



State of New Jersey
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY AFFAIRS
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PHILIP D. MURPHY
Governor

LT. GOVERNOR SHEILA Y. OLIVER
Commissioner

FINAL DECISION

February 28, 2023 Government Records Council Meeting

Rotimi Owoh, Esq. (o/b/o Delores Simmons,
Obafemi Simmons, & Grace Woko)
Complainant

Complaint No. 2021-151

v.

Oaklyn Police Department (Camden)
Custodian of Record

At the February 28, 2023 public meeting, the Government Records Council (“Council”) considered the February 21, 2023 Findings and Recommendations of the Executive Director and all related documentation submitted by the parties. The Council voted unanimously to adopt the entirety of said findings and recommendations. The Council, therefore, finds that:

1. The Complainant’s April 28, 2021 OPRA request seeking complaints and summonses was not overly broad. Rather, the request sought specifically identifiable records and would not cause the Custodian to conduct research to process. MAG Entm’t, LLC v. Div. of Alcoholic Beverage Control, 375 N.J. Super. 534, 549 (App. Div. 2005); Bent v. Stafford Police Dep’t, 381 N.J. Super. 30, 37 (App. Div. 2005); N.J. Builders Ass’n v. N.J. Council on Affordable Hous., 390 N.J. Super. 166, 180 (App. Div. 2007); Schuler v. Borough of Bloomsbury, GRC Complaint No. 2007-151 (February 2009); Donato v. Twp. of Union, GRC Complaint No. 2005-182 (January 2007). Thus, the Custodian unlawfully denied access to the Complainant’s OPRA request. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-6. However, the Council declines to order disclosure since the evidence of record demonstrates that responsive records were provided to the Complainant on March 23, 2022 as part of the Statement of Information.
2. The Complainant has achieved “the desired result because the complaint brought about a change (voluntary or otherwise) in the custodian’s conduct.” Teeters v. DYFS, 387 N.J. Super. 423, 432 (App. Div. 2006). Additionally, a factual causal nexus exists between the Complainant’s filing of a Denial of Access Complaint and the relief ultimately achieved. Mason v. City of Hoboken and City Clerk of the City of Hoboken, 196 N.J. 51, 76 (2008). Specifically, the Custodian did not provide the Complainant with the requested records until after the instant complaint was filed. Therefore, the Complainant is a prevailing party entitled to an award of a reasonable attorney’s fee. See N.J.S.A. 47:1A-6, Teeters, 387 N.J. Super. at 432, and Mason, 196 N.J. at 76. **Based on this determination, the parties shall confer in an effort to decide the amount of reasonable attorney’s fees to be paid to Complainant within twenty (20) business days. If the parties cannot agree on the amount of attorney’s fees, Complainant’s Counsel shall submit a fee application to the Council in accordance with N.J.A.C. 5:105-2.13(c).**

This is the final administrative determination in this matter. Any further review should be pursued in the Appellate Division of the Superior Court of New Jersey within forty-five (45) days. Information about the appeals process can be obtained from the Appellate Division Clerk's Office, Hughes Justice Complex, 25 W. Market St., PO Box 006, Trenton, NJ 08625-0006. Proper service of submissions pursuant to any appeal is to be made to the Council in care of the Executive Director at the State of New Jersey Government Records Council, 101 South Broad Street, PO Box 819, Trenton, NJ 08625-0819.

Final Decision Rendered by the
Government Records Council
On The 28th Day of February 2023

Robin Berg Tabakin, Esq., Chair
Government Records Council

I attest the foregoing is a true and accurate record of the Government Records Council.

Steven Ritardi, Esq., Secretary
Government Records Council

Decision Distribution Date: March 6, 2023

**STATE OF NEW JERSEY
GOVERNMENT RECORDS COUNCIL**

**Findings and Recommendations of the Executive Director
February 28, 2023 Council Meeting**

**Rotimi Owoh, Esq. (on Behalf of Delores Simmons,
Obafemi Simmons, & Grace Woko)¹
Complainant**

GRC Complaint No. 2021-151

v.

**Oaklyn Police Department (Camden)²
Custodial Agency**

Records Relevant to Complaint: Electronic copies via e-mail of:³

1. Complaints and summonses prepared by your police department relating to individuals who were charged with drug possession and or drug paraphernalia by your police department from January 2020 to present.
2. Driving While Intoxicated/Driving under the Influence (“DWI/DUI”) complaints and summonses prepared and or issued by your police department from January 2020 to present.
3. Complaints and summonses prepared by your police department relating to individuals who were charged with jaywalking by your police department from January 2016 to present.

