



STATE OF INDIANA

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August 21, 2009

Derek Morris
DOC #104145
3038 West 850 South
Bunker Hill, Indiana 46914

Re: Formal Complaint 09-FC-175; Alleged Violation of the Access to Public Records Act by the Howard County Sheriff's Office

Dear Mr. Morris:

This advisory opinion is in response to your formal complaint alleging the Howard County Sheriff's Office ("Sheriff") violated the Access to Public Records Act ("APRA") (Ind. Code 5-14-3) by failing to respond to your request for access to records. A copy of the Sheriff's response to the complaint is enclosed for your reference. It is my opinion the Sheriff did not violate the APRA.

BACKGROUND

You allege that on July 7, 2009 you mailed to the Sheriff a request for copies of a number of records. You allege the Sheriff did not respond to your request. Your complaint was postmarked on August 3, and my office received it on August 5.

The Sheriff responded to the complaint by letter dated August 21. The Sheriff contends the office did not receive your request. Further, the Sheriff provides a response to the request you enclosed with the complaint.

ANALYSIS

The public policy of the APRA states, "[p]roviding persons with information is an essential function of a representative government and an integral part of the routine duties of public officials and employees, whose duty it is to provide the information." I.C. § 5-14-3-1. The Sheriff is clearly a public agency for the purposes of the APRA. I.C. § 5-14-3-2(m). Accordingly, any person has the right to inspect and copy the public records of the Sheriff during regular business hours unless the public records are excepted from disclosure as confidential or otherwise nondisclosable under the APRA. I.C. § 5-14-3-3(a).

A request for records may be oral or written. I.C. §§ 5-14-3-3(a), 5-14-3-9(c). If the request is delivered by mail and the agency does not respond to the request within seven days of receipt, the request is deemed denied. I.C. § 5-14-3-9(b).

A response could be an acknowledgement that the request has been received and information regarding how or when the agency intends to comply. There are no prescribed timeframes when the records must be produced by a public agency. A public agency is required to regulate any material interference with the regular discharge of the functions or duties of the public agency or public employees. I.C. § 5-14-3-7(a). However, section 7 does not operate to deny to any person the rights secured by section 3 of the Access to Public Records Act. I.C. § 5-14-3-7(c). Former public access counselors and I have stated that records must be produced within a reasonable period of time, based on the facts and circumstances.

Here, the Sheriff did not receive your request. If the Sheriff had received the request, the office would have been required to issue a response to you within seven days of receipt. I.C. § 5-14-3-9(b). An agency cannot, though, respond to a request it has not received. As such, the Sheriff has not violated the APRA by not responding to a request the office did not receive.

CONCLUSION

For the foregoing reasons, it is my opinion the Sheriff has not violated the APRA.

Best regards,



Heather Willis Neal
Public Access Counselor

Cc: A. Howard Williams, Howard County Sheriff's Department