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DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY AFFAIRS  
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Commissioner

## FINAL DECISION

### August 26, 2025 Government Records Council Meeting

Rotimi Owoh, Esq. (o/b/o African American  
Data & Research Institute)  
Complainant

Complaint No. 2022-235

v.

Blairstown Police Department (Warren)  
Custodian of Record

At the August 26, 2025, public meeting, the Government Records Council (“Council”) considered the August 19, 2025, 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 Custodian’s April 25, 2022 response was insufficient because she failed to address each request item. See N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5(g); Paff v. Willingboro Bd. of Educ. (Burlington), GRC Complaint No. 2007-272 (May 2008); Lenchitz v. Pittsgrove Twp. (Salem), GRC Complaint No. 2012-265 (Interim Order dated August 27, 2013). Specifically, the Custodian failed to indicate whether responsive agreements existed between the Township and any separated police officer.
2. The Custodian unlawfully denied access to the portion of the Complainant’s OPRA request seeking the date of hire, date of separation and reason for separation, and salary of police officers from 2014 to the present. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-6. Specifically, the Custodian created a list by extracting the information from other documents, rather than providing the most comprehensive records containing the requested information. See Valdes v. Union City Bd. of Educ. (Hudson), GRC Complaint No. 2011-64 (Interim Order dated August 28, 2012); Morgano v. Essex Cnty. Prosecutor’s Office, GRC Complaint No. 2007-156 (February 2008). Thus, the Custodian shall locate and provide such records to the Complainant.
3. **The Custodian shall comply with conclusion No. 2 above within twenty (20) business days from receipt of the Council’s Final Decision. In the circumstances where the records ordered for disclosure are not provided to the Complainant, the Council’s Final Decision may be enforced in the Superior Court of New Jersey. N.J. Court Rules, R. 4:67-6; N.J.A.C. 5:105-2.9(c).**
4. 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). the Custodian improperly provided a list containing the requested information, rather than the actual records containing same. 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. The parties shall promptly notify the GRC in writing if a fee agreement is reached. 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 26<sup>th</sup> Day of August 2025

John A. Alexy, 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: August 28, 2025**

**STATE OF NEW JERSEY  
GOVERNMENT RECORDS COUNCIL**

**Findings and Recommendations of the Executive Director  
August 26, 2025 Council Meeting**

**Rotimi Owoh, Esq. (on Behalf of  
African American Data & Research Institute)<sup>1</sup>  
Complainant**

**GRC Complaint No. 2022-235**

**v.**

**Blairstown Police Department (Warren)<sup>2</sup>  
Custodial Agency**

**Records Relevant to Complaint:** Electronic copies via e-mail of: Names, date of hire, date of separation and reason for separation, salary, payroll record, amount and type of pension of individuals who either resigned or retired or terminated or otherwise separated from 2014 to the present. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-10.

- a. This request includes any agreement entered with each one of the separated police officer(s).
- b. When stating the reason for separation, please note that some police officers separate due to plea deal, criminal convictions, criminal charges, sentences, and or other court agreement or court proceedings that require officers to be separated from your police department and or law enforcement jobs.
- c. Some police officers separate due to internal affairs investigations within the police departments.

**Custodian of Record:** Kristin Shipp  
**Request Received by Custodian:** March 22, 2022  
**Response Made by Custodian:** April 25, 2022  
**GRC Complaint Received:** June 1, 2022

**Background<sup>3</sup>**

**Request and Response:**

On an unknown date,<sup>4</sup> the Complainant submitted an Open Public Records Act (“OPRA”)

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<sup>1</sup> The Complainant represents the African American Data & Research Institute (“AADARI”).

<sup>2</sup> Represented by Kevin P. Benbrook, Esq., of Benbrook & Benbrook, LLC. (Hope, NJ).

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> The Complainant stated “unsure of exact date” in the Denial of Access Complaint and the OPRA request submitted by the Custodian did not contain a date.

