# UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

PUBLIC EMPLOYEES FOR	)
ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY,	)
962 Wayne Ave., Suite 610	)
Silver Spring, MD 20910	)
Plaintiff	)
V.	)
BUREAU OF INDIAN EDUCATION	)
1849 C Street NW	)
Washington, DC 20240	)
Defendant	)

Civil Action No. 23-2194

## PRELIMINARY STATEMENT

- Plaintiff Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility ("PEER" or "Plaintiff") brings this action under the Freedom of Information Act ("FOIA"), 5 U.S.C. § 552, et seq., because the Bureau of Indian Education, ("BIE" or "Defendant") failed to disclose records wrongfully and failed to respond within the statutory deadline to Plaintiff's FOIA appeal.
- 2. Plaintiff has exhausted its administrative remedies and now seeks an order from this Court requiring Defendant to immediately produce the records sought in Plaintiff's FOIA request and appeal, as well as other appropriate relief, including attorney's fees and costs.

## JURISDICTION AND VENUE

- This Court has jurisdiction over this action under 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(B). This Court also has federal question jurisdiction over this action under 28 U.S.C. § 1331.
- 4. This Court has the authority to grant declaratory relief pursuant to the Declaratory Judgement Act, 28 U.S.C. § 2201, *et seq*.

- 5. This Court is a proper venue because Defendant is a government agency that resides in the District of Columbia. See 28 U.S.C. § 1391(b)(1) (a civil action may be brought where the defendant resides in a judicial district). Venue is also proper under 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(B) (providing for venue in FOIA cases where the plaintiff resides, where the records are located, or in the District of Columbia).
- This Court has the authority to award reasonable costs and attorneys' fees under 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(E).

#### **PARTIES**

- Plaintiff, PEER, is a non-profit public interest organization incorporated in Washington, D.C. and headquartered in Silver Spring, Maryland, with field offices in California, Colorado, and Massachusetts.
- 8. Among other public interest projects, PEER engages in advocacy, research, education, and litigation to promote public understanding and debate concerning key current public policy issues. PEER focuses on the environment, including the regulation and remediation of toxic substances, public lands and natural resource management, public funding of environmental and natural resource agencies, and ethics in government. PEER educates and informs the public through news releases to the media, through its website, www.peer.org, and through publication of the PEER newsletter.
- Bureau of Indian Education is a government agency of the United States as defined by 5
   U.S.C. § 552(f)(1).
- 10. Defendant is charged with the duty to provide public access to records in its possession consistent with the requirements of the FOIA. Here, Defendant is denying Plaintiff access to its records in contravention of federal law.

#### **STATEMENT OF FACTS**

- 11. On March 10, 2023, Lawrence Journal-World published an article announcing that the Haskell Indian Nations University ("Haskell") Cross Country team sent a letter with support from Haskell, staff, and alumni in January to the Secretary of Interior, Deb Haaland asking for the agency's investigation on Haskell to be released to the public.
- According to the letter, Haskell athletes had reported several instances of intimidation, threats, fraudulent reports, assaults, sexual abuse, embezzlement, and forged signatures from Haskell administrators.
- 13. The investigation took place in the beginning of April of 2022, and according to unverified reports, was completed within 6 months.
- 14. The Lawrence Journal-World sent a FOIA request on May 3, 2022, but has not to date received a response from BIE regarding the investigation at Haskell.
- 15. On March 15, 2023, Haskell Cross Country sent a letter to Deb Haaland to release BIE's report on Haskell and ban Jackie Shamblin from Haskell Indian Nations University but has yet to receive a reply.
- 16. On April 20, 2023, PEER submitted a Freedom of Information Act request to the Freedom of Information Officer of the Bureau of Indian Affairs seeking the report of investigation compiled by BIE in the latter half of 2022 concerning wide-ranging improprieties, ranging from sexual assaults on students to embezzlement and theft of property at Haskell.
- 17. On April 21, 2023, BIE sent PEER two items: An acknowledgment of receipt and assignment of a tracking number and a letter indicating that our request for a fee waiver was under consideration.

