundred eighty (180) days of the alleged violation, whichever occurs later.
- (d) The court shall award reasonable attorney fees and costs to a prevailing plaintiff, other than the attorney general, except where special circumstances would render such an award unjust. The court may issue injunctive relief and declare null and void any actions of a public body found to be in violation of this chapter. In addition, the court may impose a civil fine not exceeding five thousand dollars (\$5,000) against a public body or any of its members found to have committed a willful or knowing violation of this chapter.

- (e) Nothing within this section shall prohibit the attorney general from initiating a complaint on behalf of the public interest.
- (f) Actions brought under this chapter may be advanced on the calendar upon motion of the petitioner.
- (g) The attorney general shall consider all complaints filed under this chapter to have also been filed under § 38-2-8(b) if applicable.

42-46-9. Other applicable law. – The provisions of this chapter shall be in addition to any and all other conditions or provisions of applicable law and are not to be construed to be in amendment of or in repeal of any other applicable provision of law, except § 16-2-29, which has been expressly repealed.

42-46-10. Severability. – If any provision of this chapter, or the application of this chapter to any particular meeting or type of meeting, is held invalid or unconstitutional, the decision shall not affect the validity of the remaining provisions or the other applications of this chapter.

42-46-11. Reported violations. – Every year the attorney general shall prepare a report summarizing the complaints received pursuant to this chapter, which shall be submitted to the legislature and which shall include information as to how many complaints were found to be meritorious and the action taken by the attorney general in response to those complaints.

42-46-12. Notice of citizen's rights under this chapter. – The attorney general shall prepare a notice providing concise information explaining the requirements of this chapter and advising citizens of their right to file complaints for violations of this chapter. The notice shall be posted in a prominent location in each city and town hall in the state.

42-46-13. Accessibility for persons with disabilities. –

- (a) All public bodies, to comply with the nondiscrimination on the basis of disability requirements of R.I. Const., Art. I, § 2 and applicable federal and state nondiscrimination laws (29 U.S.C. § 794, chapter 87 of this title, and chapter 24 of title 11), shall develop a transition plan setting forth the steps necessary to ensure that all open meetings of said public bodies are accessible to persons with disabilities.
- (b) The state building code standards committee shall, by September 1, 1989 adopt an accessibility of meetings for persons with disabilities standard that includes provisions ensuring that the meeting location is accessible to and usable by all persons with disabilities.

- (c) This section does not require the public body to make each of its existing facilities accessible to and usable by persons with disabilities so long as all meetings required to be open to the public pursuant to chapter 46 of this title are held in accessible facilities by the dates specified in subsection (e).
- (d) The public body may comply with the requirements of this section through such means as reassignment of meetings to accessible facilities, alteration of existing facilities, or construction of new facilities. The public body is not required to make structural changes in existing facilities where other methods are effective in achieving compliance with this section.
- (e) The public body shall comply with the obligations established under this section by July 1, 1990, except that where structural changes in facilities are necessary in order to comply with this section, such changes shall be made by December 30, 1991, but in any event as expeditiously as possible unless an extension is granted by the state building commissioner for good cause.
- (f) Each municipal government and school district shall, with the assistance of the state building commission, complete a transition plan covering the location of meetings for all public bodies under their jurisdiction. Each chief executive of each city or town and the superintendent of schools will submit their transition plan to the governor's commission on disabilities for review and approval. The governor's commission on disabilities with assistance from the state building commission shall approve or modify, with the concurrence of the municipal government or school district, the transition plans.
- (g) The provisions of §§ 45-13-7 – 45-13-10, inclusive, shall not apply to this section.

42-46-14.

Burden of proof. — In all actions brought under this chapter, the burden shall be on the public body to demonstrate that the meeting in dispute was properly closed pursuant to, or otherwise exempt from the terms of this chapter.

SECTION III



PROCEDURES & FORMS



ATTORNEY GENERAL PETER F. NERONHA

PUBLIC RECORDS REQUEST GUIDELINES *OPEN GOVERNMENT UNIT*

The Office of Attorney General is committed to ensuring open and transparent access to our records. Consistent with the Access to Public Records Act (“APRA”), R.I. Gen. Laws § 38-2-1, *et. seq.*, and to facilitate access in an expeditious and courteous manner, the Office of Attorney General has instituted the following procedures for the public to obtain public records maintained by this Office.

