BRIGHTRAVEN STRATEGIES, LLC

SPONSORED BY MPI MUNICIPAL POLICE INSTITUTE

eric@brightravenstrategies.com
brightravenstrategies.com

ONLINE COURSE SYLLABUS

Basic Public Records Law Certification

for Massachusetts Public Safety Personnel

Three-Week Cohort Certification | Nineteen Modules | Fall 2026 Session

✦ A label is not *a reason.*

A BrightRaven Strategies program ✦ Delivered through MPI on Litmos and Zoom

Welcome to the Basic Public Records Law Certification Program. This course is designed to provide Massachusetts public safety personnel with the essential knowledge and practical tools to navigate public records requests effectively and in compliance with the law. Over three weeks you will move from the foundations of the law through the exemptions and into the requests that do not fit a template: the body-worn camera request, the subpoena that is not a records request, the reporter calling about an officer-involved shooting. You will finish able to write a withholding justification that survives an appeal to the Supervisor of Public Records. I look forward to your active participation.

The spine of this program is specificity: a record-specific withholding justification, never a bare statutory label.

✦ INSTRUCTOR INFORMATION

Instructor:	**Eric R. Atstupenas, Esq.** Principal, BrightRaven Strategies, LLC General Counsel, Massachusetts Chiefs of Police Association 353 Providence Road South Grafton, Massachusetts 01560
Office Telephone:	(508) 375-7793
Emergency Telephone:	(508) 400-3726
E-mail:	legal@masschiefs.org

✦ COURSE INFORMATION

Course Title:	Basic Public Records Law Certification for Massachusetts Public Safety Personnel

Course Dates:	Orientation: Monday, September 21, 2026 Unit 1: September 21–25, 2026 Unit 2: September 28 – October 2, 2026 Unit 3: October 5–9, 2026
Course Description:	This certification course covers the essential components of the Massachusetts Public Records Law (PRL) that public safety personnel need to operate effectively as records access officers or supervisors. It is built for the role rather than for lawyers: real requests, real redactions, and the recurring problems that walk through a records access officer's door.
Course Objectives:	• Understand the basic framework of the Public Records Law. • Explain the role and responsibilities of a records access officer, and build a departmental public records program around it. • Identify and apply the applicable exemptions to public records requests. • Write a record-specific withholding justification that survives an appeal to the Supervisor of Public Records. • Handle the hard requests: body-worn camera and digital evidence, media and high-profile incidents, commercial and serial requesters, and the communications that are not public records requests at all. • Draft effective responses and petitions for extensions and fees. • Implement best practices for records management, retention, and lawful destruction. The specific learning objectives for each module are listed under that module in the Course Outline.
Prerequisites:	Current or soon-to-be public safety records access officers and records supervisors. This is a general course appropriate for all students in this role. No legal training is assumed or required.
General Course Structure:	The course will be delivered entirely online through Litmos, MPI's eLearning platform, and Zoom. Upon registration, you will obtain a username and password (if you do not have one already) to access the Litmos system and all the class content. The course runs as three weekly units. Each unit contains several modules. The general flow of each week will be as follows: • On the start date of the course, students will be permitted to attend an optional online orientation at 9:00 a.m. that morning. The orientation session will be recorded and posted for students to review if they are unable to attend. After the orientation session, students will be given access to Unit 1. • On Monday of each subsequent week, that week's unit activates in Litmos at 9:00 a.m. Students work the modules and the Additional References at their own pace during the week.

	• On Wednesday, students will be required to virtually attend a live Q&A and discussion on Zoom. During this live discussion, students are encouraged to ask questions of the instructor and of one another to further their comprehension of the unit's materials. This live Q&A will begin at 2:00 p.m. and will remain open until 3:00 p.m. EST. • After the live Q&A and discussion, students will have access to that unit's forum question. Students are expected to respond to the question on the forum by 4:00 p.m. EST on Friday. • Students must also complete that unit's assessment by 4:00 p.m. EST on Friday. • See the course calendar attached to this syllabus.
Time Commitment:	Approximately four to five hours of self-paced module work per week, plus the one live hour. Twelve to fifteen hours in total across the three weeks.
Workbook & Course Materials:	The course materials and reading materials for each unit will be accessible under the “Additional References” section for each module on the MPI Litmos system. Students are expected to review the course materials for each unit at their own pace for that week. The Guide to Public Records for Massachusetts Public Safety Personnel (2026 Edition) serves as the backbone reference for the entire program and is available from the first day of the course.
Course Requirements:	A computer and internet capable of utilizing MPI's Litmos system and Zoom. A webcam and microphone so that students can interact with the instructor and one another during the weekly live Q&A and discussion sessions.

