

Chapter 1:

Scope and Agency Responsibilities

A. *Origin*

Maryland’s Public Information Act (“PIA”), Title 4 of the General Provisions Article (“GP”), grants the public a broad right of access to records that are in the possession of State and local government agencies. It has been a part of the Annotated Code of Maryland since its enactment as Chapter 698 of the Laws of Maryland 1970 and is similar in purpose to the federal Freedom of Information Act (“FOIA”), 5 U.S.C. § 552, and the public information and open records acts of other states. The text of the PIA is reproduced in Appendix E.

The basic mandate of the PIA is to enable people to have access to government records without unnecessary cost or delay. Custodians of records are to provide such access unless the requested records fall within one of the exceptions in the statute.

1. **Relation to Common Law**

Public information statutes such as the PIA expand the limited common law right of the public in some jurisdictions to inspect certain government records. Originally, the right to inspect public records in Maryland was very limited under common law, even as to court records. *See, e.g., Belt v. Prince George’s County Abstract Co.*, 73 Md. 289 (1890) (while title company was entitled pursuant to its charter to have access to certain court records, it must pay fees required by law). A 1956 Attorney General’s opinion noted that the Supreme Court of Maryland¹ had held that records could not be inspected “out of mere curiosity.” 41 *Opinions of the Attorney General* 113, 113 (1956) (citing *Pressman v. Elgin*, 187 Md. 446 (1947)); *see*

¹ In 2022, Maryland voters ratified a constitutional amendment that changed the names of Maryland’s appellate courts. The Court of Appeals thus became the Supreme Court of Maryland, while the Court of Special Appeals became the Appellate Court of Maryland. Those changes took effect on December 14, 2022. For simplicity, the current names of these courts will be used throughout the Manual, even when the relevant decisions may have been issued under the courts’ earlier names.

also Fayette Co. v. Martin, 130 S.W.2d 838, 843 (Ky. 1939) (“[A]t common law, every person is entitled to the inspection, either personally or by his agent, of public records . . . provided he has an interest therein which is such as would enable him to maintain or defend an action for which the document or record sought can furnish evidence or necessary information.”).

More recently, Maryland’s Supreme Court recognized that the “common law principle of openness” concerning court proceedings is not limited to the trial itself, but extends generally to court proceedings and documents. *Baltimore Sun Co. v. Mayor and City Council of Baltimore*, 359 Md. 653, 661 (2000); *see also Nixon v. Warner Communications, Inc.*, 435 U.S. 589, 597-99 (1978).

The two main liberalizations of most modern public information laws, including Maryland’s, are the abrogation of a personal “legal interest” requirement to obtain access to records and the expansion of the types of records that are available for public inspection. In passing the PIA, the Legislature sought to accord wide-ranging access to public information concerning the operation of government. *See* GP § 4-103; *Ireland v. Shearin*, 417 Md. 401, 408 (2010).

2. Relation to Public Records Statutes of Other Jurisdictions

In many circumstances, FOIA, other states’ public information acts, and cases decided under those laws are persuasive in interpreting the PIA. Maryland’s original act was very similar to those of Wyoming and Colorado and one of those laws was likely used as a model. The United States Department of Justice publishes an extensive guide to FOIA titled *United States Department of Justice Guide to the Freedom of Information Act*, available on-line, <https://www.justice.gov/oip/doj-guide-freedom-information-act-0>. The leading treatise on FOIA also contains a chapter on state laws. 2 James T. O’Reilly, *Federal Information Disclosure* Ch. 27 (3d ed. 2000). For a review of state public information acts, *see* Burt A. Braverman and Wesley R. Heppler, *A Practical Review of State Open Records Laws*, 49 Geo. Wash. L. Rev. 720 (1981). The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press has published a summary of each state’s public records laws titled *Open Government Guide*, available on-line at <http://www.rcfp.org/ogg/index.php>.

B. Scope of the PIA

1. Public Agencies and Officials Covered

The PIA covers virtually all public agencies or officials in the State. It includes all branches of State government—legislative, judicial, and executive. As explained more fully in Chapter 10, however, the Judiciary has adopted its own rules to govern access to judicial records in the custody of judicial agencies, judicial personnel, and special judicial units. More specifically, in recent amendments to its judicial records rules, the Supreme Court of Maryland has clarified that those rules, though they often rely on procedures borrowed from the PIA and have some exemptions from disclosure similar to those in the PIA, are the exclusive method for obtaining access to judicial records. *See* Md. Rule 16-901(a) (“Except as expressly provided or limited by other Rules, the Rules in this Chapter govern public access to judicial records . . . that are in the custody of a judicial agency, judicial personnel, or a special judicial unit”); Rule 16-921 (providing that the judicial access rules generally “constitute the exclusive procedures for requesting inspection of judicial records”); Rule 16-931 (providing that the judicial access rules “constitute the exclusive methods of resolving disputes regarding access to judicial records”).