Custodian of Record: Bonnie Taft

Request Received by Custodian: April 28, 2021

Response Made by Custodian: May 11, 2021

GRC Complaint Received: July 7, 2021

Background⁴

Request and Response:

On April 28, 2021, the Complainant submitted an Open Public Records Act (“OPRA”) request to the Custodian seeking the above-mentioned records. On May 11, 2021, Sgt. Jayne Jones with the Oaklyn Police Department responded on behalf of the Custodian in writing, stating that

¹ The Complainant represents the Delores Simmons, Obafemi Simmons, and Grace Woko.

² Represented by Timothy Higgins, Esq. (Haddonfield, NJ).

³ The Complainant sought additional records that are not at issue in this complaint.

⁴ The parties may have submitted additional correspondence or made additional statements/assertions in the submissions identified herein. However, the Council includes in the Findings and Recommendations of the Executive Director the submissions necessary and relevant for the adjudication of this complaint.

Rotimi Owoh, Esq. (on Behalf of Delores Simmons, Obafemi Simmons, and Grace Woko) v. Oaklyn Police Department (Camden), 2021-151 – Findings and Recommendations of the Executive Director

the request items were overly broad and needed clarification. Sgt. Jones also stated to refer to the Borough of Oaklyn Municipal Court (“Municipal Court”).

That same day, the Complainant responded to Sgt. Jones requesting clarification on whether the request was sent to other offices or was denied. On May 13, 2021, Sgt. Jones responded to the Complainant, stating that mention of “refer” was to assist the Custodian in identifying the entity possessing the responsive records. Sgt. Jones also stated that the request was forwarded to the Municipal Court that day. Sgt. Jones further stated that the request still required clarification.

Denial of Access Complaint:

On July 7, 2021, the Complainant filed a Denial of Access Complaint with the Government Records Council (“GRC”). The Complainant asserted that the Custodian improperly denied access to the request items in the wake of the New Jersey Supreme Court’s decision in Simmons v. Mercado, 247 N.J. 24 (2021), rev’g 464 N.J. Super. 77 (App. Div. 2020). The Complainant requested the GRC compel the Borough of Oaklyn (“Borough”) to fully comply with the OPRA request and to award counsel fees.

Statement of Information:⁵

On March 23, 2022, the Custodian filed a Statement of Information (“SOI”). The Custodian certified that she received the Complainant’s OPRA request on April 28, 2021.⁶ The Custodian certified that Sgt. Jones responded on her behalf to the Complainant on May 11, 2021.

The Custodian did not elaborate or address Sgt. Jones’s initial response to the Complainant but included copies of the responsive records as part of the SOI.

Analysis

Validity of Request

The New Jersey Appellate Division has held that:

While OPRA provides an alternative means of access to government documents not otherwise exempted from its reach, it is not intended as a research tool litigants may use to force government officials to identify and siphon useful information. Rather, OPRA simply operates to make identifiable government records “readily accessible for inspection, copying, or examination.” N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1.

⁵ On July 30, 2021, this complaint was referred to mediation. On January 28, 2022, this complaint was referred back to the GRC for adjudication.

⁶ In the SOI, the Custodian provided dates and statements about a separate OPRA request not at issue here. The GRC subsequently sought additional information to cure the timeline conflict: the Custodian responded certifying to relevant dates and statements for the subject OPRA request and same were incorporated into the SOI for clarity. Rotimi Owoh, Esq. (on Behalf of Delores Simmons, Obafemi Simmons, and Grace Woko) v. Oaklyn Police Department (Camden), 2021-151 – Findings and Recommendations of the Executive Director

[MAG Entm't, LLC v. Div. of Alcoholic Beverage Control, 375 N.J. Super. 534, 546 (App. Div. 2005) (emphasis added).]

The Court reasoned that:

Most significantly, the request failed to identify with any specificity or particularity the governmental records sought. *MAG provided neither names nor any identifiers other than a broad generic description of a brand or type of case prosecuted by the agency in the past.* Such an open-ended demand required the Division's records custodian to manually search through all of the agency's files, analyze, compile and collate the information contained therein, and identify for MAG the cases relative to its selective enforcement defense in the OAL litigation. Further, once the cases were identified, the records custodian would then be required to evaluate, sort out, and determine the documents to be produced and those otherwise exempted.

