



June 4, 2019

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

Monica Chyn
Public FOIA Liaison
Office of Privacy and Disclosure
Social Security Administration
WHR G401
6401 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, MD 21235
FOIA.Public.Liaison@ssa.gov

Re: Freedom of Information Act Request

Dear Ms. Chyn:

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552, and the implementing regulations of the Social Security Administration's (SSA) implementing regulations, 20 C.F.R. § 402, American Oversight makes the following request for records.

On February 1, 2019, SSA announced a proposed rule entitled "Removing Inability to Communicate in English as an Education Category."¹ The rule would block individuals with limited English language skills from receiving disability insurance.² American Oversight seeks records to determine whether and to what extent White House aide Stephen Miller influenced the rule's proposal. Mr. Miller is a noted advocate of restricting immigration³ and has previously been

¹ SOC. SEC. ADMIN, Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, *Removing Inability to Communicate in English as an Education Category*, 84 Fed. Reg. 1006, Feb. 1, 2019, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2019/02/01/2019-00250/removing-inability-to-communicate-in-english-as-an-education-category>.

² See, e.g., Andy Jones, *Some Non-English Speakers Would Lose Disability Benefits Under SSA Proposal*, SPECIAL NEEDS ANSWERS, Feb. 27, 2019, <https://specialneedsanswers.com/many-non-english-speakers-would-lose-disability-benefits-under-ssa-proposal-17069>.

³ See, e.g., Eugene Scott, *Stephen Miller Says Tough Immigration Policies Protect Americans. His Critics See Something Darker*, WASH. POST., Apr. 10, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/04/10/stephen-miller-says-tough-immigration-policies-protect-americans-his-critics-see-something-darker/?utm_term=.b9dec1f4cfe7; see also Anita Kumar, Gabby Orr, & Daniel Lippman, *Stephen Miller Pressuring Trump Officials Amid Immigration Shakeups*, POLITICO (Apr. 8, 2019, 9:29 AM), <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/04/07/stephen-miller-trump-immigration-1260431>.



involved in seeking to influence federal immigration policy.⁴ For instance, in 2015, as a staffer for former Senator Jeff Sessions, Mr. Miller reportedly opposed the inclusion of non-English proficiency in determining Social Security disability cases.⁵

Requested Records

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

All records reflecting communications (including emails, email attachments, text messages, messages on messaging platforms (such as Slack, GChat or Google Hangouts, Lync, Skype, or WhatsApp), telephone call logs, calendar invitations, calendar entries, meeting notices, meeting agendas, informational material, draft legislation, talking points, any handwritten or electronic notes taken during any oral communications, summaries of any oral communications, or other materials) between (1) any of the SSA officials listed below and (2) Stephen Miller or any assistant acting on his behalf such as McLaurine Klingler, *including but not limited to* the email addresses stephen.miller@who.eop.gov and the phone number (202) 881-8641:

- a. Acting Commissioner Nancy A. Berryhill
- b. Chief of Staff Beatrice M. Disman
- c. Deputy Chief of Staff Stephanie J. Hall
- d. Any other person serving in the role of Chief of Staff or Deputy Chief of Staff
- e. Anyone serving in the capacity of White House Liaison or White House Advisor
- f. Anyone communicating on behalf of any of the above officials, such as an administrative assistant or scheduler

Please provide all responsive records from January 20, 2017 through the date the search is conducted.

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 SSA 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.

⁴ See, e.g., Gabby Orr & Andrew Restuccia, *How Stephen Miller Made Immigration Personal*, POLITICO (Apr. 22, 2019, 5:91 AM), <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/04/22/stephen-miller-immigration-trump-1284287>.

⁵ Eoin Higgins, *Social Security Proposal Could Strip Benefits From Thousands of Non-English Speakers*, Splinter News (Feb. 5, 2019, 4:09 PM), <https://splinternews.com/social-security-proposal-could-strip-benefits-from-thou-1832365560>.

