

THE UTAH REPORTERS

2026



ALMANAC

Utah SPJ Needs You!

The Utah Headliners Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists is looking for a few good volunteers interested in joining the board and standing up for the Fourth Estate here in the Beehive State.

The board meets monthly, where we do such work as:

- Advocating against idiotic legislation hurting the work of the press.
- Organizing training and other career development events for journalists.
- Preparing the annual SPJ award contest and deciding on special Honors Awards winners.
- Pushing back against other attempts by government agencies to block access to records and open meetings.

Think you got what it takes? Email utahspj@gmail.com or elpenrod@gmail.com for more information. We'd love to have you on board!



**SOCIETY OF
PROFESSIONAL
JOURNALISTS**

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2026 Edition

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Thank you for reading the 2025-26 Utah Reporters Almanac!

The expression “no news is good news” is not really a saying you are likely to hear come out of a reporter’s mouth. Usually there’s always news, and a reporter who can’t find it is in trouble. Typically this welcome letter is full of bad news for transparency and open government since we finish up our almanac at the close of the most recent legislative session.

This session was a rare exception. While journalists were hopeful that some legislation this year might have corrected some of the disastrous bills of years past, that unfortunately didn’t happen. Fortunately, nothing really terrible happened either. So we’ll take it as a win that there was no news out of the Legislature of another assault on open government and the rights of reporters and citizens to access it.

For the first time since we’ve started publishing this guide, there will be no legislative recap. Still, we think you will find lots of useful information inside. You’ll hear about a retired lawyer’s crusade to uncover stealth government agencies. FOX 13’s Nate Carlisle will break down filing Freedom of Information Act requests. You’ll learn about useful data tools for looking at state court trends and how to use the new business entity search provided by the Utah Department of Commerce. Last year brought big changes to the records appeal process, so we also spoke with Rebekkah Shaw, the executive secretary of the new Government Records Office, to learn about how appeals work now that the State Records Committee is gone. We’ve also provided information we compiled for a very unique training we conducted in St. George last year to help survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault understand how to navigate the criminal justice system.

We live in a day and age when we are constantly bombarded by misinformation. It can be overwhelming, resulting in confusion and uncertainty. It’s easy to just swallow the bait of outrageous posts and get mad at the “other side.” It’s just as easy to feel helpless and jaded and wonder what, if anything, can be done. But the information you want and need to be a better citizen is all around you. Whether that’s the info a reporter needs to report the news or just the facts and information anyone needs to make informed decisions or improve their life — it’s available. You just need to know where it is and how to get it.

While the downpour of misinformation can make us feel like the sky is falling, don’t forget the truth is within reach and with it you can find the ground under your feet and the knowledge you need to stand up and advocate for yourself and your community.

Again, to all the reporters and curious citizens alike who read this, thanks again so much for the continued support.



Sincerely,

Eric S. Peterson
Executive director
The Utah Investigative Journalism Project

Dear UIJP friends, *I am no journalist, but my father was. As Intermountain Bureau Chief for United Press International in Salt Lake in the '50s and '60s, he thrived on the intensity of the highly competitive wire service business with a "deadline every minute." Discovering the facts first. Accurately capturing them using the "5 W's." Delivering them before the competition could, even if it meant typing the hot story directly on the teleprinter for national distribution: no corrections, no do-overs. Exhilarating.*

Technology has now made information available to everyone in essentially real time. What it has failed to do is ensure the right questions are asked and that relevant facts are collected and reported accurately without bias. Much of today's "news" is just regurgitated press releases lacking in analysis and often replete with lies or propaganda. Worse, there is a major trend towards hiding public information and eliminating publicly funded databases.

Here in Utah, we have seen the trusted State Records Committee disbanded, unelected "commissions" set up and exempted from public meeting and public records laws, special interest legislation introduced and passed in the dead of night, public officials' calendars being hidden from the taxpayers and minimal disclosure of the flow of funds to private groups which use public tax credits, exemptions and state loans.

This is where news services like The Utah Investigative Journalism Project come in. UIJP transforms data and information into knowledge and then, through painstaking research and analysis, turns that knowledge into wisdom. Each year, the UIJP provides a powerful teaching tool in critical thinking with this almanac. As you study it, you will see that no matter how skilled the user, they can only analyze information that is publicly available.

As a member of the UIJP Advisory Board, I hope you will take advantage of the valuable public services UIJP provides and consider supporting the cause of transparency and open public records in Utah.

*-- Craig Wallentine,
retired corporate executive & UIJP advisory board member*

UIJP Advisory Board: *Scott and Pam Parkinson, Jorge Fierro, David Irvine Janet Jenson, Terry Stephens, Henry Whiteside, Amy Maestas and Craig Wallentine*

UIJP Board of Directors: *Eric S. Peterson, Ted McDonough, Rone Tempest, Cathy McKittrick, Cindi Mansell, Dan Harrie, Kamaile Tripp-Harris and James Brown*

Free trainings

The Utah Investigative Journalism Project offers free trainings and consultations to big and small newsrooms and interested community groups in Utah. Our aim is to better equip journalists with the skills they need to utilize databases, fight for public records and employ better investigative techniques.

OUR COURSES:

“Investigative Techniques and Strategies” gives an overview of strategies for developing investigative stories and provides an introduction to GRAMA and helpful public databases.

“GRAMA-Nomics: Making the Most of Public Records Requests” focuses on how to make GRAMAs or public records requests, how to fight records request denials and strategies for getting the records you need.

“Digging With Databases” surveys numerous useful databases reporters can tap into to scour through everything from municipal budget documents to nonprofit financials and court records.

“Investigative Interviewing” is all about the interview. How to talk to reluctant sources, get useful information and better quotes, and even how to assess the truthfulness of what the interview subject is telling you.

