

University of Missouri loses suit over records of dogs and cats used in research

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A Boone County, Mo., judge has ruled that University of Missouri violated the state's open records law by placing an exorbitantly high price tag on records sought by a California animal rescue group.

When the Beagle Freedom Project requested MU records on 179 cats and dogs that the school used in [medical research](#), the university said the documents would cost \$82,000.

The group, sued the university in 2016, claiming the cost was "prohibitively high" and "violates the Missouri Sunshine Law." It alleged the high cost effectively would prevent public access to the information.

The group had sought the records as part of an awareness campaign that would put a face to the [animals](#) used in research by various institutions.

As part of the [court ruling](#), MU was fined \$1,000.

The [court](#) ruling means "that we can submit for future animal records and not be stonewalled by ridiculous, outrageous prices for documents that we are entitled to have," said Shannon Keith, president and founder of Beagle Freedom Project.

In a statement released Monday, the university said it is committed to being transparent and in compliance with the law. "We respond to nearly 700 Sunshine requests per year and devote significant resources to live up to the requirements of the Sunshine Law," the statement said. "We respectfully disagree that the University violated those requirements. We respect the court and are reviewing the decision in detail and will determine our options following that review."

The ruling did not direct MU to provide the documents to Beagle Freedom Project, said Christian Basi, university spokesman. He said the university has not heard from the group since the ruling.

"Unfortunately at this point, years later, those documents now are irrelevant," Keith said. "Those animals already have been killed."

Over the summer, university officials had reviewed the lawsuit and learned that the documents the group wanted were not as extensive as the university had originally thought, Basi said. Therefore the cost would be significantly less. The cost was based on estimates for digging up and making copies of documents, photos and videos.

He said the university notified the group of the reduction in cost to \$8,950 but never heard back.

The court ruling related to the original price tag on the records. According to court documents the \$82,000 "Was unreasonable," and university claims that it would take 536 hours to retrieve them was not justified. Similar requests for records had been made of other institutions for little or no cost, court documents said.

Beagle Freedom Project, which finds homes for animals used in research, is the same animal rescue organization that drew national attention with an explosion of condemnation against the university on social media, for the issue of records but also for the treatment of six beagles used in experiments.

In August 2016 the group began a series of Facebook posts claiming, "The University of Missouri purposely blinded six beagles and then killed them after their experiment failed."

A study published in the *American College of Veterinary Ophthalmologists Journal* said that in the experiment, the left eyes of six beagles, under sedation, were wounded and the corneal tissue scraped away. The beagles then were fitted with Elizabethan collars to prevent them from hurting their eyes any further.

A study published in the *American College of Veterinary Ophthalmologists Journal* said the MU researchers used beagles in this

research because their eyes are similar to those of humans, and there was no indication any of the dogs were ever permanently blinded.

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