



PEACE CORPS  
Chief FOIA Officer Report  
March 10, 2014

**Name and Title of Agency Chief FOIA Officer :**

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**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.

FOIA Training:

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

Yes.

2. If so, please provide the number of conferences or trainings held, a brief description of the topics covered, and an estimate of the number of participants from your agency who were in attendance.

The Peace Corps' FOIA Office has provided training on the new guidelines at New Employee Orientation at headquarters every other Monday. Number of persons in training is variable (because they are new hires); the number ranges from 2 to 12, with 5 or 6 being common.

The Peace Corps' FOIA Office has provided training to staff designated as FOIA points-of-contact, working in offices at headquarters, who coordinate efforts made by the offices to respond to a request. We had 6 new FOIA points-of-contact (among the cohort of 8 new FOIA points-of-contact) who were in need of training on the role and the process. Each had 15-20 minutes of one-to-one training, as soon as designated, with a special handout.

The FOIA Officer provided training to a program office on the FOIA administrative process. Ten employees attended the training.

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

Yes.

4. Provide an estimate of the percentage of your FOIA professionals who attended substantive FOIA training during this reporting period.

100%. The FOIA Office consists of one FOIA Officer and one FOIA/Privacy Act Specialist. Both attended training during the reporting period. Examples follow: the FOIA Officer attending OIP's *Advanced Freedom of Information Act Seminar* (April 10, 2013); and, the FOIA/Privacy Act Specialist attending OIP's standard two-day FOIA training (May 7-8, 2013), in addition to OIP's Roundtables (*Providing Records in Electronic Formats*, on July 24, 2013) and OIP's Director's Lectures (*FOIA Procedural Requirements*, on July 25, 2013).

5. OIP has issued guidance that every agency should make core, substantive FOIA training available to all their FOIA professionals at least once each year. Provide your agency's plan for ensuring that such training is offered to all agency FOIA professionals by March 2015. Your plan should anticipate an upcoming reporting requirement for your 2015 Chief FOIA Officer Reports that will ask whether all agency FOIA professionals attended substantive FOIA training in the past year.

The FOIA office has two employees. Each has attended training. Starting in February 2014, the FOIA Officer will provide training to the FOIA points-of-contact on a bimonthly basis through August 2014. In 2015, training will be offered to the FOIA points-of-contact biannually. The FOIA Officer is offering FOIA basic training to any staff wanting to know more about the FOIA process.

Outreach:

6. Did your FOIA professionals engage in any outreach and dialogue with the requester community or open government groups regarding your administration of the FOIA? If so, please briefly discuss that engagement.

No.

Discretionary Disclosures:

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.

7. Does your agency have a formal process in place to review records for discretionary release? If so, please briefly describe this process. If your agency is decentralized, please specify whether all components at your agency have a process in place for making discretionary releases.

Yes. Records which may contain exempt information are reviewed by the FOIA Officer. The Peace Corps' General Counsel reviews the FOIA Officer's determinations. The FOIA Officer also consults with the offices from which records originate to determine whether the records should be released. These reviews assure that the presumption of openness is routinely and consistently applied to the review of records under the FOIA.

8. During the reporting period did your agency make any discretionary releases of otherwise exempt information?

Yes.

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

We have released records that may have formerly been withheld under FOA Exemption 5.

10. Provide a narrative description, or some examples of, the types of information that your agency released as a matter of discretion.

Examples are documents evaluating agency operations, such as Peace Corps volunteer survey reports, program reports, and internal communications about volunteer issues.

11. If your agency was not able to make any discretionary releases of information, please explain why.

N/A.

Other Initiatives:

12. Did your agency post all of the required quarterly FOIA reports for Fiscal Year 2013? If not, please explain why not and what your plan is for ensuring that such reporting is successfully accomplished for Fiscal Year 2014.

No. The reports are not posted on FOIA.gov in accordance with the Office of Information and Policy's (OIP) guidance. The FOIA Officer is working with OIP to correct this issue.

The reports are currently available on the Peace Corps' website at <http://www.peacecorps.gov/about/policies/foia/quarterly>.

13. Describe any other initiatives undertaken by your agency to ensure that the presumption of openness is being applied. If any of these initiatives are online, please provide links in your description.

N/A.