On the local level, the PIA covers all counties, cities, towns, school districts, and special districts. *See* GP § 4-101(j), (k). Although the statute has also included the term “unincorporated town” since its inception, that term is undefined and it is not clear what, if any, entities it encompasses.

The PIA also applies to any unit or instrumentality of the State or of a political subdivision. GP § 4-101(k); *see, e.g., Moberly v. Herboldsheimer*, 276 Md. 211, 225 (1975) (Memorial Hospital of Cumberland is subject to the PIA as an instrumentality of the City of Cumberland). That language is “intentionally expansive” and must be interpreted broadly to effectuate the broad remedial purposes of the PIA. 106 *Opinions of the Attorney General* 100, 104 (2021). For example, even agencies that receive no public funds but are created by statute may be subject to the PIA. *See, e.g., A.S. Abell Publ’g Co. v. Mezzanote*, 297 Md. 26, 38-39 (1983) (holding that one such agency, the former Maryland Insurance Guaranty Association, was subject to the PIA). The Court in that case considered factors such as whether the entity served a public purpose, was subject to a significant degree of control by the government, and was immune from tort liability. *See also* 106 *Opinions of the Attorney General* at 107-08 (applying similar

factors and concluding that, as a general rule, an advisory committee created by the government to advise that government about the exercise of its public functions is very likely to be a unit or instrumentality of the government under the PIA); 86 *Opinions of the Attorney General* 94, 106 (2001) (concluding that a proposed citizen police review board, established by municipal ordinance, funded and staffed by municipality, and performing public function would be unit or instrumentality of municipal government for purposes of PIA); Letter of Assistant Attorney General Kathryn M. Rowe to Delegate Alfred C. Carr (June 2, 2009) (Citizen Advisory Board on Traffic Issues is an instrumentality of Montgomery County).

Similarly, a nonprofit entity incorporated under the State's general corporation law may be considered a unit or instrumentality of a political subdivision for purposes of the PIA, if there is a sufficient nexus linking the entity to the local government. *See Baltimore Development Corp. v. Carmel Realty Associates*, 395 Md. 299, 332-36 (2006) (nonprofit corporation formed to plan and implement long range development strategies in city was subject to substantial control by city and thus was instrumentality of city subject to PIA); *Andy's Ice Cream, Inc. v. City of Salisbury*, 125 Md. App. 125, cert. denied, 353 Md. 473 (1999) (Salisbury Zoo Commission subject to PIA, given the Mayor and City Council's role in the appointment of Commission members, authority over budget and bylaws, and power to dissolve Commission); Letter of Assistant Attorney General Kathryn M. Rowe to Delegate Kevin Kelly (Aug. 3, 2006) (volunteer fire department is not a unit of government subject to the PIA); Letter of Assistant Attorney General Robert N. McDonald to Senator Joan Carter Conway (Oct. 4, 2007) (status of various organizations under the PIA).

In rare instances, the General Assembly has exempted an instrumentality of the State from coverage under the Public Information Act. *Napata v. University of Md. Medical System Corp.*, 417 Md. 724, 737-40 (2011) (UMMS not subject to the PIA because its enabling law provides that it "is not subject to any provisions of law affecting only governmental or public entities").

The PIA covers a broader range of government entities than FOIA and some other public records laws. The PIA, unlike FOIA, covers all "public" records, and is not limited to records of "agencies." For example, under FOIA, the immediate personal staff of the President is not included in the term "agency." As a result, records held by advisors to the President need not be disclosed under FOIA. *Kissinger v. Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press*, 445 U.S. 136, 155-56 (1980). Under the PIA,

however, the Governor and the Governor's immediate staff are not automatically exempt. *Office of the Governor v. Washington Post Co.*, 360 Md. 520, 536 (2000). As explained by Maryland's Supreme Court, "cases deciding whether governmental documents are 'agency records' within the meaning of [FOIA] are not very pertinent in determining whether a governmental document is disclosable under the [PIA]." *Id.* at 555. The Maryland courts have not definitively addressed the status of records of individual legislators, many of which are covered by constitutional privileges. *See* pp. 3-6 and 3-7, below.

