

Detroit Free Press

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Dissecting an Organization

Get an overview of the group

- Get the basics: Key players, meetings, functions, oversight.
- Find out what the group is supposed to do (authorizing legislation; charity's application for tax-exempt status, anything that spells out what the group says its purpose is). How does that compare to what it actually does?

Government records

Identify where local, state and federal government have contact with the company or group, its employees, customers and competitors.

- Is the company inspected? Look for inspection reports, violation reports, records of fines, etc.
- Is the company regulated? State corporate filings and licenses, SEC records, state financial filings, consumer complaint records.
- Are the workers in the group regulated/licensed?
- Is the group a charity? IRS Form 990s, state charitable registration records/financial disclosures.
- Has the company/group/key leaders been sued?
- Is the group a government agency? Get its budget, meeting packets. Has the group been audited? Check for GAO audits, Auditor General Reports, city auditor reports.

Look for what the group says about itself

- Web sites
- Annual Reports
- PR Newswire (old news releases)
- Employee newsletters
- Meeting minutes

Identify key people

- Current employees/former employees (group/agency web site; old annual reports; workers comp records; lawsuits; news stories)
- Board members (current and past)
- Union officials
- Customers
- Competitors
- Trade organizations
- Advocacy groups

Useful Public Records

COURT DOCUMENTS. Most important: county circuit court records include criminal case files and files of civil lawsuits. These files are useful for backgrounding companies and individuals. A quick check of court records can reveal many things: Has a person been charged with/convicted of crimes in the past? Is a company or individual being sued by creditors? Are consumers suing a company for allegedly fraudulent business practices? Divorce records can be a gold mine, with some case files revealing all sorts of usually private financial information. Depositions are particularly useful. Occasionally they'll be a part of a court file. Often you can get access to them through attorneys. Don't forget search warrant returns. Other courts also have useful records: district courts, federal court, bankruptcy court.

PROPERTY RECORDS. Property records and assessor records can give clues to the wealth, assets and debts of individuals. They also will let you know if the person has tax problems: both the IRS and the Michigan Department of Revenue will attach tax liens to the property of individuals who owe them money.

POLICE REPORTS. Police reports about crimes, as well as booking mug shots of people who are arrested, can be useful in backgrounding a person and tracking their history. Also useful are search warrants, which are usually filed by the police at their local district court.

INSPECTION REPORTS. These can involve a variety of records – all available to the public: fire safety inspection reports, food safety inspection reports (for restaurants, school cafeterias, supermarkets, meat processors), building safety inspections, elevator/escalator inspections, nursing home inspections, etc.

LICENSING RECORDS. Many stories involve people or services that require state or federal licenses. Some examples: doctors, nurses, beauticians, limo companies, daycare centers, foster homes, insurance agents, etc. If they have licenses, an agency keeps a licensing file on the person or business that may have complaints/disciplinary action reports and other interesting information. For example: a doctor's licensing file may include information about where he went to medical school, did his residency, where he has previously lived and whether he's licensed to practice in other states.

CORPORATE RECORDS. Both for-profit and not-for-profit companies must file incorporation papers and annual reports in the states where they do business. These records can give you the names and addresses of the people who started the company and the names and addresses of current officers – important information if you're looking for people to interview. Large, publicly traded corporations have to file extensive financial records with the Securities and Exchange Commission.

NON-PROFIT TAX RETURNS. All charities (except church charities) must file a tax return called an IRS Form 990 – which is available for public review. This is an extremely useful document that gives a breakdown of the group's finances, where the money comes from and how it was spent; discloses the salaries of the CEO and highest paid employees and outside contractors. Keep in mind that tax-exempt organizations are not just traditional charities, like the United Way or the local soup kitchen. They also include: universities, hospitals, museums, some nursing homes, and professional associations.

DRIVERS LICENSES and AUTO/BOAT REGISTRATIONS: The Michigan Secretary of State keeps these records. Drivers' records include a person's address, date of birth, height, weight, eye color and driving violation history. Auto and boat registration records give a clue about a person's wealth. Privacy legislation has restricted access to both types of records in recent years.

CAMPAIGN FINANCE RECORDS: Candidates for local, state and national office must file reports disclosing who contributed to their campaigns. This information – available for each candidate – typically includes the name of the contributor, their company or occupation, the amount given and the date. In Michigan, state campaign finance records are available on the Internet from the Michigan Secretary of State's Office. Most records for local campaigns are still kept on paper.