## **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." It is essential that agencies effectively manage their FOIA program.

Describe here the steps your agency has taken to ensure that your management of your FOIA program 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.

Personnel:

During Sunshine Week 2012 OPM announced the creation of a new job series entitled the Government Information Series, to address the work performed by FOIA and Privacy Act professionals. Creation of this distinct job series was a key element in recognizing the professional nature of their work.

1. Has your agency converted all of its FOIA professionals to the new Government Information Specialist job series?

Yes, however, we are not using the title.

2. If not, what proportion of personnel has been converted to the new job series?

N/A.

3. If not, what is your plan to ensure that all FOIA professionals' position descriptions are converted?

N/A.

Processing Procedures:

4. For Fiscal Year 2013 did your agency maintain an average of ten or less calendar days to adjudicate requests for expedited processing? If not, describe the steps your agency will take to ensure that requests for expedited processing are adjudicated within ten calendar days or less.

N/A.

5. Has your agency taken any steps to make the handling of consultations and referrals more efficient and effective, such as entering into agreements with other agencies or components on how to handle certain categories or types of records involving shared equities so as to avoid the need for a consultation or referral altogether, or otherwise implementing procedures that speed up or eliminate the need for consultations. If so, please describe those steps.

No.

Requester Services:

6. Do you use e-mail or other electronic means to communicate with requesters when feasible?

Yes.

7. Does your agency notify requesters of the mediation services offered by the Office of Government Information Services (OGIS) at NARA?

Yes.

8. Describe any other steps your agency has undertaken to ensure that your FOIA system operates efficiently and effectively, such as conducting self-assessments to find greater efficiencies, improving search processes, eliminating redundancy, etc.

The Peace Corps' process for responding to requests follows:

- The FOIA/PA Specialist reviews the request, logs the request into the database, determines which office or offices have responsive documents and forwards the requests to the appropriate office(s).
- The office(s) return(s) the request to the FOIA/PA Specialist with the responsive documents or certifies no records were found.
- The FOIA/PA Specialist reviews the responsive documents to ensure they are indeed responsive, consults with offices from which the documents originated, prepares a response letter and forwards the response letter and responsive documents to the FOIA Officer.
- The FOIA Officer reviews the documents and approves or refers the documents to General Counsel for review if necessary.

### **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 2013 to March 2014). 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.

Posting Material:

1. Do your FOIA professionals have a system in place to identify records for proactive disclosures?

No.

2. If so, describe the system that is in place.

N/A.

3. Provide examples of material that your agency has posted this past reporting period, including links to where this material can be found online.

Because of the agency's mission, which is to field volunteers serving overseas, we anticipate strong public interest in the volunteers.

Examples of such material are safety reports, annual volunteer surveys, and early termination data. (See [www.peacecorps.gov/about/policies/docs/](http://www.peacecorps.gov/about/policies/docs/)).

Additionally, statistical information on Peace Corps Volunteers is available. (See [www.peacecorps.gov/open](http://www.peacecorps.gov/open).)

Making Posted Material More Useful:

4. Beyond posting new material, is your agency taking steps to make the posted 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 posted material, improving search capabilities on the site, posting material in open formats, making information available through mobile applications, providing explanatory material, etc.?

Yes.

5. If so, provide examples of such improvements.

The agency is taking steps toward expanding the Open Government component (and there is a public input form on the website soliciting ideas).

6. Did your agency use any means to publicize or highlight important proactive disclosures for public awareness? If so, was social media utilized?

No.

7. Has your agency encountered challenges that make it difficult to post records you otherwise would like to post? If so, please briefly explain what those challenges are.

No.

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

We have held meeting at the senior staff level to discuss our application of discretionary releases. We are reviewing several steps in the FOIA process (such as proactive posting of information online).

#### **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. Over the past several years agencies have reported widespread use of technology in receiving

and tracking FOIA requests and preparing agency Annual FOIA Reports. For 2014, as we have done over the past years, the questions have been further refined and now also address different, more innovative aspects of technology use.

Online tracking of FOIA requests:

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

Yes.

2. If yes, how is this tracking function provided to the public? For example, is it being done through regularly updated FOIA logs, online portals, or other mediums?

The tracking function is available through an online portal. Requesters can enter a FOIA tracking number and find out if the request is open or closed. If the requester wants more specific details, the requester can email the FOIA Office.

