



February 26, 2018

**VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL**

U.S. Department of State  
Office of Information Programs and Services  
A/GIS/IPS/RL  
SA-2, Suite 8100  
Washington, DC 20522-0208  
FOIArequest@state.gov

**Re: Freedom of Information Act Request**

Dear FOIA Officer:

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552, and the implementing regulations of the Department of State (State), 22 C.F.R. Part 171, American Oversight makes the following request for records.

On January 27, 2017, President Trump issued Executive Order 13769, entitled “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States.” Following legal challenges, the President issued a new executive order on March 6, 2017, Executive Order 13780 (“Second Executive Order”). The revised order permitted the grant of case-by-case waivers for individuals whose entry the Executive Order would have otherwise suspended. *See* Exec. Order No. 13780 § 3(c), 82 Fed. Reg. 13,209 (Mar. 6, 2017). After the Second Executive Order was enjoined in litigation, the President issued a proclamation entitled “Presidential Proclamation Enhancing Vetting Capabilities and Processes for Detecting Attempted Entry Into the United States by Terrorists or Other Public-Safety Threats” (“Proclamation 9645” or the “Proclamation”) on September 24, 2017. Again, like the Second Executive Order, the Proclamation included a waiver provision that permits case-by-case waivers in certain circumstances, including when denial of entry “would cause undue hardship” or when entry “would not pose a threat to national security” or “would be in the national interest.” *See* Pres. Proclamation 9645 § 3(c). The Proclamation assigns responsibility to adopt guidance regarding these waivers to the Secretary of Homeland Security and the Secretary of State. *Id.* The United States has argued in court that the availability of these waivers is an important factor that weighs in favor of the legality of the prohibitions otherwise contained in the Second Executive Order and the Proclamation. Yet there is little public information regarding these waivers, including how to apply; the criteria for granting a waiver; who decides whether to grant a waiver; or the practice of the federal government in granting or denying a waiver. We submit this request to illuminate these important issues for the public.



## Requested Records

American Oversight requests that the Department of State and its component agencies (collectively “State”) produce the following within twenty business:

Records sufficient to identify the aggregate number of applicants requesting a waiver from the requirements of the January 27, 2017 Executive Order, the Second Executive Order, or the Proclamation; the number of applicants granted such a waiver; and the number of applicants denied such a waiver.

Please provide all responsive records from January 27, 2017, through the date the search is conducted.

The search for responsive records should include all individuals and locations likely to contain responsive records, including but not limited to: the Office of the Secretary, the Office of the Undersecretary for Management, the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs, and any consular officials with authority to make a determination regarding a waiver application.

In addition to the records requested above, American Oversight also requests 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 your agency 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.**

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>1</sup> If it is your position that any portion of the requested records is exempt from disclosure, American Oversight requests 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

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<sup>1</sup> FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 § 2 (Pub. L. No. 114-185).

actually exempt under FOIA.”<sup>2</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>3</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>4</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>5</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, State 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, American Oversight welcomes 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, American Oversight and State 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 15<sup>th</sup> Street NW, Suite B255, Washington, DC 20005. If it will accelerate release of responsive records to American Oversight, 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 22 C.F.R. § 171.16(a), American Oversight requests a waiver of fees associated with processing this request for records. First, 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.<sup>6</sup> Second, the request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Founding Church of Scientology v. Bell*, 603 F.2d 945, 949 (D.C. Cir. 1979).

<sup>3</sup> *King v. U.S. Dep’t of Justice*, 830 F.2d 210, 223–24 (D.C. Cir. 1987) (emphasis in original).

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 224 (citing *Mead Data Central, Inc. v. U.S. Dep’t of the Air Force*, 566 F.2d 242, 251 (D.C. Cir. 1977)).

<sup>5</sup> *Mead Data Central*, 566 F.2d at 261.

<sup>6</sup> 22 C.F.R. § 171.16(a)(1).

<sup>7</sup> 22 C.F.R. § 171.16(a)(2).

Under the public interest requirement, FOIA requesters must satisfy four factors in sequence.<sup>8</sup> American Oversight believes it has met these four factors for reasons set forth below.

The subject matter of the requested documents specifically relates to the operations or activities of the government insofar as the requests concern how the federal government has implemented a key provision of the executive orders and proclamation. The requested records directly and clearly concern identifiable activities of the federal government, and their disclosure would meaningfully inform the public regarding how agencies have implemented the President's direction.

