



August 29, 2018

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

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Re: Freedom of Information Act Request

Dear Freedom of Information Act Officers:

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552, and the implementing regulations for the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), 45 C.F.R. Part 5, American Oversight makes the following request for records from HHS and its component, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS).

On January 19, 2018, Brian Neale and Alec Alexander, Directors of the Center for Medicaid and CHIP Services, and the Center for Program Integrity, respectively, distributed a letter¹ to State Medicaid Directors rescinding an April 19, 2016 CMS letter providing guidance concerning Medicaid beneficiaries' rights to obtain services from any qualified and willing provider.² The April

¹ Letter from Brian Neale, Director, Ctr. for Medicaid & CHIP Servs., Dep't of Health & Human Servs., & Alec Alexander, Director, Ctr. for Program Integrity, Ctrs. for Medicare & Medicaid Servs., Dep't of Health & Human Servs., to State Medicaid Directors (Jan. 19, 2018), www.medicaid.gov/federal-policy-guidance/downloads/smd18003.pdf.

² Letter from Vikki Wachino, Director, Ctr. for Medicaid & CHIP Servs., Ctrs. for Medicare & Medicaid Servs., Dep't of Health & Human Servs., to State Medicaid Directors, Apr. 19, 2016, www.medicaid.gov/federal-policy-guidance/downloads/smd16005.pdf ("Wachino Ltr.").



2016 letter was issued in the wake of controversy surrounding selectively-edited video footage released by anti-choice activist David DeLeiden to discredit Planned Parenthood.³ Despite subsequent congressional investigations finding no evidence of unlawful conduct by Planned Parenthood, a number of states nevertheless relied on the video footage to terminate their Medicaid provider agreements with Planned Parenthood.⁴ Then-Director of the Center for Medicaid and CHIP Services, Vikki Wachino, issued the April 2016 letter to clarify that states could not take action against Medicaid providers based on “a desire to target a provider or set of providers for reasons unrelated to their fitness to perform covered services,” and that absent evidence of fraud, criminal misconduct, or material issues with services provided or compliance with provider requirements, actions against providers violate federal regulations.⁵ Specifically, Director Wachino noted that “states may not deny qualification to family planning providers, or take other action against qualified family planning providers, that affects beneficiary access to those providers . . . solely because they separately provide family planning services or the full range of legally permissible gynecological and obstetric care, including abortion services.”⁶

In February 2018 letters to HHS and Congressman Trey Gowdy, Chairman of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Regulations, Congressman Elijah Cummings referenced whistleblower documents he had received “indicating that an extreme right-wing anti-choice group known as Alliance Defending Freedom” had instigated the policy change behind the January 2018 letter (and indeed provided the first draft).⁷ American Oversight seeks records to shed light on whether and to what extent external organizations have exerted influence over HHS policy decisions and related actions.

³ See Drew Griffin & David Fitzpatrick, *The Real Story Behind Those Planned Parenthood Videos*, CNN (Oct. 20, 2015, 8:46 AM), <https://www.cnn.com/2015/10/19/politics/planned-parenthood-videos/index.html>; Jackie Calmes, *Planned Parenthood Videos Were Altered, Analysis Finds*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 27, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/28/us/abortion-planned-parenthood-videos.html>.

⁴ See, e.g., *BREAKING: Oversight Committee Chairman Admits on National Television He Has No Evidence Planned Parenthood Violated Any Laws*, HOUSE COMM. ON OVERSIGHT & GOV'T REFORM DEMOCRATIC PRESS OFFICE, Sept. 30, 2015, <https://democrats-oversight.house.gov/news/press-releases/breaking-oversight-committee-chairman-admits-on-national-television-he-has-no>; Sara Rosenbaum, *The Trump Administration's Newest Strategy for Excluding Planned Parenthood from Medicaid*, HEALTH AFFAIRS, Jan. 25, 2018, <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hblog20180125.480978/full/> (describing history of litigation in Arizona, Arkansas, Indiana, and Louisiana).