3. Describe the information that is provided to the requester through the tracking system. For example, some tracking systems might tell the requester whether the request is "open" or "closed," while others will provide further details to the requester throughout the course of the processing, such as "search commenced" or "documents currently in review." List the specific types of information that are available through your agency's tracking system.

Request is open. Request has been closed.

4. In particular, does your agency tracking system provide the requester with an estimated date of completion for his/her request?

No.

5. If your agency does not provide online tracking of requests, is your agency taking steps to establish this capability? If not, please explain why.

N/A.

Use of technology to facilitate processing of requests:

6. 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?

Yes.



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

The FOIA Office purchased commercially off-the-shelf FOIA software to increase tracking, responsiveness to requesters and processing capabilities. The system went live on December 11, 2012.

8. Are there additional technological tools that would be helpful to achieving further efficiencies in your agency's FOIA program?

We have not identified any additional technological tools at this time.

### **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, appeals, and consultations. For the figures required in this Section, please use those contained in the specified sections of your agency's 2013 Annual FOIA Report and, when applicable, your agency's 2012 Annual FOIA Report.

Simple Track Requests:

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.

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

Yes.

b. If so, for your agency overall, for Fiscal Year 2013, was the average number of days to process simple requests twenty working days or fewer?

The average number of days to process simple requests was 32 days.

- 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?

N/A.

#### Backlogs and "Ten Oldest" Requests, Appeals and Consultations:

2. Section XII.A of your agency's Annual FOIA Report, entitled "Backlogs of FOIA Requests and Administrative Appeals" shows the numbers of any backlogged requests or appeals from the fiscal year. Section VII.E, entitled "Pending Requests – Ten Oldest Pending Requests," Section VI.C.(5), entitled "Ten Oldest Pending Administrative Appeals," and Section XII.C., entitled "Consultations on FOIA Requests – Ten Oldest Consultations Received from Other Agencies and Pending at Your Agency," show the ten oldest pending requests, appeals, and consultations. You should refer to these numbers from your Annual FOIA Reports for both Fiscal Year 2012 and Fiscal Year 2013 when completing this section of your Chief FOIA Officer Report.

#### Backlogs

- a. If your agency had a backlog of requests at the close of Fiscal Year 2013, did that backlog decrease as compared with Fiscal Year 2012?

No.

- b. If your agency had a backlog of administrative appeals in Fiscal Year 2013, did that backlog decrease as compared to Fiscal Year 2012?

There was a reporting error in the 2013 FOIA Annual Report. We reported having a backlog of 3 administrative appeals at the end of FY13. That was incorrect. We did not have a backlog of administrative appeals at the end of FY13. We had 3 pending administrative appeals that did not reach the statutory time period by the end of the fiscal year.

#### Ten Oldest Requests

- c. In Fiscal Year 2013, did your agency close the ten oldest requests that were pending as of the end of Fiscal Year 2012?

No.

- d. If no, please provide the number of these requests your agency was able to close by the end of the fiscal year, as listed in Section VII.E of your Fiscal Year 2012 Annual FOIA Report. If you had less than ten total oldest requests to close, please indicate that. For example, if you only had seven requests listed as part of your "ten oldest" in Section VII.E. and you closed two of them, you should note that you closed two out of seven "oldest" requests.

We closed five of the ten oldest pending requests.

#### Ten Oldest Appeals

- e. In Fiscal Year 2013, did your agency close the ten oldest administrative appeals that were pending as of the end of Fiscal Year 2012?

There were no administrative appeals pending at the end of Fiscal Year 2012.

- f. If no, please provide the number of these appeals your agency was able to close, as well as the number of appeals your agency had in Section VI.C.(5) of your Fiscal Year 2012 Annual FOIA Report.

N/A.

#### Ten Oldest Consultations

- g. In Fiscal Year 2013, did your agency close the ten oldest consultations received by your agency and pending as of the end of Fiscal Year 2012?

There were no consultations pending at the end of Fiscal Year 2012.

- h. If no, please provide the number of these consultations your agency did close, as well as the number of pending consultations your agency listed in Section XII.C. of your Fiscal Year 2012 Annual FOIA Report.

N/A.