The PIA does not apply to a private entity, such as a homeowners' association. However, other provisions of State law may provide for the retention and availability of records in specific contexts. *See* Md. Code Ann., Real Prop. § 11-116 (books and records of council of unit owners of condominium); § 11A-128 (books and records of time-share property); § 11B-112 (books and records of homeowners association).

In light of the very broad scope of the PIA, the burden falls on any governmental entity or official asserting exclusion from the PIA to show a legislative intent to exempt that entity's or official's records from the PIA's general rule of disclosure.

2. Records Covered

All "public records" are covered by the PIA. The term "public record" is defined in GP § 4-101(k) and includes not only written material but also photographs, photostats, films, microfilms, recordings, tapes, computerized records, maps, drawings, and any copy of a public record. *See* 92 *Opinions of the Attorney General* 26, 29 (2007) ("public record" includes police mug shots); 81 *Opinions of the Attorney General* 140, 144 (1996) ("public record" includes both printed and electronically stored versions of e-mail messages); 71 *Opinions of the Attorney General* 288, 290, 296 (1986) (tape records of calls to 911 Emergency Telephone System centers are public records, but portions of the recordings may fall within certain exceptions to disclosure); 73 *Opinions of the Attorney General* 12, 24 (1988) ("public record" includes correspondence that is made or received by a unit of State government in connection with its conduct of public business). *See also* *Armstrong v. Executive Office of the President*, 1 F.3d 1274, 1287 (D.C. Cir. 1993) (electronic version of e-mail message is a "record" under the Federal Records Act). Given that broad definition, the term "public record" would also include, for instance, text messages and other electronic communications if (as discussed further below) they are made or received in connection with the transaction of public business.

In addition, a private document that an agency has read in connection with its public business and incorporated in its files is thus a “public record.” *Artesian Indus. V. Department of Health and Hum. Servs.*, 646 F. Supp. 1004, 1007 n.6 (D.D.C. 1986).

As addressed in more detail in Chapter 5, the PIA provides extra-judicial dispute resolution options. A requester or custodian who wishes to pursue these options must first attempt to resolve the dispute through the Public Access Ombudsman, typically in the context of confidential mediation. If the dispute is not resolved, then—depending on the nature of the dispute—the requester or custodian may be able to file a complaint with the Public Information Act Compliance Board. The definition of public record thus excludes “a record or any information submitted to the Public Access Ombudsman or the Board under Subtitle 1B.”² GP § 4-101(k)(3)(ii). Although the language of this provision is not entirely clear, it is likely that this definitional change was primarily intended to protect confidential mediation communications and information exchanged in connection with dispute resolution through the Ombudsman.

Public records are any records that are made or received by a covered public agency in connection with the transaction of public business. The scope is broad, and all “records” possessed by an agency generally fall within the definition of “public records.” As the Supreme Court of Maryland has explained, “[t]his definition is in line with the purpose of the [PIA] generally. Because the [PIA] is designed to grant access to documents regarding the affairs of government and the official acts of public officials, it follows that the definition of a public record should be broad enough to cover a wide range of document types.” *Lamson v. Montgomery County*, 460 Md. 349, 362 (2018). As such, the “mere physical location of a record is not necessarily dispositive” as to whether it constitutes a public record. *Id.* at 365. For example, notes kept by an agency supervisor in a private journal might potentially constitute a public record if those notes relate to an employee’s job performance. *Id.* at 365, 370 (remanding for the lower court to determine the nature of the records).

² As originally enacted, GP § 4-101(k)(3)(ii) referred to Subtitle 1A of the PIA, not Subtitle 1B. *See* 2021 Md. Laws, ch. 658. The reference to Subtitle 1A was deleted and replaced with the reference to Subtitle 1B as a result of an annual corrective bill passed in 2022. *See* 2022 Md. Laws, ch. 135. The drafter’s note indicates “[c]orrection suggested by the Attorney General in the Bill Review Letter for H.B. 183 (Ch. 658) of 2021 (footnote 1), dated May 6, 2021.” *See* Letter of Attorney General Brian E. Frosh, to Governor Lawrence J. Hogan, Jr. (May 6, 2021) (bill review letter).

