Pennsylvania
Office of Open Records

2026 AGENCY OPEN RECORDS OFFICER SURVEY REPORT

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Introduction/Background

The Office of Open Records (OOR) is a quasi-judicial tribunal created in 2008 by the Right-to-Know Law (RTKL). Its main responsibility is deciding appeals of denied requests for government agency records. The OOR annually issues thousands of legally binding decisions that determine whether a local or Commonwealth agency properly denied access to government records. The OOR's website also serves as a major resource hub for citizens, public officials, and members of the media by offering pre-recorded training seminars, guides, and additional resources explaining the RTKL process. The website also allows users to conduct topical searches for over 45,000 Final Determinations of previous appeals.

While the OOR tracks how many appeals it receives annually, there is no single office or agency that tracks how many requests are filed each year with Commonwealth and local agencies. In 2017-2018, the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee conducted a comprehensive review of the fiscal impact on Commonwealth and local government agencies for implementation of the RTKL. In its 2018 report, the Committee estimated that Pennsylvania agencies subject to the RTKL received a combined total of over 109,000 RTKL requests annually.

This summer, the OOR conducted its own Commonwealth-wide survey of all Agency Open Records Officers (AOROs)[1] on file with the OOR. The survey marked the start of an annual effort to gauge the number of RTKL requests received by agencies, as well as the impact of rapidly advancing technology on agencies' processing of RTKL requests.

The survey specifically collected data on how many requests each agency received in 2025 and whether the agency uses electronic redaction tools. The survey also used a quantifying scale allowing respondents to indicate how many of those RTKL requests were fulfilled with paper copies, how many were commercial requests, and how many may have involved the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools.

Of the 4,066 agencies contacted, 1,262 responded — roughly 31% of the survey sample. Based on this survey, we estimate that all agencies received a combined total of over 285,000 RTKL requests in 2025.

In their general comments, AOROs noted the significant increase in RTKL requests and the time it takes to respond to them. They cited the leading causes as rapid advancement of AI, vexatious requesters, and commercial requesters. Respondent AOROs also commented that RTKL requests increasingly require more time, need more legal review, and stretch agency resources.

The collected data reveals a rapidly changing agency landscape in technological transition that threatens to imminently overwhelm the entire RTKL process.

[1] An AORO is the agency official or employee designated by an agency to receive and process records requests under the RTKL and to ensure that each request receives a proper and timely response.

General Summary

The OOR has 4,066 registered AOROs in its database, varying in size from the City of Philadelphia with roughly 1.6 million residents to Pine Township with 60 residents. Of that total, 1,265, or 31% of recipients responded.[2] Respondents reported a total of 89,559 RTKL requests received, for an average of nearly 71 requests per responding agency.[3] Based on this average, the estimated total number of annual requests received by AOROs registered with the OOR may be extrapolated to be nearly 288,000.

The survey sought the agency name, total number of requests received, the number of requests fulfilled with paper copies, whether the agency uses electronic redaction software, and the agency's experience with AI in the request process. The survey questions and general responses are as follows:

Total Number of AORO's Contacted:	**4066**

Total Number of Responses:	**1265**

How many requests were fulfilled by providing the requester with paper copies?	All	Most	Some	None
	9% (114)	8% (96)	37% (466)	47% (589)

How many requests were made by commercial requesters?	All	Most	Some	None
	11% (141)	44% (542)	35% (441)	10% (131)

Does your agency use software to electronically redact records that are in electronic format?	Yes	No
	31% (394)	69% (871)