- 18. On May 25, 2023, BIE sent PEER an email indicating that our request for a fee waiver had"been fully granted."
- 19. On May 25, 2023, in a separate letter, BIE sent a letter informing us that the agency had"withheld in full records consisting of 528 pages of 2 PDF files, under FOIA Exemptions 3,5, and 6." PEER understood this response to mean that all documents responsive to our request would be withheld.
- 20. On June 7, 2023, PEER electronically filed an appeal of the BIE withholding to the Department of Interior FOIA Appeals Office. The appeal argued that Exemptions 3 and 5 did not apply to the requested documents and that any application of Exemption 6 did not justify withholding more than small excerpts of the requested documents.
- 21. On July 6, July 13, and July 14, 2023, PEER reached out to the FOIA Appeals office to ascertain the status of the FOIA appeal via email and telephone. However, PEER did not receive any response.
- 22. Pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 552(a)(6)(A)(ii), Defendant had twenty working days from the date of receipt of PEER's appeal to respond, or to assert the need to extend this time limit due to unusual circumstances, and then only for ten additional working days. The FOIA also provides that upon request, agencies are to make records "promptly available." 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(3)(A).
- 23. Twenty working days from June 7, 2023 (the date that Plaintiff's appeal was sent) was June 27, 2023. As of June 27, 2023, Plaintiff had not received an acknowledgement of the FOIA appeal, a determination on that appeal, or any responsive records, and therefore filed the Complaint in this case.

#### **CAUSE OF ACTION**

- 24. Plaintiff incorporates the allegations in the preceding paragraphs.
- 25. Defendant's denial of Plaintiff's FOIA request and failure to address our appeal of this denial constitutes a wrongful withholding of records in violation of FOIA, 5 U.S.C. § 552.
- 26. Plaintiff has exhausted its administrative remedies due to the failure of the BIE to comply with the applicable time limits in the statute. 5 U.S.C. 553(a)(6)(C)(i).

## **RELIEF REQUESTED**

WHEREFORE, Plaintiff respectfully requests that this Court:

- i. Enter an order declaring that Defendant wrongfully withheld requested agency records;
- ii. Issue a permanent injunction directing Defendant to disclose to Plaintiff all wrongfully withheld records;
- iii. Maintain jurisdiction over this action until Defendant is in compliance with the FOIA and every order of this Court;
- iv. Award Plaintiff attorney fees and costs pursuant to 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(E); and
- v. Grant such additional and further relief to which Plaintiff may be entitled.

Respectfully submitted on July 28, 2023,

<u>/s/ Monica Mercola</u> Monica Mercola, DC District Bar # NY0513 Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility 962 Wayne Ave, Suite 610 Silver Spring, MD 20910 (202) 265-4187 mmercola@peer.org *Counsel for Plaintiff* 

