



January 18, 2022

VIA EMAIL AND ONLINE PORTAL

Privacy Office
Mail Stop 0655
Department of Homeland Security
2707 Martin Luther King Jr. Ave. SE
Washington, DC 20528
foia@hq.dhs.gov

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

FOIA Officer
Department of Health and Human
Services
Hubert H. Humphrey Building, Room
729H
200 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20201
[Via Online Portal](#)

FOIA Officer
Centers for Disease Control and
Prevention
1600 Clifton Road NE
Building 57, Room MS D-54
Atlanta, GA 30333
[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 response to the Covid-19 outbreak, then-President Trump invoked a section of the Public Health Safety Act, Title 42, to close the Southern Border.¹ This provision enabled Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to summarily expel migrants lacking valid entry documents, thereby preventing those seeking asylum the opportunity to do so.² Numerous experts have questioned the stated rationale for the decision, as it has done little to contain the spread of Covid-19.³ In addition, Title 42 has put migrants in danger, as they are often deposited in unfamiliar cities without family members to

¹ See 85 Fed. Reg. 16,559 (Mar. 24, 2020).

² Am. Immigr. Council, *Guide to Title 42 Expulsions at the Border* (Mar. 2021), https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/sites/default/files/research/title_42_expulsions_at_the_border.pdf.

³ Jason Dearen & Garance Burke, *Pence Ordered Borders Closed After CDC Experts Refused*, Assoc. Press (Oct. 3, 2020), <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-pandemics-public-health-new-york-health-4ef0c6c5263815a26f8aa17f6ea490ae>.



receive them.⁴ Moreover, criminal organizations have targeted these vulnerable migrants, hundreds of whom have been threatened, robbed, assaulted, and kidnapped.⁵ Since assuming office, President Biden has largely left the system in place, albeit with small exceptions for cases involving children and certain humanitarian arrivals.⁶ As such, migrants continue to suffer the detrimental effects of this policy.⁷

American Oversight seeks records with the potential to shed light on the expulsion of vulnerable migrants at the Southern Border during a global pandemic.

Requested Records

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

All email communications (including emails, complete email chains, calendar invitations, and attachments thereto) sent by the individuals listed below to any anyone in the White House Office or National Security Council (including anyone with an email address ending in @who.eop.gov or @nsc.eop.gov) regarding Title 42.

Department of Homeland Security:

1. Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas
2. Anyone serving as Chief of Staff (including in an acting capacity)
3. Deputy Secretary John K. Tien
4. Under Secretary for Strategy, Policy, and Plans Robert Silvers
5. Deputy Under Secretary for Strategy, Policy, and Plans Kelli Ann Burriesci
6. Acting Assistant Secretary for Border and Immigration Policy Blas Nunez Neto
7. Assistant Secretary for Partnership and Engagement Eva A. Millona
8. Anyone serving as White House liaison

⁴ Molly O'Toole, *'Sitting Ducks for Organized Crime': How Biden Border Policy Fuels Migrant Kidnapping, Extortion*, L.A. Times (Apr. 28, 2021, 6:00 AM), <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2021-04-28/biden-title-42-policy-fueling-kidnappings-of-migrant-families-at-border-and-extortion-of-u-s-relatives>.

⁵ Hum. Rts. First, *Tracker of Reported Attacks During the Biden Administration Against Asylum Seekers and Migrants Who Are Stranded in and/or Expelled to Mexico* (Apr. 2021), <https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/sites/default/files/AttacksonAsylumSeekersStrandedinMexicoDuringBidenAdministration.pdf>.

⁶ See, e.g., Nicole Narea, *Biden Is Quietly Enforcing One of Trump's Most Anti-Immigrant Policies*, Vox (Apr. 29, 2021, 12:50 PM), <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/22398712/biden-title-42-migrant-border-expel>; Hamed Aleaziz, *Biden Officials Are Considering a Process to Allow Some "Vulnerable" Immigrants to Avoid Trump-Era Border Restrictions*, BuzzFeed News (Apr. 29, 2021, 5:56 PM), <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/hamedaleaziz/immigrants-humanitarian-exemptions-us-border>.

