

ACCESSING PERSONAL INFORMATION IN THE

Northwest Territories

RESOURCES

Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act

http://www.justice.gov.nt.ca/Legislation/..%5CPDF%5CACTS%5CAccess_to_Information.pdf

Northwest Territories Access and Privacy Guide

http://www.justice.gov.nt.ca/ATIPP/atipp_request.htm

Northwest Territories Access and Privacy Directories

http://www.justice.gov.nt.ca/pdf/ATIPP/Directory_2004.pdf

Disclaimer:

We have attempted to ensure that the information provided in this Manual is reasonably accurate and complete as of December 2005. However, we cannot guarantee complete accuracy or comprehensiveness; you should consult the relevant legislation and authorities if you seek fully accurate, complete, and up-to-date information.

Moreover, this Manual provides information of a general nature and does not constitute legal advice. Should you need legal advice, seek a lawyer.

Please report any errors or omissions in this Manual to cippic@uottawa.ca

WHO CAN REQUEST PERSONAL INFORMATION?

Anyone can request access to his or her own personal information. For information on requesting personal information about someone else, see *Accessing Government Information in the Northwest Territories*.

WHAT INFORMATION CAN I ACCESS?

You have the right to access any record containing your own personal information that is under the control of a public body, subject to certain exceptions described below. You also have the right to correct your personal information.

Public bodies include departments and offices of the governments of the Northwest Territories and its agencies, commissions, etc. Public bodies do not include the Office of the Legislative Assembly or members of the Executive Council.

WHAT IF THERE'S A MISTAKE IN MY PERSONAL INFORMATION?

You have the right to correct mistakes of fact, but not opinion, found in your personal information. To make such a correction, simply contact the relevant public body and request that a correction be made.

WHAT ARE THE EXCEPTIONS TO MY RIGHT OF ACCESS?

There are a number of circumstances in which you may be denied access to your own personal information, including those listed below. Note, however, that if one of these exceptions applies but it is possible to sever the excepted material from a record, you are entitled to access the rest of the information.

Confidential evaluations

You may be denied access to information about you if it has been provided in confidence or for the purpose of determining your suitability for government employment, including the award of contracts.

Privileged information

Your request for information may be denied if the information is protected by legal privilege, such as solicitor-client privilege.

Court records

You cannot access personal information found in court records. In addition, the personal notes of judges and those acting in a judicial role are not accessible. However, court administration records are accessible and court records relating to a criminal prosecution are accessible after the proceedings are over.

Information available to the public

You may be denied access to information that is available to the public. This includes information for which you must pay a fee and information that will be made available to the public within six months of the date when the request is received. For example, information that has been placed in the territorial archives is exempt from access to information requests because it is already accessible to the public.

If your request is refused because the information will be available within six months, the public body must inform you when it becomes available. If it is still not available after six months, the public body may not deny you access on the grounds that the information is available to the public.

Third party privacy

Your access request will be denied if disclosure of the requested information would invade a third party's privacy. Furthermore, a public body may refuse to confirm or deny the existence of information if doing so could invade a third party's privacy.

Disclosure of the following will be considered an invasion of a third party's privacy:

- a third party's personal health information;
- a third party's personal information that is part of a law enforcement record (except to the extent that disclosure is necessary to pursue prosecution);
- financial information related to a third party's taxation, income, financial situation or receipt of social assistance;
- a third party's employment or educational history;
- a third party's personal recommendations, character references or personnel evaluations if they could reveal the identity of the recommender or referee;
- a third party's name (in some circumstances); and
- information revealing the race, ethnic origin, religious beliefs, gender, age, ancestry or place of origin of a third party.

In addition to the list above, other information may violate a third party's privacy, and in determining whether this is the case a public body will consider all relevant circumstances including:

- whether disclosure is desirable in order to subject the activities of a public body to public scrutiny;

- whether disclosure is likely to promote public health and safety or the protection of the environment;
- whether disclosure will help determine an applicant's rights;
- whether disclosure will help to validate claims or grievances of aboriginal people;
- whether disclosure could expose a third party to harm;
- whether the information has been provided in confidence;
- whether the information is accurate and reliable; and
- whether disclosure could damage a third party's reputation.

There are, however, circumstances when, regardless of the criteria above, disclosure will be permitted. These include:

- when the relevant third party consents in writing to disclosure;
- when there are compelling circumstances affecting the applicant's health or safety;
- when another law expressly allows or requires disclosure;
- when disclosure is for research purposes;
- when the information relates to a public body employee's salary, classification, benefits, or expenses;
- when the information relates to a goods or services contract with a public body;
- when the information relates to a financial discretionary benefit to a third party; and
- when the information relates to travel expenses.

When a third party's personal information is at risk of being disclosed, the third party will be notified and given an opportunity to respond. Access to the information will be delayed until the head of the public body makes a decision regarding the third party disclosure.

Another Act prevails

If the information you want is governed by an Act that specifies that the *Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act* does not apply, you may be denied access to it.

Individual or public safety

Your access request may be denied if disclosure could threaten individual or public safety.

Law enforcement and legal proceedings

Your access request may be denied if disclosure could be harmful to law enforcement. This includes information that would: jeopardize national security; reveal investigative techniques or details of an investigation; reveal confidential information; endanger anyone; deny someone a fair trial or otherwise harm legal proceedings; expose its source to civil liability; or facilitate the escape of an inmate.

