



July 17, 2018

**VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL**

Dionne Hardy  
FOIA Officer  
Office of Management and Budget  
725 17th Street NW, Suite 9204  
Washington, DC 20503  
[OMBFOIA@omb.eop.gov](mailto:OMBFOIA@omb.eop.gov)

**Re: Freedom of Information Act Request**

Dear FOIA Officer:

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552, and implementing regulations for the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), 5 C.F.R. Part 1303, American Oversight makes the following request for records.

Last month, OMB announced a plan to reorganize the federal government, including significant changes to the Department of Health and Human Services.<sup>1</sup> The plan reflects several recommendations made last year by the Heritage Foundation.<sup>2</sup> American Oversight seeks to understand whether and to what extent the Heritage Foundation or other outside groups were involved in OMB's process of developing the government reorganization plan.

**Requested Records**

American Oversight requests that OMB produce the following within twenty business days:

All communications between any political appointees\* at OMB and any of the groups listed below regarding the reorganization of the federal government, from January 20, 2017, to the date the search is conducted:

- a) Heritage Foundation (@heritage.org)

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Doyle, *Trump Rolls Out Long-Shot Plan for Government Overhaul*, E&E News, June 21, 2018, <https://www.eenews.net/stories/1060086039>; DELIVERING GOVERNMENT SOLUTIONS IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY: REFORM PLAN AND REORGANIZATION RECOMMENDATIONS, available at [https://www.eenews.net/assets/2018/06/21/document\\_gw\\_12.pdf](https://www.eenews.net/assets/2018/06/21/document_gw_12.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Helena Bottemiller Evich & Andrew Restuccia, *Trump Seeks to Reorganize the Federal Government*, POLITICO (June 6, 2018, 3:26 PM), <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/06/06/trump-reorganize-federal-government-629133>.



- b) Heritage Action (@heritageaction.com)
- c) Foundation for Government Accountability (@thefga.org)

\*Political appointee should be understood as any person who is a Presidential Appointee with Senate Confirmation (PAS), a Presidential Appointee (PA), a Non-Career SES, any Schedule C employees, or any persons hired under Temporary Non-Career SES Appointments, Limited Term SES Appointments, or Temporary Transitional Schedule C Appointments.

In addition to the records requested above, we also request records describing the processing of this request, including records sufficient to identify search terms used and locations and custodians searched and any tracking sheets used to track the processing of this request. If OMB uses FOIA questionnaires or certifications completed by individual custodians or components to determine whether they possess responsive materials or to describe how they conducted searches, we also request any such records prepared in connection with the processing of this request.

American Oversight seeks all responsive records regardless of format, medium, or physical characteristics. In conducting your search, please understand the terms “record,” “document,” and “information” in their broadest sense, to include any written, typed, recorded, graphic, printed, or audio material of any kind. We seek records of any kind, including electronic records, audiotapes, videotapes, and photographs, as well as letters, emails, facsimiles, telephone messages, voice mail messages and transcripts, notes, or minutes of any meetings, telephone conversations or discussions. Our request includes any attachments to these records. **No category of material should be omitted from search, collection, and production.**

Please search all records regarding agency business. **You may not exclude searches of files or emails in the personal custody of your officials, such as personal email accounts.** Records of official business conducted using unofficial systems or stored outside of official files is subject to the Federal Records Act and FOIA.<sup>3</sup> **It is not adequate to rely on policies and procedures that require officials to move such information to official systems within a certain period of time; we have a right to records contained in those files even if material has not yet been moved to official systems or if officials have, through negligence or willfulness, failed to meet their obligations.**<sup>4</sup>

In addition, please note that in conducting a “reasonable search” as required by law, you must employ the most up-to-date technologies and tools available, in addition to searches by individual custodians likely to have responsive information. Recent technology may have rendered OMB’s prior FOIA practices unreasonable. **In light of the government-wide requirements to manage information electronically by the end of 2016, it is no longer reasonable to rely exclusively on custodian-driven searches.**<sup>5</sup> **Furthermore, agencies that have adopted the National Archives and Records Agency (NARA) Capstone program, or similar policies, now maintain emails in a form that is reasonably likely to be more**

**complete than individual custodians' files.** For example, a custodian may have deleted a responsive email from his or her email program, but OMB's archiving tools would capture that email under Capstone. Accordingly, American Oversight insists that OMB use the most up-to-date technologies to search for responsive information and take steps to ensure that the most complete repositories of information are searched. We are available to work with you to craft appropriate search terms. **However, custodian searches are still required; agencies may not have direct access to files stored in .PST files, outside of network drives, in paper format, or in personal email accounts.**