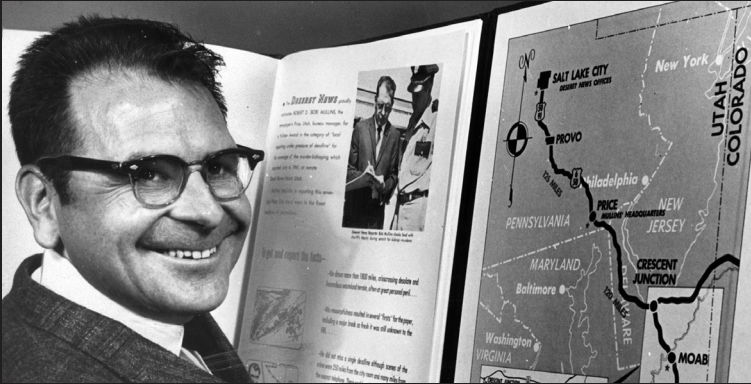
“GRAMA Appeal Consultation” is a focused training that will help you with a specific GRAMA appeal. We'll give you advice on appealing before the Government Records Director and strategies on successful negotiating in mediation for the records you are after.

All trainings are designed and taught by UIJP Executive Director Eric Peterson or staff writer Sydnee Chapman.

Since training is brought directly to your newsroom, it can be tailored to fit the interests of participants and could blend components of multiple training programs as well as offer journalists the opportunity to ask specific questions about stories and projects they're working on. If you're interested in setting up a training, contact Eric Peterson at epeterson@utahinvestigative.org.

In memory of Bob Mullins:

We're dedicating this edition of the almanac



Robert D. “Bob” Mullins won a Pulitzer Prize in 1962 for his reporting on a murder and kidnapping at Dead Horse Point.

Mullins spent countless hours following the story in Moab, at one point even driving through the night to deliver photos to the office in Salt Lake before returning to Grand County.

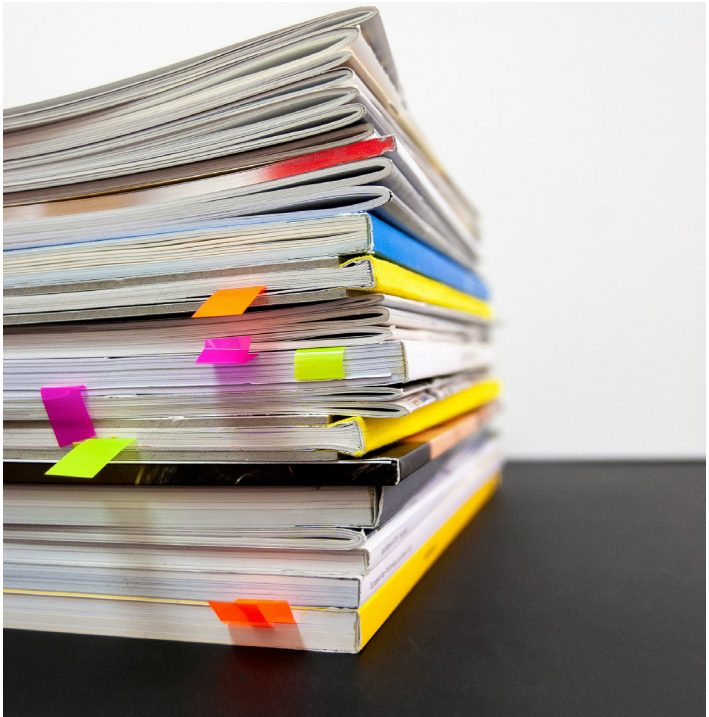
Columnist Steve Hale later wrote later, “Because of Bob, that story got back to Salt Lake City before the local FBI office heard about the find.”

Mullins passed away in 2016 at the age of 91. His career spanned 36 years at Deseret News, including as a “copyboy,” sports writer and investigative journalist.

Mullins’ niece, Marva Warnock, generously donated \$10,000 to the UIJP in his memory.

State and federal records requests

SECTION I



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How to appeal to the new government records director

The new system is faster and new rule changes give record seekers more flexible options

By Eric S. Peterson | The Utah Investigative Journalism Project

Asking for records from the government should be a lot more straightforward than it is sometimes.

Your taxpayer dollars pay for the records, so they should be easy to get. While often that is the case, there are also lots of times when a government agency disagrees with a requester and denies their request for everything from budget documents and police reports to emails and text messages.

Feuds over record request denials built up so much that the Legislature did away with the independent State Records Committee in 2025 and replaced it with a government records director. At that time, requests for hearings were delayed sometimes three to four months or longer, but things have changed.

“We’ve caught up on the backlog,” says Rebekkah Shaw, executive secretary of the Government Records Office. “So appeals are being heard pretty quick.”

Appeals have been heard once a week under the new director, compared to the committee’s old schedule of regular monthly meetings. Now, Shaw said there’s about a four- to six-week delay from filing your appeal to having your hearing. The new system is a bit different Shaw said, and there are also new rule changes to help requesters out.

Here’s what you need to know to navigate the new system.

The process

The appeal process is still essentially the same. You file

your first records request under the Government Records Access and Management Act, or GRAMA, and, hopefully, get the information you're after. If your request is denied, you can appeal to the head of the government agency that denied you. Get denied again and, in most cases, you then have the option of taking it to court or appealing to the government records director now, instead of the State Records Committee.

The new director is Lonny Pehrson, a former assistant attorney general who previously handled GRAMA requests to that agency.

Taking your argument to the director is the same as it was before the committee. You have a five-minute opening statement, then the government takes its five-minute turn. Both sides also get a five-minute closing statement and may answer questions from the government records director.

Just as with the old State Records Committee, you can cite committee decisions when



Lonny Pehrson

making your arguments, but double check them to make sure they are still relevant in case the GRAMA law was updated after the decision was made. And keep in mind they are helpful but not authoritative.

“They’re not binding on the director,” Shaw said, but can still be very useful.

What’s changed

Previously the State Records Committee was not likely to have read the disputed records in advance of the hearing. Sometimes, the committee would adjourn to meet privately to review the records before making its decision, but

not always. Shaw says Pehrson now routinely gathers disputed records before the hearing and reads them in advance of the hearing to be better prepared.