## Case 1:23-cv-02194-ABJ Document 1-1 Filed 07/28/23 Page 1 of 2

**CIVIL COVER SHEET** 

JS-44 (Rev. 6/17 DC)									
I. (a) PLAINTIFFS			DEFENDANTS						
Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility			Bureau of	Indian	Educa	tion			
(b) COUNTY OF RESIDENCE OF FIRST (EXCEPT IN U.S.	LISTED PLAINTIFF <b>88888</b> PLAINTIFF CASES)				(IN U.S	. PLAINTI	ED DEFENDANT <b>8888</b> FF CASES ONLY) e location of the tract of L		'ED
(c) ATTORNEYS (FIRM NAME, ADDRES Monica Mercola, DC District I 962 Wayne Ave, Suite 610 Silver Spring, MD 20910 (202) 265-4187			ATTORNEYS	(IF KNOW	N)				
II. BASIS OF JURISDICTION							S (PLACE AN x IN ONE F	BOX FOR	
(PLACE AN x IN ONE BOX ONLY)		PLAINTIFF	AND ONE BO	X FOR DEF PTF	ENDANT DFT	) FOR DIV	ERSITY CASES ONLY!	PTF	DFT
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P		Citizen or S Foreign Co		<b>O</b> 3	<b>O</b> 3	Foreign 1	Nation	<b>O</b> 6	<b>O</b> 6
(Place an X in one cate	IV. CASE ASSIGN gory, A-N, that best represe						onding Nature of Sui	t)	
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<ul> <li>315 Airplane Product Liability</li> <li>320 Assault, Libel &amp; Slander</li> <li>330 Federal Employers Liability</li> <li>340 Marine</li> <li>345 Marine Product Liability</li> <li>350 Motor Vehicle</li> <li>355 Motor Vehicle Product Liability</li> <li>360 Other Personal Injury</li> <li>362 Medical Malpractice</li> <li>365 Product Liability</li> <li>367 Health Care/Pharmaceutical Personal Injury Product Liability</li> </ul>			Social Security       Any nature of suit fr         861 HIA (1395ff)       may be selected for the case assignment.         862 Black Lung (923)       *(If Antitrust, then And the case assignment.)         863 DIWC/DIWW (405(g))       *(If Antitrust, then And the case assignment.)         864 SSID Title XVI       *(If Antitrust, then And the case assignment.)         865 RSI (405(g))       *(If Antitrust, then And the case assignment.)         0 Other Statutes       *(If Antitrust, then And the case assignment.)         893 Environmental Matters       *(If Antitrust, the case assignment.)         890 Other Statutory Actions (If Administrative Agency is Involved)       *(If Antitrust, the case assignment.)			this category of			
O E. General Civil (Other)	OR	(	<b>)</b> F. Pro	o Se Gen	eral Ci	ivil			
Real Property         210 Land Condemnation         220 Foreclosure         230 Rent, Lease & Ejectment         240 Torts to Land         245 Tort Product Liability         290 All Other Real Property         370 Other Fraud         371 Truth in Lending         380 Other Personal Property         Damage         385 Property Damage         Product Liability	Bankruptcy         422 Appeal 27 USC 153         423 Withdrawal 28 US         Prisoner Petitions         535 Death Penalty         540 Mandamus & Othe         550 Civil Rights         555 Prison Conditions         560 Civil Detainee – Coof Confinement         Property Rights         820 Copyrights         830 Patent         835 Patent – Abbreviat Drug Application         840 Trademark	er onditions	870         Forfeitu         625         690         Other S         375         376         400         430         450	Tax Suits Taxes (U defendar I IRS-Thin 7609 re/Penalty 5 Drug Rel Property ) Other tatutes 5 False Cli 5 Gui Tam 3729(a)) ) State Re ) Banks & ) Commer Rates/etc ) Deportal	S plainti at) rd Party 2 lated Sei 21 USC 1 (31 USC 3 (31 USC) 3 (31 USC)	26 USC zure of 881	462 Naturalizat Application 465 Other Imm Actions 470 Racketeer I & Corrupt 480 Consumer 0 490 Cable/Satel 850 Securities/C Exchange 896 Arbitration 899 Administra Act/Review Agency Dec 950 Constitution Statutes 890 Other Statu (if not admi review or P	igration nfluence Organizz Credit lite TV commodi commodi tive Proc or Appe ision nality of 1 tory Act nistrativ	ntion ties/ edure al of State ions e agency

### Case 1:23-cv-02194-ABJ Document 1-1 Filed 07/28/23 Page 2 of 2

<ul> <li>G. Habeas Corpus/ 2255</li> <li>530 Habeas Corpus – General</li> <li>510 Motion/Vacate Sentence</li> <li>463 Habeas Corpus – Alien Detainee</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>H. Employment Discrimination</li> <li>442 Civil Rights – Employment (criteria: race, gender/sex, national origin, discrimination, disability, age, religion, retaliation)</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>I. FOIA/Privacy Act</li> <li>895 Freedom of Information Act</li> <li>890 Other Statutory Actions (if Privacy Act)</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>J. Student Loan</li> <li>152 Recovery of Defaulted Student Loan (excluding veterans)</li> </ul>				
	*(If pro se, select this deck)*	*(If pro se, select this deck)*					
<ul> <li>K. Labor/ERISA (non-employment)</li> <li>710 Fair Labor Standards Act</li> <li>720 Labor/Mgmt. Relations</li> <li>740 Labor Railway Act</li> <li>751 Family and Medical Leave Act</li> <li>790 Other Labor Litigation</li> <li>791 Empl. Ret. Inc. Security Act</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>L. Other Civil Rights (non-employment)</li> <li>441 Voting (if not Voting Rights Act)</li> <li>443 Housing/Accommodations</li> <li>440 Other Civil Rights</li> <li>445 Americans w/Disabilities – Employment</li> <li>446 Americans w/Disabilities – Other</li> <li>448 Education</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>M. Contract</li> <li>110 Insurance</li> <li>120 Marine</li> <li>130 Miller Act</li> <li>140 Negotiable Instrument</li> <li>150 Recovery of Overpayment &amp; Enforcement of Judgment</li> <li>153 Recovery of Overpayment of Veteran's Benefits</li> <li>160 Stockholder's Suits</li> <li>190 Other Contracts</li> <li>195 Contract Product Liability</li> <li>196 Franchise</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>N. Three-Judge Court</li> <li>441 Civil Rights – Voting (if Voting Rights Act)</li> </ul>				
V. ORIGIN							
O 1 Original Proceeding          O 2 Removed from State Court       3 Remanded from Appellate Court       4 Reinstated or Reopened Court       5 Transferred from another district (specify)       6 Multi-district Litigation       7 Appeal to District Judge from Mag. Judge       8 Multi-district Litigation – Direct File							
VI. CAUSE OF ACTION (CITE THE U.S. CIVIL STATUTE UNDER WHICH YOU ARE FILING AND WRITE A BRIEF STATEMENT OF CAUSE.) 5 U.S.C. 552: 43 C.F.R. 2.1 et seq. Constructive denial and wrongful withholding of records under FOIA.							
	CHECK IF THIS IS A CLASS ACTION UNDER F.R.C.P. 23 JU	S Check Y Check Y Check Y YES	ES only if demanded in complaint				
VIII. RELATED CASE(S) IF ANY	(See instruction) YES	NO X If yes, p	lease complete related case form				
DATE: July 28, 2023	SIGNATURE OF ATTORNEY OF REC	CORD /s/Monica	Mercola				