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request to the Custodian seeking the above-mentioned records. On April 25, 2022, the Custodian responded in writing providing a list of information on four (4) separated officers.<sup>5</sup> The Custodian also disclosed a salary rate sheet for each officer.

#### Denial of Access Complaint:

On June 1, 2022, the Complainant filed a Denial of Access Complaint with the Government Records Council (“GRC”). The Complainant asserted the records did not provide the reasons for separation. The Complainant also asserted that per Libertarians for Transparent Gov’t v. Cumberland Cnty., 250 N.J. 46 (2022), and AADARI v. Profitt, 2022 N.J. Super. Unpub LEXIS 622 (App. Div. 2022), creating a new spreadsheet or list stating “terminated” or “resigned” or “retired” is not sufficient. The Complainant also stated the response did not state whether any officers left due to a plea deal or court proceeding that precludes them from law enforcement positions. Furthermore, the Complainant asserted the time for compliance had expired.

The Complainant requested the GRC order Blairstown Police Department (“BPD”) to comply with the OPRA request. The Complainant also requested the GRC award counsel fees.<sup>6</sup>

#### Statement of Information:

On November 10, 2022, the Custodian filed a Statement of Information (“SOI”). The Custodian certified that she received the Complainant’s OPRA request on March 22, 2022. The Custodian certified that her search included coordinating with BPD’s Chief and the Township of Blairstown (“Township”) Chief Financial Officer to obtain all requested information. The Custodian certified that she responded in writing on April 25, 2022, disclosing a list of information on four (4) separated officers and attaching salary sheets.

The Custodian certified that she provided “all information and documents requested” by the Complainant. The Custodian further affirmed that no separation agreements existed as none were due to criminal proceedings or based on internal affairs investigations. The Custodian argued that no additional records existed. The Custodian noted that she notified the Complainant he could contact her with any issues; however, the Complainant never did prior to filing this complaint.

#### Additional Submissions:

On June 18, 2025, the GRC sent the Custodian a request for additional information. Specifically, the GRC inquired whether the provided personnel information was collected from an electronic database, and whether the list was created via Excel. On June 25, 2025, Custodian’s Counsel confirmed receipt of the GRC’s request for additional information. Counsel added that

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<sup>5</sup> The Custodian’s response was on the twenty-third (23<sup>rd</sup>) business day, which is a “deemed” denial of access. However, the GRC will not address this issue because the Complainant did not raise it.

<sup>6</sup> The Complainant further noted that access to the records should have been granted under the “common law ‘right to access public records.’” However, the GRC does not have the authority to address a requestor’s common law right to access records. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-7(b); Rowan, Jr. v. Warren Hills Reg’l Sch. Dist. (Warren), GRC Complaint No. 2011-347 (January 2013); Kelly v. N.J. Dep’t of Transp., GRC Complaint No. 2010-215 (November 2011). Thus, the GRC cannot address any common law right of access to the requested records.

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OPRA did not require a custodian to create a new record containing the “reason for separation,” which appeared to be the Complainant’s issue here.

On July 1, 2025, the Custodian responded to the GRC’s request for additional information. The Custodian certified the personnel information provided to the Complainant was not generated from an electronic database, as the Township does not maintain one.

## **Analysis**

### **Sufficiency of Response**

OPRA provides that if a “custodian is unable to comply with a request for access, the custodian *shall indicate the specific basis therefor . . .* on the request form and promptly return it to the requestor.” N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5(g) (emphasis added). In Paff v. Willingboro Bd. of Educ. (Burlington), GRC Complaint No. 2007-272 (May 2008), the Council held that “[t]he Custodian’s response was legally insufficient because he failed to respond to each request item individually. Therefore, the Custodian has violated N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5(g).” See also Lenchitz v. Pittsgrove Twp. (Salem), GRC Complaint No. 2012-265 (Interim Order dated August 27, 2013).

Upon review, the GRC is satisfied that the Custodian provided an insufficient response. Specifically, the Custodian responded to the Complainant’s OPRA request with a letter including a list of personnel information. However, the response failed to indicate whether any “agreement” existed between the Township and the separated officers. The facts here are on point with those in Paff; thus, it follows there was an insufficient response in the instant complaint.