1. Requests for records must be made in writing, except as provided in paragraph 3, and sent to the Open Government Unit, which is the Unit within the Office of Attorney General designated to respond to requests. APRA Requests may be submitted in any of the following manners:
 - Mailed to: Office of Attorney General, Attn: Open Government Unit, 150 South Main Street, Providence, Rhode Island 02903.
 - Hand-delivered during business hours to the Office of Attorney General at the reception desk (150 South Main Street Providence, Rhode Island 02903) and addressed to the Open Government Unit. The regular business hours of the Office are 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.
 - Emailed to: opengovernment@riag.ri.gov.
 - Submit Public Records form through our website: <https://riag.ri.gov/forms/apra-request>
2. A request form is appended for your convenience and is also available on our website: www.riag.ri.gov. You are not required to use our request form, to provide identifying information, or to provide the reason you seek the records. If you do not provide any identifying or contact information, a response to your request will be available no later than 10 business days following your request at the reception desk (150 South Main Street) during normal business hours (8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.).
3. If pursuant to the APRA, you are seeking documents available pursuant to the Administrative Procedures Act or other documents prepared for or readily available to the public and do not wish to submit a written request, you must contact an attorney in the Open Government Unit to make your request.
4. Please be advised that the APRA allows a public body ten (10) business days to respond, which can be extended an additional twenty (20) business days for “good cause.” These times may be tolled pending a request for prepayment or clarification. We appreciate your understanding and patience.
5. If you feel that you have been denied access to public records, you have the right to file a review petition with the Attorney General. Any withholding or redaction of records constitutes a denial, as does a response from our Office that we do not maintain any records responsive to your request. You may submit a review petition in the same manner as your original request. You may also file a lawsuit in Superior Court.
6. If you have any questions regarding submitting an APRA request, you may email: opengovernment@riag.ri.gov or contact us at (401) 274-4400 and ask to be connected to the Open Government Unit. Additional materials regarding the APRA can be found at: <http://www.riag.ri.gov> (then proceed to the “Open Government Unit” page).



**ATTORNEY GENERAL
PETER F. NERONHA**

**ACCESS TO PUBLIC RECORDS ACT
REQUEST FORM**

Date _____

Name (optional) _____

Address (optional) _____

Telephone (optional) _____

Email Address (optional) _____

Requested Records: _____

Preferred Format of Response _____

Forward this Document to the Open Government Unit

Note: You are not required to provide identifying information or the reason you seek the records. If you do not provide any identifying or contact information, a response to your request will be available no later than 10 business days following your request at the reception desk (150 South Main Street) during normal business hours (8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.).

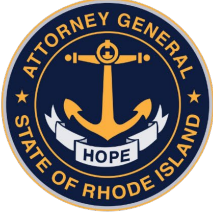


ATTORNEY GENERAL
PETER F. NERONHA

Rules and Regulations
Regarding Training under the Access to Public Records Act

1. The Chief Administrative Officer, as defined by the Access to Public Records Act, must certify annually, as provided in R. I. Gen. Laws §38-2-3.16 (“compliance by agencies and public bodies”), that persons who have the authority to grant or deny Access to Public Records Act requests have received training for the upcoming calendar year. Individuals must be certified each calendar year.
2. Any person who has not received training prior to the beginning of the calendar year, but who during the calendar year becomes authorized to grant or deny Access to Public Records Act requests, shall receive training as required under the Access to Public Records Act as soon as practicable, but not less than one (1) month after being authorized to grant or deny Access to Public Records Act requests. Such time may be extended at the discretion of the Department of Attorney General for “good cause.” The Chief Administrative Officer must certify to the Attorney General that training has been received when training has been completed.
3. Authorized training must be conducted by the Department of Attorney General. The Department of Attorney General will offer various training programs throughout each calendar year and such training programs will be conducted at various locations throughout the State. Public bodies or governmental entities wishing to schedule training sessions may contact the Department of Attorney General. Public entities wishing to schedule Access to Public Records Act training should make every effort to schedule training sessions to as large a group as practicable. The Department of Attorney General reserves the sole discretion to determine whether and when to schedule a training session.
4. For purposes of these Rules and Regulations the requirement for training may be satisfied by attending an Attorney General training in person or by viewing a recent video of an Access to Public Records Act presentation given by the Department of Attorney General. Any person satisfying the Access to Public Records Act training requirement must certify to the Chief Administrative Officer that he or she viewed the entire Access to Public Records Act presentation, or attended the live training program, and such certification shall be forwarded by the Chief Administrative Officer to the Department of Attorney General.

5. Certification may be e-mailed to agsummit@riag.ri.gov, or mailed to the Department of Attorney General, Attn: Public Records Unit, 150 South Main Street, Providence, Rhode Island 02903. Certification forms are available on the Department of Attorney General Website.
6. The Attorney General may annually prepare and post a list of all certifications received by the office by public bodies.
7. The Department of Attorney General may assess a reasonable charge for the certification required by R.I. Gen. Laws § 38-2-3.16, is to defray the cost of such training and related materials.