In addition, if the disclosure of information is prohibited by law, your request for access will be denied. Furthermore, the public body may refuse to confirm or deny the existence of such information.

However, you are entitled to access information that:

- is part of a report of a routine inspection conducted by an agency authorized to enforce laws;
- consists of statistics related to the success rate of law enforcement; or
- contains reasons for deciding not to prosecute someone.

Frivolous or vexatious request

Your request may be denied if it is frivolous or vexatious, if it is not made in good faith, or if it concerns a trivial matter.

Exceptions related to government information

For exceptions relevant to government information, see *Accessing Government Information in the Northwest Territories*.

HOW DO I MAKE A REQUEST?

1. Contact the public body

Contact a representative of the public body and ask if the body is willing to provide access to the information you want. Such informal methods can be effective. Note, however, that informal access-to-information requests do not trigger time limits for responding to you, nor do they trigger certain rights, such as the right to complain to the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner (OIPC).

Contact information for the Northwest Territories' ATIPP coordinators can be found at: <http://www.justice.gov.nt.ca/pdf/ATIPP/Public%20Bodies%20and%20ATIPP%20Coordinators.pdf>

2. Identify the appropriate public bodies

a) *Determine whether the body is subject to access to information law*

The Act applies to departments, branches or offices of the governments of the Northwest Territories, or its agencies, boards, commissions, corporations, offices or other bodies designated in the regulations. It does not apply to the Office of the Legislative Assembly or the office of a member of the Legislative Assembly or a member of the Executive Council.

b) Determine whether the information is in the custody or control of the public body

Access to information laws only apply to records in the custody or control of a public body. If a record is destroyed, it is no longer in the custody or control of a public body, but it is an offence to wilfully destroy records in order to evade an access request.

3. Frame your request carefully

a) Request "records"

Request access to "records", not to "information", because "record" has a specific and broad definition that includes: "information in any form and includes information that is written, photographed, recorded or stored in any manner, but does not include a computer program or other mechanism that produces records."

b) Request indexes, catalogues, and other records-management aids

If you are seeking information that spans a broad area or could involve many records, you should first consider requesting indexes, file lists, file plans, and other records-management aids. These records of records can help you to narrow your request and to choose only the most relevant materials. This process can also shed light on other issues you may not have been aware of. A drawback, however, is that this is a two-step process: once you decide which records you would like, you must file another request to which the public body will have 30 days to respond.

c) Be specific

The more specific your request, the faster and less costly the production of records is likely to be. For example, a public body is less likely request a time extension if the request is specific than if it is general.

4. If you need help

If you need help, ask the relevant public body. It is required to help you with your request.

DO I HAVE TO USE A FORM?

You do not have to use a form, but your request must be in writing. Consider using the form since it can help you structure your request. The form for the Northwest Territories is available at: http://www.justice.gov.nt.ca/pdf/ATIPP/access_request.pdf

Your request may be made orally if you have limited ability to read and write in English or French, or if you are physically disabled in a way that limits your ability to make a written request.

WHAT WILL IT COST?

There is no fee to apply for your own personal information. You may be charged for the cost of copying if that cost exceeds \$25. In that event, the entire amount of the cost of the copying is due, not just the amount exceeding \$25.

The government will send you an estimate of the fees. You have 20 days to either accept the estimate or modify your request so as to reduce the fees. If you accept the fee estimate, you must pay half of the fees up front, and the other half when receiving your information.

You may write to the head of the public body to be excused from paying all or part of the fee. The fee may be waived if you cannot afford it, or there are other circumstances that would make it unfair to charge you the fee.

HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?

The public body must make every reasonable effort to respond to your request within 30 days of receiving it. If your request is transferred to another public body, the new body must respond to you within 30 days of receiving your request.

A transfer to another body is only allowed when:

- the record is in the custody or under the control of the public body to which your request is being transferred; or
- the record originated with, or was first obtained by, the public body to which your request is being transferred.

A public body can extend the time limit for responses by up to 30 days or, with the Commissioner's permission, for a longer period. The time limit for responses may only be extended when:

- your request does not provide enough detail for the public body to identify the requested record;
- you have requested a large number of records and responding within 30 days would unreasonably interfere with the operations of the public body;
- a large number of records must be searched and responding within 30 days would unreasonably interfere with the operations of the public body;
- the public body needs time to consult with a third party or another public body before deciding whether to grant access to a record; or
- a third party requests a review of a decision to grant access.

Failure to respond to a request within 30 days is considered a denial of access. You can complain to the OIPC about both denial of access and failure to respond on time.

WHAT ARE MY OPTIONS REGARDING FORMAT?

Copies or originals

You may have copies sent to you or you may view the originals. A public body may impose one format (copy or original) depending on considerations of length, condition, and form.

Language

A public body will give access in one of the of the Northwest Territories' official languages if the record already exists in that language or if it considers that there is a public interest in doing so. If there is such a public interest, no translation fee will be charged.

Alternative formats

A public body is not required to provide records in alternative formats for the hearing or seeing impaired. It will nevertheless often try to accommodate such requests.

WHAT CAN I DO IF MY REQUEST FOR ACCESS IS DENIED?

If you are not satisfied with a public body's response to your access request, you may request a review of its decision to the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner (OIPC). With regard to the collection, use and disclosure of personal information, unlike government information, there is no right to appeal to the Supreme Court.

For more information, see *Appealing Access to Information Decisions in the Northwest Territories*.