

# 2012 Chief FOIA Officer Reports

## Content of 2012 Chief FOIA Officer Reports

### Time frame for Report

Unless otherwise noted, your 2012 Chief FOIA Officer Report should address agency activities that have occurred since the filing of last year's Report, which was March 8, 2011, up until the filing of the 2012 Report, which will be March 12, 2012. Thus, the general reporting period for the Chief FOIA Officer Reports is March 2011 to March 2012.

*Name and Title of Agency Chief FOIA Officer:  
Ruth Ann Abrams, Assistant Secretary*

## **Section I: Steps Taken to Apply the Presumption of Openness**

The guiding principle underlying the President's FOIA Memorandum and the Attorney General's FOIA Guidelines is the presumption of openness.

Describe the steps your agency has taken to ensure that the presumption of openness is being applied to all decisions involving the FOIA. To do so, you should answer the questions listed below and then include any additional information you would like to describe how your agency is working to apply the presumption of openness.

1. Did your agency hold an agency FOIA conference, or otherwise conduct training during this reporting period?

*Answer: Yes. The Office of General Counsel provided training to the Commissioners and to agency staff with FOIA responsibilities.*

2. Did your FOIA professionals attend any FOIA training, such as that provided by the Department of Justice?

*Answer: Yes. Two of our employees attended the Refresher Training Session: Fiscal Year 2011 Agency Annual FOIA Reports and 2012 Chief FOIA Officer Reports offered on October 13, 2011.*

In his 2009 FOIA Guidelines, the Attorney General strongly encouraged agencies to make discretionary releases of information even when the information might be technically exempt from disclosure under the FOIA. OIP encourages agencies to make such discretionary releases whenever there is no foreseeable harm from release.

3. Did your agency make any discretionary releases of otherwise exempt information?

*Answer: No. The Commission did not claim any exemptions in the reporting period, thus this question is not applicable.*

4. What exemptions would have covered the information that was released as a matter of discretion?

*Answer: N/A*

5. Describe your agency's process to review records to determine whether discretionary releases are possible.

*Answer: Records gathered in response to a request are reviewed by the Office of the General Counsel (OGC). The attorneys from OGC make recommendations regarding the degree to which exemptions would apply. The General Counsel, Chief FOIA Officer and Secretary then meet to discuss which information, if any, could be discretionarily released.*

6. Describe any other initiatives undertaken by your agency to ensure that the presumption of openness is being applied.

*Answer: The Commission established a series of monthly public meetings and publicly broadcasts and archives the audio recordings of these meetings on the Commission's website. The contents of the public dockets, apart from certain items designated as nonpublic by submitters, are available on the Commission's website. The Postal Service and other submitters must provide specific justification for nonpublic treatment of the items to be designated as nonpublic. Also posted on the Commission website are listings of inquiries from the public, news media, and legislators.*

In Section V.B.(1) of your agency's Annual FOIA Report, entitled "Disposition of FOIA Requests – All Processed Requests" the first two columns list the "Number of Full Grants" and the "Number of Partial Grants/Partial Denials." Compare your agency's 2011 Annual FOIA Report with last year's Annual FOIA Report, and answer the following questions:

7. Did your agency have an increase in the number of responses where records were released in full?

*Answer: No, the Commission processed the same number of responses (9) where records were released in full.*

8. Did your agency have an increase in the number of responses where records were released in part?

*Answer: Yes, the Commission processed one response where records were released in part, as compared to the FY 2010 where there were none.*

## Section II: Steps Taken to Ensure that Your Agency Has an Effective System in Place for Responding to Requests

As the Attorney General emphasized in his FOIA Guidelines, "[a]pplication of the proper disclosure standard is only one part of ensuring transparency. Open government requires not just a presumption of disclosure, but also an effective system for responding to FOIA requests."

This section should include a discussion of how your agency has addressed the key roles played by the broad spectrum of agency personnel who work with FOIA professionals in responding to requests, including, in particular, steps taken to ensure that FOIA professionals have sufficient IT support.