**ATTORNEY GENERAL
PETER F. NERONHA**

**CERTIFICATE OF COMPLIANCE
ACCESS TO PUBLIC RECORDS ACT SECTION 38-2-3.16
COMPLIANCE BY AGENCIES AND PUBLIC BODIES**

SECTION A – TO BE COMPLETED BY CHIEF ADMINISTRATOR

This certifies that _____ of _____, has completed the Access to Public Records training on the _____ day of _____, 20____, and is in compliance with § 38-2-3.16.

The above has completed training by means of: _____ Live Presentation _____ Video Presentation

Chief Administrator

Department/Entity

Dated

SECTION B – TO BE COMPLETED BY CERTIFIED PERSONNEL

I certify that I have viewed the video presentation and/or a live presentation and am in compliance with § 38-2-3.16 of the Access to Public Records Act. In addition, I certify that the information I have provided on this statement is true and correct.

Date of Training: _____

Signed: _____

Email Address: _____

[Email address will be used only to provide notice of future Open Government seminars]

****Please List ANY and ALL Entities for which you are certifying compliance. For instance, the Clerk’s Office, the Police Department, the School Department, the entire City/Town/Department.**

Upon completion please return to this office by either emailing to agsummit@riag.ri.gov, facsimile 401-222-3016, or mail to Office of Attorney General, Open Government Unit, 150 South Main Street, Providence, Rhode Island 02903.



ATTORNEY GENERAL PETER F. NERONHA

ACCESS TO PUBLIC RECORDS ACT CHECKLIST¹ *OPEN GOVERNMENT UNIT*

It is important to note that the APRA establishes the minimum requirements with which public bodies must comply. Public bodies are encouraged to implement policies promoting increased disclosure and transparency that are consistent with the APRA and its goal of facilitating public access to government records.

PROCEDURES (R.I. Gen. Laws § 38-2-3(d))

- ❖ All public bodies must establish written procedures regarding access to public records, which must be posted on the public body's website, if such a website is maintained, and made otherwise readily available to the public.
- ❖ Written procedures must include the following:
 - Identification of a designated public records officer or unit;
 - Where to make a public records request; and
 - How to make a public records request.
- ❖ A public body may require that requests be made in writing. However, requests need not be in writing if the requested records are available pursuant to the Administrative Procedures Act or are otherwise readily available to the public.
- ❖ A public body cannot require that requests be made on a specific form or that requesters provide identifying information or the reason(s) for their request.

TRAINING AND CERTIFICATION (R.I. Gen. Laws § 38-2-3.16)

- ❖ Any officer or employee given authority to grant or deny access to records must be trained, either by attending an Attorney General training or by watching the video of the Attorney General's Open Government Summit.
- ❖ No later than **January 1** of every year, every public body and Chief Administrative Officer must certify that all officers and employees who have the authority to grant or deny persons or entities access to records have been provided orientation and training during the prior year.
 - Any person who becomes authorized by their employer after January 1 to grant or deny Access to Public Records Act requests shall receive training as required under the Act as soon as practicable, but not more than one (1) month after being authorized to grant or deny APRA requests. The Chief Administrative Officer must certify to the Office of Attorney General that training has been received when training has been completed.
- ❖ Certification should be accomplished using forms generated by the Attorney General and available at: <http://www.riag.ri.gov/CivilDivision/OpenGovernmentUnit.php>.

¹ This checklist is provided by the Office of Attorney General to assist public bodies and provide guidance concerning the Access to Public Records Act's requirements. This checklist does not list all Access to Public Records Act requirements and is neither intended to replace the Access to Public Records Act nor should it be construed as legal advice. Public bodies should defer to their legal counsel when questions regarding compliance arise. Revised July 2021.

- ❖ Completed certification forms must be forwarded to the Office of Attorney General, Attn: Open Government Unit 150 South Main Street, Providence, Rhode Island 02903 or agsummit@riag.ri.gov.

RESPONDING TO REQUESTS²

- ❖ Within ten (10) business days of receipt of a request, the public body must provide one of the following responses to the requester:
 - Access to the records;
 - Denial of the request in whole or in part (i.e. redaction);
 - Extension of the time to respond; or
 - Estimate of the time and cost, which tolls the time to respond.
- ❖ The ten (10) business day clock begins to run on the first business day following receipt of the request. Requests received outside of normal business hours or on weekends or state holidays are deemed received as of the next business day.