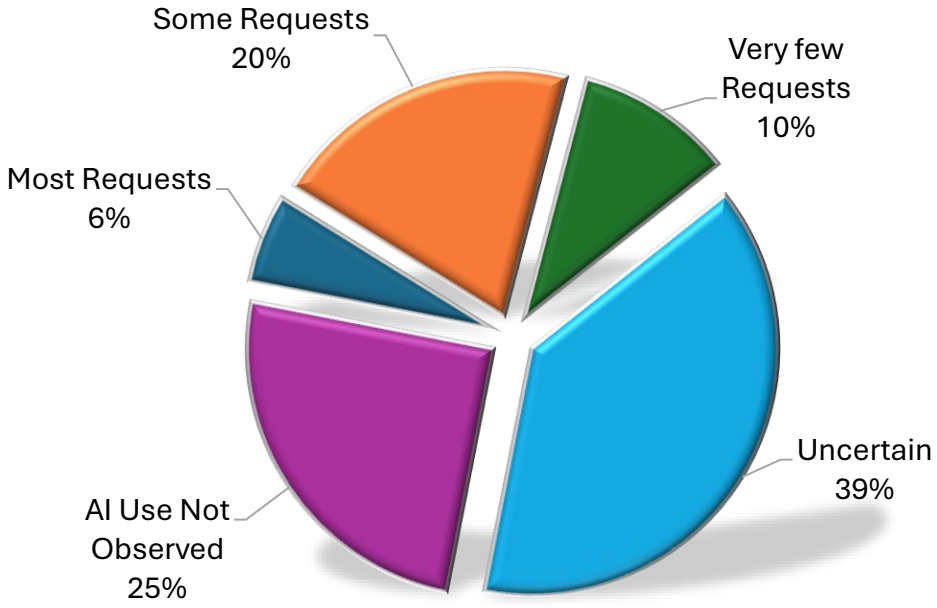
Which of the following best describes your agency's experience with requests that were AI-generated?	Nearly all Requests	Most Requests	Some Requests	Very few Requests	AI Use Not Determinable	AI Use Not Observed
	2% (20)	4% (53)	20% (256)	10% (130)	39% (490)	25% (316)

[2] Of the 1,265 respondents, 439 were Townships, 291 were Boroughs, 228 were categorized as "Other", 196 were School Districts, 48 were Police Departments, 44 were Counties, and 19 were Cities.

[3] Although a handful of high-volume agencies increase the average, other large agencies did not participate, so the figure should be read with both factors in mind.

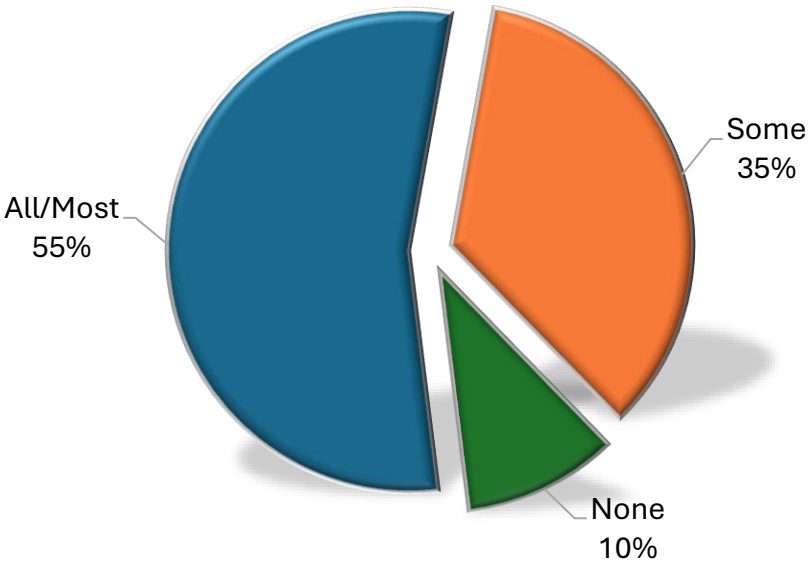
Data Regarding AI

In 2025, the OOR observed a rapid increase in the use of AI by requesters filing appeals, from a rare encounter to seeing it used in most appeals. Survey respondents reported a similar trend with respect to AI being used to file requests, with 36% indicating that AI was used in at least some of the requests filed with them. This figure likely understates actual use because nearly 39% of agencies remain uncertain about whether AI played a role in generating a given request, as does the sharp surge of reported AI use in 2026. As agencies have become more adept at recognizing AI-generated requests, the OOR has received an increasing number of calls and communications reporting its use and expects the 2026 survey results to reflect an even greater increase in AI use. Additionally, the OOR has seen a spike in appeals and is now seeing over 500 appeals filed per month, a sharp increase from the 2024 average of 269 appeals. To put this in perspective, the OOR surpassed the 3,970 appeals docketed in 2025 at the end of September.