[Id. at 549 (emphasis added).]

The Court further held that “[u]nder OPRA, agencies are required to disclose only ‘identifiable’ government records not otherwise exempt . . . In short, OPRA does not countenance open-ended searches of an agency's files.” Id. (emphasis added). Bent v. Stafford Police Dep’t, 381 N.J. Super. 30, 37 (App. Div. 2005);⁷ N.J. Builders Ass’n v. N.J. Council on Affordable Hous., 390 N.J. Super. 166, 180 (App. Div. 2007); Schuler v. Borough of Bloomsbury, GRC Complaint No. 2007-151 (February 2009).

The validity of an OPRA request typically falls into three (3) categories. The first is a request that is overly broad (“any and all” requests seeking “records” generically, *etc.*) and requires a custodian to conduct research. MAG, 375 N.J. Super. at 534; Donato v. Twp. of Union, GRC Complaint No. 2005-182 (January 2007). The second is those requests seeking information or asking questions. See *e.g.* Rummel v. Cumberland Cnty. Bd. of Chosen Freeholders, GRC Complaint No. 2011-168 (December 2012). The final category is a request that is either not on an official OPRA request form or does not invoke OPRA. See *e.g.* Naples v. N.J. Motor Vehicle Comm’n, GRC Complaint No. 2008-97 (December 2008).

The Council addressed the search/research question in Donato v. Twp. of Union, GRC Complaint No. 2005-182 (January 2007). There, the Council held that pursuant to MAG, a custodian is obligated to search his or her files to find identifiable government records listed in a requestor’s OPRA request. The complainant in Donato requested all motor vehicle accident reports from September 5, 2005 to September 15, 2005. The custodian sought clarification of said request on the basis that it was not specific enough. The Council stated that:

Pursuant to [MAG], the Custodian is obligated to search her files to find the identifiable government records listed in the Complainant’s OPRA request (all motor vehicle accident reports for the period of September 5, 2005 through

⁷ Affirmed on appeal from Bent v. Stafford Police Department, GRC Complaint No. 2004-78 (October 2004). Rotimi Owoh, Esq. (on Behalf of Delores Simmons, Obafemi Simmons, and Grace Woko) v. Oaklyn Police Department (Camden), 2021-151 – Findings and Recommendations of the Executive Director

September 15, 2005). However, the Custodian is not required to research her files to figure out which records, if any, might be responsive to a broad or unclear OPRA request. The word search is defined as “to go or look through carefully in order to find something missing or lost.” The word research, on the other hand, means “a close and careful study to find new facts or information.” (Footnotes omitted.)

[Id.]

Here, the Complainant’s OPRA request sought DWI/DUI, drug possession, and drug paraphernalia complaints and summonses over a one (1) year period. The Complainant also sought jaywalking complaints and summonses over a four (4) year period. Sgt. Jones asserted that the request items were overly broad and required clarification.

Upon review, the GRC is satisfied that the Complainant’s OPRA request was valid. The request specifically identified government records spanning a definitive period: complaints and summonses. Furthermore, the Custodian was ultimately able to conduct a search and locate well over 100 pages of responsive complaints and summonses. Although the universe of responsive records may be voluminous, that does not always necessarily equate to an invalid OPRA request. See Chester v. Pleasantville Hous. Auth. (Atlantic), GRC Complaint No. 2015-50 (Interim Order dated March 28, 2017).

Accordingly, the Complainant’s April 28, 2021 OPRA request seeking complaints and summonses was not overly broad. Rather, the request sought specifically identifiable records and would not cause the Custodian to conduct research to process. MAG, 375 N.J. Super. at 549; Bent, 381 N.J. Super. at 37; N.J. Builders Ass’n, 390 N.J. Super. at 180; Schuler, GRC 2007-151; Donato, GRC 2005-182. Thus, the Custodian unlawfully denied. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-6. However, the Council declines to order disclosure since the evidence of record demonstrates that responsive records were provided to the Complainant on March 23, 2022 as part of the SOI.

Prevailing Party Attorney’s Fees

OPRA provides that:

A person who is denied access to a government record by the custodian of the record, at the option of the requestor, may: institute a proceeding to challenge the custodian's decision by filing an action in Superior Court . . .; or in lieu of filing an action in Superior Court, file a complaint with the Government Records Council . . . A requestor who prevails in any proceeding shall be entitled to a reasonable attorney's fee.