Access:

- ❖ Requested documents are presumed to be public records and must be disclosed, unless the document (in whole or in part) is exempt pursuant to one or more of the exemptions found in R.I. Gen. Laws § 38-2-2(A)-(AA). (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 38-2-2(4)*).
 - Even if a document is exempt from disclosure, the public body may, in its discretion, still disclose the document, unless disclosure is prohibited by some other law, regulation, or rule of court.
- ❖ Documents must be provided in any requested media that can be provided. (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 38-2-3(g)*).
 - Must provide copies electronically, by facsimile, or by mail pursuant to requester's choice, unless doing so would be unduly burdensome due to the volume of records requested or the costs incurred. Person requesting delivery responsible for costs, if any. (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 38-2-3(k)*).
 - For example, if the public body maintains and can provide a document in word or excel and the requester requests that document in one of those particular formats, the public body cannot provide a PDF.

Denial:

- ❖ Any denial of a request for records:
 - must be in writing (even if request was made orally);
 - Provide specific reason(s) (including citation to specific exemptions, where applicable) for denial;
 - Without a showing of good cause, any exemption not specifically stated in the denial is deemed waived. (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 38-2-7(a)*).
 - If withholding entire document, must state that no reasonably segregable portion of the document can be produced. (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 38-2-3(b)*); and
 - Identify procedure for appealing denial. (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 38-2-7(a)*).
- ❖ The following responses constitute denials for purposes of the APRA and the requirements set forth above:

² This section should not be used for requests seeking adult arrest logs for arrests taking place within five (5) days of the request, which require a law enforcement agency to provide a response within 48 hours after receipt of a request, unless a request is made on a weekend or a holiday, in which case the records shall be made available within 72 hours. (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 38-2-3.2*).

- A response indicating that the public body does not maintain documents responsive to the request. (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 38-2-7(c)*).
- A response indicating that the public body can neither confirm nor deny whether it maintains documents responsive to the request.
- A response that includes the redaction of any records, in whole or in part.
- A response indicating that responsive documents are being withheld in their entirety.

Extend the time to respond (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 38-2-3(e)*)

- ❖ A public body may extend the time to respond by an additional twenty (20) business days.
- ❖ The extension must:
 - Be in writing;
 - Demonstrate extension necessary due to voluminous nature of the request, the number of requests pending, or the difficulty in searching for and retrieving or copying requested records; and
 - Be particularized to specific request – no copying above boilerplate language from the statute.

COSTS (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 38-2-4*)

- ❖ Up to \$.15 per document copied on a common or legal-size paper;
- ❖ Up to \$15.00 per hour for search, retrieval, review, and redaction, with no charge for the first hour;
 - Multiple requests from the same person/entity within a 30-day time may be considered one request for purposes of calculating the first hour at no charge.
 - The time expended to review and redact documents may be included in the assessed costs. See *D.A.R.E. v. Gannon*, 819 A.2d 651, 661 (R.I. 2003).
- ❖ No more than the reasonable actual cost for providing electronic records;
- ❖ No more than the reasonable actual cost for retrieving records from storage, but only where the public body is assessed a retrieval fee; and
- ❖ Any other cost provision specifically authorized by law.
- ❖ For all costs, an estimate must be provided upon request; and a detailed itemization of the search and retrieval costs must be provided upon request.
- ❖ It is a best practice to provide requesters with an estimate up front so that they have an opportunity to make an informed decision about whether to proceed with the request.

COMMUNICATION

- ❖ Maintaining open communication with the requestor is key in order to clarify the scope of the request, to confirm that your public body understands what records are being sought, and to potentially resolve any disputes (or narrow the issues) before a complaint is filed with this Office.



ATTORNEY GENERAL PETER F. NERONHA

OPEN MEETINGS ACT CHECKLIST¹ *OPEN GOVERNMENT UNIT*

It is important to note that the OMA establishes the minimum requirements with which public bodies must comply. Public bodies are encouraged to conduct meetings as openly as possible, consistent with the OMA and its purpose of ensuring that public business is carried out in an open and transparent manner.

WHEN THE OMA APPLIES *(R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-2)*

- ❖ The OMA applies whenever a quorum of a public body convenes for a meeting. The OMA applies when all three elements are present:
 - A public body is “any department, agency, commission, board, council, bureau, or authority or any subdivision thereof of state or municipal government,” in addition to certain libraries.
 - A meeting is “the convening of a public body to discuss and/or act upon a matter over which the public body has supervision, control, jurisdiction, or advisory power.”
 - A quorum is defined as “a simple majority of the membership of a public body.”
 - Note: a “walking” or “rolling” quorum may be created where a majority of the members of a public body attain a quorum by a series of one-on-one conversations or interactions, whether in person or by electronic means.
 - Except as provided in any applicable Executive Order, discussions of a public body by telephone or electronic means are permissible only to schedule a meeting or due to a member being on active duty in the armed services or having a disability. *(R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-5(b)).*

NOTICE REQUIREMENTS *(R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-6)*

- ❖ Annual Notice (beginning of each calendar year only) *(R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-6(a)).*
 - Includes the date(s), time(s), and location(s) of the meetings.
 - Notice must be posted electronically with the Secretary of State **and** provided to a member of the public upon request.
- ❖ Supplemental Notice/Agenda (minimum 48 hours before the date of the scheduled meeting, **excluding** weekends and state holidays) *(R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-6(b)).*
 - Notice includes:
 - the date notice was posted;
 - the date(s), time(s), and location(s) of the meetings; and
 - a statement specifying the nature of the business for each matter to be discussed.
 - Statement must give the public fair notice of the nature of the business to be discussed or acted upon. Agenda items such as “Old Business” or “Treasurer’s Report” are insufficient.