#### INSTRUCTIONS FOR COMPLETING CIVIL COVER SHEET JS-44 Authority for Civil Cover Sheet

The JS-44 civil cover sheet and the information contained herein neither replaces nor supplements the filings and services of pleadings or other papers as required by law, except as provided by local rules of court. This form, approved by the Judicial Conference of the United States in September 1974, is required for the use of the Clerk of Court for the purpose of initiating the civil docket sheet. Consequently, a civil cover sheet is submitted to the Clerk of Court for each civil complaint filed. Listed below are tips for completing the civil cover sheet. These tips coincide with the Roman Numerals on the cover sheet.

- I. COUNTY OF RESIDENCE OF FIRST LISTED PLAINTIFF/DEFENDANT (b) County of residence: Use 11001 to indicate plaintiff if resident of Washington, DC, 88888 if plaintiff is resident of United States but not Washington, DC, and 99999 if plaintiff is outside the United States.
- III. CITIZENSHIP OF PRINCIPAL PARTIES: This section is completed <u>only</u> if diversity of citizenship was selected as the Basis of Jurisdiction under Section II.
- IV. CASE ASSIGNMENT AND NATURE OF SUIT: The assignment of a judge to your case will depend on the category you select that best represents the <u>primary</u> cause of action found in your complaint. You may select only <u>one</u> category. You <u>must</u> also select <u>one</u> corresponding nature of suit found under the category of the case.
- VI. CAUSE OF ACTION: Cite the U.S. Civil Statute under which you are filing and write a brief statement of the primary cause.
- VIII. RELATED CASE(S), IF ANY: If you indicated that there is a related case, you must complete a related case form, which may be obtained from the Clerk's Office.

Because of the need for accurate and complete information, you should ensure the accuracy of the information provided prior to signing the form.

FOIA Summons 1/13

**CLEAR FORM** 

## UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Public Employees for Envt'l Responsibility	)
Plaintiff	)
v.	)
Bureau of Indian Education	)
Defendant	. ý

Civil Action No. 23-2149

## SUMMONS IN A CIVIL ACTION

To: (Defendant's name and address) Bureau of In 1849 C Stree

Bureau of Indian Education 1849 C Street NW Washington, DC 20240

A lawsuit has been filed against you.

Within 30 days after service of this summons on you (not counting the day you received it) you must serve on the plaintiff an answer to the attached complaint or a motion under Rule 12 of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure. The answer or motion must be served on the plaintiff or plaintiff's attorney, whose name and address are:

Monica Mercola Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility 962 Wayne Ave, Suite 610 Silver Spring, MD 20910

If you fail to respond, judgment by default may be entered against you for the relief demanded in the complaint. You also must file your answer or motion with the court.

ANGELA D. CAESAR, CLERK OF COURT

Date:

Signature of Clerk or Deputy Clerk

FOIA Summons (12/11) (Page 2)

Civil Action No.

#### **PROOF OF SERVICE**

## (This section should not be filed with the court unless required by Fed. R. Civ. P. 4 (l))

	This summons for (no	ame of individual and title,	if any)					
was re	ceived by me on (date)		·					
	□ I personally serve	d the summons on the	individual at (place)					
	on (date) ; or							
	□ I left the summons at the individual's residence or usual place of abode with (name)							
				le age and discretion who res				
	on (date)	, and maile	d a copy to the indiv	idual's last known address;	or			
	$\Box$ I served the summ	nons on (name of individu	ual)			, who is		
	designated by law to	accept service of proc						
				on (date)	; or			
	$\Box$ I returned the sum	mons unexecuted bec	ause			; or		
	□ Other (specify):							
	My fees are \$	for travel a	nd \$	for services, for a total of \$	0.	00		
	I declare under penal	ty of perjury that this	information is true.					
Deter								
Date:				Server's signature				
				Printed name and title				

