



June 11, 2020

VIA EMAIL & ONLINE PORTAL

Douglas Hibbard  
Chief, Initial Request Staff  
Office of Information Policy  
Department of Justice  
1425 New York Avenue, NW, Suite 11050  
Washington, DC 20530-0001  
Via FOIA STAR

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

FOIA Section  
Office of General Counsel, Room 924  
Federal Bureau of Prisons  
Department of Justice  
320 First Street NW  
Washington, DC 20534  
[ogc\\_foia@bop.gov](mailto:ogc_foia@bop.gov)

FOIA Office  
Customs and Border Protection  
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Room 3.3D  
Washington, DC 20229  
Via FOIAOnline

Communications Center (FOIA/PA)  
U.S. Secret Service  
245 Murray Drive, Building T-5  
Washington, DC 20223  
[FOIA@uss.dhs.gov](mailto:FOIA@uss.dhs.gov)

FOIA Office  
Immigration and Customs Enforcement  
500 12th Street SW  
STOP-5009  
Washington, DC 20536  
[ice-foia@dhs.gov](mailto:ice-foia@dhs.gov)

Charlotte M. Luckstone  
FOIA/PA Officer  
Office of General Counsel, CG-3  
15th Floor  
U.S. Marshals Service  
Washington, DC 20350  
[usms.foia@usdoj.gov](mailto:usms.foia@usdoj.gov)

Transportation Security Administration  
TSA-20, East Tower  
FOIA Branch  
601 South 12th Street  
Arlington, VA 20598-6020  
[FOIA@tsa.dhs.gov](mailto:FOIA@tsa.dhs.gov)

U.S. Department of Defense  
OSD/JS FOIA Requester Service Center  
Office of Freedom of Information  
1155 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301-1155  
[whs.mc-alex.esd.mbx.osd-js-foia-requester-service-center@mail.mil](mailto:whs.mc-alex.esd.mbx.osd-js-foia-requester-service-center@mail.mil)

NGB FOIA Office (NGB/JA-OIP)  
National Guard Bureau  
111 South George Mason Drive, AH2  
Arlington, VA 22204-1373  
[ngb.foia@mail.mil](mailto:ngb.foia@mail.mil)



Charis Wilson, FOIA Officer  
National Park Service  
12795 W. Alameda Parkway  
Denver, CO 80225  
Via ONLINE PORTAL

**Re: Freedom of Information Act Request**

Dear FOIA Officers:

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552, and the implementing regulations of your agency, American Oversight makes the following request for records.

In the wake of nationwide public protests against police brutality, including the recent police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, a number of federal agencies have been deployed in response to public protests.<sup>1</sup> Public reporting has indicated that tear gas, pepper spray capsules, and other chemical irritants have been used on individuals present at protests, raising concerns among health experts and others about exacerbating the risk of coronavirus in the midst of a pandemic.<sup>2</sup> The use of crowd containment techniques, such as “kettling,” as well as mass arrests and detention, have similarly raised concerns about the spread of coronavirus.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Priscilla Alvarez & Ellie Kaufman, *Why Trump Has the FBI, ICE and TSA Patrolling Washington Streets*, CNN (June 4, 2020, 7:40 AM), <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/03/politics/federal-authorities-washington-dc/index.html>; Devlin Barrett, *Barr Seeks to Subdue D.C. Protests by ‘Flooding the Zone’ with Federal Firepower*, WASH. POST (June 3, 2020, 9:08 PM), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/william-barr-george-floyd-protests-fbi-atf-us-marshals/2020/06/02/6d093d0a-a515-11ea-b473-04905b1af82b\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/william-barr-george-floyd-protests-fbi-atf-us-marshals/2020/06/02/6d093d0a-a515-11ea-b473-04905b1af82b_story.html); Zolan Kanno-Youngs & Katie Benner, *Trump Deploys the Full Might of Federal Law Enforcement to Crush Protests*, N.Y. TIMES, June 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/02/us/politics/trump-law-enforcement-protests.html>.

<sup>2</sup> See Lisa Song, *Tear Gas Is Way More Dangerous Than Police Let On — Especially During the Coronavirus Pandemic*, PROPUBLICA (June 4, 2020, 12:25 PM), <https://www.propublica.org/article/tear-gas-is-way-more-dangerous-than-police-let-on-especially-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic>; Rachel Kurzius, *Black Lives Matter D.C. Sues Trump And Barr Over Tear Gas At Lafayette Square*, DCIST (June 4, 7:06 PM), <https://dcist.com/story/20/06/04/black-lives-matter-d-c-sues-trump-and-barr-over-tear-gas-at-lafayette-square/>.