“The State Records Committee would deliberate, but the director comes to the hearing with questions ready,” Shaw says.

The office has also made a couple new rule changes that will affect how the hearings happen — or not — in the future. For example, if the idea of arguing in front of a records judge seems intimidating to you, or for any reason you would not want to have a hearing, an option is now available to simply submit written arguments and let the director weigh the arguments and then decide. Both sides would have to agree to just submit written arguments.

It’s still early to tell, but depending on the director’s caseload, this could result in a faster turnaround time on the decision.

The other change gives requesters more flexibility when

the point of contention isn’t about being denied records and instead about whether the government even admits the records exist in the first place.

Previously, if a government agency denied they had the records someone was after, “the chair of the (State Records Committee) would look at it and decide whether to schedule the hearing or not,” Shaw says.

The chair could just deny the hearing but then would have to discuss it with the full committee at its next meeting where the members would review denials. The old State Records Committee could reverse the chair’s decision and hold the hearing.

Now Shaw says the government records director gives the government the option to file a motion to dismiss the hearing and explain why it believes it doesn’t have responsive records.

The requester will also get the chance to file a response to that. The director may decide to dismiss the hearing or still

hold it if he thinks the government hasn't made its case.

Now the records requester has more time to argue why records should exist in the first place rather than trying to shoehorn that argument into a short opening statement at the same time he or she is arguing that the records should be made public.

"It's definitely more than five minutes to present," Shaw says.

Another change is not a matter of rule or regulation but simple practice — meetings are almost all virtual now. Requesters can still present in person if they want, but it's much more common now to present virtually since there's not a full committee meeting and deliberating together.

Tips for a successful appeal

Shaw said under the new system, it does help to focus more on your written appeal. That being said, she said, the director isn't expecting average citizens to file appeals that read like courtroom briefs.

"The director's very accommodating, he knows the majority of petitioners are not attorneys," Shaw said. Still, it helps to write a strong argument and be ready to restate your case at the hearing and answer questions.

Shaw said she's also noticed a couple other things to be careful about. She is seeing more records requesters sending screenshots of emails with government agencies. Shaw says it's best to forward the actual email since it's hard sometimes to read the dates on screenshots. The other problem is one that's becoming more common.

"One thing we've been seeing is a lot of appeals written by ChatGPT," she said. Getting robot help is not forbidden, she added, but she just recommends caution.

"I would highly recommend that petitioners read it and review it before they submit it," she said. "Because ChatGPT hasn't quite caught up with the changes from committee to director." •

Observe and request

SLCPD Records officer Candee Allred on how to request police records

By Eric S. Peterson | The Utah Investigative Journalism Project

A lot of mid-budget cop dramas these days follow a simple formula: a show title that's an acronym (NCIS, FBI, CSI) and a team of attractive investigators resolving a daring rescue/shootout/hostage crisis/serial killer apprehension in a half-hour episode. As you may have guessed, it's not just the actors that look more like models than cops that make these shows not very true to life.

"Don't expect the Salt Lake City Police Department or any law enforcement agency to be CSI," said Candee Allred, the records officer for the Salt Lake City Police Department.

It's not like TV where a quirky character on the show mashes a keyboard and miraculously pulls up a trove of records to help solve a case.

Even with technology advancing by leaps and bounds, Allred says requesting police records still means being patient while actual human beings search high and low for the records and make sure they can be released without compromising the work of real-life investigators.

"It's definitely a job that evolved over time," says Allred, who started work as the records officer for the department in 2008. "We were still using sharpies and copiers. It was before bodycam video and it was way before people realized what kind of records the police department really had and that they could access them," she said.

She added that back then the department might field 8,000 records requests a

year, mostly from law firms or people requesting reports for insurance purposes. But by 2024, Allred said the department processed over 16,000 requests.

For journalists who may only work with Allred, it might come as a surprise to learn that the department actually has a records unit with as many as 20 employees working three different shifts, 24/7.

That team doesn't just focus on GRAMA requests; it also handles missing person and stolen vehicle reports.

Allred is the department's GRAMA coordinator and because she's a paralegal she also handles subpoenas, bodycam video requests and the "more involved" GRAMA requests.

Allred says not a lot of departments have the same staff and resources for responding to records requests. But most agencies do have similar considerations when it comes to requests for police reports, whether it's about a fender

bender or an officer-involved shooting.

"The police report is never just a police report," Allred says. "[Records officers] have to review it to see if it's an open case and they have to talk to detectives about it because they don't want to give something out that's going to interfere with or disrupt an investigation."

“

I haven't met one records officer who is like 'we just don't want to release records,' that's not the intention at all... Don't be afraid to communicate with law enforcement, we are people, you know.

— Candee Allred
*Salt Lake Police Department
Records Officer*

This can involve possibly significant delays in providing records, depending on the request. But it's for good reason.

“I haven’t met one records officer who is like ‘we just don’t want to release records,’ that’s not the intention at all,” Allred said. But police records are different from other municipal records.

“This very much affects people’s lives, and if we screw up an investigation, that’s a big deal,” she said.

Allred added that being prepared by having as much information as possible at the time of the request will make the process much smoother.

Have names of people involved, addresses and dates of birth. If you already have a case number, have it ready. Having all that information up front prevents delays with records officers going back to the requester to ask for more information.

She also recommends just checking in.

“Don’t be afraid to communicate with law enforcement, we are people, you know,” she said.

Takeaways:

Know what reports to request

Allred says that generally most agencies will release an initial contact report when requested, no matter the stage of the investigation. This report contains the responding officer’s first interaction with a crime scene and will likely include some redactions of witness names or investigative details that can’t be disclosed.

“Pursuant to the code, the initial contact report is generally presumed public, so if you see a SLCPD car come down your street, you can request the police report and what you would generally get is the initial contact report,” Allred said



Candee Allred

The full file on a case may include supplemental reports and other records that you won't have access to at first.