Therefore, the Custodian’s April 25, 2022 response was insufficient because she failed to address each request item. See N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5(g); Paff, GRC 2007-272; Lenchitz, GRC 2012-265. Specifically, the Custodian failed to indicate whether responsive agreements existed between the Township and any separated police officer.

### **Unlawful Denial of Access**

OPRA provides that government records made, maintained, kept on file, or received by a public agency in the course of its official business are subject to public access unless otherwise exempt. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1.1. A custodian must release all records responsive to an OPRA request “with certain exceptions.” N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1. Additionally, OPRA places the burden on a custodian to prove that a denial of access to records is lawful pursuant to N.J.S.A. 47:1A-6.

### **Personnel Information**

Regarding personnel records, OPRA begins with a presumption against disclosure and “proceeds with a few narrow exceptions that . . . need to be considered.” Kovalcik v. Somerset Cnty. Prosecutor’s Office, 206 N.J. 581, 594 (2011). These exceptions include “an individual’s name, title, position, salary, payroll record, length of service, date of separation and the reason therefore, and the amount and type of any pension received shall be government record.” N.J.S.A. 47:1A-10 (“Section 10”).

In Danis v. Garfield Bd. of Educ. (Bergen), GRC 2009-156, *et seq.* (Interim Order dated June 29, 2010), the Council determined that “name, title, position, salary, payroll record and length of service” is information which is specifically considered to be a “government record” under Section 10, and that “payroll records” must be disclosed pursuant to Jackson v. Kean Univ., GRC Complaint No. 2002-98 (February 2004). The Council thus held that the complainant’s March 25, 2009, request for “[t]he name, position, salary, payroll record and length of service for every [agency] employee who was employed in whole or part from January 1, 2008, to March 24, 2009,” was a valid request pursuant to OPRA. *Id.* at 5. Additionally, prior GRC case law supports the disclosure of database information regarding personnel actions. See Matthews v. City of Atlantic City (Atlantic), GRC Complaint No. 2008-123 (February 2009).

While this matter awaited adjudication, the GRC issued its decision in Owoh, Esq. (O.B.O. AADARI) v. Voorhees Twp. Police Dep’t (Camden), GRC Complaint No. 2022-12 (March 2024). There, the complainant raised the same objections as the instant matter, with the custodian providing a spreadsheet containing the requested personnel information. However, the Council found that in accordance with Paff v. Twp. of Galloway, 229 N.J. 340, 353 (2017), the spreadsheet provided was an acceptable form of disclosure, as it was generated through the agency’s electronic database. The Council further held that, under Matthews, GRC 2008-123, the custodian was not obligated to explicitly denote whether an officer’s separation was the result of a plea agreement or other court proceedings.

However, the Council has previously held that responding to an OPRA request for personnel information requires a custodian to provide the most comprehensive records containing responsive information. See Valdes v. Union City Bd. of Educ. (Hudson), GRC Complaint No. 2011-64 (Interim Order dated August 28, 2012). In Valdes, the complainant sought the same personnel information at issue in the instant case. The custodian denied access since the requestor sought only information and did not identify a specific record that may contain the requested information. The Council held that OPRA did not require the custodian to extract and synthesize requested information from government records, but instead to provide the most comprehensive record containing said information, with necessary redactions. See also Morgano v. Essex Cnty. Prosecutor’s Office, GRC Complaint No. 2007-156 (February 2008).

In the instant matter, the Complainant requested in part Section 10 information from the Custodian. In response, the Custodian provided a letter listing the requested information. Such information could be provided in a spreadsheet if originating from an electronic database per Voorhees, GRC 2022-12. However, in response to the GRC’s request for additional information here, the Custodian certified that the information did not come from an electronic database. Thus, in accordance with Valdes and Morgano, the Custodian was obligated to instead provide the most comprehensive records containing Section 10 information with redactions applied as necessary.

