

Our Data Bodies Project

Tips for Protecting our Data

While every system is different, there are some basic strategies you can use to protect your personal and community data from abuse:

1. **Always ask.** Is my social security number needed? In many systems, you can be assigned a unique client identifier (UCI) instead of a social security number, especially if you are a victim of domestic violence. This will protect your identity somewhat, and will make it more difficult for your information to be linked up across systems. However, for systems that require proof of assets and income—like TANF, General Relief, or SNAP—you will almost always have to give a social security number to qualify for benefits.
2. **It's not all or nothing.** In many cases, public programs will accept forms that have some sections crossed out. Tell a caseworker if there are any sections of a form or parts of an interview that make you feel weird. Ask, “If I choose not to disclose that information, will it impact my chances of receiving benefits?” If the answer is no, cross that section out!
3. **Always appeal.** If you are rejected for or kicked off a public program, request an appeal of the decision (often called a fair hearing) right away. Always make the request in writing. Always request that the fair hearing be held in person (not over the phone). In many programs, like SNAP, TANF and Medicaid, filing an appeal will protect and maintain your benefits until a hearing can be held. However, if you lose your appeal, you'll have to pay back the cost of the benefits you received.
4. **It's never forever.** Ask if there is an “expungement” process available. That means that, after a certain amount of time, your record can't be opened or read by anyone, or is erased from the system entirely. For example, in many states, a CPS record that indicates child abuse or neglect can be sealed 10 years after the involved child's 18th birthday. Youthful offender criminal records can often be expunged as well.
5. **Always document.** Files often get lost, and it is almost always seen as a program applicant's fault when something goes missing. Keep a copy of EVERYTHING you send to a public agency. Always ask that anything you submit be stamped “received” and request proof that it has been submitted.
6. **Request your record.** Certain laws allow you to request copies of public records—including your own—from federal and state agencies like HUD, Department of Corrections, etc. It's your record. You should be able to see a copy of it.