¹ This checklist is provided by the Office of Attorney General to assist public bodies and provide guidance concerning the Open Meetings Act’s requirements. This checklist does not list all Open Meetings Act requirements and is neither intended to replace the Open Meetings Act nor should it be construed as legal advice. Public bodies should defer to their legal counsel when questions regarding compliance arise. Revised July 2021.

- Cannot take a vote on an item if agenda only states that the item will be discussed and does not indicate that it may be voted upon.
- A public body may respond to comments initiated by members of the public during an open forum but may not vote on the matter absent an emergency. A public body is not required to hold an open forum or permit open discussion but is encouraged to do so when appropriate.
- Notice must be posted: (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-6(c)*)
 - at the principal office of the public body holding the meeting, **or** if no principal office exists, at the building where the meeting is to be held;
 - in at least one other prominent location within the governmental unit; **and**
 - electronically with the Secretary of State.
- ❖ **Emergency Meetings** may be held without satisfying the usual notice requirements, provided that:
 - The majority takes an affirmative vote that the emergency meeting is necessary to address an unexpected occurrence that requires immediate action to protect the public;
 - The public body states for the record why the matter must be addressed without providing the usual notice;
 - The statement regarding why the matter must be addressed without the usual notice must be recorded in the meeting minutes.
 - Notice is posted as soon as practicable and electronically filed on the Secretary of State's website; and
 - The public body may only address the issue or issues which created the need for an emergency meeting.

OPEN MEETINGS

(*R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-3*).

- ❖ All meetings must be open to the public unless closed in accordance with the OMA.
 - The public has a right to record open session meetings.

CLOSED MEETINGS

(*R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-4(a)*)

- ❖ Although not required, a meeting may be held in closed or executive session if it concerns at least one of the following:
 - A discussion of the **job performance**, character, or physical or mental health of a person(s), pursuant to *R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-5(a)(1)*, provided that:
 - person(s) affected shall be notified in advance in writing;
 - person(s) affected advised they may require discussion held in open session; and
 - A statement in open session (**and** record in open session minutes) that affected person(s) have been notified.
 - Sessions pertaining to **collective bargaining or litigation**. (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-5(a)(2)*).
 - Discussions regarding a matter of **security**. (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-5(a)(3)*).
 - **Investigative proceedings** regarding allegations of civil or criminal misconduct. (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-5(a)(4)*).
 - Discussions or considerations related to the **acquisition or lease of real property** for public purposes, or of the **disposition of publicly held property** wherein advanced public information would be detrimental to the public interest. (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-5(a)(5)*).
 - Discussions related to or concerning a **prospective business or industry locating in Rhode Island** when an open meeting would have a detrimental effect on the interest of the public. (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-5(a)(6)*).
 - A matter related to the question of the **investment of public funds**, which includes any investment plan or matter related thereto, where the premature disclosure would adversely affect the public interest. (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-5(a)(7)*).
 - School committee sessions to conduct **student disciplinary hearings** or to review other matters that relate to the privacy of students and their records, provided in either case: (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-5(a)(8)*).
 - any affected student(s) shall be notified in advance in writing;

- affected student(s) advised they may require discussion held in open session; and
 - during open call, state in open session **and** record in open session minutes that affected student(s) have been notified.
 - Hearings on, or discussions of, a **grievance filed pursuant to a collective bargaining agreement**. (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-5(a)(9)*).
 - Discussion of the **personal finances of a prospective donor to a library**. (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-5(a)(10)*).
- ❖ In order to properly convene in executive session, the following must first be performed by the public body in **open session**:
- A vote by a majority of the members to convene in executive session;
 - A statement of the specific subsection of R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-5(a)(1)-(10) upon which **each** executive session discussion has been convened; **and**
 - A statement specifying the nature of the business for **each** matter to be discussed. (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-4(a)*).

**The above information must also be recorded in the open session minutes.*

MINUTES - FORMAT (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-7*)

- ❖ Open **and** closed session minutes **must** be maintained and contain:
- The date, time, and place of the meeting;
 - The members of the public body recorded as either present or absent;
 - A record by individual member of any vote taken; **and**
 - Any other information relevant to the business of the public body that a member of the public body requests be included. (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-7(a)*).