Describe here the steps your agency has taken to ensure that its system for responding to requests is effective and efficient. To do so, answer the questions below and then include any additional information that you would like to describe how your agency ensures that your FOIA system is efficient and effective.

1. Do FOIA professionals within your agency have sufficient IT support?

*Answer: Yes. IT staff provides direct support when needed to ensure that FOIA requests are researched and posted quickly.*

2. Is there regular interaction between agency FOIA professionals and the Chief FOIA Officer?

*Answer: Yes. The Chief FOIA Officer has ensured that the electronic, faxed, and mailed FOIA requests are logged and read on the day they are received. Administrative staff is responsible for assigning a tracking number to each request, and posting that tracking number, along with a summary of the request, on the FOIA section of the Commission's website.*

3. Do your FOIA professionals work with your agency's Open Government Team?

*Answer: Yes. For example, as the OPEN Government Act requires the use of tracking numbers for all FOIA requests, the Commission instituted an electronic tracking number system for all FOIA requests.*

4. Describe the steps your agency has taken to assess whether adequate staffing is being devoted to FOIA administration.

*Answer: The Chief FOIA officer determines that there is adequate staffing by the measuring the response time from receipt of the FOIA requests to response date as posted on the Commission's website.*

5. Describe any other the steps your agency has undertaken to ensure that your FOIA system operates efficiently and effectively.

*Answer: Effective communication among offices at the Commission and timely response by Commission employees to requests for records ensure that the Commission responds to all requests in an expeditious manner. Additionally, process improvements have been undertaken to ensure that response time kept to a minimum, with the target of being within statutory time for all requests. These process improvements include a weekly review of all FOIA activity to ensure that the target of response within statutory timelines can be met.*

### **Section III: Steps Taken to Increase Proactive Disclosures**

Both the President and Attorney General focused on the need for agencies to work proactively to post information online without waiting for individual requests to be received.

Describe here the steps your agency has taken both to increase the amount of material that is available on your agency website, and the usability of such information, including providing examples of proactive disclosures that have been made during this past reporting period (i.e., from March 2011 to March 2012). In doing so, answer the questions listed below and describe any additional steps taken by your agency to make and improve proactive disclosures of information.

1. Has your agency added new material to your website since last year?

*Answer: Yes*

2. Provide examples of the records, datasets, videos, etc, that have been posted this past year.

*Answer: The Commission established a series of monthly public meetings and publicly broadcasts and archives audio recordings of these meetings on the Commission's website. These are updated on a continual basis. Additionally, the archived document section of the website, containing thousands of records from the first 30 years of the Commission's existence, was upgraded this year to allow for better search and retrieval capability.*

3. Describe the system your agency uses to routinely identify records that are appropriate for posting.

*Answer: Part of the mission of our agency is to provide transparency to the public, and proactive disclosure is integral to this mission. Policies and procedures have been put in place to allow for records to be immediately available on the public website as soon as they are posted. Each department also identifies material for posting.*

4. Beyond posting new material, is your agency taking steps to make the information more useful to the public, especially to the community of individuals who regularly access your agency's website, such as soliciting feedback on the content and presentation of the posted material, improving search capabilities, providing explanatory material, etc.?

*Answer: Yes*

5. Describe any other steps taken to increase proactive disclosures at your agency.

*Answer: The Commission has found that through proactively posting more of its records online, and accurately describing the records for which the Commission has custody and control, the Commission significantly reduced the overall volume of FOIA requests and specifically reduced requests for which the Commission has no records. We have also improved online search capability for archived documents to allow for access to older Commission documents and increased the number of documents proactively posted on the Commission website.*

## **Section IV: Steps Taken to Greater Utilize Technology**

A key component of the President's FOIA Memorandum was the direction to "use modern technology to inform citizens about what is known and done by their Government." In addition to using the internet to make proactive disclosures, agencies should also be exploring ways to utilize technology in responding to requests. In 2010 and 2011, agencies reported widespread use of technology in handling FOIA requests. For 2012, the questions have been further refined and now also address different, more innovative aspects of technology use.

