



Fiscal Year 2025

Annual Report

of the

**Civil Rights Cold Case
Records Review Board**

January 2026
coldcaserecords.gov

CIVIL RIGHTS COLD CASE RECORDS REVIEW BOARD
JANUARY 2026

OVERVIEW

The 2025 fiscal year was a momentous one for the work of the Civil Rights Cold Case Records Review Board. After overcoming numerous bureaucratic hurdles and establishing review protocols with partner agencies, the Board accelerated the public release of records. Through the Board's own [website](https://coldcaserecords.gov) (coldcaserecords.gov), and via the [Civil Rights Cold Case Records Portal](https://crcca.archives.gov) (crcca.archives.gov) maintained by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), victims' family members, historians, journalists, and the public at large can now easily review more than 9,000 pages of federal investigative records that had once been difficult to access.

Although the pace of releases is encouraging, the Board is working under a looming deadline; the Board is mandated by law to cease its work no later than January 2027. As of this writing, legislation that would extend the lifespan of the Board by four years has passed by unanimous consent in the U.S. Senate, and is pending in the U.S. House of Representatives.

YEAR IN REVIEW

On October 30, 2024, the Civil Rights Cold Case Records Review Board announced the release of 69 pages of federal records about the 1945 death of Hattie DeBardelaben, a 46-year-old Alabama grandmother. The announcement constituted the first public release of records under the provisions of the Civil Rights Cold Case Records Collection Act of 2018 ("the Act"), which empowers the Board to release government-held records concerning civil rights violations that occurred from 1940 through 1979.

In many respects, the release of the DeBardelaben records was both a culmination and a historic beginning for the Board's work. As the Act requires, relatives of Hattie DeBardelaben were contacted in advance of the release, and given the opportunity to see

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the records before they were made public on [NARA's Civil Rights Cold Case Records Portal](https://crrca.archives.gov) (crrca.archives.gov), a searchable landing site where all the records released under the Act are made available. The family members publicly expressed the importance of learning the circumstances surrounding the death of their grandmother 79 years earlier. "I finally know what happened," Mary DeBardelaben, Hattie's granddaughter, told CNN. "And other people are going to know, too."

More releases followed in the weeks and months afterwards. All told, in fiscal year 2025, the Board released federal records from 31 incidents involving 36 victims, among them World War II veterans, laborers, and farmers. Perhaps the most recognizable case was that of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old boy who was lynched by white men in Mississippi in 1955. In August 2025, the Board released 6,510 pages of records to coincide with the 70th anniversary of his murder. In the coming months, the Board plans to add thousands more pages of Department of Justice (DOJ) and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) records related to Till.

Each set of documents released in FY 2025 was accompanied on the Board's website (coldcaserecords.gov) by a case summary that encapsulates salient points from the records, as well as draws on other sources of information surrounding the incident and the victim. The Board also made contact with the victims' next of kin when it could be established, although the FBI's decision to withhold those names from the Board has proved a challenge to the Board's outreach and engagement efforts (see "Administrative and Performance Challenges").

In FY 2025, the Board also expanded its outreach efforts. In addition to the summaries of each case on its website, the Board used social media channels (LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, and X) to publicize cases as they were released. The Communications Manager notified relevant media outlets – primarily national outlets, plus regional ones that would find certain cases of particular interest.

In February 2025, the Board convened in Atlanta for its first public appearance to speak before an audience of journalists and attorneys about the importance of its work. The Board's presentation at the Georgia Bar, Media, and Judiciary Conference also included remarks from Wanda Charles, the niece of Chrispon Charles, who was shot and killed by New Orleans police in the presence of his father in 1949. Federal records concerning Chrispon Charles' death were released by the Board in December 2024. In response to the release of the records, Ms. Charles has launched a literary nonprofit in her late uncle's name.

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In April 2025, legislation known as the Civil Rights Cold Case Records Collection Reauthorization Act (“the Reauthorization Act”) was introduced in both the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives, with bipartisan sponsorship in both chambers. The Reauthorization Act would extend by four years the Board’s current sunset date of January 2027.

In July, the Board’s research staff, along with Board co-chairs Margaret Burnham and Hank Klibanoff, attended “Gathering the Red Record,” a two-day conference sponsored by Northeastern Law’s Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Project, of which Burnham is co-founder and director. The conference drew historians, archivists and academics associated with myriad initiatives focused on compiling incidents of historical racial violence together to explore greater collaboration.