Orientation

Monday, September 21, 2026 · 9:00 a.m. EST · Optional, recorded

Topic:	Orientation
Learning Objectives:	• Students will get acquainted with the course and be operationally ready to begin substantive training that same week. • Students will get all the information, materials, and resources needed to meaningfully participate in and succeed in this course. • Students will learn how to access the course materials and utilize the LMS. • Students will be able to understand the course expectations, including learning comprehension assessments.

Unit 1 · Foundations and the Request Lifecycle

September 21–25, 2026 · Modules 1–7

Everything from the moment a request arrives to the moment a response goes out, plus the two things that sit underneath all of it: what a public record actually is, and who is responsible for it. The unit closes by moving from the person to the program.

Topic:	Module 1 · Foundations
Learning Objectives:	• Students will state the three core concepts of the Public Records Law: every person holds a right of access; dissemination of information is a core service of a police department rather than an optional one; and every record is presumed public unless a specific exemption applies. • Students will understand that the burden of proving an exemption rests with the custodian, not the requester. • Students will explain why a requester's identity and motivation are irrelevant to the department's obligation to respond. • Students will identify what materials qualify as public records, regardless of format, medium, or where they are stored.

Topic:	Module 2 · The Records Access Officer
Learning Objectives:	• Students will describe the statutory duties of a records access officer and how an RAO is appointed and designated. • Students will identify the posting and public-facing obligations that attach to the RAO role.

	• Students will recognize the state-agency obligations that municipal RAOs commonly assume do not apply to them. • Students will distinguish the RAO's role from that of the custodian, the chief, and municipal counsel.

Topic:	**Module 3 · Intake and Responding**
Learning Objectives:	• Students will understand how a public records request may be made, and by whom. • Students will apply the ten-business-day response clock and identify what actually counts as a response. • Students will apply the format-of-production rules, including the requester's entitlement to a copy rather than a link, the honoring of preferred and searchable formats, and the single-copy rule. • Students will recognize the communications that arrive at the RAO's desk but are not public records requests at all.

Topic:	**Module 4 · Extensions, Fees, and the Cost of Production**
Learning Objectives:	• Students will apply the fee structure, including the five-cent-per-page paper copy charge and the absence of any per-page fee for electronic production. • Students will apply the labor thresholds and the twenty-five-dollar-per-hour cap calculated at the rate of the lowest-paid employee capable of performing the work. • Students will determine when segregation and redaction time is chargeable and when it is not. • Students will understand the fee-waiver consequence of missing the response deadline, and the extension caps for municipalities and state agencies.

Topic:	**Module 5 · The Appeal Process**
Learning Objectives:	• Students will describe how an appeal to the Supervisor of Public Records proceeds, including the ninety-day window, the writing requirement, and the requirement that the request first have gone to the RAO. • Students will identify the four procedural grounds under 950 CMR 32.08 and articulate why a procedural ground is not an exemption and does not bind a court.

	• Students will understand the limits of the Supervisor's enforcement authority and the referral path to the Attorney General or Superior Court. • Students will evaluate the three options available to a department on an adverse decision and explain why issuing a new compliant response is usually the right move.

Topic:	**Module 6 · Records Management, Retention, and Destruction**
Learning Objectives:	• Students will apply the applicable records retention schedules to public safety records. • Students will execute lawful destruction, using the municipal disposal forms and, for state agencies, the written-permission process. • Students will articulate why a destroyed record is a different and more serious problem than a withheld one.

Topic:	**Module 7 · Building and Running a Department Public Records Program**
Learning Objectives:	• Students will distinguish between having a records access officer and having a public records program. • Students will draft the components of a written departmental public records policy and establish a request-tracking log. • Students will identify what the statute requires a department to post on its website. • Students will design front-desk training for the personnel who first receive requests, and conduct an annual audit of where the department is exposed.