The same logic applies, for instance, to email communications from private email accounts and text messages stored on private devices; if they are made or received by a custodian in connection with the transaction of public business, they are public records. *See, e.g., Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Pol’y*, 827 F.3d 145, 149-50 (D.C. Cir. 2016) (agency director’s work-related correspondence in private email account was within scope of FOIA request); *City of San Jose v. Superior Court*, 389 P.3d 848, 858 (Cal. 2017) (email and text messages that conducted public business but were sent from mayor and council members’ private devices were subject to California’s Public Records Act). Similarly, a database set up by a private vendor for use by a public agency for risk management purposes is a “public record.” *Prince George’s County v. Washington Post Co.*, 149 Md. App. 289, 335 (2003) (remanded to allow government or vendor to demonstrate whether database fields qualify as vendor’s proprietary intellectual property).

Materials supplied to a legislative committee are public records normally available for inspection. Letter of Assistant Attorney General Kathryn M. Rowe to Delegate John Adams Hurson (May 14, 2004). Photographs posted on the Governor’s website are public records. Letter of Assistant Attorney General Kathryn M. Rowe to Senator Roy P. Dyson (July 14, 2005). Individual criminal trial transcripts in the hands of the Public Defender are public records available for inspection and copying, 68 *Opinions of the Attorney General* 330, 331-32 (1983), as are prosecutorial files of a State’s Attorney unless subject to an exemption under the PIA. 81 *Opinions of the Attorney General* 154, 156-57 (1996). In addition, records gathered by a unit of State government, given to the federal government to be used at a federal trial, and not used exclusively at a State trial, are considered “public records” subject to disclosure, if the State agency has either the original documents or copies of them. *Epps v. Simms*, 89 Md. App. 371, 380-81 (1991).

The term “public record” explicitly encompasses the salaries paid to public employees, including bonuses and performance awards. GP § 4-101(k)(2); *Moberly v. Herboldsheimer*, 276 Md. 211, 225-28 (1975); Opinion of the Attorney General No. 81-034, at 1-2 (Nov. 23, 1981) (unpublished); 83 *Opinions of the Attorney General* 192, 192-93 (1998). It also includes an employment contract of a public employee because such a contract evidences how a publicly-funded salary is earned. *University Sys. of Md. v. Baltimore Sun Co.*, 381 Md. 79, 89-90, 102-03 (2004).

Although most records located at a public agency fall within the definition of “public records,” some records might fall outside the definition. For example, the Supreme Court held that Henry Kissinger’s notes of telephone conversations, prepared while he was in the Office of the President, were not State Department records under FOIA, even though Kissinger had brought them with him to the State Department. *Kissinger v. Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press*, 445 U.S. 136, 155-57 (1980). The Court noted that “[i]f mere physical location of papers and materials could confer status as an ‘agency record’ Kissinger’s personal books, speeches, and all other memorabilia stored in his office would have been agency records subject to disclosure under the FOIA.” *Id.* at 157.

Certain records in possession of the State might not qualify as “public records.” For example, records of telephone calls made from Government House, the official residence of the Governor in Annapolis, are not public records under the PIA. *Office of the Governor v. Washington Post Co.*, 360 Md. 520, 536 (2000). Similarly, personal matters and family engagements may properly be redacted prior to release of the Governor’s scheduling records under the PIA. *Id.* at 543. In *Office of the Governor*, the Supreme Court of Maryland declined to address whether telephone message slips and an official’s individual appointment calendar that is not distributed to other staff are public records. *Id.* at 555; *cf. Bureau of Nat’l Affairs v. Dep’t of Justice*, 742 F.2d 1484, 1496 (D.C. Cir. 1984) (such records not “agency records” under FOIA); *see also Consumer Fed’n of America v. United States Dep’t of Agric.*, 455 F.3d 283, 288-93 (D.C. Cir. 2006) (electronic appointment calendars of certain officials were “agency records” under FOIA); *Bloomberg, L.P. v. United States Sec. and Exch. Comm’n*, 357 F. Supp. 2d 156, 165-66 (D.D.C. 2004) (telephone message slips and computerized calendar created for personal use of SEC Chairman not “agency records”).

A private contractor’s own records are not “public records” if the agency does not possess them, even if the agency has a contractual right to obtain them. *Forsham v. Harris*, 445 U.S. 169, 170 (1980); *see also 80 Opinions of the Attorney General* 257, 259 (1995) (definition of “public record” does not extend to records that are required to be maintained by an applicant for a residential child care facility license, if they never come into the possession of a State agency). On the other hand, an agency’s own records—those created or received in connection with public business—remain “public records” even if the agency outsources the task of maintaining them to a private contractor.

