



## GUIDELINES FOR DATABASES AS PUBLIC RECORDS

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### PURPOSE

These guidelines assist Ohio public offices in responding to public records requests for electronic databases or their content. They reflect current Ohio law, court interpretations, and best practices from the Ohio Attorney General’s Sunshine Laws Manual and Ohio Revised Code. They incorporate principles from National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) guidance on electronic records management where relevant to state obligations. These guidelines are general and are not intended to address every scenario. Specific questions on obligations and responsibilities in responding to public records requests should be directed to in-house counsel or the Office of the Attorney General.

### OVERVIEW

Ohio’s Public Records Act ([R.C. 149.43](#)) requires public offices make records<sup>1</sup> available and provide copies upon request. “Records” as defined by R.C. 149.43(A)(1) and R.C. [149.011](#)(G).

Database contents qualify as records if they meet this definition and can be produced through standard sorting, filtering or queries with no new programming. Public offices must organize and maintain records (including electronic ones) for prompt public access (R.C. 149.43(B)(2)).

Requests for an entire database or portions thereof present challenges because they often include interdependent components (e.g., software, hardware, program logic, data tables, security controls, links and computations). Raw data exports may lack usability without supporting context. The goal is to fulfil requests lawfully while using reasonable measures to protect system security, avoid disclosing proprietary information, and maintain compliance with licensing agreements.

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## OHIO ELECTRONIC RECORDS COMMITTEE

<http://www.ohiohistory.org/ohiojunction/erc/>

### POLICY GUIDELINES

#### *OFFICIAL REQUEST*

Designate a public records coordinator to handle requests, clarify needs, and ensure compliance. When possible, encourage records requests in writing (including email) for accuracy. If not able to complete a written request, the coordinator should document the request.

Interview requestor to clarify:

- Specific information or records sought
- Date range
- Desired sorting, filtering or format
- Delivery method and format (e.g., electronic file, CSV, PDF)
- Supporting documentation needed (e.g., data dictionaries, table relationships, field definitions)

Inform requester of:

- Exempt or redacted information within their request not subject to the Public Records Act
- Estimated time and cost to fulfill the request
- Delivery arrangements
- A method for further communication if clarification is needed

If a request is ambiguous or overly broad, provide assistance in refining the request, explaining how records are maintained and accessed.

#### *EXEMPT RECORDS*

Databases or records may be exempt from disclosure or require redaction under ([R.C.149.43\(A\)\(1\)](#)) exceptions or other state/federal laws (e.g., Social Security numbers, confidential personal information). Public offices have no obligation to release these records. Redact exempt information while making public information available to the requestor.

The best practice in database design is to contain exempt records in separate fields so that these can be easily identified and filtered out of a public records request.<sup>2</sup>

#### *REQUESTS FOR SPECIFIC RECORDS*

Standard queries or reports can efficiently extract records needed to satisfy the requestor. When records can be produced via existing tools, fulfillment is straightforward. If programming is necessary to create records or views, the record does not exist as a public record, and the public office has no obligation to fulfill the request. The public office may choose to accommodate the request.

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### *REQUEST FOR ENTIRE DATABASES OR FOR PORTIONS OF DATABASES*

Notify requestors that raw exports may lack usability without the database components. Provide data in the maintained format or other readily available format (e.g., CSV, JSON, XML with schema). Make reasonable efforts to accommodate including:

- Supporting metadata (data dictionaries, field definitions, schemas, codebooks)
- Warnings about context limitations
- Minimum software requirements for use

Do not provide propriety software, source code, or items compromising security or licensing. Prefer to use open, non-proprietary formats (e.g. CSV over database dumps).

### RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Anticipate database requests when designing systems, consider Ohio's Public Records Act and retention requirements (see OhioERC's [Database Records and Disposal](#)).
2. Separate exempt records and public records using a data field.
3. Consider logical database design, licensing, security, data relationships, proprietary elements, and retention when designing databases.
4. Ensure a public records request coordinator has access to descriptive information about the office's databases, their contents and schemas to respond efficiently and accurately.
5. Involve records management and IT experts in database procurement and design.

### DEFINITIONS

See R.C. 149.011 and the current Ohio Attorney General Sunshine Laws Manual for full statutory definitions.

- a. Column—A vertical list of fields from multiple records.
- b. Database— organized collection of data that can be accessed, managed, and updated (most commonly relational).
- c. Data Definitions—Descriptions of layout, content, and use of data fields (e.g., file types, delimiters, code tables, field names, join instructions).
- d. Field—a defined area within a record (including name, format and length).
- e. File / Data Set—Multiple records of identical layout treated as a unit.
- f. Media—Physical or digital storage medium (e.g., CD-ROM, cloud storage).

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- g. Proprietary Formats / Software—Privately owned and controlled not openly specified.
- h. Query—A request to retrieve or manipulate data (select or action queries).
- i. Redact— To obscure confidential information.
- j. Relational Database—Data organized in tables that can be flexibly accessed or reassembled.
- k. Reports—Formatted output from database.
- l. Row—One complete set of data fields (one record instance).
- m. Table—Predefined structure of rows and columns defining an entity.
- n. Tuple (Database Record)—A collection of related data.

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<sup>1</sup> The term "record(s)" as used in these guidelines refers to public records as defined in section [149.43](#) of the Ohio Revised Code. It is not used as a database or IT term.

<sup>2</sup> When creating databases with redacted layers, the file produced for distribution should be a combination of the original file and the redacted layer(s), so that they are one image with one layer. Once the new file is saved, it should not be possible to lift the redaction from the confidential fields.