

FoiaMCP — Getting Started

Your Virginia public-records assistant, inside the Claude app. Ten minutes to set up. Nothing to memorize.

What this is: a toolkit that turns Claude (the AI assistant) into your FOIA desk editor. Tell it what story you're working on, and it figures out which government records exist, writes the request emails, watches every legal deadline, and — if an agency stonewalls you — writes the letters and court paperwork to fight back under Virginia law. Everything stays on your computer. Nothing is sent anywhere unless *you* hit send.

Setting up (once, ~10 minutes)

- 1 Install the Claude desktop app (if you don't have it).**
Go to **claude.ai/download**, download the Windows app, install it, and sign in (create a free account if needed — though a paid plan is recommended for daily use).
- 2 Unpack the FoiaMCP folder into Documents.**
Find **FoiaMCP.zip** (probably in Downloads). Right-click it → **Extract All...** → click **Browse**, choose your **Documents** folder → **Extract**. You should now have a folder **Documents\foiamcp**. Don't leave it in Downloads — this folder becomes your filing cabinet.
- 3 Start a Claude session that can use your folder.**
Open the Claude app and start a new conversation in **Cowork** — the mode where Claude can work with files on your computer (look for "Cowork" or the option to select a folder when starting a chat). When it asks which folder to work with, choose **Documents\foiamcp**. That's it — Claude can now see the toolkit.
- 4 Paste the setup message.**
Open your **foiamcp** folder in File Explorer and double-click **SETUP-PROMPT.txt**. Select all the text (Ctrl-A), copy it (Ctrl-C), paste it into the Claude chat (Ctrl-V), and send. Claude will read its instructions, install its FOIA memory so it recognizes the job in future chats, and ask you a few questions — your name, outlet, and the city or county where you live. (Those go on your request letters and matter legally: Virginia FOIA serves Virginia citizens and Virginia media.)

5

Bookmark your dashboard.

When setup finishes, Claude creates **dashboard.html** inside the folder **Documents\foiamcp\data**. Double-click it — it opens in your browser and shows every request, every deadline, and what to do next. Bookmark it (Ctrl-D). This page is your mission control.

Using it day to day

Open the Claude app, start a Cowork chat with your foiamcp folder (it appears in your recent folders after the first time), and just talk. Claude greets you with a briefing: what's overdue, what's due soon, what it has already drafted. There are no commands — some things you might say:

YOU SAY...	IT DOES...
I want to look into why the city bought tsunami cameras	Maps every record the government would have — purchase orders, grant applications, emails, council minutes — who holds each one, and what to ask for first.
Draft the requests for the money records	Writes the legal request emails, addressed to the right FOIA officers. You copy, paste, and send them from your own email.
I sent them this morning	Starts the 5-working-day legal clock and tracks it.
They denied it — they say it's all "critical infrastructure"	Explains whether that's legally plausible (usually: no, not for invoices), and writes the rebuttal letter.
They just ignored me	That's illegal after 5 working days. It flags the violation and drafts the overdue notice — and if needed, real court paperwork.
What's on my plate?	A rundown: what's overdue, what's due soon, what to do next.

The dashboard

Open your bookmark (or double-click **dashboard.html** in the **data** folder) any time. Every request shows its status, its legal deadline, and — for anything needing action — **a blue sentence you can click to copy, then paste to Claude**. The dashboard always tells you

what to say next, so you never need to remember what the tool can do. It updates whenever anything changes; just refresh the page (F5).

When an agency fights you

FoiaMCP escalates one honest step at a time, and writes every document:

- **Rebuttal letter** — dismantles their legal excuse, citation by citation, and gives them a deadline to fix it.
- **FOIA Council opinion** — a free second opinion from a state body. No lawyer needed. Agencies usually fold here.
- **Court petition** — a fill-in-the-blanks Petition for Mandamus for your local General District Court. Virginia built this process for regular people: modest filing fee, hearing within 7 days, and the *agency* has to prove it was right — not you. If you win, they pay your costs.

ONE HONEST CAVEAT

FoiaMCP explains the law and prepares documents, but it isn't a lawyer and this isn't legal advice. Before filing anything in court, consider a quick review by an attorney — the Virginia Coalition for Open Government (opengovva.org) can point you to free help for journalists. Filing on your own is legal and doable; it's your call.

Three rules

- **You send everything yourself.** FoiaMCP writes; you review, copy, and send from your own email. It never contacts anyone.
- **Tell it things as they happen.** "They acknowledged," "a bill came," "records arrived," "still nothing." Ten seconds of typing keeps every deadline accurate.
- **Never share the data folder.** It's your notebook — requests, notes, deadlines. Keep it private (details in SECURITY.md).

If something goes wrong

PROBLEM	FIX
Claude doesn't seem to know about FOIA in a new chat	Make sure the foiamcp folder is connected to the chat, then say: <code>Read the CLAUDE.md file in my foiamcp folder and follow it</code> .

Claude can't see the folder	The chat needs the folder connected. Start a Cowork chat and select Documents\foiamcp when it asks for a folder (or add it from the chat's folder controls).
Dashboard looks out of date	Refresh the page (F5). Still stale? Tell Claude: <code>update the dashboard</code> .
Claude seems confused about a request	Just re-state it plainly: "The OEM grant request — they denied it yesterday." It'll re-sync.
Anything else	Ask Claude itself — "something's broken, can you check?" It can inspect and fix its own files.

FoiaMCP is free and open source (MIT license), released by the Center for Petty Justice. Agencies count on friction. The law was already on your side — this just deletes the friction.