Once a case has been closed, however, you will be able to access more records, though some information likely will still be redacted to protect the privacy interest of people named in the report or to protect information about law enforcement techniques or confidential informants.

Bodycam

Allred says that technological advances in bodycam and video editing software have greatly increased in recent years. It's now much easier to blur faces or block out sections of video to protect the privacy of people caught on bodycam video.

However, that technology has done nothing to make it faster for records officers to review bodycam footage.

"We have to very carefully watch bodycam, and it is time consuming," Allred said. "I would say listening is even harder. You have people talking over each other, you have people giving private info while they talk over

each other."

Allred recommends being selective in requesting bodycam video. Try starting off by requesting bodycam from the responding officer on a call.

Requesting "all" bodycam for one incident could mean a massive delay in getting the records, and getting a lot of duplicate records.

"When you have 680 officers all with bodycam and typically anywhere from three to 10 officers on an incident — that's a lot of bodycam," Allred says, adding that "even a half-hour video could take up to two hours to process." •

FOIA 101

Fox 13 investigative reporter Nate Carlisle breaks down the basics of filing Freedom of Information Requests

By Eric S. Peterson | The Utah Investigative Journalism Project

In 2021, a Utah National Guard member drowned during a training exercise at Fort Campbell in Kentucky. It was a tragic event that shouldn't have happened. He was in good shape and his life vest had been inspected before he began a grueling 1,500-meter swim across Fort Campbell's Joe Swing Reservoir. So what happened?

The army began an investigation to find out. FOX 13's Nate Carlisle also wanted to know, so he filed a Freedom of Information Act request, or FOIA. When the army concluded its investigation, Carlisle was able to quickly get the investigative records himself.

That is saying something given how difficult it can often be getting federal records back in a timely fashion. Unlike a GRAMA request — where Utah reporters can easily get in touch with state



Nate Carlisle

and local records officers and will usually get a response in 10 business days —FOIA means dealing with the federal government, and that means delays.

For most reporters, filing a FOIA can feel like sending a smoke signal to Washington, D.C., and hoping for the best, not knowing if they'll receive a response in months, years or ever.

Carlisle says delays are unavoidable with filing FOIAs. But if you put in the work, you can improve your odds on getting records in a reasonable amount of time. It's similar to filing a GRAMA, but you've got to do more homework.

"It's different in that you're dealing with a much larger bureaucracy so you have to be much more precise in what you're seeking, to the point you have to even tell them which files specifically to look at," Carlisle said.

Do your homework

The federal government — even after being DOGE'd — is still a vast and sometimes byzantine organization of agencies, divisions, departments and field offices. Carlisle says one benefit is that many federal offices publish descriptions of their record-keeping online. He recommends searching for these descriptions to target your FOIA requests to the right agency and file.

Carlisle had done that with requests on enforcement actions from the Securities and Exchange Commission, identifying exactly where the files he was after were stored with the SEC. From there he recom-

mends finding a local field office.

"The classic example is the Parks Service and the Forest Service. They are divided up into regions, so let's say I want a law enforcement report for something that happened in a national park or forest in Utah," Carlisle said. "I don't send the request to Washington, D.C. For the Forest Service, the regional office is in Ogden."

The tricky consideration is that if you are looking for federal records locally, you might just focus on the field office, like the U.S. Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management. But sometimes you might need records that could be spread between a field office and Washington, D.C.

"If I really want FBI files about a particular person or subject, I've sent two FOIAs: one to the SLC field office and one to Washington, D.C.," he said.

By filing two requests, you don't wait six months to get a response from the field office telling you that you need to file the request to D.C., or vice versa. Besides searching agency websites for information about record locations,

he also recommends looking for “reading rooms,” or spots on agency websites where they sometimes describe previously fulfilled FOIA requests.

If you see a request similar to what you want, just request the same records they provided previously, which should speed up the process. If the agency has already reviewed and redacted the records, it shouldn't take long for them to send them your way.

Keep it simple

Carlisle's other recommendation is to realize that when it comes to complex federal bureaucracies, the last thing you want to do is file a big, complex FOIA.

“With FOIA, it's very important that you try to keep the request simple and ask to be put in the ‘simple queue’ or ‘simple processing track,’” Carlisle says.

Those magic words can make the difference. If you file one FOIA seeking lots of different records and you get relegated to the “Complex” queue or track, then you will be in for quite the wait.

“Then it can really be years —

or if ever — that you get your documents,” Carlisle said.

Besides just asking for the “simple” treatment, Carlisle recommends keeping the requests simple. Even if you want multiple reports from one federal agency, try to spread them out over separate requests to avoid FOIA purgatory. Journalists can also ask for requests to be expedited. While there's no guarantee that they will be, you still should ask.

Carlisle applied this approach to reporting on the death of the Utah soldier in the training accident in Kentucky. He had to be precise, target the request directly to the agency conducting the investigation and keep the request simple. It paid off, as Carlisle was able to report on how the Army discovered that the soldier likely lost consciousness and was unable to activate his emergency life vest. Carlisle's reporting also showed the training exercise didn't have enough staff monitoring the swimmers, otherwise they might have observed that the soldier was in distress.

With a plan and patience, it's possible to get valuable federal records. •

Keeping the government from burying investigative reports

How The Salt Lake Tribune got a sexual harassment report on Higher Ed commissioner

By Eric S. Peterson | The Utah Investigative Journalism Project

For two years, The Salt Lake Tribune sought records of an investigation into alleged misconduct by Utah Higher Education Commissioner David Woolstenhulme. Reporter Courtney Tanner requested the report in 2023, was denied and took the fight to the State Records Committee, which ordered the report be released.

Instead, the Utah Board of Higher Education, or UBHE, appealed the decision in district court to block its release. In the meantime, state lawmakers moved to not only get rid of the State Records Committee but also initially tried to undo a part of Utah's open records law that the committee used in ordering the release of the records.