Live Q&A / Discussion:	Wednesday, September 23, 2:00–3:00 p.m. EST. The presumption in practice, and the two places new records access officers stumble first: treating a court order or subpoena as a public records request, and asking a requester why they want a record. One live intake hypothetical.
Forum Question:	Due Friday, September 25, by 4:00 p.m. EST. Identify what is and is not a public record in a short scenario, and describe the state of the public records program in your own department.
Unit Assessment:	Due Friday, September 25, by 4:00 p.m. EST. Pooled from the Module 1 through 6 item banks, with additional items on program administration.
Additional References:	• Guide to Public Records for Massachusetts Public Safety Personnel (2026 Edition) • The Five Principles of the Public Records Law

	• Glossary of Public Records Terms • Department Public Records Program Checklist

Unit 2 · Exemptions and Defensible Withholding

September 28 – October 2, 2026 · Modules 8–13

The keystone first, then every exemption public safety agencies actually use. The order matters. Students learn how to justify before they learn what to justify with, because a records access officer who knows every exemption but writes conclusory justifications will lose on appeal anyway. Every module in this unit runs the drafting loop against the Specificity Scorecard.

Topic:	**Module 8 · Writing Defensible Justifications**
Learning Objectives:	• Students will apply the five checks of the Specificity Scorecard: authority, target, reason and harm, segregability, and plain non-conclusory language. • Students will work the drafting loop, moving from a model justification, to a guided one, to an independent one, to a critique of another's. • Students will diagnose the failure in a conclusory justification and rebuild it into one that would survive an appeal. • Students will internalize the governing principle of this program: a label is not a reason.

Topic:	**Module 9 · Exemption (a) and Its Incorporated Statutes**
Learning Objectives:	• Students will perform the two-step Exemption (a) analysis: identify the outside law that restricts disclosure, then apply it to the specific content and address segregability. • Students will identify the statutes commonly incorporated in public safety records, including CORI, the sexual assault and domestic violence provisions, juvenile and student records, grand jury materials, and the home-address protections for public safety personnel. • Students will apply the rule that booking photographs, arrest logs, and registers are not CORI. • Students will maintain a public daily log under G.L. c. 41, § 98F, and apply its carve-outs for domestic violence, rape and sexual assault responses, c. 209A arrests, and entries identifying incapacitated persons.

Topic:	**Module 10 · Exemption (c) and the Privacy Balance**
Learning Objectives:	• Students will apply the personal privacy exemption and the balancing test it requires.

	• Students will apply the misconduct-investigation carve-out enacted by Chapter 253 of the Acts of 2020 as construed by the Supreme Judicial Court in 2024. • Students will recognize that the carve-out triggers on the existence of an investigation rather than on a finding of wrongdoing.

Topic:	**Module 11 · Exemption (f) and the Investigatory Exemption**
Learning Objectives:	• Students will identify what the investigatory exemption protects and, just as importantly, what it does not. • Students will articulate a specific, prospective harm rather than asserting the exemption by label. • Students will apply the holding that the witness shield protects private citizens rather than public officials, with the consequence that an officer's own interview statement is not shielded by it.

Topic:	**Module 12 · The Remaining Exemptions and Attorney-Client Privilege**
Learning Objectives:	• Students will apply the deliberative process exemption and explain why vague labels fail under it. • Students will distinguish opinion work product from draft factual reports, and will build a privilege log that identifies what is being withheld and why. • Students will apply the security exemption's two prongs and recognize the inverse-correlation problem it creates. • Students will recognize on sight the specialized exemptions a public safety agency meets less often, completing exemptions (a) through (v).

Topic:	**Module 13 · Personnel, Internal Affairs, and POST-Era Discipline Records**
Learning Objectives:	• Students will identify where the exemptions collide with the personnel file. • Students will apply current case law and Chapter 253 to internal affairs reports and discipline records. • Students will describe how the POST Commission's certification and discipline records interact with a department's own files. • Students will recognize collective bargaining provisions that promise a confidentiality the statute does not allow.

