Finding records on your beat

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Public records work generally falls into three phases: Identifying records that are public, crafting a strategic request and bird-dogging officials to actually answer it. The hardest part is often figuring out what's "out there". Government is great at amassing information, but terrible at figuring out or using what it has, so knowing the name of a record and what it contains will provide the detail officials need to get started.

FINDING DOCUMENTS AND DATABASES

- **Blank forms**. Although much of government's work is computerized, the basic structure of collecting information, both internally and from the public, still comes from forms. Just like your income taxes, there might even be computerized ways of submitting them, but the basic form still exists.

- **State auditor, GAO and inspector general reports:** One section of most reports is a list of the records investigators used in their analysis. These are often technical descriptions of the databases held by agencies. Look there whenever you start work on an agency, even if you don't care about the findings of a specific audit.

- **Approved Information Collections** : The federal government, and some state and local governments, require that any information collected by any agency be cleared in advance by the budget office. The reason is to avoid duplication across agencies and to reduce paperwork burdens.

- Look at **other FOIAs** for similar records. Some of these will from be activists who know this agency better than you do. You can touch base with them and get older, unofficial copies to work on before you get your own FOIA answered. Review the **FOIA section** of a federal agency's website, looking in particular for "frequently requested records" and "reading room" information.

- **Printouts** and **statistical reports** produced for press releases and annual reports. If they could compile a statistical report, there are detailed records underneath it.

- **Take a tour** and get a roadmap of the agency. Ask questions about what is in a filing cabinet or what someone is doing behind a computer. Let them tell you how they do their work, what makes it difficult for them, who's responsible for what. Don't forget the obvious: an in-depth browse through of the agency's web site. Click on every link that you can.

- Read the **regulations and the law** surrounding your subject. They sometimes map out information that must be reported to legislators or collected

- **Follow the paper trail** from local, to state, to federal records, or from units to agencies to the chief executive. At every stage, information is lost – the last stop only gives you the common denominator. You might also find that other agencies hold something similar.

TYPICAL RECORDS TO GET YOU STARTED

- **Calendars** for high-level officials. In the federal government, this includes most anyone listed in the Plum Book at the deputy undersecretary level or above.

- **Correspondence logs**, including letter, e-mails and logs of telephone contacts. Correspondence with Congress is usually monitored quite closely and can be especially useful.

- **Travel records** of any public employee.

- **Phone books** and organizational charts. Collect these periodically and make sure to get one last one before any change in administration. If they're online, try to save a copy every six months or so. It's a great source for former workers.

- **Audits**, including any annual financial audits and performance audits on programs or investigations. Locally, these are usually done by the auditor general. Federally, they are done by GAO and inspectors general.

- Lists of public records requests. (In the federal government, this is called the **FOIA log**.) It will show you who has asked for what records from the agency, whether the request was fulfilled and will outline the general information contained in the documents. The FOIA log tells you a lot about how it keeps its records and what special interest groups or lawyers might already have documents you want.