Finally in May 2025, The Tribune prevailed in court and Tanner received the report that

the UBHE had been holding onto for years. The report documented Woolstenhulme inappropriately touching women while he appeared to be "visibly intoxicated." Woolstenhulme has denied the allegations.

Mike Judd, the attorney who represented The Tribune, said the battle to get the records set important precedent and opened



Mike Judd

up new tools for those trying to get similar records.

The troubling reality, Judd says, is that the UBHE tactic in the case was to classify their investigation as a “draft” that would remain private so long as the party being investigated resigned. This maneuver would keep the public in the dark about potential misconduct from public officials.

“That seems to be an established playbook that has kept back who knows how much stuff like this in the past,” Judd said. “Because we were told in the course of this litigation that this was an unwritten rule but an accepted practice that UBHE was using based on University of Utah policies, essentially.”

A draft document?

The road to winning the report’s release in court was a windy path with lots of hurdles, Judd says. Initially, UBHE lobbed every argument it could against release of the report.

“Government agencies always do this in my experience. They’re like ‘GRAMA is a menu we can order off and we’re going to try

and order one of everything,’” Judd said in reference to Utah’s open records law, the Government Records Access and Management Act.

Tanner’s request for the report was initially denied because of a “pending investigation.” But Judd says that argument lost momentum when Woolstenhulme resigned. UBHE also argued releasing the records constituted an “invasion of privacy” and later claimed that the investigative report was a draft that should not be released since it had not been finished.

The State Records Committee pushed back against UBHE’s arguments and applied the GRAMA “balancing test” to order the release of the document. The balancing test argues that if the public’s right to know outweighs the government’s right to secrecy, then even a record properly classified as private or protected can be released.

In 2025, lawmakers tried to strip the balancing test out of GRAMA, and Sen. Mike McKell, R-Spanish Fork, even had a representative of UBHE speak to a committee in favor of his bill to eliminate the

State Records Committee. While the records committee was eliminated, GRAMA's balancing test was spared thanks to tremendous public pushback.

Judd said it was interesting that the issue of what constitutes a draft really didn't come to focus until the matter went to court. Then it came down to proving the report was not a draft as GRAMA defined it. Judd came at it from two different angles: an agency can't just slap the label "draft" on the top of a document and a draft is one that is not sent outside the government agency.

"You can put 'draft' on the top, but if you send it outside your group, that's no longer the case," Judd said.

UBHE hired an outside firm to conduct an impartial investigation into the allegations. But the "draft" report itself was sent to Woolstenhulme, which prompted him to resign so that it would not be completed and made public. Judd said that at the same time Woolstenhulme was still overseeing the state's colleges and universities. he was an adversarial party to the investigation. So by giving him the chance to see

the report, the report itself was no longer a draft.

"Should that count as the same kind of internal circulation? Like you're sending a memo around the office for comment?" Judd asked. "Or should that count as 'sending it outside the agency?' And the government said, 'Well, of course, he was still our head' and our position was, 'Yeah, but you were sending it to him in an adversarial posture. You were literally sending it to the other side at that point.'"

The other approach, Judd said, focused on a GRAMA provision that states a document is a draft if an agency relies on it to take some formal action. In this case, he argued, the report was used to get Woolstenhulme to resign and then was also used by the UBHE board to discuss and accept his resignation.

'A one paragraph win'

The matter was decided by 3rd District Judge Robert Faust in May of 2025, and he quickly set aside UBHE's privacy concerns.

UBHE had told The Tribune that releasing the report would discourage victims from coming

forward if they knew their names would be made public. Yet multiple women had already spoken with the paper about the incident and had their identities protected. In the end, Faust simply allowed victim names to be redacted, which Judd said The Tribune never had any concerns with.

When it came to the draft question, Judd says, the decision was a win but not as expected. He hoped the court would weigh in on the nature of drafts. Faust instead took a more “common sense interpretation,” arguing that you couldn’t call the final document a draft. Nevertheless, Judd took the very brief court ruling as a victory:

“I’ll take a one paragraph win over a 100 page loss any day of the week,” he said.

Takeaways:
Don’t fall for blanket GRAMA denials for “employee records”

While the court didn’t address it specifically, the judge was unfazed by UBHE’s arguments that the investigative report was part of employee personnel records that are protected by GRAMA.

“In the employment context,

there’s this catchall file that says things like personal status information, job performance details and things like that are protected under GRAMA and people will often argue that outside investigations like this are part of the employee file,” Judd said.

He explained that this section of GRAMA is referring to documents like “your quarterly performance review, not a unique, one-off investigation into an alleged breach of the public trust.”

Arguments against the “draft classification”

Judd says it’s wise to challenge draft classifications by seeing if they went “outside” the government agency or were used by the agency to take action. You might file other requests or look to other public records to support your argument. In the Woolstenhulme case, the board met in an emergency closed session immediately before accepting his resignation.

You can also refer to Faust’s

decision and see if the “draft” document was the last one created. If so, you can argue it’s the finished product and not a draft. •

Navigating the justice system for survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault

By Eric S. Peterson & Sydnee Chapman |
The Utah Investigative Journalism Project

On Feb. 27, 2025, The Utah Investigative Journalism Project held a free workshop at Utah Tech University to help survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault, as well as their loved ones and victim advocates, understand how to request police reports, use court databases and advocate for themselves in the justice system. Justin Boardman, a former sex-crimes detective and police consultant also spoke about what survivors need to know about the justice system.

Here are some takeaways from the event.

Police reports:

There are a number of different reports that can be requested. A survivor who is the subject of the record is likely to get more information than a



Justin Boardman
journalist or other third party.

If a case is ongoing, you likely won't receive all the records you want but should at least be able to get the initial contact report, which GRA-MA considers to be a public record.

These reports should provide the basic narrative from when officers first responded

to the scene of a crime.

If the investigation is closed because it went to court or it was never filed in court because prosecutors or police closed the case, you can receive more reports.