Server's address

Additional information regarding attempted service, etc:

FOIA Summons 1/13

**CLEAR FORM** 

## UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Public Employees for Envt'l Responsibility	
Plaintiff	
V.	
Bureau of Indian Education	
Defendant	

Civil Action No. 23-2149

## SUMMONS IN A CIVIL ACTION

To: (Defendant's name and address)

US Attorney General 950 Pennsylvania Ave, NW Washington, DC 20530

A lawsuit has been filed against you.

Within 30 days after service of this summons on you (not counting the day you received it) you must serve on the plaintiff an answer to the attached complaint or a motion under Rule 12 of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure. The answer or motion must be served on the plaintiff or plaintiff's attorney, whose name and address are:

Monica Mercola Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility 962 Wayne Ave, Suite 610 Silver Spring, MD 20910

If you fail to respond, judgment by default may be entered against you for the relief demanded in the complaint. You also must file your answer or motion with the court.

ANGELA D. CAESAR, CLERK OF COURT

Date:

Signature of Clerk or Deputy Clerk

FOIA Summons (12/11) (Page 2)

Civil Action No. 23-2149

#### **PROOF OF SERVICE**

## (This section should not be filed with the court unless required by Fed. R. Civ. P. 4 (l))

	This summons for (no	me of individual and title, if any)						
was ree	ceived by me on (date)							
	□ I personally serve	d the summons on the individual	at (place)					
	on (date) ; or							
	□ I left the summons at the individual's residence or usual place of abode with (name)							
			of suitable age and discretion who resid					
	on (date)	, and mailed a copy to	the individual's last known address; or					
	□ I served the summ	ons on (name of individual)		, who is				
	designated by law to	accept service of process on beh	alf of (name of organization)					
			on (date)	; or				
	$\Box$ I returned the sum	mons unexecuted because		; or				
	□ Other (specify):							
	My fees are \$	for travel and \$	for services, for a total of \$	0.00				
	I declare under penal	ty of perjury that this information	n is true.					
Date:								
Date.			Server's signature					
			Printed name and title					

Server's address

Additional information regarding attempted service, etc:

FOIA Summons 1/13

**CLEAR FORM** 

## UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Public Employees for Envt'l Responsibility	)
Plaintiff	)
V.	)
Bureau of Indian Education	)
Defendant	)

Civil Action No. 23-2149

## SUMMONS IN A CIVIL ACTION

To: (Defendant's name and address)

US Attorney for the District of Columbia 555 Fourth Street, NW Washington, DC 20530

A lawsuit has been filed against you.

Within 30 days after service of this summons on you (not counting the day you received it) you must serve on the plaintiff an answer to the attached complaint or a motion under Rule 12 of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure. The answer or motion must be served on the plaintiff or plaintiff's attorney, whose name and address are:

Monica Mercola Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility 962 Wayne Ave, Suite 610 Silver Spring, MD 20910

If you fail to respond, judgment by default may be entered against you for the relief demanded in the complaint. You also must file your answer or motion with the court.

ANGELA D. CAESAR, CLERK OF COURT

Date:

Signature of Clerk or Deputy Clerk

FOIA Summons (12/11) (Page 2)

Civil Action No. 23-2149

#### **PROOF OF SERVICE**

## (This section should not be filed with the court unless required by Fed. R. Civ. P. 4 (l))

	This summons for (na	ume of individual and title,	if any)					
was ree	ceived by me on (date)		·					
	□ I personally served the summons on the individual at ( <i>place</i> )							
	on <i>(date)</i> ; or							
	□ I left the summons at the individual's residence or usual place of abode with <i>(name)</i>							
			-	le age and discretion who res				
	on (date)	, and maile	d a copy to the indiv	vidual's last known address; o	or			
	$\Box$ I served the summ	ons on (name of individu	ual)			, who is		
	designated by law to	accept service of prod	cess on behalf of (na	ne of organization)				
				on (date)	; or			
	$\Box$ I returned the sum	mons unexecuted bec	ause			; or		
	□ Other (specify):							
	My fees are \$	for travel a	nd \$	_ for services, for a total of \$	0.	00		
	I declare under penal	ty of perjury that this	information is true.					
D (								
Date:				Server's signature				
				Printed name and title				

Server's address

Additional information regarding attempted service, etc: