



Maui County, Hawaii

Natural disaster, national attention: Public records request management steps up in time of need

1

month for
soft launch

~500

requests
per year

21

departments
using solution

OVERVIEW

When historic wildfires tore through the idyllic tropical landscape of Maui, Hawaii, the national attention resulted in an overwhelming number of public records requests. The county turned to Granicus' Records Request Management solution (GovQA) to implement a reimagined online request management solution that created more opportunities for transparency and time savings.

SITUATION | AN ISLAND IN A SEA OF RECORDS REQUESTS

Maui County, which consists of the islands of Maui, Lānaʻi, and Molokaʻi within the state of Hawaii, usually conjures images of a tropical paradise and an island lifestyle. In August 2023, however, the county faced historically destructive wildfires, including the Lahaina fire that killed 101 people. Over a period of days, the fires caused \$6 billion in damage and left many people asking questions about what happened.

"We received a flood of media requests for public records and realized that we needed an online solution to handle that volume," said Christie Trenholme, deputy corporation counsel for the County of Maui.

She recalled "really inefficient" tracking solutions that included "massive spreadsheets" as part of an infrastructure ill-equipped to meet the numerous media demands for public records in the wake of the disaster.

While some departments, such as the police, had more robust systems in place, not all departments had experience with an onslaught of public records requests. Additionally, many departments had — and continue to have — staffing shortfalls.

The increased national attention that came with the disaster also saw an uptick in requests from national news outlets. "We'd never dealt with national news outlets and they're very aggressive," said Trenholme.

MUST HAVE SOLUTIONS

Records Request
Management

GovQA allows our departments to more effectively handle public records requests, especially if there are a high volume of media requests."

Christie Trenholme, Deputy
Corporation Counsel, County
of Maui, HI



SOLUTION | SAVING TIME WHILE INCREASING TRANSPARENCY

In the wake of the fires and the related requests that followed, Trenholme knew an improved system was necessary for managing public records requests. She gained insight by talking to those who knew about dealing with wildfires firsthand.

"We were speaking to counties in California that have dealt with wildfire disasters, and they recommended GovQA as an option," she said. "We started looking into that and some others and found that GovQA was the best fit for our needs."

Trenholme said Granicus' Records Request Management solution stood out in how it manages multi-departmental requests, which had created roadblocks and inefficiencies during the 2023 fires.

"GovQA was really able to customize to each department's needs," she said. "Both our police — who probably had the highest volume of records requests — and the fire department — who also received a lot of requests — liked how they could tweak the system to their particular needs."

— Christie Trenholme, Deputy Corporation Counsel, County of Maui, HI

Beyond being able to create a portal and request processing system tailor-made to individual departments, Trenholme said the hands-on approach of GovQA from system development all the way through training and implementation was critical for a county making such a large step forward in their public records tools.

"They were very supportive versus other options that were more hands-off," she said. "We needed that more hands-on approach to get all these departments up and running quickly on GovQA. Just to get everything online and tracking the requests and deadlines was really a huge piece of it."

GovQA's automation features also stood out as a way to get a better handle on requests across multiple departments within the county. "Automating the process around deadlines makes it easier for everyone to keep track of requests," said Trenholme. "The feedback we've received so far has been positive; it's much easier for them to log in to GovQA, see the request, and track the status."

Rather than rely on massive spreadsheets, Trenholme sees department staff more able to manage records requests, including automating templated responses to increase communication with requesters.

"Having all that in GovQA, we can just send those out easily and not have to reopen a word document, type things in, and then email it," she said of the time savings the responses create.



Redaction tools within GovQA also provide time savings, she added, with the system set to automatically detect standard privacy redactions, such as Social Security numbers, without human interaction. "That definitely reduces time where we'd previously had to go manually through Adobe and do the redactions," said Trenholme. "I think some departments were even using Sharpies on printed documents in the past."

The benefits of a public records request portal through GovQA go beyond time savings, impacting the county's goal of increasing transparency with the public. "Previously, requesters would have to email the individual department and wait for a response," noted Trenholme. "Now they can go to the portal and select the department that they want and interact with them directly."

RESULTS | NO DEPARTMENT IS AN ISLAND

While Maui has fortunately not yet faced another disaster to test their new public records request system, Trenholme already appreciates how GovQA has streamlined and improved its public records process.

"It's reduced the amount of time the departments need to spend on routine requests," she said. "Timewise, it's more efficient, and tracking requests has been a lot easier."

"We're the first county in the state that's utilizing a platform like this," said Trenholme. "It's difficult with government sometimes to embrace technology, but we had the full support of our mayor and our managing director in expediting the buildout of GovQA because it was so important to get an online public records platform in place."

— Christie Trenholme, Deputy Corporation Counsel, County of Maui, HI

The Office of Information Practices, the state agency that oversees the Hawaii public records law, [released a statement](#) saying: "OIP applauds Maui County's trailblazing foresight in utilizing new technology to respond to UIPA [Uniform Information Practices Act] record requests, which may be a model for other state and county agencies in Hawaii to consider implementing as well."