⁷ *Id.*

Department of Health and Human Services:

1. Secretary Xavier Becerra
2. Deputy Secretary Andrea Palm
3. Chief of Staff Sean McCluskie
4. Executive Secretary to the Department Karuna Seshasai
5. Deputy Executive Secretary to the Department Wilma M. Robinson
6. Anyone serving as Director, Office of Intergovernmental and External Affairs (including in an acting capacity)
7. Office of Refugee Resettlement Director Cindy Huang
8. Anyone serving as White House Liaison

Centers for Disease Control:

1. Director Rochelle Walensky
2. Chief of Staff Sherri A. Berger
3. Acting Principal Deputy Director Debra Houry
4. Director of Intergovernmental and Strategic Affairs John Auerbach
5. Division of Global Migration and Quarantine (DCMQ) Director Martin Cetron
6. Anyone serving as White House Liaison

Department of State:

1. Secretary of State Antony Blinken
2. Director of Policy Planning Salman Ahmed
3. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy R. Sherman
4. Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Lisa Peterson
5. Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Brian A. Nichols

In an effort to accommodate your agency and reduce the number of potentially responsive records to be processed and produced, American Oversight has limited its request to emails sent by the custodians listed above. To be clear, however, American Oversight still requests that complete email chains be produced, displaying both sent and received messages. This means, for example, that both the custodian's response to an email from a White House or National Security Council official and the initial received message are responsive to this request and should be produced.

Please provide all responsive records from March 1, 2021, through the date of the search.

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.”⁸ The public has a significant interest in the expulsion of migrants under Title 42. Records with the potential to shed light on this matter would contribute significantly to public understanding of operations of the federal government, including the role of key agency officials in implementing the policy. 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰

American Oversight has also demonstrated its commitment to the public disclosure of documents and creation of editorial content through regular substantive analyses posted to its website.¹¹ Examples reflecting this commitment to the public disclosure of documents and the creation of editorial content include the posting of records related to the Trump Administration’s contacts with Ukraine and analyses of those contacts;¹² posting records and editorial content about the federal government’s response to the Coronavirus pandemic;¹³ posting records received as part of American Oversight’s

⁸ 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii).

⁹ *See id.*

¹⁰ American Oversight currently has approximately 15,600 page likes on Facebook and 109,500 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited Jan. 11, 2022); American Oversight (@weareoversight), Twitter, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited Jan. 11, 2022).

¹¹ *See generally News*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/blog>.

¹² *Trump Administration’s Contacts with Ukraine*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/the-trump-administrations-contacts-with-ukraine>.

¹³ *See generally The Trump Administration’s Response to Coronavirus*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/the-trump-administrations-response-to-coronavirus>; *see, e.g., CDC Calendars from 2018 and 2019: Pandemic-Related*

“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;¹⁴ 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;¹⁵ and posting records and analysis of federal officials’ use of taxpayer dollars to charter private aircraft or use government planes for unofficial business.¹⁶

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:

- 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.¹⁷ It is not adequate to rely on policies and

Briefings and Meetings, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/cdc-calendars-from-2018-and-2019-pandemic-related-briefings-and-meetings>.

¹⁴ 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>.

¹⁵ *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>.

¹⁶ See generally *Swamp Airlines: Chartered Jets at Taxpayer Expense*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/swamp-airlines-private-jets-taxpayer-expense>; see, e.g., *New Information on Pompeo’s 2017 Trips to His Home State*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/new-information-on-pompeos-2017-trips-to-his-home-state>.

¹⁷ 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).

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.¹⁸

- 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,¹⁹ 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

¹⁸ See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, No. 14-cv-765, slip op. at 8 (D.D.C. Dec. 12, 2016).

¹⁹ 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>.

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 request, please contact Hart Wood at foia@americanoversight.org or 202.873.1743. 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,

/s/ Hart Wood
Hart Wood
on behalf of
American Oversight