Information Regarding Commercial Requesters

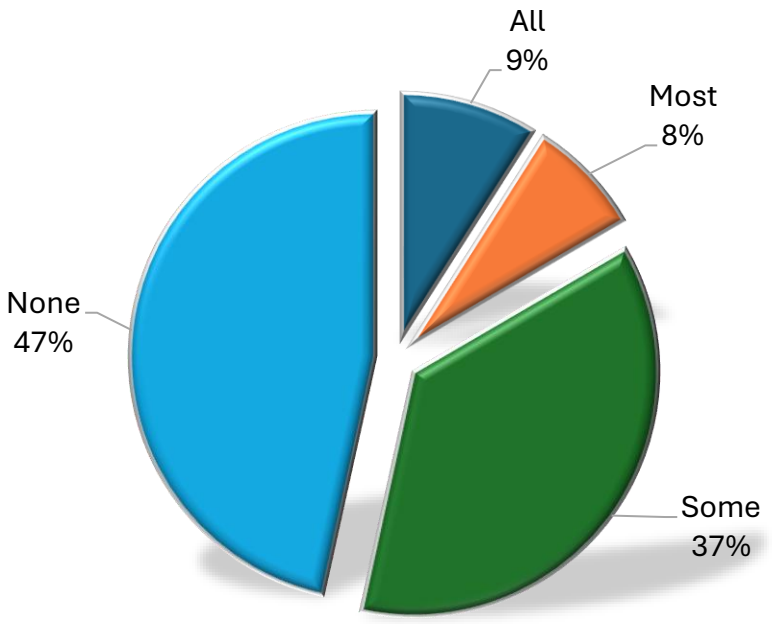
An overwhelming majority of agencies report receiving requests from commercial requesters. Nearly 90% of responding agencies indicated that at least some of the requests they received came from commercial requesters. To further show the impact of commercial requesters, almost half of the responding agencies report that all or most of their requests were from commercial requesters. This high proportion underscores the extent to which businesses are using records obtained with the RTKL for private interests to support operations, gain competitive insight, or compile data for resale. Demands on time and resources can accumulate quickly, particularly when a single commercial requester submits multiple or broad requests. Commercial requests are especially challenging for agencies with limited personnel and tight budgets. These direct implications on agency staff time and costs may warrant closer legislative scrutiny, because commercial requesters are subject to the same fee structure as citizen requesters under the RTKL, resulting in many hours of labor without compensation to the Agency.



Information Regarding Paper Copies and Electronic Redaction

Requests Fulfilled with Paper Copies

A little over half of responding agencies (53%) indicated that they still fulfill at least some of their requests with paper copies, while the remaining 47% provide only electronic copies. This nearly even split suggests that paper copies remain a consistent fixture in the fulfillment of RTKL requests, even as digital record storage and management become more common. These numbers are notable because they show that a comprehensive shift to electronic delivery is far from complete and that electronic records will not fulfill every request.



Electronic Redaction Software

Only 31% of responding agencies indicated that they currently use electronic redaction software. This relatively low adoption rate is notable given the volume of records agencies process electronically and well-documented effectiveness that redaction software offers over manual methods. The gap suggests that roughly two-thirds of agencies may still rely on manual redaction processes, which the OOR has flagged as an area to pinpoint in upcoming training sessions.

Conclusion

The survey reveals two converging trends in Pennsylvania's RTKL process, old and new. The rapid rise of the use and misuse of AI, combined with widespread use of the RTKL by commercial requesters, is placing unprecedented strain on the process designed to give access to government records in Pennsylvania. Automated tools now let requesters generate and submit requests at an increased volume and speed that agencies were never designed to handle.

Commercial requesters are not new; they are a widespread and long-standing presence under the RTKL. Since its inception, they have built the records they obtain into their business models, harvesting them in bulk for resale, data aggregation, or market research. Almost every responding agency, regardless of size, function, or jurisdiction, now receives commercial requests.

These two trends threaten the integrity of the system itself. The spike in RTKL requests and appeals at the OOR in 2026, foreshadowed by this survey, may soon produce a system overwhelmed not by genuine public demand for transparency and accountability, but by the sheer scale and volume of computer-assisted filings. A process designed to resolve disputes could quickly slow to a crawl, blocking access to public records; the very outcome the RTKL was designed to prevent.

The RTKL was drafted long before the emergence of AI and its framework provide for a few practical mechanisms for addressing the challenges it now presents. Still, the OOR continues to develop training regarding best practices under the current law to assist agencies advance the public interest while at the same time maximize their staff time, legal review, and resources. For example, agencies can adopt policies that charge fees for complex datasets, set standards for automated filings, and establish how requests will be processed.

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