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WEEKEND

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Canandaigua Police Chief Mathew Nielsen talks about FOIL law and how he handles requests.

JAMIE GERMANO/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

‘A huge, huge burden for us’

NY police say releasing discipline files strains small departments

Finn Lincoln USA TODAY NETWORK

“It took weeks on end,” described one police chief — “It was a huge, huge burden for us,” said another. ● These officials aren’t talking about solving homicide or burglary cases. They are talking about completing public records requests. ● In 2020, New York repealed a section of its Civil Rights Law, called 50-a, that had previously prohibited public access to police disciplinary records. That allowed news outlets, like the USA TODAY Network-New York, and members of the public to file Freedom of Information Law requests for misconduct records dating back to 1970.

Suddenly, departments were expected to compile hundreds or even thousands of documents for public view. Many came from systems that were never designed to serve that purpose.

“Anyone who tells you they are a FOIL expert, they are wrong,” said Cheektowaga’s public information officer, Capt. Jeffrey Schmidt. “There are so many guidelines and nuances. Things are changing all the time.”

These issues often cause delays in providing records, which can frustrate requestors.

Departments may take months to respond or charge thousands of dollars for internal work to fulfill specific requests. While there are legal exceptions for some delays and costs, certain departments appear to deliberately create barriers to transparency.

Meanwhile, preparing these documents can distract personnel from their primary job of protecting

More inside

Check this list of how well police have supplied discipline records, **Page 3A**



City of Geneva police vehicles are parked in front of the City of Geneva public safety building on May 28.

TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

COVID levels in NY wastewater among highest in the nation

Emily Barnes

New York Connect Team | USA TODAY NETWORK

Wastewater COVID-19 levels are currently highest across the Northeast, including in New York, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s latest data.

The CDC’s most recent wastewater data, for the week ending Sept. 25, shows the Empire State had “high” levels of COVID-19 viral activity, which may indicate a rise of infection in an area, the agency says.

Of the 61 sites throughout the state reporting their wastewater COVID-19 levels for the week ending Sept. 25, “very high” levels were found at sites in the following 14 counties: Bronx, Clinton, Columbia, Dutchess, Erie, Kings, Monroe, Oneida, Onondaga, Queens, Rockland, Seneca, St. Lawrence and Westchester.

“High” levels were reported at sites in these seven counties: Jefferson, Kings, Nassau, Onondaga, Richmond, St. Lawrence and Westchester.

The Empire State’s “high” wastewater COVID-19 level currently exceeds the national level of “moderate,” according to the CDC.

The CDC is also continuing to track COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths on a weekly basis. Through the week ending Sept. 20, 7.9% of Americans tested positive for COVID-19, 0.8% of all U.S. deaths were attributed to COVID-19 and 1% of emergency room visits were COVID-19 related. These numbers are either lower than or unchanged from the previous week.

See COVID, Page 2A

States concerned Trump will dismantle FEMA

Watchdog says cuts put U.S. at risk

Sarah D. Wire

USA TODAY

A year after Hurricane Helene killed more than 240 people across seven states, the town hall and the fire department in Canton, North Carolina, are still operating out of temporary facilities.

Some businesses and homes haven’t been rebuilt, and surrounding towns are struggling after being nearly “wiped off the Earth,” said Canton Mayor Zeb Smathers.

“We’re absolutely just worn out because the damage to our region is immense,” he told USA TODAY. “We lost 100 years of progress.”

But his town and many others still haven’t received federal money and support they were promised

See FEMA, Page 2A



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