FOIA Online goes live; new tool to track FOIA requests, responses

October 1, 2012 by sunshineingov 1 Comment

Journalists who regularly use the federal FOIA will complain bitterly about lost requests, long delays and agency responses that give no indication whether and when the agency will actually turn over documents. But a new system that went live October 1 promises to make it easier on agencies and requesters alike to keep track of requests and make the FOIA process more efficient.

The new system, called FOIA Online, allows anyone to search pending FOIA requests and documents already released as the result of previous FOIA requests, submit a new FOIA request to an agency, track requests, see the status of any request and receive agency correspondence and documents all within the new system. And for FOIA geeks like us, it provides anyone the ability to search the tracking data, identify trends and keep tabs on how well (or poorly) any agency is fulfilling its obligations under FOIA. We also hope it's a useful tool for government folks responsible for keeping the FOIA responses flowing to find and fix the bottlenecks that slow FOIA responses.

To build FOIA Online, a team at the Environmental Protection Agency modified the Regulations.gov system. The Office of Government Information Services helped spearhead the effort.

The new system is elegant and a big step forward.

FOIA online

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The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) is a federal law that gives the public the right to make requests for federal agency records. All federal agencies are required to make requested records available unless the records are protected from disclosure by certain FOIA exemptions. Agencies may withhold information according to *nine exemptions* contained in the statute. The FOIA applies only to federal agencies. It does not apply to records held by Congress, the courts, or by state or local government agencies. Each state has its own public access laws that should be consulted for access to state and local records.

Contact Information

★ First Name :

Middle Initial :

★ Last Name :

Organization :

Email Address :

❷ Phone Number :

Fax Number :

★ Mailing Address Location : United States/U.S. Territories

❷ ★ Address Line 1 :

Address Line 2 :

★ City :

★ State/Province : --

★ Zip Code / Postal Code :

Agency and Fee Information

❷ ★ Agency : Select an Agency

★ Will Pay Up To : $ 25.00

Refer to the links below for agency-specific FOIA information:
- U.S Environmental Protection Agency
- Merit Systems Protection Board
- U.S. Department of Commerce
- Federal Labor Relations Board
- National Archives and Records Administration
- Department of Treasury

❷ ★ **Description :**   0/2000

Only a few agencies are using the system to handle new requests: EPA, National Archives and Records Administration, Merit Systems Protection Board, Federal Labor Relations Board, and the Departments of Commerce and Treasury. Treasury is dipping its toe into the new system slowly; the vast majority of requests that come in after Oct. 1 won't use the new system. EPA's development team hopes to add new agencies and offices. Because only a few agencies are participating, FOIA Online's short-term impact on FOIA processing is limited; however, it is a watershed moment in FOIA processing because it is a serious effort by the federal government to create a friendlier way for the public to exercise our right to information held by the government – and it's a more efficient way for agencies to respond to FOIA requests.

FOIA Online is very important and something sorely needed. Through numerous congressional hearings on FOIA, we have highlighted the many ways FOIA can be frustrating, inefficient and insufficient. Back in 2007, Clark Hoyt, former Washington, DC Bureau Chief for the Knight Ridder/Tribune Information Services, explained (pdf) that FOIA frustrations delayed his reporters from hearing that U.S. soldiers returning from the battlefield faced delays and red tape obtaining veterans health benefits they were promised. Clark's testimony included the astonishing statistic that over the previous decade, approximately 13,700 veterans died waiting for the benefits disputes to be resolved. Their reporting, using — and in some ways overcoming — FOIA, spurred

reforms to speed the veterans benefits system.

Nearly 18 months ago, I spoke at a conference co-sponsored by NARA and Duke University's [DeWitt Wallace Center for Media and Democracy](#) about the need for the federal government to create an electronic FOIA system. If you're a glutton for punishment, you can see the presentation here:

After giving a few modest suggestions for ways that groups outside government could help investigative journalism using government information, I suggested something I thought was out of left field and bold. An idea that would go, frankly, nowhere, or take a long time to make real.

Here's what I wrote in a background paper for the conference:

> And finally, thinking bigger, researchers and experimenters could develop a Disclosure Online Content System (DOCS), a scalable electronic system for processing FOIA requests. This system would create a centralized, electronic system that would allow anyone with a computer to make a FOIA request, route the request to the right agency and subcomponents within agencies, track the request through the research and review processes, and allow public disclosure of authenticated information to the requester and the public. Current efforts such as DocumentCloud and MuckRock already disseminate documents obtained through FOIA. Mexico already has an electronic FOIA processing system. DOCS would integrate better tools and standards for viewing previous FOIA requests and information released in response. The Justice Department's newly released FOIA.gov provides annual snapshots of data on agency FOIA performance, but DOCS would more comprehensively manage the workflow and lifecycle of a FOIA request while bringing greater transparency and accountability to the FOIA system. Done right, the system could allow the government to hold anyone in an agency accountable for creating delays in responding to FOIA inquiries and provide faster responses to FOIA. This would benefit both agencies and

requesters.

I mention this not to take credit for the idea of FOIA Online; I've heard the regulations.gov team had considered this idea for months by that point. I mention it to underscore the potential and real importance of FOIA Online, and to underscore the remarkable work that this EPA team has put into making this project a reality in such a short time.

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About sunshineingov
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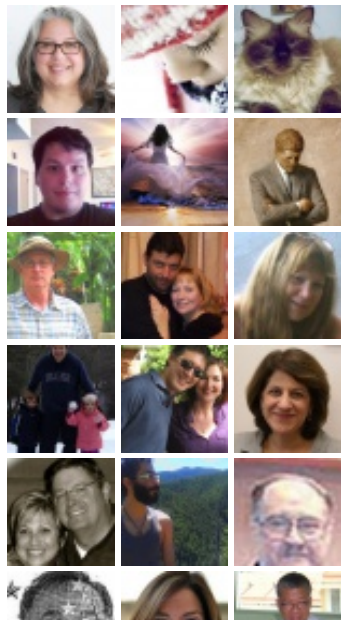
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