Extra reports to request for a closed investigation:

- Initial contact report
- Supplemental reports

- Supervisor reports
- Attachments to the file from investigating and reporting officers

Police call outs

You might also be interested in seeing how often police are called to an address. Possibly the home of an abusive ex, for example. By requesting CAD reports, or computer-aided

Template for requesting open investigation police reports

Hello my name is [BLANK].

[I] OR [A member of my family] was the victim of a crime and I hope you will help me by providing records of the investigation under GRAMA. [Short description of what happened to you or your family member, only 1 or 2 sentences.] I understand the investigation is ongoing but that I still might be able to obtain the initial contact report under GRAMA.

You can consider this my official GRAMA request for the initial contact report for the police response to the incident that took place on [DATE] at [ADDRESS]. The suspect's name is [NAME] and his date of birth is [DOB].

I would like to receive the records electronically. Please let me know if I can answer any questions to help you fulfill this request.

Thank you so much,

*[NAME]
[ADDRESS, EMAIL, PHONE]*

Template for requesting police call outs

Hello my name is [BLANK]. [I] OR [A member of my family] was the victim of a crime and I am concerned about possible criminal activity at a location. I hope you will help provide me with records of police responses to a particular location. [Short description of what happened to you or your family member, only 1 or 2 sentences.]

You can consider this my official GRAMA request for all CAD reports for [ADDRESS] from this [BEGINNING DATE] until [ENDING DATE].

I would like to receive the records electronically. Please let me know if I can answer any questions to help you fulfill this request.

Thank you so much,

[NAME]

[ADDRESS, EMAIL, PHONE]

dispatch records, you will get less information than a full police report but enough to see if police are being called out frequently to a particular address.

Asking a records officer to search for police reports from other cities

Under GRAMA, a records officer is encouraged to point you in the right direction of where other reports you are after might be located. This is useful if you are trying to find

out if a person has had other encounters with law enforcement from different agencies that you don't know about.

Specific language for your request:

"I also understand that under GRAMA section 63G-2-204(4)(b)(iii) you are encouraged to point me in the right direction if other agencies might have records that I am after. If you are able to let me know if there are other police departments

that I should reach out to request police reports on the above named suspect I would be VERY GRATEFUL!"

Court searches:

Anyone can sign up to use the state's court search program called Court Xchange by visiting utcourts.gov/en/court-records-publications/records/xchange.html.

There are fees associated with searches and downloading of documents. To get the most results for a search, try selecting "District and Justice" for the courts to search so that it searches both court systems.

When you enter a name in the search field for a party in a case, remember to put an asterisk after the first name.

As an example, searching "Peterson" in the last name field and "Eric*" in the first name field will tell the system to not just search for Eric but will also include searches for the middle initial and middle name.

When you click on the case number in Xchange. it will

bring up a docket that explains all the events in the trial. If you see notations for "hearings" you can request audio from the courts for those hearings by visiting utcourts.gov/en/court-records-publications/records/transcripts.html

Make a note of the date of the hearing and the tape number when you request audio. Keep in mind, though, that your request for audio will trigger a notification to the parties in the case or their attorneys. That means the defendant might be notified that someone is pulling court audio about the case.

You can view the full video from our training as well as other training videos at The Utah Investigative Journalism Project YouTube channel at youtube.com/@theutahinvestigativejourna272 •

LEGAL

SECTION II



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How to uncover stealth government agencies

The local attorney peeling back secrecy from the Utah School Boards Association

By Eric S. Peterson | The Utah Investigative Journalism Project

John Gadd is a patent attorney who doesn't quite consider himself retired since he still litigates when something gets him fired up.

"I guess I am retired in the sense that I don't continue to work for a paycheck, but I still do a lot of work, mostly for free," he said.

As a parent living in Alpine, he got curious before he got fired up. He was curious when he was looking into the Alpine School District, the biggest in the state, and saw that it was sending thousands of dollars in 2024 to an organization called the Utah School Boards Association.

When he filed a GRAMA request with the Utah School Boards Association to try and understand its finances, he got



John Gadd

a denial letter back, with USBA informing him they were not a government agency, and therefore not subject to GRAMA.

That's when he got fired up.

"That seems crazy to me," Gadd said. By using the Utah Transparent website to investigate, he found that all 41 school boards are members

of the organization. USBA, he says, also received over \$100 million dollars in taxpayer funds over the years from the different school districts.

An uphill battle and a smoking gun

As an attorney, Gadd was ready to take the matter to district court. Which was fortunate for him because the State Records Committee was not sympathetic. In fact, the committee disqualified his appeal from the outset without holding a hearing.

Gadd discovered that the State Records Committee had a list of official government entities, but if a request was made with an entity not on their list, then the appeal was automatically denied.

Gadd went to court, filing a petition for judicial review on March 14, 2024. He argued USBA should be considered a government entity by four different arguments. On June 5, 2025, 3rd District Judge Keith Kelly gave him a win.

There are numerous definitions under the law as to what

qualifies as a government entity, besides obvious ones like being a county or a city.

But then there is the definition the judge focused on in his ruling. That decision focused on the section of GRA-MA that says a government entity can be defined as one that is an agency of another government entity and is funded by the government to carry out the public's business.

"There's a definition where it says 'Well, hey if you are an agency of one of those [entities] or a department or bureau of one of those other things, then you are absolutely subject to GRAMA."

Judge Kelly found that USBA was an agency working on behalf of school boards in the state. In fact, he found it was specifically written into the law about USBA that clearly stated: "The Utah School Boards Association is recognized as an organization and agency of the local school boards of Utah and is representative of those local school boards."

This smoking gun came from

“

If something walks and talks like a government entity, figure out a way to make them comply with government transparency laws

- John Gadd
Patent attorney

”

part of the law written specifically about the USBA.

“They have their own section of Utah code that talks about how great they are,” Gadd said.

Pointing it out to the judge gave him strong evidence in the case.