Accordingly, the Custodian unlawfully denied access to the portion of the Complainant’s OPRA request seeking the date of hire, date of separation and reason for separation, and salary of police officers from 2014 to the present. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-6. Specifically, the Custodian created a list by extracting the information from other documents rather than providing the most comprehensive records containing the requested information. See Valdes, GRC 2011-64;

Morgano, GRC 2007-156. Thus, the Custodian shall locate and provide such records to the Complainant.

### Settlement Agreements

The Council has previously found that, where a custodian certified that no responsive records exist, no unlawful denial of access occurred. Pusterhofer v. N.J. Dep't of Educ., GRC Complaint No. 2005-49 (July 2005). Here, in addition to the requested personnel information, the Complainant sought any “agreement” between the Township and any separated police officer containing the “reason for separation.” Although the Custodian did not respond at the time of the request, the Custodian certified in the SOI that no responsive agreements existed. Moreover, the Complainant failed to present any evidence that the Township possessed same at the time of the request, or to refute the Custodian’s certification.

Accordingly, notwithstanding the Custodian’s insufficient response, she has borne her burden of proof that she lawfully denied access to the Complainant’s OPRA request seeking any “agreement[s]” between the Township and separated police officers. Specifically, the Custodian certified, and the record reflects, that no such records exist. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-6; see Pusterhofer, GRC 2005-49.

### **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 (7<sup>th</sup> 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.]

Here, the Complainant sought “[n]ames, date of hire, date of separation and reason for separation, salary, payroll record, amount and type of pension of individuals who either resigned or retired or terminated or otherwise separated from 2014 to the present,” as well as any “agreement.” The Custodian responded by letter providing a list containing the requested personnel information. The Complainant then filed the instant complaint on June 1, 2022, asserting



in part that the Custodian failed to provide the “real reason” for the officers’ separations. The Complainant also asserted the Custodian did not provide the requested information via actual records but instead provided a created list.

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. Specifically, the Custodian certified that the information contained in the list did not originate from an electronic database. The Custodian is therefore obligated to locate and provide the actual records containing the requested personnel information. 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 fees.<sup>7</sup>

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. the Custodian improperly provided a list containing the requested information, rather than the actual records containing same.. 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. The parties shall promptly notify the GRC in writing if a fee agreement is reached. 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 Custodian’s April 25, 2022 response was insufficient because she failed to address each request item. See N.J.S.A. 47:1A-5(g); Paff v. Willingboro Bd. of Educ. (Burlington), GRC Complaint No. 2007-272 (May 2008); Lenchitz v. Pittsgrove Twp. (Salem), GRC Complaint No. 2012-265 (Interim Order dated August 27, 2013). Specifically, the Custodian failed to indicate whether responsive agreements existed between the Township and any separated police officer.
2. The Custodian unlawfully denied access to the portion of the Complainant’s OPRA request seeking the date of hire, date of separation and reason for separation, and salary of police officers from 2014 to the present. N.J.S.A. 47:1A-6. Specifically, the Custodian created a list by extracting the information from other documents, rather than

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<sup>7</sup> 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).

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providing the most comprehensive records containing the requested information. See Valdes v. Union City Bd. of Educ. (Hudson), GRC Complaint No. 2011-64 (Interim Order dated August 28, 2012); Morgano v. Essex Cnty. Prosecutor's Office, GRC Complaint No. 2007-156 (February 2008). Thus, the Custodian shall locate and provide such records to the Complainant.

3. **The Custodian shall comply with conclusion No. 2 above within twenty (20) business days from receipt of the Council's Final Decision. In the circumstances where the records ordered for disclosure are not provided to the Complainant, the Council's Final Decision may be enforced in the Superior Court of New Jersey. N.J. Court Rules, R. 4:67-6; N.J.A.C. 5:105-2.9(c).**
4. 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). the Custodian improperly provided a list containing the requested information, rather than the actual records containing same. 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. The parties shall promptly notify the GRC in writing if a fee agreement is reached. 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: Frank F. Caruso  
Executive Director

August 19, 2025