




# **Evaluation of Data Practices Process**


Presentation to the City of Saint Paul Audit Committee

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# Agenda

 Study background and purpose

 Research questions and methods

 GovQA platform overview and data findings

 What we heard: staff, peer jurisdictions, and surveys

 Key findings

 Recommendations

 Discussion

# Study Background & Research Questions

The City of Saint Paul partnered with Wilder Research to evaluate its public data request process under the Minnesota Government Data Practices Act (MGDPA).

Three guiding research questions:

- How is the City's current public data request process operating?
- How does the public experience the current request process?
- What opportunities exist to strengthen the process moving forward?

# Methods

Document & system review: City policies, GovQA training materials, internal workflows, and model guidance from the MN Data Practices Office (DPO)

Literature review: Peer-reviewed and gray literature on best practices for municipal public records programs nationwide

Peer jurisdiction interviews: Representatives from Hennepin County, Minneapolis, Duluth, the State Auditor's Office, the League of Minnesota Cities, and the DPO

Surveys: Staff survey (n=13 departmental leads) and portal user survey (n=26 requesters)

GovQA data analysis: Extract of 75,000+ requests from 2022–2025



GovQA Platform Overview and Request Volume Findings

# **Current Process & Key Data**

# GovQA: The City's Request Management Platform



GovQA is the City's central platform for receiving, tracking, and managing public data requests across all departments



Key capabilities: public request portal, multi-department routing, parent-child request structure, document management, built-in redaction, audio/video redaction integration, and reporting dashboards



The City uses a decentralized model: GovQA centralizes intake and tracking while departments locate and review responsive records

# GovQA Comparison

GovQA compares favorably to alternatives (NextRequest, JustFOIA) on complex workflows including multi-department routing, parent-child requests, and redaction

Critical distinction: GovQA manages and tracks requests but does not retrieve records from City systems — staff must search email, shared drives, and departmental databases separately

# Request Volume: A Growing Workload

75,370 total requests received 2022–2025 (2025 data partial through November)

Year-over-year growth: 15,190 (2022) → 19,005 (2023) → 22,678 (2024) — a 49% increase over three years

Average close time: ~19.6 days overall; median of 4 days — a small number of complex requests significantly drive up the average

Close times have improved: 20.4 days avg (2022) → 12.1 days (2024), reflecting operational progress

Open request rate: ~0.5% for completed years 2022–2024 — a strong completion rate

Departments with higher open-request rates warrant attention: Planning & Economic Development (36%), Human Resources (33%), City Attorney (19%)

# Request Volume by Department

Police Department accounts for 95% of all requests (71,585 of 75,367 total)

Next highest: Safety & Inspections (2.2%), Site Administrator (0.6%), Fire (0.5%)

PD Interagency Requests have grown rapidly: near zero in 2022 to 19.7% of request type in 2025

Human Rights & Equal Economic Opportunity requests have grown year-over-year (19 in 2022 → 123 in 2025)

Non-police departments account for ~5% of volume but face proportionally higher complexity

Takeaway: Improvements benefiting Police will have the broadest impact; citywide consistency matters for all departments



Staff Interviews, Peer Jurisdictions, and Survey Results

# **What We Heard**

# What We Heard: GovQA as a Coordination Tool

Staff consistently described GovQA as effective for tracking requests, routing to departments, communicating with requesters, and maintaining documentation

Critical limitation: GovQA does not retrieve records — staff must search email, shared drives, and other repositories outside the platform

“GovQA is really just a repository that allows you to communicate with the requester.” — City staff

GovQA’s flexibility has enabled customized departmental workflows — but created inconsistent practices across the organization

“The system gives too many hidden options, so if you don’t know the system really deeply, you don’t know how to leverage all of the aspects of it.” — City staff

Many features remain underutilized due to limited training and awareness of available functionality

# What We Heard: Challenges Across the System



Request intake is highly manual: open-ended forms require staff to interpret, route, and split requests — approximately half of centrally received requests are rerouted



Email requests are the most resource-intensive: broad keyword searches produce large volumes requiring manual review



Requests are growing in volume and complexity with no corresponding increase in staffing: “More requests for more data, taking longer, but we all have the same resources.”





Legal complexity: The MGDPA is highly interpretive — “It’s not black and white at all. It’s very gray.” — Peer jurisdiction





Requester expectations often don’t match operational realities — many are unaware of the time and effort required to fulfill requests


# Peer Jurisdiction Insights


 Interviewed: Hennepin County, City of Minneapolis, City of Duluth, League of Minnesota Cities, Office of the State Auditor, and the MN Data Practices Office


 Consistent themes across all jurisdictions, regardless of platform or size

 Requests are growing in volume and complexity everywhere — especially email-intensive requests

 Technology helps with tracking, but most substantive work happens outside the platform: “90% of the work happens outside of GovQA.”

 Clear written procedures, defined staff roles, and regular training are the strongest differentiators of effective programs

 Proactive disclosure (publishing frequently requested info publicly) reduces workload and improves public access

 Saint Paul’s challenges are not unique — and structured intake and consistent procedures are within reach



Perspectives from City Staff and Data Requesters

# **Survey Findings**

# Staff Survey: Key Findings (n=13 departmental leads)



69% have used GovQA for 2+ years; most log in weekly or less frequently



77% process requests directly; 69% assign requests to other staff



GovQA functionality ratings: 54% somewhat functional, 23% very functional, 23% not functional



Most difficult aspects: understanding what's needed to complete a request (46%); tracking deadlines and closing requests (31% each); running reports (31%)



What would help most: clearer guidance on best practices/workflows (62%), clearer request intake form (62%), improved automation/features (54%), refresher training (46%)



Staff report cross-department communication and determining responsibility are among the hardest parts of the process

# Requester Survey: Key Findings (n=26 portal users)

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73% found it easy to know which department to submit a request to; 27% found it difficult

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85% found logging into the portal easy; 95% found it accessible in their preferred language

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74% found filling out a request easy; 26% found it somewhat or very difficult

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Top requested improvements:

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Clearer updates about request status and next steps (48%)

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Clearer instructions and examples of what to include (33%)

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Clearer explanations of department roles (29%)

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Simpler request form and links to publicly available data (24%)



Actionable Opportunities for Improvement

# **Recommendations**

# Recommendations



1. Make better use of existing GovQA tools: Help staff leverage current features through training, shared practices, and a cross-department review before exploring new platforms



2. Create a more structured intake process: Revise the public request form to guide requesters toward providing specific information, reducing clarification burden and rerouting



3. Develop clearer citywide procedures: Establish shared guidance for routing, documenting, communicating, and handling complex or multi-department requests



4. Invest in ongoing staff training and support: Regular training, refresher sessions, and peer-learning opportunities to build consistency and confidence



5. Use reporting data to identify trends: Regularly review GovQA data on volume, processing times, and request types to identify bottlenecks and guide improvements

# Recommendations

6. Make frequently requested information easier to find: Identify records requested repeatedly and proactively publish them online to reduce staff workload and improve public access

7. Periodically review whether current technology meets the City's needs: As request volumes and electronic records grow, regularly assess GovQA and alternatives

8. Strengthen public-facing information about the request process: Update FAQs, guidance materials, and status communications to set clear expectations for requesters

Looking ahead: Subject-based routing, expanded proactive disclosure, and dedicated data practices staffing are longer-term investments worth exploring

Questions for the Audit Committee: Are there specific findings you would like to discuss further, or priorities you want to surface for next steps?

# Here for good.



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