

Improving the Freedom of Information Act

The National Archives' Office of Government Information Services (OGIS) is in a unique position to suggest improvements to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) process. As the Federal FOIA Ombudsman, OGIS works with Federal agencies and FOIA requesters as it reviews agency policies, procedures and compliance, and assists in resolving FOIA disputes. The following are four ways to improve the administration of FOIA.

1. Training

FOIA is everyone's responsibility, Attorney General Eric Holder said in his March 19, 2009 FOIA Memo. As such, regular training is necessary to ensure all agency employees, including those in the Senior Executive Service and political appointees, are up to date on the basics of FOIA.

- Day-one training: all new employees would learn FOIA principles as part of traditional agency orientation.
- Refresher training: all employees would receive annual refresher training.
- FOIA Professionals' training: Chief FOIA Officers and FOIA Public Liaisons would receive specific training to assist in carrying out their statutory duties, learn about FOIA dispute-resolution skills and help them train other agency employees.
- FOIA forum: professionals from throughout an agency who are part of the FOIA process would gather to discuss specific issues or concerns.

2. Standardize Agency Web Pages

The E-Government Act of 2002 requires every agency's website to include information made public under FOIA, and although agency websites often contain a wealth of FOIA information, the lack of consistency across these sites can be confusing. Standardizing agency FOIA websites would be a customer-friendly and efficient way to ensure the public can find FOIA resources.

- Develop an easy-to-use design template, with shareholder input, for agencies to customize.
- Standardize and index online FOIA reading rooms.
- Provide full contact information for designated FOIA professionals.

3. Top-down Agency Support

Agency leadership should actively support FOIA programs, policies and initiatives.

- Senior official memos would remind FOIA professionals and all employees of their duty to assist openly, accurately and completely with the FOIA process.
- Agency all-hands meetings on FOIA responsibilities would bolster such support.

4. Professionalize FOIA Career Track

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) is committed to creating a job series for FOIA professionals. This would help fulfill FOIA's statutory mission and intent, and enhance the visibility of FOIA professionals. It also would increase the likelihood that agencies can retain FOIA professionals and create continuity in their FOIA programs.

- Create a certification program for FOIA professionals.
- Incorporate FOIA performance standards into performance plans for agency leadership as well as FOIA professionals.