

As the Government, we wish to continue to play our role in establishing proper standards and enabling effective use of the Act. To that end, information which is believed will be of assistance has been included, which you are now invited to explore:

A USER'S GUIDE TO THE ACCESS TO INFORMATION ACT

The Access to Information Act, 2002, was passed in June, 2002. It will give citizens and other persons a general legal right of access to official government documents which would otherwise be inaccessible.

By recognising and upholding this right, the Act aims to reinforce fundamental democratic principles vital to:

- **improved , more transparent government;**
- **greater accountability of government to its people;**
- **increased public influence on and participation in national decision making; and**
- **informed knowledge of the functioning of government.**

The Act therefore signals the departure from an age-old culture of secrecy surrounding government and its day to day activities.

The History of ATI

Access to Information or Freedom of Information legislation, as it is called in some jurisdictions, has existed since 1776 and is in force in many countries. (eg the United States, Australia, Canada and most of Europe.)

The last ten years have seen a tremendous increase in the number of countries adopting this type of legislation, the chief reasons being:

- **the rise of new democracies with constitutional guarantees of the right to information;**
- **an increased involvement of International Bodies/Funding Agencies in the promotion of this type of law in furtherance of government accountability and transparency;**

Article 19 – Universal Declaration of Human Rights

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

In the Caribbean, Jamaica follows Trinidad and Belize as the third CARICOM country to enact such legislation.

ATI PROCEDURES FOR THE APPLICANT

A. How to Request Information

Step 1

Research

Research the topic thoroughly before making a request. Fishing expeditions are usually an inefficient use of both your time and ATI Personnel's time and resources.

Step 2

Where to Apply

Determine which Government entity is most likely to have the information desired and decide whether to make:

- i) an informal request for the information (visit the websites, check the ATI Road Map or call the Access Unit in each Ministry to find out if the information desired is already routinely disclosed or made available)

or

- ii) a formal request under the Act for information which is not readily available or already published

Use the Access to Information Road Map to discern what entity is most likely to have the information required and the names, addresses and location of Principal Officers and ATI Officers

Step 3

Making Your Application for Information

- i. To apply for information under the Act, **complete an Application form or write a letter** requesting the information desired.
- ii. Applications may also be made by email, telephone or fax.
- iii. If a personal visit is made to the Public Authority to request access, the Officer responsible for ATI applications will ask that the request be put in writing in order to conform with the provisions of the Act.
- iv. If for any reason, you are unable to do this, then the Officer should be so informed so that this may be done by him for you.
- v. Be as specific as possible in the Application i.e. describe the subject matter of the records and, if known, indicate the dates of the records, the places where they originated, and the names of the originating persons or offices.
- vi. State that the records are requested under the ATI Act. It would be prudent to address the envelope in the following manner: "**Access to Information Act Request**" or words to similar effect. This will bring the letter to the attention of staff in the mailroom so that they may appreciate the need to forward it as quickly as possible to the Authority's ATI personnel.
- vii. The Officer responsible for ATI applications may be asked to assist in identifying the documents desired (**S. 7 (3) (a)**)
- viii. A daytime telephone number should be included and such other contact information as will make it easy for the Officer to remain in contact with you. This will aid the processing of your Application within the time specified.

Application Forms will be available in hard copy from each Ministry, on-line at each Ministry's website or at the ATI Unit's webpage at www.jis.gov.jm

SAMPLE BAD ATI APPLICATION LETTER

Dear Sir¹,

My name is Mr. Brown² and in the 1970's some official person was declared persona non grata. There was a newspaper article on it.³

Or

I would like information on the Furniture Scandal⁴

Sincerely

Hurdell Brown

1. Should be addressed to a specific government entity's office

2. Should indicate in letter his address, tel. Number etc for contact

3. Should indicate the name of the paper if known

4. Should specify the documents requested.

B. Amendment & Annotation of Your Personal Records

- i. Where an official document containing personal information about you is incomplete, incorrect, out of date or misleading, and is used or is available for use by a government entity for administrative purposes, an Application may also be made to have the document amended or annotated.
- ii. This Application must be in writing and must specify the basis for making the claim and the nature of the amendment or annotation which you require.
- iii. Where an annotation is required, you must include, along with the Application, a statement specifying the correction which you feel needs to be made.
- iv. You will, in most cases, be required to provide verification of the truth of the matters contained in this type of Application. You may also be asked to provide relevant identification.