Under the FOIA Improvement Act of 2016, agencies must adopt a presumption of disclosure, withholding information “only if . . . disclosure would harm an interest protected by an exemption” or “disclosure is prohibited by law.”<sup>6</sup> If it is your position that any portion of the requested records is exempt from disclosure, we request that you provide an index of those documents as required under *Vaughn v. Rosen*, 484 F.2d 820 (D.C. Cir. 1973), *cert. denied*, 415 U.S. 977 (1974). As you are aware, a *Vaughn* index must describe each document claimed as exempt with sufficient specificity “to permit a reasoned judgment as to whether the material is actually exempt under FOIA.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the *Vaughn* index “must describe *each* document or portion thereof withheld, and for *each* withholding it must discuss the consequences of disclosing the sought-after information.”<sup>8</sup> Further, “the withholding agency must supply ‘a relatively detailed justification, specifically identifying the reasons why a particular exemption is relevant and correlating those claims with the particular part of a withheld document to which they apply.’”<sup>9</sup>

In the event some portions of the requested records are properly exempt from disclosure, please disclose any reasonably segregable non-exempt portions of the requested records. If it is your position that a document contains non-exempt segments, but that those non-exempt segments are so dispersed throughout the document as to make segregation impossible, please state what portion of the document is non-exempt, and how the material is dispersed throughout the document.<sup>10</sup> Claims of nonsegregability must be made with the same degree of detail as required for claims of exemptions in a *Vaughn* index. If a request is denied in whole, please state specifically that it is not reasonable to segregate portions of the record for release.

**You should institute a preservation hold on information responsive to this request.** American Oversight intends to pursue all legal avenues to enforce its right of access under FOIA, including litigation if necessary. Accordingly, OMB is on notice that litigation is reasonably foreseeable.

To ensure that this request is properly construed, that searches are conducted in an adequate but efficient manner, and that extraneous costs are not incurred, we welcome an opportunity to discuss its request with you before you undertake your search or incur search or duplication costs. By working together at the outset, we can decrease the likelihood of costly and time-consuming litigation in the future.

Where possible, please provide responsive material in electronic format by email or in PDF or TIF format on a USB drive. Please send any responsive material being sent by mail to American Oversight, 1030 15th Street, NW, Suite B255, Washington, DC 20005. If it will accelerate release of responsive records, please also provide responsive material on a rolling basis.

### **Fee Waiver Request**

In accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) and 5 C.F.R. § 1303.70, American Oversight requests a waiver of fees associated with processing this request for records. The subject of this request concerns the operations of the federal government, and the disclosures will likely contribute to a better understanding of relevant government procedures by the general public in a significant way. Moreover, the request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.

The subject of this request concerns the operations of the federal government, and the disclosures will likely contribute to a better understanding of government activities by the general public in a significant way. The request relates to identifiable operations and activities of the federal government, namely email communications between OMB's political staff and certain outside groups with an interest in OMB's efforts to reorganize the federal government. The reorganization plan has the potential to impact virtually every American in some way, and the public deserves to know which entities had a seat at the table when the proposal was being developed. Disclosure of the requested records will be "meaningfully informative" about how the executive branch arrived at its proposed reorganization. American Oversight will convey information obtained through this request to the general public via its website and social media accounts, as described below.

Additionally, this request is primarily and fundamentally not for commercial purposes. As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, American Oversight does not have a commercial purpose and the release of the information requested is not in American Oversight's commercial interest. American Oversight's mission is to promote transparency in government, to educate the public about government activities, and to ensure the accountability of government officials. American Oversight uses the information it gathers, and its analysis of it, to educate the public through reports, press releases, or other media. American Oversight also makes materials it gathers available on its website and promotes their availability on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.<sup>3</sup> One example of American Oversight's demonstrated public disclosure of documents and creation of editorial content is in its "Audit the Wall" effort, where the organization is gathering and analyzing information and commenting on public releases of

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<sup>3</sup> American Oversight currently has over 11,900 page likes on Facebook, and over 43,900 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight> (last visited July 3, 2018); American Oversight (@weareoversight), TWITTER, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited July 3, 2018).

information related to the administration's proposed construction of a barrier along the U.S.-Mexico border.<sup>4</sup>

Accordingly, this request qualifies for a fee waiver.

### **Conclusion**

We share a common mission to promote transparency in government. American Oversight looks forward to working with your agency on this request. If you do not understand any part of this request, have any questions, or foresee any problems in fully releasing the requested records, please contact Sara Creighton at [foia@americanoversight.org](mailto:foia@americanoversight.org) or 202.869.5245. Also, if American Oversight's request for a fee waiver is not granted in full, please contact us immediately upon making such a determination.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Austin R. Evers". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending to the left.

Austin R. Evers  
Executive Director  
American Oversight

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<sup>4</sup> *Audit the Wall*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/audit-the-wall>.