Live Q&A / Discussion:	Wednesday, September 30, 2:00–3:00 p.m. EST. The drafting loop, run live. The cohort writes a conclusory justification, the group runs it through the Scorecard, and it gets rebuilt into one that would survive appeal.
Forum Question:	Due Friday, October 2, by 4:00 p.m. EST. Post a redaction, justified against all five Scorecard checks.
Unit Assessment:	Due Friday, October 2, by 4:00 p.m. EST. Pooled across the exemption banks and weighted toward the specificity checks. This is the heaviest assessment of the three.
Additional References:	• The Specificity Scorecard • The Exemption Catalog • Guide to Public Records for Massachusetts Public Safety Personnel (2026 Edition)

Unit 3 · Applied Practice: Hard Requests, Drafting, and Running a Program

October 5–9, 2026 · Modules 14–19

The requests that do not fit the template. This is the week where the certification earns its name, and it closes with the capstone and the cumulative final.

Topic:	**Module 14 · Body-Worn Camera and Digital Evidence Requests**
Learning Objectives:	• Students will determine whether footage held on a vendor's cloud is a public record, applying control rather than location as the test. • Students will perform segregability analysis on a single clip containing a victim, a juvenile, a bystander, and an officer. • Students will assess the redaction burden, determine whether that time is chargeable, and build a fee estimate that would be defensible on appeal. • Students will apply format-of-production and retention rules to digital evidence, and respond to a request for footage that has already aged out. • Students will run the drafting loop end to end against a realistic body-worn camera request.

Topic:	**Module 15 · Requests That Aren't Requests**
Learning Objectives:	• Students will distinguish subpoenas, court orders, discovery demands, litigation holds, and preservation letters from public records requests, and route each correctly. • Students will apply the four procedural grounds under 950 CMR 32.08 and identify the narrow circumstances in which each is available. • Students will explain why a procedural ground is not an exemption and does not bind a court.

Topic:	**Module 16 · Media Requests and High-Profile Incidents**
Learning Objectives:	• Students will manage records requests arising from an officer-involved shooting, an in-custody death, and an arrest that draws press attention. • Students will coordinate with the District Attorney and identify where the department's obligations end and the District Attorney's begin. • Students will use the public daily log as a release valve, and will distinguish a public information decision from a records decision.

Topic:	**Module 17 · Commercial, Serial, and Aggregator Requests**
Learning Objectives:	• Students will apply the solely-commercial-purpose ground and recognize its narrow reach. • Students will recognize why the harassment ground almost never applies. • Students will use fee strategy as the lawful response to request volume, and will articulate why refusing to respond is not.

Topic:	**Module 18 · Emerging Technology and AI Records**
Learning Objectives:	• Students will identify the records generated by automated license plate readers, unmanned aircraft, acoustic gunshot detection, and surveillance camera networks, and the retention gaps they create. • Students will apply the rule that prompts submitted to and outputs generated by artificial intelligence tools are records. • Students will address authorization, de-identification, and what a department owes the public about the tools it uses.

Topic:	**Module 19 · Drafting Responses and Petitions, and the Capstone**
Learning Objectives:	• Students will draft a complete response letter containing every element a response requires. • Students will draft a petition to the Supervisor of Public Records for additional time, and a petition to charge fees beyond the statutory cap. • Students will evaluate the three options on an adverse decision and select the right one. • Students will complete the capstone: a full request worked from intake to production, scored against the Specificity Scorecard, followed by the cumulative final assessment.

Live Q&A / Discussion:	Wednesday, October 7, 2:00–3:00 p.m. EST. Draft a body-worn camera fee petition live against a realistic request, then critique it as a group.
Forum Question:	Due Friday, October 9, by 4:00 p.m. EST. A request arrives. Post the opening move — extend, charge, produce, or withhold — and the reasoning behind it.
Unit Assessment:	Due Friday, October 9, by 4:00 p.m. EST. A drafting-forward assessment plus the cumulative final, pooled across the full program and weighted toward Unit 2 and the capstone. The cumulative final gates the certificate.

Additional References:	• Body-Worn Camera Request Decision Tree • Request-Type Triage Card • Response Letter and Petition Templates • The Specificity Scorecard

✦ EVALUATION & GRADING

Grade Required for Certification:	In order to obtain the Basic Public Records Law Certification for Massachusetts Public Safety Personnel, each student's learning comprehension will be evaluated and assessed. A grade of seventy (70) percent is required to obtain this certification.
Grading Breakdown:	

Component	Weight
Unit assessments (Units 1 and 2)	**40%**
Unit 3 assessment and cumulative final	**30%**
Participation in live Q&A / discussion (three sessions)	**15%**
Participation in forum question & discussion (three posts)	**15%**
Module video completion	**Gate**

Earning Participation Points:	Each unit will contain an opportunity for students to engage with the instructor and fellow students in multiple formats. Participation is required and counts as part of the student's final grade. To receive full participation points during the live Q&A and discussion, students must attend the session and take part in the discussion. To receive full participation in the forum question and discussion, students are expected to post a substantive response by 4:00 p.m. EST on that Friday.
Module Videos:	Each unit contains several module videos. Students must view every one of that week's module videos in its entirety. Failure to do so will result in the student obtaining a 0 for all assignments during that week, regardless of whether they complete those individual assignments.

