



February 28, 2020

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL & ONLINE PORTAL

The Privacy Office  
U.S. Department of Homeland Security  
245 Murray Lane SW  
STOP-0655  
Washington, DC 20528-0655  
[foia@hq.dhs.gov](mailto:foia@hq.dhs.gov)

Catrina Pavlik-Keenan  
Freedom of Information Act Office  
U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement  
500 12th Street SW, Stop 5009  
Washington, DC 20536-5009  
[ice-foia@dhs.gov](mailto:ice-foia@dhs.gov)

FOIA Officer  
U.S. Customs and Border Protection  
90 K Street NW, 9th Floor  
FOIA Division  
Washington, DC 20229-1181  
Via FOIAOnline

**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 Homeland Security (DHS), 6 C.F.R. Part 5, American Oversight makes the following request for records.

The use of force by DHS subcomponents on detainees held in custody and in apprehending suspects has been an ongoing issue of significant public concern. On February 12, 2020, a social media video depicted Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents using a stun gun while apprehending a suspect at Burger King in El Paso, TX, after saying, "Let me 'tase' him. Let me 'tase' him."<sup>1</sup> On February 6, 2020, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents in Brooklyn, NY,

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<sup>1</sup> Fernie Ortiz, *Border Agents Deploy Taser During Struggle with Suspected Human Smuggler Inside Burger King*, KTSM (Feb. 12, 2020 4:11 PM, updated Feb. 12, 2020, 5:25 PM),



attempted to detain Gaspar Avendaño Hernandez, an undocumented immigrant, and in the subsequent altercation one discharged an electroshock weapon on Avendaño and a second officer shot Avendaño's girlfriend's son in the cheek with a gun.<sup>2</sup> On August 2, 2019, at Bossier Parish Corrections Center in Louisiana, immigrant detainees claimed ICE guards pepper-sprayed and beat them.<sup>3</sup> A later inspection of the Bossier Parish facility by the Nakamoto Group found that during this protest, force was used on a detainee while he was unconscious.<sup>4</sup> Another such incident reportedly occurred on June 12, 2017, when surveillance footage captured from ICE's Adelanto, CA, processing center depicted ICE personnel using pepper spray on detainees protesting detention conditions.<sup>5</sup>

American Oversight seeks records with the potential to shed light on DHS's (and its component agencies') treatment of detainees, including actions DHS officials have taken to address serious threats to the life of people DHS has detained.

### **Requested Records**

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

All sent email communications (including emails, email attachments, complete email chains calendar invitations and attachments thereto) of the below specified officials containing any of the following terms:

- a. Taser
- b. electroshock
- c. electro-shock
- d. "stun gun"
- e. "electric weapon"
- f. CED
- g. "conducted energy"
- h. ECW
- i. "electronic control"

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<https://www.ktsm.com/news/border-agents-deploy-taser-during-struggle-with-migrant-inside-burger-king/>.

<sup>2</sup>Annie Correal & Ed Shanahan, *Shooting of Man in the Face by ICE Turns Into a Trump-New York Fight*, N.Y. TIMES (Feb. 11, 2020, last updated Feb. 12, 2020, 1:16 PM)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/11/nyregion/ice-officer-shooting.html>.

<sup>3</sup>Fernanda Echavarri, *Dozens of ICE Detainees Were Pepper-Sprayed by Guards for Protesting at a Louisiana Jail*, MOTHER JONES, Aug. 2, 2019, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2019/08/immigrant-detention-ice-bossier-louisiana-pepper-spray/>.

<sup>4</sup>Noah Lanard & Fernanda Echavarri, *ICE Stops Using Jail Where Detainees Were Beaten and Pepper Sprayed*, MOTHER JONES, Feb. 10, 2020, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2020/02/ice-stops-using-jail-where-detainees-were-beaten-and-pepper-sprayed/>.