Public funds and elected officials

In the court’s ruling, the judge also noted that USBA was funded by the government.

“USBA admits that all the revenue it receives, except for interest on invested funds, comes from local boards of education,” the court order states.

The court also found that public money was spent directly on addressing the public’s business. Again, the court pointed to the existing statute that USBA focuses on “activities and problems relating to the state’s educational system.”

“Here you have an organization where 100% of their members are elected officials and almost 100% of their money comes from tax dollars,” Gadd said.

He also made other arguments. Gadd notes that in Utah there are over 100 “public associations” that are typically organized as nonprofit organizations. Under a recent law, these associations are not considered government

entities subject to GRAMA as long as they are not made up of 50% or more members who are elected or appointed public officials and as long as 50% or more of their financial support doesn't come from public funds.

He also argued they were subject to GRAMA based on another Utah law that states that a nonprofit organization is subject to records requests if they are wholly owned or controlled by one or more government entities and receive public funds.

Looking at all angles

His final angle of attack has to deal with property taxes. He found that USBA had actually bought land from the Jordan School District in the '90s. The property tax record shows that USBA listed itself as a government entity so it would be exempt from paying property taxes.

"They say 'drop dead, we're not giving you any records because we're a private entity,' but when it comes to paying property taxes, they've got

themselves listed as owning government buildings and government land," Gadd said.

He is still waiting for decisions on these other approaches and plans to fight them as far as he needs to.

Takeaways:

Get creative

"My advice is to be creative and realize there's more than one way to skin a cat," Gadd said.

By doing research into USBA, he was shocked to discover the sections of Utah code that already defined them as a government agency. But don't forget to focus on what the entity does and who pays for it. If it's public money funding public business, then you're on the right track.

"If something walks and talks like a government entity, figure out a way to make them comply with government transparency laws," he said. •

DATA & DATABASES



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SECTION IV

Court data dashboard offers a treasure trove of story ideas

By Sydnee Chapman | The Utah Investigative Journalism Project

Is crime increasing in your city? Which county has the highest number of evictions? Is medical malpractice on the rise in Utah?

These are the kinds of questions the Utah State Courts filing data can help answer. The Courts public dashboard (bit.ly/utcasefilings) offers a wealth of information that reporters can use to bolster existing stories or come up with new ideas.

It's a tool that "allows reporters to move from anecdotal reporting to data-driven journalism," according to Courts Communications Director Tania Mashburn, who previously worked as a reporter in Utah for over 15 years.

"It can also serve as a tip sheet, helping journalists identify emerging issues early, ask better questions of officials and provide context that makes their reporting more meaningful and impactful to

the public," she added.

Although Utah Courts have reported case filings for a long time, the dashboard is only a few years old, said Courts Director of Data and Research Tucker Samuelson. It aims to make the data user friendly and easily accessible to the public. The dashboard allows users to break down filings by year, court, city, county and case type. The results are then filtered into pie charts, tables and linegraphs that are simple to scan and digest.

Reporters can use the filters to localize state and national stories by evaluating how trends impact their coverage areas, come up with new pitches or bolster their existing reporting.

For example, you can use the appellate tab on the dashboard to see how often cases are appealed to the Utah Supreme Court. Or use the county filter to compare felony

filings in Salt Lake County versus Utah County during the last year.

“Instead of relying solely on press releases or individual case tips, journalists can use the dashboard to spot trends — such as spikes in certain types of criminal charges, increases in eviction filings, or geographic patterns across judicial districts — and turn those patterns into story ideas,” Mashburn said.

For those wanting to go beyond just case filings, the courts also accept statistics requests that can allow journalists to dive into specific topics like domestic violence, traffic offenses or fraud. There is a charge for such requests based on the number of hours it takes to complete and, because the Courts receive multiple statistical requests daily, there isn't a set timeline on fulfilling the requests but staff do their best to help reporters meet their deadlines.

The case filings dashboard is one of just a handful of resources Utah Courts offer to journalists. A full list of resources is available at bit.ly/UT-courtsmedia.

Takeaways:

Use the dashboard to bolster existing reporting

Using data from the dashboard can help you level up your reporting by going beyond press releases and other anecdotal tips to data-driven reporting.

Spot trends and discover new story ideas

Struggling with a slow news day? Playing around with the case filings dashboard can help you spot patterns and emerging trends that you can turn into story ideas, or it can assist you in localizing national and state stories by finding data specific to your coverage area.

Utah State Courts can help with statistics that aren't on the dashboard

Utah State Courts can help with data queries that go beyond case filings. Make sure you have a time frame and, if possible, specific statutes in mind before filing a request for statistical information with the courts. The request form and other court-related resources for journalists are available at bit.ly/UTcourtsmedia. •

Getting down to business

The pros and just one con of Utah's new business search site

By Eric S. Peterson | The Utah Investigative Journalism Project

Business is always booming in Utah, so any reporter or inquisitive citizen should know how to quickly search business listings and find out the people running them. It's a good way to connect public officials to private businesses or track down people behind sketchy companies.

In 2018, for example, the UIJP used business records to show how a Salt Lake City school administrator had signed a contract between the school district and his own private company in apparent violation of state law (the administrator resigned while we were reporting the story).

The Utah Department of Commerce changed its website for business entity searches recently and it's been a significant improvement. It's fast, efficient and, most importantly, a heck of a lot cheaper.

Previously, if you wanted to search a person's name to see all the businesses connected to it (known as a "registered principal search"), it would cost you \$3 a pop. To run a name search cost \$1 and so did downloading a copy of a business document like an annual report. It was not a ton of money, but those searches can easily add up when digging into shell companies and mapping out business connections between politicians and other persons of interest.

But some changes were not for the best, like removing the ability to easily scan a list of businesses to easily spot connections. Luckily, there is a workaround to that problem using another free resource.

