



Testimony

HB 1810

Testimony Before the Texas House Committee on State Affairs

by Shelby Sterling, Policy Analyst

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

My name is Shelby Sterling, and I am a policy analyst at the Texas Public Policy Foundation. Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee today. I am testifying in support of [House Bill 1810](#).

The Texas Public Information Act (TPIA) provides the public with the tools needed to request government information. As the opening [preamble of the public information act](#) states:

The people, in delegating authority, do not give their public servants the right to decide what is good for the people to know and what is not good for them to know. The people insist on remaining informed so that they may retain control over the instruments they have created.

While this intent may be good and true, the law in practice has evolved into a tool that is often less effective than what it aspires to be. This is evidenced, in part, when individuals receive the requested information in an unusable format—one that is not easy to search or sort. The Office of the Attorney General stated that information should be provided in the requested format, if available. Unfortunately, that is not always the outcome.

For instance, a requestor may seek information through the TPIA in an Excel spreadsheet and, if the governmental entity keeps the information in an Excel spreadsheet, the information should be provided as such. Oftentimes, however, a governmental entity will provide the information in PDF format, which is not easily searchable or sortable.

Many individuals, groups, journalists, researchers, and the public may request data for analysis or are trying to analyze a large amount of information. A PDF requires extensive work of “scraping and converting” information so it can be converted into a spreadsheet that is more easily searchable and sortable. PDFs are often inadequate and do not provide the opportunity for the requestor to easily search, analyze, or synthesize the data. This legislation would not only provide format accessibility to the requestor, it would also reduce the workload on government employees so that they do not need to maintain multiple versions of the same information.

HB 1810 would require electronic public information to be produced in a searchable and sortable format, if the information is maintained in that manner and the requestor asks for information in a searchable and sortable format. Obtaining information from governmental entities should not be made more difficult by providing such information in unsearchable documents.

Texans should have the right to obtain government information in the usable and requested format. While some governmental entities already provide records as requested, codifying the attorney general’s opinion into law would provide relief to information requestors and reduce future rulings from the Office of the Attorney General on this issue. This legislation would streamline the quality of data received under the Public Information Act.

HB 1810 offers a way to strengthen the TPIA and ensure the public has more easily accessible government information. For these reasons, we support HB 1810. Thank you for your time and consideration. ★

Shelby Sterling, JD, is a policy analyst for the Government for the People campaign at the Texas Public Policy Foundation. She is a licensed attorney with a JD from Texas A&M University School of Law in Fort Worth with a concentration in public policy. Sterling received her BA in Letters from the University of Oklahoma.