That same month, the Board and its entire staff of seven full-time employees gathered at the NARA research facility in College Park, Maryland. There, Board members for the first time reviewed federal grand jury material involving 12 incidents, to determine if the Board would pursue release of any of the material under section 8 of the Act, which permits the Board to request that the Attorney General petition the relevant court for the release of any information under seal.

As of September 30, 2025, there are 32 additional incidents, spanning 10,082 pages, that await public release. Although the Board has reviewed and voted unanimously to release these documents, their public release has been delayed over an impasse with the FBI and DOJ concerning the status of disputed postponements within the documents. The Board voted to release these records based on the postponement categories outlined in section 4 of the Act, as well as its own postponement guidelines, with an eye to maximum disclosure permissible under access laws. For the cases released in fiscal year 2025, the agencies either did not recommend any postponements or they accepted the Board’s decisions on the postponements they had proposed. However, for the 10,082 as-yet unreleased pages on which the Board has already issued final determinations, in addition to thousands of other pages in the review queue, the agencies have not accepted the Board’s postponement guidelines. As the Board looks ahead to fiscal year 2026, maintaining the pace of releases will require resolving disputed postponements (see “Administrative and Performance Challenges”).

Throughout FY 2025, the Board met weekly, and when necessary, more than once a week. Because the Board members are geographically dispersed, most meetings were held via video conferencing.

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RECORDS REVIEW UPDATE

- So far, the agencies have provided 76,566 pages of federal records to the Board for review and potential release. A total of 53,191 of those pages were produced in FY 2025.
 - In FY 2025, the Board released 9,081 pages of federal records, spanning 31 incidents and involving 36 victims.
 - In FY 2025, the Board made decisions on an additional 10,082 pages, spanning 32 incidents, that are awaiting public release.
 - The remaining 57,403 pages, spanning 32 incidents, are awaiting Board action.
- So far, the Board has asked NARA, the Department of Justice, and the FBI to search for and produce all records related to 145 incidents, with 64 of those requested in FY 2025. The Board has identified an additional 750 incidents, involving 971 victims, for which it intends to request responsive records.
- The Board has reviewed and voted on more than 8,000 postponements proposed by the agencies, approving (with or without modifications) approximately 2,700, and rejecting approximately 4,200. An additional 1,416 proposed postponements were withdrawn by the agencies because of further consultation with the Board and based on Board staff research.

ADMINISTRATIVE AND PERFORMANCE CHALLENGES

Staffing

The Board began FY 2025 with nine full-time employees and was in the process of filling its attorney advisor position, the only vacant position in its staffing plan. Beginning in January 2025, the Board implemented the federal workforce initiatives instituted by the new presidential administration including the government-wide hiring freeze, the Deferred Resignation Program, and agency reorganizations. As a result, the number of Board staff decreased by 30 percent. One of the Board's five Researchers opted into the Deferred Resignation program. Another staffer – the Administrative Officer – resigned to take a position with another federal agency. An executive order put a freeze on new

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hires and a subsequent reorganization meant the two positions were unfilled and later eliminated. Moreover, in compliance with the executive order, the Board withdrew its offer of employment to the attorney advisor candidate, who had tentatively accepted the job offer. The Board navigated the administration's workforce optimization initiatives by realigning responsibilities among the remaining staff. This has ensured that the Board's statutory objectives continue to be met.

Currently the Board's staff consists of a Chief of Staff, a Lead Records Researcher, three Records Researchers, and a Communications Manager.

Next of Kin Engagement

The Act requires that the victim's next of kin be notified at least seven days in advance of the public release of cold case records. Next of kin information, including names, relation to the victim, birth dates, and any other publicly-available information, are identified as part of the incident research conducted by Board researchers. The leads are then passed on to the FBI, which confirms the next-of-kin status of the individuals and tracks down contact information, i.e. phone numbers, addresses, etc. The FBI then shares the contact information with NARA – which, as the official custodian of the records, is the agency required to make the official notification to the next of kin.

In October 2024, as the Board and agencies were preparing for the release of records in the cold case records collection, the FBI informed the Board that the Bureau's interpretation of the Privacy Act precludes the agency from sharing the contact information it had collected with the Board or its staff. This restriction has hampered the Board's own outreach efforts, as it seeks to make contact with next of kin to answer any questions they might have about the nature of the records, the Board's work, and how to respond to possible media inquiries surrounding the release of records. Furthermore, the family members may have photographs, correspondence or other ephemera that could add to the public's understanding of the victim and the incident. Indeed, with rare exceptions, photographs of victims on the Board's website are sourced from next of kin. It would markedly enhance the Board's outreach efforts to be able to connect to next of kin after they are formally notified of the product of the Board's work.