C. *Role of the Custodian and Official Custodian*

Central to the structure of the PIA are the roles played by the “custodian” and “official custodian” of the agency records. They are the public officials who must take actions under the statute. Certain other agency personnel may have key roles in responding to PIA requests. For example, the agency’s Public Information Officer may respond to inquiries from the press or the agency may designate a PIA coordinator to coordinate responses to certain types of requests. *See* Appendix H. These officials may or may not also perform the statutory functions of “custodian” or “official custodian.”

A custodian is any “authorized” person who has physical custody and control of the agency’s public records. GP § 4-101(d). The “custodian” is the person who has the responsibility to allow inspection of a record and to determine, in the first instance, whether inspection can or should be denied. GP § 4-201. The custodian is also responsible for preparing written denials when inspection is not allowed. GP § 4-203(c). A custodian generally must respond to a request for public records that are in the agency’s custody, even if another agency might also have custody of the same records. *See PIACB Decisions 23-14*, at 6 (Apr. 17, 2023) (explaining that it was improper for an agency with custody of the records in question to refer the requester to another agency because the first agency was “a custodian of the records—although granted, perhaps not the *only* custodian”). An agency official or employee who is not entitled by law to possess agency records may still become a “de facto” custodian and, therefore, become “authorized” within the meaning of GP § 4-101(d) when he or she in fact has assumed custody of public records. 65 *Opinions of the Attorney General* 365, 366, 369 (1980).

The “official custodian” is the officer or employee of the agency who has the overall legal responsibility for the care and keeping of public records. GP § 4-101(f); *see also Glass v. Anne Arundel County*, 453 Md. 201, 211 (2017) (explaining the roles of the “official custodian”). Often, the “official custodian” will be the head of the agency. The official custodian is to consider designating specific types of public records of the unit that can be made available immediately on request and maintaining a list of such records. GP § 4-201(c). The official custodian is authorized to decide whether to seek court action to protect records from disclosure. GP § 4-358. The official custodian is also the person who must establish “reasonable fee” schedules under GP § 4-206. The official custodian can also be the “custodian” of the records, depending upon who has physical custody and control of the records. GP § 4-101(d), (f).

Under a law passed in 2021, and which became effective on July 1, 2022, official custodians must “adopt a policy of proactive disclosure of public records that are available for inspection.” The policy may “vary as appropriate to the type of public record and to reflect . . . staff and budgetary resources” and may also—but is not required to—“include publication of public records on [a] website . . . or publication of prior responses to requests for inspection.” GP § 4-104. To be clear, this provision does not affirmatively require an agency to proactively disclose any particular records; it merely requires the official custodian to adopt a policy governing which records, if any, should be proactively disclosed and, if so, how. The legislative history of this particular provision suggests that the General Assembly did not intend it to be an onerous one for agencies. Rather, it was “assumed that agencies can meet this requirement with existing resources, as the bill specifies that the proactive disclosure policy may reflect the staff and budgetary resources of an agency.” Revised Fiscal & Policy Note, H.B. 183, 2021 Leg., Reg. Sess. at 8.

Although a PIA request directed to the “official custodian” of records will suffice under the Act, applicants (usually referred to more colloquially as requesters) may also submit requests to the PIA representative identified on the agency’s website. *See* GP § 4-503 (requiring each governmental unit to post on its website the contact information of its PIA representative); *see also* Appendix J. There is also no requirement that the request be made to the *physical* custodian of the records. *See Ireland v. Shearin*, 417 Md. 401, 410 (2010) (official custodian had no basis for requiring requester to resubmit PIA request to physical custodian of records sought); *ACLU v. Leopold*, 223 Md. App. 97, 125 (2015) (explaining that a “higher-level official” may not simply “kick the PIA responsibility down the chain of command” to a physical custodian). Similarly, an agency custodian can sometimes retain custody of agency records even where those records are no longer in the physical custody of the agency. *Glass*, 453 Md. at 234 (agency records manager was still custodian of archived emails stored by separate information technology office). At the same time, the official custodian is not obligated to bring records from disparate custodians to one location for inspection, especially if it would interfere with official business. *Ireland*, 417 Md. at 411.

Section 4-201(b) provides that, “[t]o protect public records and to prevent unnecessary interference with official business, each official custodian shall adopt

reasonable rules and regulations that . . . govern timely production and inspection of a public record.” A set of model regulations for State agencies is included in Appendix F.