<sup>3</sup> Alice Miranda Ollstein & Dan Goldberg, *Mass Arrests Jeopardizing the Health of Protesters, Police*, POLITICO (June 4, 2020, 5:34 PM), <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/04/police-arrest-coronavirus->

American Oversight seeks records with the potential to shed light on the extent of efforts taken, if any, by the federal government to ensure that this mass mobilization of federal agents does not exacerbate the spread of coronavirus.

### **Requested Records**

American Oversight requests that your agencies produce the following records as soon as practicable, and at least within twenty business days:

1. Any final assessments, reports, analyses, recommendations, or guidance prepared by your agency or received from other agencies (including from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)) regarding the effects or impacts of the use of chemical irritants or crowd dispersants (including tear gas, pepper spray, or any other “riot control agents,” including but not limited to chloroacetophenone (CN) and chlorobenzylidenemalonitrile (CS)) during the coronavirus pandemic, including risks that such use could increase the spread of the virus such as by causing people to cough and wheeze, exacerbate symptoms of individuals with COVID-19, or increase the risk of contracting coronavirus and other respiratory illnesses in the future by damaging people’s lungs.
2. Any final assessments, reports, analyses, recommendations, or guidance prepared by your agency or received from other agencies (including from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)) regarding the effects or impacts of the crowd control or riot control techniques, including “kettling,”<sup>4</sup> during the coronavirus pandemic, including the risk that such techniques could increase the spread of the virus.
3. Any final assessments, reports, analyses, recommendations, or guidance prepared by your agency or received from other agencies (including from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)) regarding the effects or impacts of mass arrests, jailing, or detention during the coronavirus pandemic, including the risk that such practices could increase the spread of the virus.

Please provide all responsive records from May 26, 2020, through the date of the search.

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[301913?nname=politico-nightly-coronavirus-special-edition&nid=00000170-c000-da87-af78-e185fa700000&nrid=0000016b-328a-d5f2-a16f-77ab6a850000&nlid=2670445.](https://www.americanoversight.org/document/politico-nightly-coronavirus-special-edition)

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Ollstein & Goldberg, supra note 3.

## 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>5</sup> The public has a significant interest in the extent to which the federal government is protecting the public, and its own workers, from the coronavirus. CNN has reported that members of the White House Coronavirus Task Force have "discussed the 'increasing' risk that the virus is spreading among protesters at the demonstrations across the U.S.,"<sup>6</sup> and the Surgeon General has expressed similar concerns.<sup>7</sup> Records with the potential to shed light on this matter would contribute significantly to public understanding of operations of the federal government, including whether and to what extent federal law enforcement responding to protests has taken actions to minimize the risk of spread and made efforts to protect the public from a deadly disease. 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>8</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>9</sup>

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

<sup>6</sup> Jim Acosta, *Coronavirus Task Force Members Discussed Possibility of Virus Spreading at Protests, Source Says*, CNN (June 2, 2020, 4:07 PM), [https://www.cnn.com/world/live-news/coronavirus-pandemic-06-02-20-intl/h\\_1855d086e311919458e43d41cbd6c539](https://www.cnn.com/world/live-news/coronavirus-pandemic-06-02-20-intl/h_1855d086e311919458e43d41cbd6c539).

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Owerhohle, *Surgeon General: 'You Understand the Anger'*, POLITICO (June 1, 2020, 8:06 PM), [https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/01/surgeon-general-protests-coronavirus-294270?mod=article\\_inline](https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/01/surgeon-general-protests-coronavirus-294270?mod=article_inline).

<sup>8</sup> See 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii).

<sup>9</sup> American Oversight currently has approximately 15,500 page likes on Facebook and 102,200 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, FACEBOOK,

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>10</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>11</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>12</sup> posting records regarding potential self-dealing at the Department of Housing & Urban Development and related analysis;<sup>13</sup> posting records and analysis relating to the federal government’s efforts to sell nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia;<sup>14</sup> 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>15</sup>

Accordingly, American Oversight qualifies for a fee waiver.

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<https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited June 4, 2020); American Oversight (@weareoversight), TWITTER, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited June 4, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> *News*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/blog>.

<sup>11</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>12</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, <https://www.americanoversight.org/border-wall-investigation-report-no-plans-no-funding-no-timeline-no-wall>.

<sup>13</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>14</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>15</sup> *Sessions’ Letter Shows DOJ Acted On Trump’s Authoritarian Demand to Investigate Clinton*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/sessions-letter>.

## 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. For instance, to the extent communications may be responsive to this request, please search all locations likely to contain communications, including relevant hard-copy files, correspondence files, appropriate locations on hard drives and shared drives, emails, text messages or other direct messaging systems (such as iMessage, WhatsApp, Signal, or Twitter direct messages), voicemail messages, instant messaging systems such as Lync or ICQ, and shared messages systems such as Slack.
- 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 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>16</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

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<sup>16</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).

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>17</sup>

- 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>18</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

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<sup>17</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).

<sup>18</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>.

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 request, 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