MAKING MINUTES AVAILABLE (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-7*)

- ❖ For all public bodies:
- **Unofficial** (unapproved) open and closed session minutes must be available at the principal office of the public body within thirty-five (35) days of the meeting, **or** at the next regularly scheduled meeting, whichever is earlier. (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-7(b)*).
 - **EXCEPTIONS**
 - when a closed session meeting has been properly convened and a majority of the members vote to seal the minutes, or
 - where a majority of the members vote to extend the time period for filing minutes and publicly state the reason for the extension. (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-7(b)*).
 - **Official**/approved minutes must be maintained **and** electronically filed with the Secretary of State within 35 days of the meeting. (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-7(d)*).
 - **EXCEPTION**
 - not applicable to public bodies whose responsibilities are *advisory* in nature. (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-7(d)*).
- ❖ For volunteer fire companies, associations, fire district companies, or any other organization currently engaged in extinguishing fires and preventing fire hazards:
- must post unofficial minutes on the Secretary of State's website within 21 days of the meeting, **but not later** than 7 days **prior** to the next regularly scheduled meeting, whichever is earlier. (*R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-7(b)(2)*)(also note 2021 amendment excepting certain matters from the provisions of this section).

DISCLOSING VOTES

(R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-7(b))

- ❖ All votes listing how each member voted on each issue shall be available at the office of the public body within two (2) weeks of the vote, and
- ❖ If a vote is cast during **executive session**, the vote must be disclosed once the open session is reopened.
 - **EXCEPTION**
 - a vote taken in executive session need not be disclosed for the period during which its disclosure would jeopardize any strategy, negotiation or investigation undertaken pursuant to a properly closed meeting. *(R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-4(b)).*

PUBLIC COMMENT

(R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-6(d))

- ❖ Nothing within the OMA requires a public body to hold an open forum or public comment session.
- ❖ Nothing within the OMA requires the members of a public body to respond to any comments made during an open forum or public comment session.
- ❖ If a public body chooses to hold an open forum or public comment session, nothing prohibits the public body members from responding to comments initiated by members of the public.
- ❖ The public body is permitted to limit comment on any topic during an open forum or public comment session.



ATTORNEY GENERAL PETER F. NERONHA

GUIDANCE FOR CONVENING INTO EXECUTIVE SESSION¹

Pursuant to the Open Meetings Act (“OMA”), public bodies are required to conduct public business in an open and transparent manner. Accordingly, public bodies may only enter into executive (closed) session for limited, specific reasons and are subject to certain requirements when they do so. Some of the most common purposes for entering executive session, and the steps necessary to go from an open meeting to an executive session, are explained below. The full list of purposes for which executive session may be entered can be found at R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-5(a).

We emphasize that public bodies should only resort to executive session when necessary and are encouraged to consider whether business may be conducted in open session, even when the OMA may permit the matter to be discussed in closed session.

In addition to articulating in an open call the particular OMA subsection and providing a statement specifying the nature of the business to be discussed, the open session meeting minutes must also record the particular OMA subsection and the statement specifying the nature of the business to be discussed in executive session. See R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-4(a). This generally should be more specific than the categories listed below. Examples of how to convene and adjourn an executive session are included below.

Convening in and out of Executive Session

During the Open Session:

- **Councilmember A:** “*Motion to convene into executive session, pursuant to R.I. Gen. Laws § [appropriate section here], to [repeat whatever is on the agenda here].*”

Examples:

- (1) “*I move that the XYZ Council go into executive session pursuant to R.I. Gen. Laws §42-46-5(a)(1) to discuss the job performance of the Town Manager. The Town Manager was provided prior written notice that her job performance would be discussed and that she could require that discussion be held during the open session.*”

* Meeting minutes must reflect that this statement regarding notice was made for the record^{2*}

- (2) “*I move that the XYZ Council go into executive session pursuant to R.I. Gen. Laws §42-46-5(a)(2) to discuss the pending litigation of Leslie Knope v. Ron Swanson, Case Number: KC2019-1234.*”

¹ This information is provided by the Office of Attorney General to assist public bodies and to provide guidance concerning the Open Meetings Act’s requirements. This information does not list all Open Meetings Act requirements and is neither intended to replace the Open Meetings Act nor should it be construed as legal advice. Public bodies should defer to their legal counsel when questions regarding compliance arise. Revised March 2021.

² See R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-5(a)(1).