The requested documents will be “likely to contribute” to an understanding of specific government operations because of their potential to shed light on how the agencies have implemented the waiver provisions contained in the President's orders. Additionally, responsive records will illuminate whether the federal government has, in fact, established a robust and meaningful waiver process. American Oversight has the capacity to disseminate this information as it posts all records to its public websites and publishes analyses of its records. In the past, the organization has successfully informed the public of specific government activities and operations. As an example, American Oversight obtained Education Secretary DeVos's calendar entries, which revealed Secretary DeVos's frequent absences from office, staffing choices, and the influence of charter schools and for-profit colleges on the Education Department.<sup>9</sup> The New York Times and CNN relied on American Oversight's analyses to report on Secretary DeVos's priorities within the Education Department.<sup>10</sup>

Disclosure will contribute to a greater understanding on the part of the public at large on how the federal government is implementing the President's orders, including whether there is in fact a meaningful and robust waiver process. Having such knowledge would allow members of the public to participate in the debate regarding these controversial measures in an informed manner.

Disclosure will “significantly” contribute to the public's understanding of government activities or operations related to the America's diplomatic efforts and implementation of entry restrictions for eight countries. Moreover, there is significant public interest in how the federal government has implemented the executive orders and proclamation at issue, including the waiver provisions therein, and these orders have been matters of intense public interest and controversy. Indeed, the

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<sup>8</sup> *D.C. Technical Assistance Org. Inc., v. U.S. Dep't of Hous. and Urban Dev. (D.C. Technical Assistance)*, 85 F.Supp.2d 46, 48-49 (D.D.C. 2000) (requested documents will contribute to “greater understanding of government activities”).

<sup>9</sup> See *Influence & Access at the Department of Education*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT (Oct. 27, 2017), <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/influence-access-at-the-department-of-education>; *Unexcused Absences: DeVos Calendars Show Frequent Days Off*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT (Oct. 27, 2017), <https://www.americanoversight.org/unexcused-absences-devos>.

<sup>10</sup> Eric Lipton, *Betsy DeVos's School Schedule Shows Focus on Religious and Non Traditional Schools*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 27, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/27/us/politics/betsy-devos-work-schedule-education.html>; Gregory Wallace et. al., *What Betsy DeVos's Schedule Tells Us About Her Agenda*, CNN (Oct. 29, 2017 12:22 PM), <http://www.cnn.com/2017/10/28/politics/devos-schedules-education/index.html>

federal government itself has highlighted the importance of the waiver provisions in defending the legality of these presidential orders. The public has significant interests in understanding how these waiver provisions are, in fact, being implemented by the federal government. As noted, the subject of this request is a matter of public interest, and the public's understanding of the government's activities would be enhanced through American Oversight's analysis and publication of these records.

American Oversight's request is also primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.<sup>11</sup> 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 financial 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 gathered, 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 our public website and promote their availability on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.<sup>12</sup> American Oversight has demonstrated its commitment to the public disclosure of documents and creation of editorial content. For example, after receiving records regarding an ethics waiver received by a senior DOJ attorney, American Oversight promptly posted the records to its website<sup>13</sup> and published an analysis of what the records reflected about DOJ's process for ethics waivers.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, American Oversight has a project called "Audit the Wall," where the organization is gathering and analyzing information and commenting on public releases of information related to the administration's proposed construction of a barrier along the U.S.-Mexico border.<sup>15</sup>

Accordingly, American Oversight qualifies for a fee waiver.

## Conclusion

We share a common mission to promote transparency in government. American Oversight looks forward to working with State 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 Cerissa Cafasso at [foia@americanoversight.org](mailto:foia@americanoversight.org) or 202.869.5244. Also, if American Oversight's

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<sup>11</sup> 22 C.F.R. § 171.16(a)(2)(i)-(iii).

<sup>12</sup> American Oversight currently has approximately 11,800 page likes on Facebook, and 40,100 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited Feb. 28, 2018); American Oversight (@weareoversight), TWITTER, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited Feb. 28, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> *DOJ Civil Division Response Noel Francisco Compliance*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/document/doj-civil-division-response-noel-francisco-compliance>.

<sup>14</sup> *Francisco & the Travel Ban: What We Learned from the DOJ Documents*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/francisco-the-travel-ban-what-we-learned-from-the-doj-documents>.

<sup>15</sup> *Audit the Wall*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, [www.auditthewall.org](http://www.auditthewall.org).

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, appearing to read 'MS', is positioned below the word 'Sincerely,'.

Melanie Sloan  
Senior Advisor  
American Oversight