<sup>5</sup>Tom Dreisbach, *Exclusive: Video Shows Controversial Use Of Force Inside An ICE Detention Center*, NPR (Feb. 6, 2020, 7:45 AM), <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/06/802939294/exclusive-video-shows-controversial-use-of-force-inside-an-ice-detention-center>.

- j. Axon
- k. Wexler
- l. Walker
- m. "less-lethal"
- n. "less lethal"
- o. "pepper spray"
- p. oleoresin
- q. capsicum
- r. "OC Spray"
- s. "tear gas"
- t. "compressed air"
- u. "bean bag"

Specified Officials:

- 1) Acting DHS Secretary Chad Wolf (including in any prior capacity, including Chief of Staff and Acting Under Secretary of Homeland for Strategy, Policy and Plans) or anyone communicating on his behalf, such as a Chief of Staff, scheduler, or assistant
- 2) Acting DHS Deputy Secretary Ken Cuccinelli or anyone communicating on his behalf, such as a Chief of Staff, scheduler, or assistant
- 2) Former Acting DHS Secretary Kevin McAleenan or anyone communicating on his behalf, such as a Chief of Staff, scheduler, or assistant
- 3) Former DHS Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen
- 4) Acting ICE Director Matthew Albence
- 5) Acting ICE Deputy Director Derek Benner
- 6) Former Acting ICE Director Ronald Vitiello
- 7) ICE Senior Advisor Jon Feere
- 8) Acting CBP Commissioner Mark Morgan
- 9) Former Acting CBP Commissioner John Sanders

Please provide all responsive records from January 1, 2019, through the date of the search.

Please exclude news clips generated from non-governmental services and emails distributed to a wide listserv of twenty or more email addresses. A news clips email that is forwarded by an individual to one of the identified individuals with any additional message *should* be considered responsive.

**Fee Waiver Request**

In accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) and your agency's regulations, 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.

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 operations or activities of the government.”<sup>6</sup> The public has a significant interest in understanding the work of DHS and its subcomponents, CBP and ICE, including the treatment of individuals they detain. Records with the potential to shed light on this issue would contribute significantly to public understanding of operations of the federal government, including understanding the policies and training procedures currently in place guiding agents’ use of force, as well as whether and to what extent DHS has responded to inappropriate uses of force by its agents. American Oversight is committed to transparency and makes the responses agencies provide to FOIA requests publicly available, and the public’s understanding of the government’s activities would be enhanced through American Oversight’s analysis and publication of these records.

This request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.<sup>7</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 its public website and promotes their availability on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.<sup>8</sup>

American Oversight has also demonstrated its commitment to the public disclosure of documents and creation of editorial content through numerous substantive analyses posted to its website.<sup>9</sup> Examples reflecting this commitment to the public disclosure of documents and the creation of editorial content include the posting of records related to an ethics waiver received by a senior Department of Justice attorney and an analysis of what those records demonstrated regarding the Department’s process for issuing such waivers;<sup>10</sup> posting records received as part of American Oversight’s “Audit the Wall” project to gather and analyze information related to the administration’s proposed construction of a barrier along the U.S.-Mexico border, and analyses of what those records reveal;<sup>11</sup> posting records regarding potential self-dealing at the Department of

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<sup>6</sup> 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii).

<sup>7</sup> See 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii).

<sup>8</sup> American Oversight currently has approximately 15,400 page likes on Facebook and 101,800 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited Feb. 18, 2020); American Oversight (@weareoversight), TWITTER, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited Feb. 18, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> News, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/blog>.

<sup>10</sup> *DOJ Records Relating to Solicitor General Noel Francisco’s Recusal*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/document/doj-civil-division-response-noel-francisco-compliance>; *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>11</sup> See generally *Audit the Wall*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/audit-the-wall>; see, e.g., *Border Wall Investigation Report: No Plans, No Funding, No Timeline, No Wall*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT,

Housing & Urban Development and related analysis;<sup>12</sup> posting records and analysis relating to the federal government's efforts to sell nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia;<sup>13</sup> and posting records and analysis regarding the Department of Justice's decision in response to demands from Congress to direct a U.S. Attorney to undertake a wide-ranging review and make recommendations regarding criminal investigations relating to the President's political opponents and allegations of misconduct by the Department of Justice itself and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.<sup>14</sup>

Accordingly, American Oversight qualifies for a fee waiver.