Councilmember B: *“I second the motion.”*

This motion requires an affirmative vote of the majority of members³

This motion, and the vote of each member on the question of holding a closed meeting must be recorded in the minutes⁴

During the Closed Session (at the conclusion of the substantive closed session business):

(1) Motion to convene into open session

Councilmember A: *“I move that the XYZ Council reconvene into open session.”*

Councilmember B: *“I second the motion.”*

This motion requires an affirmative vote of the majority of members

Presiding Councilmember: *“So ordered. The XYZ Council is now in open session.”*

During Open Session:

(1) Report on Actions Taken in Executive Session (Often Provided by the Presiding Member)

- The [INSERT NAME OF BODY HERE] convened in executive session pursuant to [section] to [agenda], and the following votes were taken:
 - Vote(s), if any, on whatever was noticed
 - Motion, if any, to seal the minutes of executive session
 - Motion to return to open session

Note: Any action/vote taken in closed session **SHALL be disclosed in **OPEN SESSION** unless disclosure would jeopardize any strategy, negotiation, or investigation undertaken pursuant to discussions conducted under R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-5(a). R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-4(b).*

(2) Motion to seal the executive session minutes (optional)

Councilmember A: *“I move that the minutes of the XYZ Council executive session be sealed.”*

Councilmember B: *“I second the motion.”*

This motion requires an affirmative vote of the majority of members

Presiding Councilmember: *“So ordered. The XYZ Council executive session minutes of [DATE] shall be sealed.”*

Minutes of a closed session shall be made available at the next regularly scheduled meeting unless the majority votes to keep the minutes sealed. R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-7(c). Public bodies are encouraged to not seal minutes unless necessary.

³ See R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-4(a).

⁴ See *id.*

Open Government Complaint Process



ATTORNEY GENERAL
PETER F. NERONHA

Acknowledgement Letters

If allegations in the complaint, if assumed to be true, state a potential violation of the Act, the Office sends acknowledgment letters to complainant and legal counsel for public body outlining process and requesting a response to the allegations.

Complainant Rebuttal

Complainant may submit a rebuttal to the public body's response within 5* business days of receipt that is limited to addressing issues raised in response and may not address new issues. Sent to the Office and legal counsel for public body.

Finding Issued

The Office issues a finding that is sent to parties and published on www.riag.ri.gov.

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Complaint Submitted

Email: opengovernment@riag.ri.gov
or
Mail: Office of the Attorney General
Attn: Open Government Unit
150 South Main Street Providence, RI 02903

Complaint should include a short and clear statement of the specific alleged violation(s) and any relevant documentation.

Public Body Response

Legal counsel for the public body provides a substantive response to complaint within 10 business days* of acknowledgment letter. Sent to the Office and complainant.

Investigation Period

The Office investigates the allegations and may request supplemental information from the parties. Neither the public body nor the complainant may submit additional information without permission.

Potential Superior Court Complaint Filed

If injunctive relief is appropriate or if a violation is found to be willful or knowing (OMA) or willful and knowing, or reckless (APRA), the Office may file a complaint against the public body in the Superior Court seeking civil fines.

*This process is subject to change at the discretion of the Office.
Reasonable extensions may be granted upon an appropriate showing.



Guidance on Public Bodies Returning to In-Person Meetings and Remote Public Participation in Open Meetings

The Open Meetings Act (“OMA”) provides the Office of Attorney General with the statutory authority to investigate alleged violations of the OMA, as well as to interpret the requirements of the OMA. See R.I. Gen. Laws §§ 42-46-8(a), 42-46-12. Pursuant to that authority, the Attorney General frequently issues findings and offers trainings and guidance regarding the provisions of the OMA.

The executive order permitting for virtual and hybrid meetings of public bodies for reasons related to the state of emergency resulting from COVID-19 expired on March 31, 2022. Accordingly, public bodies must conform to the requirements of the OMA. Some public bodies and individuals have questions related to returning to in-person meetings, particularly in light of the widespread adoption of technologies and platforms that facilitate virtual access and participation. Accordingly, this guidance document is intended to provide clarity on the requirements of the OMA, for both members of public bodies and members of the public.

As set forth in greater detail below, this guidance clarifies that:

- **Members of the Public Body Must Attend Meetings In-Person**
- **Members of the Public Must Be Permitted to Attend Open Meetings in Person**
- **Public Bodies May Livestream Their Meetings to the Public**
- **Public Bodies May Permit Members of the Public to Participate Remotely in Open Meetings**



Members of the Public Body Must Attend Meetings In-Person

All members of a public body who are participating in a meeting in any fashion must be physically present at the meeting, unless one of the limited exceptions provided for in the OMA applies. The OMA expressly provides that “discussions of a public body via electronic communication, including telephonic communication and telephone conferencing, shall be permitted *only to schedule a meeting.*” R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-5(b)(1) (emphasis added). The OMA provides only two exceptions to this rule: “a member of a public body may participate by use of electronic communication or telephone communication while on active duty in the armed services of the United States” or if a member has a disability and cannot otherwise participate as further described in the OMA. R.I. Gen. Laws §§ 42-46-5(b) (2), (3). Except in these very limited circumstances, all members of the public body must be physically present at any meetings in which they are participating.