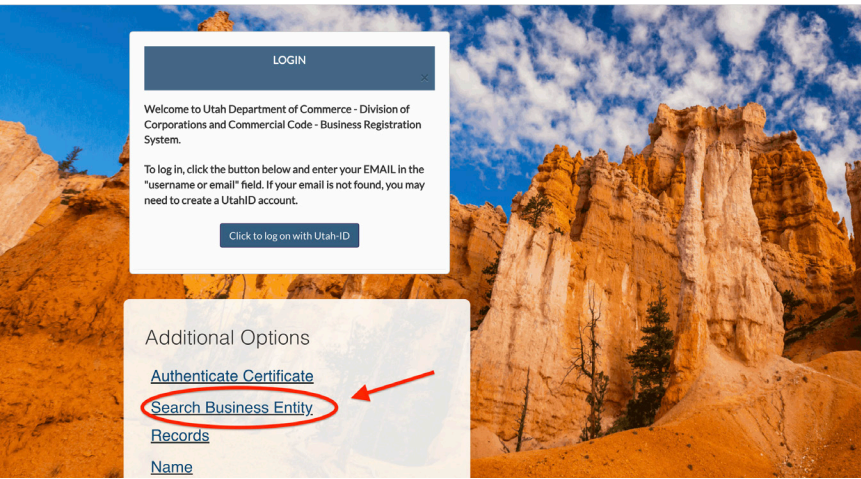
The New Site

Visit businessregistration.utah.gov to start your business searching. This site also is

where you would go to register a business and because of that the first thing you see is a login button. If you are just here to do business searches you don't need a login, just scroll down to the "Search Business Entity Records" button underneath the "Additional Options" header.

It easily allows you to search a business name as an exact search, or something more open like searches that start with or just contain parts of the information you put in the search field.

It allows a search of a prin-



Step 1: Click "Search business entity"

Screenshot of businessregistration.utah.gov

Once you click on "search business entity," you'll be taken to a page where you can do standard searches. It gives you the option to search by unique field like an entity number or the domicile name, fancy language for the state or jurisdiction where a business was officially formed. But you are most likely going to search by the name of the business or the name of someone associated with it.

principal and registered agent. The principal is an official listed member of a company like a director. The registered agent is a person who is able to receive legal notices for a company and has to have an address in the state.

The registered agent can also be a member of the company or they might be a lawyer or a person at a company that



Step 2: Use the search fields

BUSINESS SEARCH

* Includes Business Entities, Name Reservations & Foreign Name Registrations.

I WOULD LIKE TO SEARCH BY:

Starts With Contains Exact Match

Name:

Entity Number:

Domicile Name:

Assumed Name:

Principal Name:

Registered Agent Name:

Screenshot of businessregistration.utah.gov

specializes in forming LLCs for a fee.

There is an advanced search option that allows you to get pinpoint precise in your search if that is what you are after. It will allow you to search business filings for specific time frames and by status of the business (like active, or canceled) and even if the business is foreign or based in Utah.

When you click on a business, you can see information about when the business was formed, the name of the registered agent and an address.

Often the registered agent is a member of the business and might use a home address,

which can help you track down individuals for contact.

It will also list the other members or principals of the business.

You'll also find at the bottom of the listing options to see if the business' name has changed in the past, if there have been mergers and other options like "Filing History" where you can download company reports for free.

Keep in mind, company reports for LLCs are not that rich in detail. Though you might be able to go back and see old members of a company in previous filings who are no longer with the company.

The Con

OK, we said there was a con, so here it is. The old system, while more expensive, did offer the chance to get basic information about similar sounding businesses or businesses attached to a particular name.

If you searched a common name like John Smith, there would be pages of business listings. But the listings would also show business addresses next to the names.

One could quickly scan the listings and see common addresses. If you knew for sure a business address associated with the subject of your inquiry you could then use that information to reasonably link other

businesses to that name.

But with the new site a name search will just bring up the various business names and you have to click on each individual one to get more info like an associated address.

This can be a serious time suck if you're trying to quickly find out businesses that might all be connected based on a specific individual or business name.

Luckily, you can also search company names and names of company officers at another free site: opencorporates.com. This site scrapes basic business information from state and

Searching All jurisdictions > United States > Utah

John Smith GO

exclude inactive Advanced Options

inactive JOHN D SMITH *manager*, **inactive** JDI HOMES, LLC (Utah (US), 21 Apr 2003-21 Apr 2004) 4917 W 800 N, West Point, Utah, 84015

inactive JOHN D SMITH *registered agent*, **inactive** JDI HOMES, LLC (Utah (US), 21 Apr 2003-21 Apr 2004) 4917 W 800 N, West Point, UT, 84015

inactive JOHN D SMITH *member*, **inactive** SMISSE JTECH, LLC (Utah (US), 26 May 2011-31 May 2016) 3319 W 1600 N, CLINTON, Utah, 84015

inactive JOHN D SMITH *agent*, **inactive** JDI HOMES, LLC (Utah (US), 21 Apr 2003-21 Apr 2004) 4917 W 800 N, West Point, UT, 84015

inactive JOHN D. SMITH *vice president*, **inactive** ATLAS EQUIPMENT CO. (Utah (US), 6 Jan 1956- 1 Mar 1989) 470 N 850 E, AMERICAN FORK, Utah, 84002

inactive JOHN D. SMITH *director*, **inactive** MAJESTIC MACHINERY INCORPORATED (Utah (US), 2 Oct 1986- 1 Jan 1994) 470 N 850 E, AMERICAN FORK, Utah, 84003

Screenshot of opencorporates.com

even international agencies.

If, for example, you are interested in seeing if a Utah business owner has operations in other states or countries this would be a good place to research their business presence outside of the Beehive State.

An opencorporates.com search also helps you make those quick connections between names and addresses that you can't easily do with the state site.

Open Corporates is a valuable resource but it's not likely

to be kept as up to date as the state commerce website. But it also has another advantage worth checking out: address searches.

With Open Corporates, you can search by more than just a name, you can also search by an address. This will bring up all businesses listed to that address, even if they are out of state or out of the country.

Happy hunting! •