### **Guidance Regarding the Search & Processing of Requested Records**

In connection with its request for records, American Oversight provides the following guidance regarding the scope of the records sought and the search and processing of records:

- Please search all locations and systems likely to have responsive records, regardless of format, medium, or physical characteristics.
- Our request for records includes any attachments to those records or other materials enclosed with those records when they were previously transmitted. To the extent that an email is responsive to our request, our request includes all prior messages sent or received in that email chain, as well as any attachments to the email.
- Please search all relevant records or systems containing records regarding agency business. Do not exclude records regarding agency business contained in files, email accounts, or devices in the personal custody of your officials, such as personal email accounts or text messages. Records of official business conducted using unofficial systems or stored outside of official files are subject to the Federal Records Act and FOIA.<sup>15</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; 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, by intent or through negligence, failed to meet their obligations.<sup>16</sup>

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<https://www.americanoversight.org/border-wall-investigation-report-no-plans-no-funding-no-timeline-no-wall>.

<sup>12</sup> *Documents Reveal Ben Carson Jr.'s Attempts to Use His Influence at HUD to Help His Business*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/documents-reveal-ben-carson-jr-s-attempts-to-use-his-influence-at-hud-to-help-his-business>.

<sup>13</sup> *Investigating the Trump Administration's Efforts to Sell Nuclear Technology to Saudi Arabia*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigating-the-trump-administrations-efforts-to-sell-nuclear-technology-to-saudi-arabia>.

<sup>14</sup> *Sessions' Letter Shows DOJ Acted on Trump's Authoritarian Demand to Investigate Clinton*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/sessions-letter>.

<sup>15</sup> 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).

<sup>16</sup> See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, No. 14-cv-765, slip op. at 8 (D.D.C. Dec. 12, 2016).

- Please use all tools available to your agency to conduct a complete and efficient search for potentially responsive records. Agencies are subject to government-wide requirements to manage agency information electronically,<sup>17</sup> and many agencies have adopted the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Capstone program, or similar policies. These systems provide options for searching emails and other electronic records in a manner that is reasonably likely to be more complete than just searching individual custodian files. For example, a custodian may have deleted a responsive email from his or her email program, but your agency’s archiving tools may capture that email under Capstone. At the same time, custodian searches are still necessary; agencies may not have direct access to files stored in .PST files, outside of network drives, in paper format, or in personal email accounts.
- 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 a request is denied in whole, please state specifically why it is not reasonable to segregate portions of the record for release.
- Please take appropriate steps to ensure that records responsive to this request are not deleted by the agency before the completion of processing for this request. If records potentially responsive to this request are likely to be located on systems where they are subject to potential deletion, including on a scheduled basis, please take steps to prevent that deletion, including, as appropriate, by instituting a litigation hold on those records.

## **Conclusion**

If you have any questions regarding how to construe this request for records or believe that further discussions regarding search and processing would facilitate a more efficient production of records of interest to American Oversight, please do not hesitate to contact American Oversight to discuss this request. 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 your agency can decrease the likelihood of costly and time-consuming litigation in the future.

Where possible, please provide responsive material in an electronic format by email. Alternatively, please provide responsive material in native format or in PDF 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.

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

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<sup>17</sup> 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>.

request, have any questions, or foresee any problems in fully releasing the requested records, please contact Mehreen Rasheed at [foia@americanoversight.org](mailto:foia@americanoversight.org) or 202.848.1320. 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, appearing to read "Austin R. Evers", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the left.

Austin R. Evers  
Executive Director  
American Oversight