### *Electronic receipt of FOIA requests:*

1. Can FOIA requests be made electronically to your agency?

*Answer: Yes. By accessing the Commissions website, individuals have the option of submitting their FOIA request via an online form, email, fax, or via regular mail.*

2. If your agency processes requests on a decentralized basis, do all components of your agency receive requests electronically?

*Answer: N/A. All requests are processed in one centralized location.*

### *Online tracking of FOIA requests:*

3. Can a FOIA requester track the status of his/her request electronically?

*Answer: Yes. The Commission maintains a FOIA log on our website which is updated regularly, generally as soon as a FOIA request has been received or processed.*

4. If not, is your agency taking steps to establish this capability?

*Answer: N/A*

*Use of technology to facilitate processing of requests:*

5. Beyond using technology to redact documents, is your agency taking steps to utilize more advanced technology to facilitate overall FOIA efficiency, such as improving record search capabilities, utilizing document sharing platforms for consultations and referrals, or employing software that can sort and de-duplicate documents?

*Answer: Yes*

6. If so, describe the technological improvements being made.

*Answer: The Commission has digitized many documents, and incorporates Optical Character Recognition (OCR) on documents whenever possible, to allow for increased ease, accuracy and speed in record search capability.*

## **Section V: Steps Taken to Improve Timeliness in Responding to Requests and Reduce Backlogs**

The President and the Attorney General have emphasized the importance of improving timeliness in responding to requests. This section addresses both time limits and backlog reduction. Backlog reduction is measured both in terms of numbers of backlogged requests or appeals and by looking at whether agencies closed their ten oldest requests and appeals. *For the figures required in this Section, please use those contained in the specified sections of your agency's 2011 Annual FOIA Report.*

1. Section VII.A of your agency's Annual FOIA Report, entitled "FOIA Requests – Response Time for All Processed Requests," includes figures that show your agency's average response times for processed requests. For agencies utilizing a multi-track system to process requests, there is a category for "simple" requests, which are those requests that are placed in the agency's fastest (non-expedited) track, based on the low volume and/or simplicity of the records requested. If your agency does not utilize a separate track for processing simple requests, answer the question below using the figure provided in your report for your non-expedited requests.

- a. Does your agency utilize a separate track for simple requests?

*Answer: No. The Commission receives few FOIA requests, and most are simple, so a separate tracking system is not required.*

- b. If so, for your agency overall, for Fiscal Year 2011, was the average number of days to process simple requests twenty working days or fewer?

*Answer: N/A*

- c. If your agency does not track simple requests separately, was the average number of days to process non-expedited requests twenty working days or fewer?

*Answer: Yes*

2. Sections XII.D.(2) and XII.E.(2) of your agency's Annual FOIA Report, entitled "Comparison of Numbers of Requests/Appeals from Previous and Current Annual Report – Backlogged Requests/Appeals," show the numbers of any backlog of pending requests or pending appeals from Fiscal Year 2011 as compared to Fiscal Year 2010. You should refer to those numbers when completing this section of your Chief FOIA Officer Report. In addition, Section VII.E, entitled "Pending Requests – Ten Oldest Pending Requests," and Section VI.C.(5), entitled "Ten Oldest Pending Administrative Appeals," from both Fiscal Year 2010 and Fiscal Year 2011 should be used for this section.

- a. If your agency had a backlog of requests at the close of Fiscal Year 2011, did that backlog decrease as compared with Fiscal Year 2010?

*Answer: The Commission did not have a backlog of requests at the end of either FY 2010 or FY 2011.*

- b. If your agency had a backlog of administrative appeals in Fiscal Year 2011, did that backlog decrease as compared to Fiscal Year 2010?

*Answer: N/A*

- c. In Fiscal Year 2011, did your agency close the ten oldest requests that were pending as of the end of Fiscal Year 2010?

