

Chapter 6: Copies

A. Right to Copies

GP § 4-205 grants any person who has the right to inspect a public record the right to be furnished copies, printouts, or photographs for a reasonable fee. If the custodian does not have the facilities to reproduce a record, the applicant should be granted access to make a copy. One exception, however, pertains to written promotional examinations: while certain individuals may review the examination and results after the examination has been graded, they are not entitled to a copy. GP § 4-345(b).

B. Format

With the exception of records stored in electronic format (addressed in Part C below), the PIA has not generally addressed the format in which copies should be provided. (The Legislature has designated the Department of Legislative Services as the “sole determiner” of the form in which records of the General Assembly are released in response to a PIA request. Md. Code Ann., State Gov’t § 2-1260.) Nor have the Maryland courts resolved whether the right to copies includes the right to pick the format in which records are copied. Federal authority decided before 1996, when FOIA was amended to address the question, as well as some out-of-state authority, held that the agency, not the requester, has the right to select the format of disclosure. *See E. S. Dismukes v. Department of the Interior*, 603 F. Supp. 760, 763 (D.D.C. 1984); *Chapin v. Freedom of Info. Comm.*, 577 A.2d 300, 302-03 (Conn. App. Ct. 1990). In the past, this Office adopted a similar position.

Nonetheless, to further the PIA’s general purposes, agencies should voluntarily accede to the requester’s choice of format unless doing so imposes a significant, unrecoverable cost or other burden on the agency. *See 56 Opinions of the Attorney General* 461, 461, 463-64 (1971) (advising the State Department of Assessments and Taxation that it could provide paper printouts of the names and addresses of all active Maryland corporations rather than the requested duplicate of a data processing tape

that contained additional, confidential information); Letter from Assistant Attorney General Emory A. Plitt, Jr. to Sheriff Earnest Zaccanelli, Prince George's County Sheriff's Department (June 27, 1983); Letter from Assistant Attorney General Kathryn M. Rowe to F. Carvel Payne, Director, Department of Legislative Reference (Jan. 9, 1995) (PIA does not require that the requested information be given in any particular form). For example, an agency typically should allow a requester to make copies with a hand-held scanner unless the mechanism by which the scanner operates could harm the document. Similarly, the PIA Compliance Board has encouraged agencies to provide electronic copies instead of paper copies if that medium is acceptable to the requester and would result in a significantly reduced fee. *PIACB Opinions* 20-05, at 3 (Nov. 7, 2019) (opining that copying paper records into an electronic format could result in more staff time but would likely "result in a lower overall fee" in situations "where there are voluminous paper records and the agency is charging a relatively high per page copying fee").

C. Format of Copies of Electronic Records

Under the Electronic Freedom of Information Act Amendments of 1996, a federal agency must provide a record in the format requested if the record is readily reproducible in that format. 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(3)(B). Until 2011, the PIA had no similar express requirement.

In 2011, however, the General Assembly amended the PIA to provide a requester with a right to obtain a copy of an electronic record in a "searchable and analyzable electronic format" in specified circumstances. GP § 4-205(c). The law sets forth certain key conditions:

- (1) The public record must exist in a "searchable and analyzable" format;
- (2) the requester must explicitly request the copy in a searchable and analyzable format; and
- (3) the custodian must be able to produce the copy without compromising material that is exempt from disclosure.

GP § 4-205(c)(1). The statute does not define "searchable and analyzable electronic format." However, the phrase is likely meant to obligate agencies to provide records in

formats that can be searched and manipulated when the requester seeks such capabilities and the agency can readily remove any exempt material. A custodian is not required to release a record in a format that would somehow compromise the security or integrity of the original record or of any proprietary software. GP § 4-205(c)(4)(iv).

When the Legislature created this presumptive right to an electronic copy of an electronic record, it also authorized custodians to remove certain information, known as “metadata,” from the copies that are provided, regardless of whether the metadata is otherwise exempt from disclosure. GP § 4-205(c)(3). “Metadata”—literally, data about data—is information in an electronic record that is generally not visible but is often readily accessible in particular formats. Metadata sometimes contains exempt material; for example, the metadata for a word processing document may include prior drafts, editorial comments, suggestions by reviewers, and other material that may be exempt as part of a pre-decisional deliberative process. *See* Chapter 3.D.1 above. But other metadata may be relatively innocuous material not covered by any exemption. The invisible nature of metadata has made it a matter of concern to custodians.

Section 4-205(a) defines metadata as follows:

(1) “Metadata” means information, generally not visible when an electronic document is printed, describing the history, tracking, or management of the electronic document, including information about data in the electronic document that describes how, when, and by whom the data is collected, created, accessed, or modified and how it is formatted.

(2) “Metadata” does not include:

- (a) a spreadsheet formula;
- (b) a database field;
- (c) an externally or internally linked file; or
- (d) a reference to an external file or hyperlink.

This definition thus broadly defines “metadata” but also limits it. The statute permits a custodian to remove metadata from the copy of an electronic record provided to a requester by means of a software program or by converting the electronic record

to a different searchable and analyzable format without the metadata. GP § 4-205(c)(3). The definition of metadata, with its very specific exceptions, and the authorization to remove metadata from copies appear to be a legislative effort to create a presumptive right for a requester to a usable electronic copy and, at the same time, to provide some comfort to a custodian who wishes to avoid the inadvertent production of exempt materials in invisible metadata.

D. Judicial Records

For information about the copying of judicial records, see Maryland Rule 16-905 and Chapter 10 of this Manual.