[N.J.S.A. 47:1A-6.]

In Teeters v. DYFS, 387 N.J. Super. 423 (App. Div. 2006), the Appellate Division held that a complainant is a “prevailing party” if he achieves the desired result because the complaint brought about a change (voluntary or otherwise) in the custodian’s conduct. Id. at 432. Additionally, the court held that attorney’s fees may be awarded when the requestor is successful

(or partially successful) via a judicial decree, a quasi-judicial determination, or a settlement of the parties that indicates access was improperly denied and the requested records are disclosed. Id.

Additionally, the New Jersey Supreme Court has ruled on the issue of “prevailing party” attorney’s fees. In Mason v. City of Hoboken and City Clerk of the City of Hoboken, 196 N.J. 51, 71 (2008), the Court discussed the catalyst theory, “which posits that a plaintiff is a ‘prevailing party’ if it achieves the desired result because the lawsuit brought about a voluntary change in the defendant’s conduct” (quoting Buckhannon Bd. & Care Home v. West Virginia Dep’t of Health & Human Res., 532 U.S. 598, 131 S. Ct. 1835, 149 L. Ed. 2d 855 (2001)). In Buckhannon, the Supreme Court held that the phrase “prevailing party” is a legal term of art that refers to a “party in whose favor a judgment is rendered.” Id. at 603 (quoting Black’s Law Dictionary 1145 (7th ed. 1999)). The Supreme Court rejected the catalyst theory as a basis for prevailing party attorney fees, in part because “[i]t allows an award where there is no judicially sanctioned change in the legal relationship of the parties . . .” Id. at 605, 121 S. Ct. at 1840, 149 L. Ed. 2d at 863. Further, the Supreme Court expressed concern that the catalyst theory would spawn extra litigation over attorney’s fees. Id. at 609, 121 S. Ct. at 1843, 149 L. Ed. 2d at 866.

However, the Court noted in Mason that Buckhannon is binding only when counsel fee provisions under federal statutes are at issue. 196 N.J. at 72, citing Teeters, 387 N.J. Super. at 429; see, e.g., Baer v. Klagholz, 346 N.J. Super. 79 (App. Div. 2001) (applying Buckhannon to the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), certif. denied, 174 N.J. 193 (2002). “But in interpreting New Jersey law, we look to state law precedent and the specific state statute before us. When appropriate, we depart from the reasoning of federal cases that interpret comparable federal statutes.” 196 N.J. at 73 (citations omitted).

The Mason Court accepted the application of the catalyst theory within the context of OPRA, stating that:

OPRA itself contains broader language on attorney’s fees than the former RTKL did. OPRA provides that “[a] requestor who prevails in any proceeding shall be entitled to a reasonable attorney’s fee.” N.J.S.A. 47:1A-6. Under the prior RTKL, “[a] plaintiff in whose favor such an order [requiring access to public records] issues . . . may be awarded a reasonable attorney’s fee not to exceed \$500.00.” N.J.S.A. 47:1A-4 (repealed 2002). The Legislature’s revisions therefore: (1) mandate, rather than permit, an award of attorney’s fees to a prevailing party; and (2) eliminate the \$500 cap on fees and permit a reasonable, and quite likely higher, fee award. Those changes expand counsel fee awards under OPRA.

[196 N.J. at 73-76.]

The Court in Mason, further held that:

[R]equestors are entitled to attorney’s fees under OPRA, absent a judgment or an enforceable consent decree, when they can demonstrate (1) “a factual causal nexus between plaintiff’s litigation and the relief ultimately achieved”; and (2) “that the

relief ultimately secured by plaintiffs had a basis in law.” Singer v. State, 95 N.J. 487, 495, cert. denied, New Jersey v. Singer, 469 U.S. 832 (1984).

[Id. at 76.]

In the instant matter, the Complainant sought complaints and summonses prepared by the Borough’s police department pertaining to drug possession, drug paraphernalia, DUI/DWI, and jaywalking offenses. Sgt. Jones responded on behalf of the Custodian stating that the request was overly broad. The Complainant then filed the instant complaint on July 7, 2021, asserting that the Custodian should have obtained the records via the Borough’s police department in accordance with the Simmons ruling. While the matter remained pending, the Custodian provided the Complainant with copies of responsive records on March 23, 2022.