WHAT IT TAKES TO CERTIFY

- A final grade of seventy (70) percent or better.
- A passing score on the cumulative final, which gates the certificate independently of aggregate score.
- Every module video in each week viewed in full. Miss one and that week scores zero.
- Attendance and participation at all three live Zoom sessions.

✦ COURSE POLICIES

Illnesses & Anticipated Absences:	Students who are anticipating absences or who experience sudden illness or injury should speak with the instructor to obtain deadline extensions. Failure to do so may result in a student receiving 0 points for any assignment missed.
Late Assignments:	Late submissions will result in reduced grades unless prior arrangements have been made with the instructor. Students are responsible for ensuring timely submission of all work.
Academic Honesty:	Cheating or plagiarism will result in failure in the assignment and potential failure in the course. All work should be the student's own work, not someone else's.
Honor Code Statement:	The ways in which assessments in an online course are accomplished require that extra steps be taken to ensure that academic misconduct does not occur during them. As part of these extra steps, students are asked to indicate agreement with an honor statement on each major test in the course. The student who participates in this course is expected to be the one who posts his or her own messages in the discussions, and who takes the quizzes and tests. The student's work should be the result of the student's own efforts, not someone else's work. The student may consult the course reading materials and resources in completing these assignments. Each student also is expected to not reveal the contents of quizzes and tests to anyone outside of this course.
Netiquette Guidelines:	Netiquette is a set of rules for behaving properly online. Your instructor and fellow students wish to foster a safe online learning environment. All opinions and experiences, no matter how different or controversial they may be perceived, must be respected in the tolerant spirit of academic discourse. You are encouraged to comment, question, or critique an idea but you are not to attack an individual. Working as a community of learners, we can build a polite and respectful course community. The following netiquette tips will enhance the learning experience for everyone in the course: • Do not dominate any discussion. • Give other students the opportunity to join in the discussion. • Never make fun of someone's ability to read or write. • Share tips with other students. • Keep an “open mind” and be willing to express even your minority opinion. Minority opinions must be respected. • Think and edit before you push the “Send” button. • Do not hesitate to ask for feedback.

	• Using humor is acceptable.

✦ COURSE CALENDAR

All times are Eastern.

SEPTEMBER 2026

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
Aug 30	31	1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21 Orientation session, 9:00 a.m. EST on Zoom (optional; recorded) Unit 1 activates in Litmos immediately after orientation	22	23 Unit 1 Live Q&A / Discussion, 2:00–3:00 p.m. EST on Zoom	24	25 Unit 1 forum response due by 4:00 p.m. EST Unit 1 assessment due by 4:00 p.m. EST	26
27	28 Unit 2 activates at 9:00 a.m. EST	29	30 Unit 2 Live Q&A / Discussion, 2:00–3:00 p.m. EST on Zoom	Oct 1	2 Unit 2 forum response due by 4:00 p.m. EST Unit 2 assessment due by 4:00 p.m. EST	3

OCTOBER 2026

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
Sep 27	28 Unit 2 activates at 9:00 a.m. EST	29	30 Unit 2 Live Q&A / Discussion, 2:00–3:00 p.m. EST on Zoom	1	2 Unit 2 forum response due by 4:00 p.m. EST Unit 2 assessment due by 4:00 p.m. EST	3
4	5 Unit 3 activates at 9:00 a.m. EST	6	7 Unit 3 Live Q&A / Discussion, 2:00–3:00 p.m. EST on Zoom	8	9 Unit 3 forum response due by 4:00 p.m. EST Unit 3 assessment and cumulative final due by 4:00 p.m. EST	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31

This syllabus is a training document, not legal advice for any specific matter. Current as of the 2026 edition · reviewed annually. For novel or high-stakes questions, consult municipal counsel.