*Answer: N/A*

- d. In Fiscal Year 2011, did your agency close the ten oldest administrative appeals that were pending as of the end of Fiscal Year 2010?

*Answer: N/A*

3. If you answered “no” to any of the above questions, describe why that has occurred. In doing so, answer the following questions then include any additional explanation:

Request Backlog:

- a. Was the lack of a reduction in the request backlog a result of an increase in the number of incoming requests?

*Answer: N/A*

- b. Was the lack of a reduction in the request backlog caused by a loss of staff?

*Answer: N/A*

- c. Was the lack of a reduction in the request backlog caused by an increase in the complexity of the requests received?

*Answer: N/A*

- d. What other causes, if any, contributed to the lack of a decrease in the request backlog?

*Answer: N/A*

Administrative Appeal Backlog:

- a. Was the lack of a reduction in the backlog of administrative appeals a result of an increase in the number of incoming appeals?

*Answer: N/A*

- b. Was the lack of a reduction in the appeal backlog caused by a loss of staff?

*Answer: N/A*

- c. Was the lack of a reduction in the appeal backlog caused by an increase in the complexity of the appeals received?

*Answer: N/A*



- d. What other causes, if any, contributed to the lack of a decrease in the appeal backlog?

*Answer: N/A*

All agencies should strive to both reduce any existing backlogs or requests and appeals and to improve their timeliness in responding to requests and appeals. Describe the steps your agency is taking to make improvements in those areas. In doing so, answer the following questions and then also include any other steps being taken to reduce backlogs and to improve timeliness.

1. Does your agency routinely set goals and monitor the progress of your FOIA caseload?

*Answer: Yes. The Commission attempts to continually improve its timeliness and efficiency in responding to FOIA requests and administrative appeals. One improvement made during FY 2011 was the speed at which requests are disseminated to responding staff. We have set a goal to complete all requests within the statutory timeline, and we monitor this through a weekly review of FOIA requests received.*

2. Has your agency increased its FOIA staffing?

*Answer: No*

3. Has your agency made IT improvements to increase timeliness?

*Answer: No. All improvements to increase timeliness revolved around the entire process.*

4. If your agency receives consultations from other agencies, has your agency taken steps to improve the efficiency of the handling of such consultations, such as utilizing IT to share the documents, or establishing guidelines or agreements with other agencies on the handling of particular information to speed up or eliminate the need for consultations?

*Answer: N/A*

## Use of FOIA's Law Enforcement "Exclusions"

In order to increase transparency regarding the use of the FOIA's statutory law enforcement exclusions, which authorize agencies under certain exceptional circumstances to "treat the records as not subject to the requirements of [the FOIA]," 5 U.S.C. § 552(c)(1), (2), (3), please answer the following questions:

1. Did your agency invoke a statutory exclusion during Fiscal Year 2011?

*Answer: No, the Commission did not invoke a statutory exclusion during FY 2011.*

2. If so, what is the total number of times exclusions were invoked?

*Answer: N/A*

## Spotlight on Success

Out of all the activities undertaken by your agency since March 2011 to increase transparency and improve FOIA administration, describe here one success story that you would like to highlight as emblematic of your agency's efforts.

*Success Story (Stories): Part of the mission of the Commission is to provide transparency to the public, and proactive disclosure is integral to this mission.*

*The Commission's efforts to promote transparency resulted in zero exemptions claimed during the last 2 fiscal years.*

*Additionally, the Commission:*

- 1) *Reprocessed and prepared 30 years of archived Commission documents so these tens of thousands of documents are now available in improved searchable form online.*
- 2) *Published an online archive of audio recordings of PRC Hearings, public meetings and technical conferences.*
- 3) *Published an online archive of Public Inquiry Logs showing all contacts from the public (rate and service inquiries, complaints, media inquiries, legislative inquiries)*
- 4) *Published online the complete set of technical material from a study on Social Benefits of the Mail*
- 5) *Published online a set of documentation about international postal regulatory activities.*
- 6) *Published an online archive of documents previously posted but since removed from the Commission's home page*