SAMPLE GOOD ATI APPLICATION LETTER	
<p>Principal Officer or other relevant Officer¹</p> <p>Name of Ministry Address of Ministry</p> <p>Re: Access to Information Act Request</p> <p>Dear:</p> <p>This is a request under the Access to Information Act.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I request that a copy of the following documents <i>[or documents containing the following information]</i> be provided to me: <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>I am aware that I am entitled to make this request under the Access to Information Act and that if my request is denied I am entitled to know the grounds for this denial</p> <p>If possible, I would prefer to see the original documents in person rather than having copies made, in order to avoid copying fees.</p> <p>Sincerely,</p> <p>Name Address Telephone Number and email address</p>	<p>1. Addresses letter to ATI offices in the relevant Government Entity;</p> <p>2. Specifies law under which the request is being made;</p> <p>3. Specifies documents requested;</p> <p>4. Establishes familiarity with the ATI Act</p>

C. Responding to Your Application and Time Limits

- i.** Receipt of your Application must be acknowledged in writing by the Public Authority to which it is addressed. A decision must be made and you must be so informed **within 30 days of receipt of the Application**. The Act also allows for the extension of this time period by another 30 days which may only be done where there is reasonable cause to do so.
- ii.** If Access to the document is to be given, that also must be done within the 30 day time limit.
- iii.** If you desire copies to be made, a fee will be chargeable. You may, however, request a waiver, remission or reduction of those fees. You should note however, that the running of time will be suspended until a decision in whatever regard is made.

D. Granting You Access to Documents

Under the Act, you are entitled to view, listen to, inspect or have a copy or transcript made of the information requested. Access to information may be granted in a form other than that which you requested, if to do so would prove detrimental to the preservation of the document or be inappropriate having regard to its physical.

E. Transfer of Applications

- i.** Your Application may be transferred to another government entity if the information requested is held by that other entity or the subject matter of what you requested is more closely connected to that other entity's functions.
- ii.** The transfer must be done not later than 14 days after receipt of your Application by the original government body
- iii.** You must be informed immediately of this transfer and told the details of the receiving government body and personnel.

F. Release/Denial of Request

The information requested will be released provided it does not fall in any of the nine (9) categories of exempt documents under the Act. Exempt documents are those which:

- affect security, defense or international relations
- relate to law enforcement
- are subject to legal privilege
- affect national security
- reveal government's deliberative processes
- relate to business affairs
- relate to heritage sites
- affect personal privacy
- are Cabinet Documents

G. Applicable Fees

- i. Fees under the Act are chargeable only for the reproduction of any official document (**S. 12**). You are not liable to pay fees for inspection, viewing, or listening to any official document to which access has been granted.
- ii. You will be required to pay such fees as are applicable before the actual reproduction of the document is done
- iii. A request for a waiver, reduction or remission of fees may be made under **S. 12 (2)** of the Act.

H. Your Rights of Appeal

- i. You have a right of Appeal with respect to:
 - refusal of a grant of access
 - the grant of access to only some of the documents requested
 - deferral of the grant of access
 - refusal to amend or annotate a personal record
 - the charging of, or amount of a fee
- ii. You must make your Appeal in writing [Internal Review or Appeal to the Appeals Tribunal if a decision has already been made at Internal Review or Internal Review is not applicable]
- iii. You must utilise the Internal Review Process (where applicable) before an appeal may be made to the Appeals Tribunal
- iv. Internal Review will not be applicable if the original decision on the Application

SAMPLE LETTER APPEALING FEES

Permanent Secretary or Principal Officer
Name of Public Authority
Address of Public Authority

Re: Access to Information Act Application for Internal Review

Dear:

This is an application for Internal Review under the Access to Information Act. On *[date]* I requested documents under the Act. My request was assigned the following Reference Number: *[000 000-000]*.

On *[date]*, I received a response to my request in a letter signed by *[official's name]* stating that access to the document requested would be granted upon payment of *[\$ amount of fees]* I am appealing the amount of the fee charged.

Or *[Name of responsible Minister, official address etc.]*

On *[date]*, I received a response to my request in a letter signed by *[official's name]* stating that access to the document requested would be granted upon payment of *[\$ amount of fees]*

I believe that I am entitled to a waiver/ reduction of fees. Disclosure of the documents I requested is in the public interest as the information is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations or activities of the government.

[or] I cannot afford any of the amounts charged as I am a student engaged in research at the University of the West Indies.

Thank you for consideration of this appeal.

for access to information was made by
the Permanent Secretary or Principal Officer,
or the Responsible Minister **or** where no decision on the original application was made.

***SAMPLE LETTER
APPEALING EXEMPTION***

Principal Officer or other relevant Officer
Name of Public Authority
Address of Public Authority

Re: Access to Information Act Appeal

Dear _____:

This is an appeal under the Access to Information Act.

On *[date]* I requested documents under the Access to Information Act. My request was assigned the following Reference Number: *[000 000-000]*.

On *[date]*, I received a response to my request in a letter signed by *[official's name.]* denying my request. I now wish to obtain a review of the denial of my request.

I believe the documents that were withheld must be disclosed under the ATI Act because

Thank you for consideration of this appeal.

Sincerely,

Name
Address
Telephone Number