In determining whether the Complainant is a prevailing party entitled to attorney’s fees, the GRC is satisfied that the evidence of record supports a conclusion in the affirmative. Sgt. Jones initially denied access to the Complainant’s request by asserting same was overly broad. It was only until after the complaint was filed that the Custodian reversed course and provided the Complainant with responsive records. Thus, a causal nexus exists between this complaint and the change in the Custodian’s conduct. Mason 196 N.J. at 76. Accordingly, the Complainant is a prevailing party entitled to attorney’s fees.⁸

Therefore, the Complainant has achieved “the desired result because the complaint brought about a change (voluntary or otherwise) in the custodian’s conduct.” Teeters, 387 N.J. Super. at 432. Additionally, a factual causal nexus exists between the Complainant’s filing of a Denial of Access Complaint and the relief ultimately achieved. Mason, 196 N.J. at 76. Specifically, the Custodian did not provide the Complainant with the requested records until after the instant complaint was filed. Therefore, the Complainant is a prevailing party entitled to an award of a reasonable attorney’s fee. See N.J.S.A. 47:1A-6, Teeters, 387 N.J. Super. at 432, and Mason, 196 N.J. at 76. **Based on this determination, the parties shall confer in an effort to decide the amount of reasonable attorney’s fees to be paid to Complainant within twenty (20) business days. If the parties cannot agree on the amount of attorney’s fees, Complainant’s Counsel shall submit a fee application to the Council in accordance with N.J.A.C. 5:105-2.13(c).**

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Executive Director respectfully recommends the Council find that:

1. The Complainant’s April 28, 2021 OPRA request seeking complaints and summonses was not overly broad. Rather, the request sought specifically identifiable records and would not cause the Custodian to conduct research to process. MAG Entm’t, LLC v.

⁸ The Council makes this determination with the understanding that the Complainant acted on behalf of a bona fide client at the time of the request. Although the Complainant’s status as representing an actual client has been previously challenged, the available evidence on the record is insufficient to address that issue herein. See Owoh, Esq. (O.B.O. AADARI) v. Neptune City Police Dep’t (Monmouth), GRC Complaint No. 2018-153 (April 2020) and Owoh, Esq. (O.B.O. AADARI) v. Freehold Twp. Police Dep’t (Monmouth), GRC Complaint No. 2018-155 (Interim Order dated September 29, 2020).

Rotimi Owoh, Esq. (on Behalf of Delores Simmons, Obafemi Simmons, and Grace Woko) v. Oaklyn Police Department (Camden), 2021-151 – Findings and Recommendations of the Executive Director

Div. of Alcoholic Beverage Control, 375 N.J. Super. 534, 549 (App. Div. 2005); Bent v. Stafford Police Dep't, 381 N.J. Super. 30, 37 (App. Div. 2005); N.J. Builders Ass'n v. N.J. Council on Affordable Hous., 390 N.J. Super. 166, 180 (App. Div. 2007); Schuler v. Borough of Bloomsbury, GRC Complaint No. 2007-151 (February 2009); Donato v. Twp. of Union, GRC Complaint No. 2005-182 (January 2007). Thus, the Custodian unlawfully denied access to the Complainant's OPRA request. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-6. However, the Council declines to order disclosure since the evidence of record demonstrates that responsive records were provided to the Complainant on March 23, 2022 as part of the Statement of Information.

2. The Complainant has achieved “the desired result because the complaint brought about a change (voluntary or otherwise) in the custodian’s conduct.” Teeters v. DYFS, 387 N.J. Super. 423, 432 (App. Div. 2006). Additionally, a factual causal nexus exists between the Complainant’s filing of a Denial of Access Complaint and the relief ultimately achieved. Mason v. City of Hoboken and City Clerk of the City of Hoboken, 196 N.J. 51, 76 (2008). Specifically, the Custodian did not provide the Complainant with the requested records until after the instant complaint was filed. Therefore, the Complainant is a prevailing party entitled to an award of a reasonable attorney’s fee. See N.J.S.A. 47:1A-6, Teeters, 387 N.J. Super. at 432, and Mason, 196 N.J. at 76. **Based on this determination, the parties shall confer in an effort to decide the amount of reasonable attorney’s fees to be paid to Complainant within twenty (20) business days. If the parties cannot agree on the amount of attorney's fees, Complainant’s Counsel shall submit a fee application to the Council in accordance with N.J.A.C. 5:105-2.13(c).**

Prepared By: Samuel A. Rosado
Staff Attorney

February 21, 2023