Reasons for Any Backlogs:

3. If you answered “no” to any of the questions in item 2 above, describe why your agency was not able to reduce backlogs and/or close the ten oldest pending requests, appeals, and consultations. In doing so, answer the following questions then include any additional explanation:

Request and/or Appeal Backlog

- a. Was the lack of a reduction in the request and/or appeal backlog a result of an increase in the number of incoming requests or appeals?

No.

There was a reporting error in the 2013 FOIA Annual Report. We reported having a backlog of 3 administrative appeals at the end of FY13. That was incorrect. We did not have a backlog of administrative appeals at the end of FY13. We had 3 pending administrative appeals that did not reach the statutory time period by the end of the fiscal year.

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

Yes. Normally we have a summer intern work throughout the summer (June -- August). The intern would assist with simple requests and help with repetitive redactions and help relieve the FOIA/PA specialist of routine non-complex duties. This year we were unsuccessful in obtaining a summer intern. Additionally, we did not have a fall Federal Work Study student who would help with administrative duties and closing out requests at the end of the Fiscal Year.

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

Yes. In FY12, we received 20 complex requests (8 processed and 12 pending at end of FY12). In FY13, we received 27 complex requests (10 processed and 17 pending at end of FY13). We closed 7 of the 12 pending FY12 complex requests in FY13.

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

N/A.

## “Ten oldest” Not Closed

- e. Briefly explain the obstacles your agency faced in closing its ten oldest requests, appeals, and consultations from Fiscal Year 2012.

Five of the 10 oldest requests are requests for the same information. That information is not being processed through the FOIA office. Therefore, we have not been able to control the results.

- f. If your agency was unable to close any of its ten oldest requests or appeals because you were waiting to hear back from other agencies on consultations you sent, please provide the date the request was initially received by your agency, the date when your agency sent the consultation, and the date when you last contacted the agency where the consultation was pending.

N/A.

## Plans for Closing of Ten Oldest Pending Requests, Appeals, and Consultations and Reducing Backlogs:

Given the importance of these milestones, it is critical that Chief FOIA Officers assess the causes for not achieving success and create plans to address them.

4. If your agency did not close its ten oldest pending requests, appeals, and consultations, please provide a plan describing how your agency intends to close those “ten oldest” requests, appeals, and consultations during Fiscal Year 2014.

We have provided one additional employee (on a part-time basis) to assist the FOIA Office. Additionally, we are considering hiring temporary staffing to help reduce the backlog.

5. If your agency had a backlog of more than 1000 pending requests and did not reduce that backlog in Fiscal Year 2013, provide your agency’s plan for achieving backlog reduction in the year ahead.

N/A.

## Interim Responses:

OIP has issued guidance encouraging agencies to make interim releases whenever they are working on requests that involve a voluminous amount of material or require searches in multiple locations. By providing rolling releases to requesters agencies facilitate access to the requested information.

6. Does your agency have a system in place to provide interim responses to requesters when appropriate?

Yes. We provide interim responses when appropriate.

7. If your agency had a backlog in Fiscal Year 2013, please provide an estimate of the number or percentage of cases in the backlog where a substantive, interim response was provided during the fiscal year, even though the request was not finally closed.

We provided one or more substantive interim responses for cases in the backlog for as many as one-half of such cases.

#### 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 2013?

No.

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

N/A.

#### **Spotlight on Success**

Out of all the activities undertaken by your agency since March 2013 to increase transparency and improve FOIA administration, please briefly describe here at least one success story that you would like to highlight as emblematic of your agency's efforts. The success story can come from any one of the five key areas. As noted above, these agency success stories will be highlighted during Sunshine Week by OIP. To facilitate this process, all agencies should use bullets to describe their success story and limit their text to a half page. The success story is designed to be a quick summary of a key achievement. A complete description of all your efforts will be contained in the body of your Chief FOIA Officer Report.

We took on the project of writing some new material (explaining search requirements) and revising some old material (tracking request distribution) for use with agency staff. It has been, in a sense, a collaboration. We realized, after listening to feedback from agency staff about challenges they face, that such a

project was going to be worth it. We aim to provide agency staff with material that will communicate, plain and simple, what is expected and how to proceed. It is meant to promote better understanding of the FOIA process which, in turn, facilitates the response that will be made to the public.