

March 14, 2001

Mr. Jeffrey W. Blackmon
#935563
Wabash Valley Correctional Facility
P.O. Box 1111
Carlisle, IN 47838-1111

Re: *Advisory Opinion 01-FC-14*; Alleged Denial of Access to Public Records by the Indiana Department of Correction.

Dear Mr. Blackmon:

This is in response to your formal complaint, which was received on February 14, 2001. You have alleged that the Indiana Department of Correction ("Department") violated the Indiana Access to Public Records Act, ("APRA,") Indiana Code chapter 5-14-3. Specifically, you claim that you requested access to several items from the Department and did not receive a response to your request. Ms. Pam Pattison of the Department responded in writing to your complaint and a copy of her response is enclosed for your reference.

For the reasons set forth below, it is my opinion that the Department's failure to respond to your written request within seven (7) days after it was received was a denial that is actionable under the APRA.

BACKGROUND

According to your complaint, on January 22, 2001, you sent a written request to Ms. Pattison for access to and, if necessary, a copy of several documents.¹ You sent this request by certified mail and received a return receipt indicating that on January 29, 2001, someone from the Department had accepted the request on behalf of Ms. Pattison. You also provided a copy of your request to the public information officer for the Wabash Valley Correctional Facility. You filed your formal complaint because more than seven (7) days had passed and you had not received a response from the Department.

In response to your complaint, Ms. Pattison admitted that the Department received your written request on January 29, 2001. After receiving your request, Ms. Pattison contacted the public information officer for the Facility and was informed that you did receive this information as a result of an investigation that was conducted as a result of allegations you raised about an employee of the Department. The Department does not dispute your right to access public records, but considers your formal complaint a reaction to recent disciplinary action taken against you.

ANALYSIS

The public policy of the APRA states that "(p)roviding persons with information is an essential function of a representative government and integral part of the routine duties of public officials and employees, whose duty it is to provide the information." Ind. Code § 5-14-3-1. Furthermore, "[t]his chapter shall be liberally construed to implement this policy and place the burden of proof for the nondisclosure of a public record on the public agency that would deny access to the record and not on the person seeking to inspect and copy the record." Ind. Code § 5-14-3-1.

The Department is clearly a public agency for the purposes of the APRA. Ind. Code § 5-14-3-2. Accordingly, any person has the right to inspect and copy the public records of the Department during regular business hours unless the public records are excepted from disclosure as confidential or otherwise nondisclosable under Indiana Code section 5-14-3-4. Ind. Code § 5-14-3-3(a).

It is the responsibility of the public agency to respond to requests for access to public records within a specified time period. The APRA does not set any time periods for producing public records, merely for responding to the request. For requests that are delivered by mail, a denial is deemed to have occurred if seven (7) days elapse after the agency receives the request and there has been no response. Ind. Code §5-14-3-9(b). Once a denial has occurred under the APRA, a person may file suit in the circuit or superior court in which the denial took place to compel the public agency to disclose the public records requested. Ind. Code § 5-14-3-9(d).

According to your complaint, you mailed your request to the Department and did not receive a response to your request within seven (7) days after the Department received it. It is my opinion that under the APRA, this failure to respond to your request constituted a denial that is actionable under Indiana Code section 5-14-3-9(d). If you had received the information requested as a result of the investigation referenced in Ms. Pattison's letter, the Department was not obligated to provide you with the same information twice. It is my opinion, however, that you should have received a response to your request even if it were to state merely that you had already received the public records requested.

CONCLUSION

It is my opinion that the Department of Correction's failure to respond to your written request for access to public records within seven (7) days after it was received was a denial that is actionable under Indiana Code section 5-14-3-9(d).

Sincerely,

Anne Mullin O'Connor

Enclosure

cc: Ms. Pam Pattison, DOC

¹ Your request listed 55 different items.