Members of the Public Must Be Permitted to Attend Open Meetings in Person

The OMA expressly provides that “[e]very meeting of all public bodies shall be open to the public” unless closed for one of the specific reasons permitted by the statute. R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-3. **As such, members of the public must be permitted, in-person, to attend the open meetings of public bodies and to observe the conducting of those open meetings.** Although there may be certain particular circumstances where granting in-person attendance to an unlimited number of people may not be feasible, for example due to fire codes or health occupancy restrictions, open meetings must be available to the public for in-person attendance in a manner that conforms with the OMA and with this Office’s precedent. See *Brunetti, et al. v. Town of Johnston*, OM 17-19.



Public Bodies May Livestream Their Meetings to the Public

Even prior to COVID-19, a number of public bodies livestreamed their meetings to permit citizens to observe the open meetings in real-time even if they were unable to attend in person. Although the OMA does not require livestreaming open meetings, nothing in the OMA prevents a public body from doing so. In fact, livestreaming open meetings via television, Youtube, Zoom, or some other technology increases access to public meetings and promotes the OMA's purpose of ensuring that "public business be performed in an open and public manner and that the citizens be advised of and aware of the performance of public officials and the deliberations and decisions that go into the making of public policy." R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-1. **Although offering livestreaming does not relieve public bodies of their obligation to permit in-person attendance at public meetings, public bodies are permitted and encouraged to livestream their open meetings when feasible in order to promote additional public access.**

Public Bodies May Permit Members of the Public to Participate Remotely in Open Meetings

Many public bodies have reported that, during the time when the executive orders regarding the OMA were in effect, they found it beneficial to offer members of the public the ability to participate in the open meeting remotely by offering public comment, testimony, or other remarks through virtual means. **Although the OMA is clear that members of the public body may not participate remotely in open meetings unless expressly permitted by an OMA exception, there is nothing in the OMA that prevents public bodies from permitting members of the public the ability to participate in a meeting remotely, including, for example, offering public comment via Zoom.**

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The Rhode Island Supreme Court has been clear that “[i]n determining legislative intent, ‘[i]t is well settled that when the language of a statute is clear and unambiguous, this Court must interpret the statute literally and must give the words of the statute their plain and ordinary meaning.’” *State v. Badessa*, 869 A.2d 61, 65 (R.I. 2005) (quoting *State v. Martini*, 860 A.2d 689, 691 (R.I. 2004)). Moreover, “[w]e glean the intent and purpose of the Legislature ‘from a consideration of the entire statute, keeping in mind [the] nature, object, language and arrangement’ of the provisions to be construed * * *.” *Id.* (quoting *In re Advisory to the Governor (Judicial Nominating Commission)*, 668 A.2d 1246, 1248 (R.I. 1996)). “In a nutshell, ‘[i]n matters of statutory interpretation our ultimate goal is to give effect to the purpose of the act as intended by the legislature.’” *Id.* (quoting *Webster v. Perrotta*, 774 A.2d 68, 75 (R.I. 2001)).

Here, the OMA's provisions restricting meeting by virtual means expressly pertain to “discussions of a public body” and “member[s] of a public body.” See R.I. Gen. Laws §§ 42-46-5(b)(1), (2), (3). Nothing in the language of the OMA expressly prohibits members of the public from participating remotely. Additionally, offering remote participation to members of the public is consistent with the intent of the OMA, which is for government business to be performed in an open and transparent manner that is accessible to the public. See R.I. Gen. Laws §§ 42-46-1, 42-46-3. As such, under the OMA, public bodies may permit members of the public to participate remotely in meetings.

We note that any such remote participation by members of the public must be able to be heard/observed by everyone in attendance at the in-person meeting and carried out in a manner that conforms with any other requirements of the OMA or other applicable laws. Although the OMA does not require public bodies to permit public comment or to permit remote participation by members of the public, public bodies are free to do so and are encouraged to do so when they find that it would advance the purpose of the OMA. We also note that although nothing in the OMA prevents members of the public from providing remote testimony, it is outside this Office's purview under the OMA to address whether doing so would conform with other legal requirements.

We hope that this guidance is helpful as public bodies return to meeting in person. The Open Government Unit is available to answer questions and provide guidance on these and other issues related to the OMA and can be reached at:

Email opengovernment@riag.ri.gov or call 401-274-4400.