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 are subject to the Federal Records Act and FOIA.⁶ **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; American Oversight has 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.**⁷

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 SSA’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.**⁸ Furthermore, agencies that have adopted the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Capstone program, or similar policies, now maintain emails in a

⁶ See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, 827 F.3d 145, 149–50 (D.C. Cir. 2016); cf. *Judicial Watch, Inc. v. Kerry*, 844 F.3d 952, 955–56 (D.C. Cir. 2016).

⁷ See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, No. 14-cv-765, slip op. at 8 (D.D.C. Dec. 12, 2016) (“The Government argues that because the agency had a policy requiring [the official] to forward all of his emails from his [personal] account to his business email, the [personal] account only contains duplicate agency records at best. Therefore, the Government claims that any hypothetical deletion of the [personal account] emails would still leave a copy of those records intact in [the official’s] work email. However, policies are rarely followed to perfection by anyone. At this stage of the case, the Court cannot assume that each and every work related email in the [personal] account was duplicated in [the official’s] work email account.” (citations omitted)).

⁸ Presidential Memorandum—Managing Government Records, 76 Fed. Reg. 75,423 (Nov. 28, 2011), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/28/presidential-memorandum-managing-government-records>; Office of Mgmt. & Budget, Exec. Office of the President, Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments & Independent Agencies, “Managing Government Records Directive,” M-12-18 (Aug. 24, 2012), <https://www.archives.gov/files/records-mgmt/m-12-18.pdf>.

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 SSA's archiving tools would capture that email under Capstone. Accordingly, American Oversight insists that SSA 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. American Oversight is 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.”⁹ 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 actually exempt under FOIA.”¹⁰ 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.”¹¹ 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.’”¹²

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.¹³ 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, SSA 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

⁹ FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 § 2 (Pub. L. No. 114-185).

¹⁰ *Founding Church of Scientology v. Bell*, 603 F.2d 945, 949 (D.C. Cir. 1979).

¹¹ *King v. U.S. Dep't of Justice*, 830 F.2d 210, 223-24 (D.C. Cir. 1987) (emphases in original).

¹² *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)).

¹³ *Mead Data Central*, 566 F.2d at 261.

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 SSA 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 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 20 C.F.R. § 402.185, 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.¹⁴ Moreover, the request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.¹⁵

American Oversight requests a waiver of fees because disclosure of the requested information is “in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding” of government operations and activities.¹⁶ The subject matter of the requested records specifically relates to the operations or activities of the government, because it concerns communications made by SSA personnel in their official capacities, including potential communications with White House political appointees who may be attempting to influence SSA’s policies and rules on the issue of immigrant disability benefits. As discussed below, American Oversight has the capacity and intention to inform a broad audience about government activities that are the subject of these records.

This request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.¹⁷ 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 its public website and promotes their availability on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.¹⁸ American

¹⁴ 20 C.F.R. § 402.185 (a)(1).

¹⁵ 20 C.F.R. § 402.185 (a)(2), (c).

¹⁶ 28 C.F.R. § 402.185 (b).

¹⁷ *Supra* note 11.

¹⁸ American Oversight currently has approximately 12,300 page likes on Facebook and 54,200 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/>

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,¹⁹ American Oversight promptly posted the records to its website and published an analysis of what the records reflected about DOJ's process for ethics waivers.²⁰ As another example, 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.²¹

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 SSA 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 Khahilia Shaw at foia@americanoversight.org or 202.539.6507. 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,



Austin R. Evers
Executive Director
American Oversight

(last visited May 30, 2019); American Oversight (@weareoversight), TWITTER, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited May 30, 2019).

¹⁹ *DOJ Records Relating to Solicitor General Noel Francisco's Recusal*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/document/doj-civil-division-response-noel-francisco-compliance>.

²⁰ *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>.

²¹ *Audit the Wall*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/audit-the-wall>.