Board-Rejected Postponements from Disclosure

The Board provided the first iteration of its guidelines for postponement of personally-identifiable information to the FBI, DOJ and NARA in January 2024. As the Board reviewed thousands of pages of documents and consulted more with the agencies,

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it updated its guidelines in February 2025, and again in May 2025. These updates are intended to more clearly balance the statutory imperative for maximum disclosure with the need to protect personal information.

In the records released in FY 2025, the Board approved redactions within the documents proposed by the agencies that aligned with its postponement guidelines. However, there is a growing number of records the Board has voted to release but have not been because at least one agency disagrees with the Board's decision to disclose specific information within the records. These delays have not only slowed the pace of releases, but are counter to the mandates of the statute. In March, the Board informed the agencies of its rejections of proposed postponements in records for three incidents. The Board initially gave the agencies 30 days to transmit copies of the records reflecting the Board's release determinations to NARA for inclusion in the Civil Rights Cold Case Records collection or to initiate an appeal of the Board's decision under the provisions of section 7(d)(1). The agencies stated they needed additional time to consider which course of action they would pursue so the Board granted them an additional 30 days. While NARA responded that it would not appeal the Board's decisions, no official response was forthcoming from the DOJ or the FBI. The DOJ and the FBI did not transmit the records to NARA for public release, nor did they formally appeal the Board's decisions. The May 2025 notification of the Board's official determinations on records responsive to another six incidents met a similar fate. In such cases, when the Board and an agency cannot come to an agreement, the Act calls for the President to be the final arbiter, triggered by an appeal from the agency that disagrees with the Board's decision.

The Board's Chief of Staff, along with the Board's consulting attorney, have met multiple times with DOJ representatives to discuss the most efficient manner that agencies can make appeals to the White House. An in-person meeting that was scheduled for July among all the stakeholders – the Board members, NARA, DOJ and FBI – was cancelled two days before, when the DOJ and the FBI pulled out of the meeting. Since then, the Chief of Staff and the Board's consulting attorney have also met with representatives from the Office of White House Counsel, apprising them of the impasse. The Board has provided to the agencies a list of the postponement categories in question, and awaits a final decision from the White House.

There is further disagreement between the Board and the FBI when it comes to the release of confidential informant information. While the Act precludes the release of "the name or identity" of living confidential informants, the Act contains no such restriction when it comes to releasing the names of deceased confidential informants. The Board

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follows the precedent of the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992, in which names of deceased confidential informants were released.

Federal Grand Jury Material

Section 8 of the Act permits the Board to request that the Attorney General petition the relevant court for the release of “any information relevant to civil rights cold cases that is held under seal of court.” Federal grand jury material falls in this category..

In July 2025, the Board members reviewed approximately 3,500 pages of federal grand jury material when it convened at the NARA research facility in College Park, Maryland. Board members conducted preliminary votes on postponements proposed by the agencies. The proposed postponements fell into two broad categories – grand jury related information and grand jury generated records. The Board discussed the criteria to identify federal grand jury records it would seek to unseal. It also discussed the protocol for requesting that the Attorney General petition the relevant court for release.

Recommendations

Given the initial delays surrounding the appointment of the Board members and hiring of staff, the significant volume of records to be reviewed, and the still-unresolved questions surrounding the postponement of certain records, the Board believes an extension of the Board’s term beyond its current sunset date of January 2027 is necessary in order for it to provide a representative foundation of the breadth of civil rights cold cases. If the Board’s tenure is extended, additional appropriations will be necessary to fund the Board’s operation and further accelerate the review and release of records.

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FINANCIAL STATEMENT

Congress approved a one-time \$8 million appropriation for the Board in FY 2023. The Board set aside \$600,000 of the appropriation for NARA to use towards the development of the Civil Rights Cold Case Records Portal, construction and equipment costs for space used by its project team assigned to the cold case initiative, and expenses related to implementation of the Act. In FY 2025, NARA spent \$600 of the set aside on the notification of next of kin about the release of records mandated by the Act. NARA retains a balance of \$129,259.

Civil Rights Cold Case Records Review Board
STATEMENT OF CHANGE IN NET POSITION
For The Fiscal Year Ended September 30, 2025
(in dollars)

Unexpended Appropriations:

Beginning Balance	\$ 6,189,802.51
Appropriations used	(1,856,117.46)
Net Change of Unexpended Appropriations	<u>(1,856,117.46)</u>
Total Unexpended Appropriations	<u>\$ 4,333,685.05</u>