⁵ Wachino Ltr., *supra* note 2.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Letter from Elijah E. Cummings, Ranking Minority Member, U.S. House of Reps. Comm. on Oversight & Gov't Reform, to Eric D. Hargan, Deputy Secretary, Dep't of Health & Human Servs. (Feb. 12, 2018), https://watsoncoleman.house.gov/uploadedfiles/2018-02-12.eec_to_hhs_re.planned_parenthood.pdf; Letter from Rep. Cummings to Trey Gowdy, Chairman, U.S. House of Reps. Comm. on Oversight & Gov't Reform (Feb. 27, 2018), <https://democrats-oversight.house.gov/sites/democrats.oversight.house.gov/files/2018-02-27.EEC%20to%20TG%20re.Planned%20Parenthood.pdf>.

Requested Records

American Oversight requests that HHS (and its component CMS) produce the following within twenty business days:

All records reflecting communications and meetings (including emails, email attachments, text messages, messages on messaging platforms (such as Slack, GChat or Google Hangouts, Lync, Skype, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Twitter Direct Messages, or Signal), telephone call logs, calendar invitations/entries, meeting notices, meeting agendas, informational material, draft legislation, draft letters, talking points, any handwritten or electronic notes taken during any oral communications, summaries of any oral communications, or other materials) concerning the January 19, 2018 letter⁸ from Brian Neale and Alec Alexander to State Medicaid Directors regarding Section 1902(a)(23) of the Social Security Act (the “any willing provider” or “free choice of provider” provision), including records containing the following search terms in the subject line, body of the communication, or attachment:

- a) “free choice of provider”
- b) “any willing provider”
- c) “Section 1902(a)(23)”
- d) “family planning” AND medicaid
- e) (“planned parenthood” OR pp OR ppfa) AND (medicaid OR video* OR footage)
- f) Daleiden
- g) “Center for Medical Progress” OR CMP
- h) Blackburn
- i) conscience /3 (protect* OR right* OR healthcare OR “health care” OR rule OR regulation)

Please provide all responsive records from the date of January 20, 2017, to the date the search is conducted.

Please note that American Oversight is here using the asterisk (*) to designate the standard use of “wildcards” in the search for responsive records. For example, a search for “protect*” would return all of the following: protect, protects, protected, protection, etc. In addition, American Oversight is using the forward slash (/) to designate proximity of words. For example, a search for “conscience /3 protect” would return any instances of the word “conscience” within three words of the word “protect.” If you are unable to search for wildcards or to use proximity searches, please advise so that we may specifically include the variations that we would like searched.

⁸ Letter from Brian Neale, Director, Ctr. for Medicaid & CHIP Servs., Dep’t of Health & Human Servs., & Alec Alexander, Director, Ctr. for Program Integrity, Ctrs. for Medicare & Medicaid Servs., Dep’t of Health & Human Servs., to State Medicaid Directors (Jan. 19, 2018), www.medicaid.gov/federal-policy-guidance/downloads/smd18003.pdf.

HHS and CMS are in the best position to determine the components and offices that are likely to have records responsive to this request.

However, American Oversight requests that HHS search, at a minimum, the following components and offices: (i) the immediate Office of the Secretary; (ii) the immediate Office of the Deputy Secretary; (iii) the Executive Secretariat; (iv) the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation; (v) the Office of Civil Rights; (vi) the Office of Intergovernmental and External Affairs; (vii) HHS Regional Office 5; (viii) HHS Regional Office 6; and (ix) HHS Regional Office 9. American Oversight also requests that HHS search any other components, offices, or individuals that HHS determines are likely to contain responsive records.

In addition, American Oversight requests that CMS search, at a minimum, the following components and offices: (i) the immediate office of the Administrator; (ii) the Center for Medicaid and CHIP Services (including but not limited to Brian Neale); and (iii) the Center for Program Integrity (including but not limited to Alec Alexander). American Oversight also requests that CMS search any other components, offices, or individuals that CMS determines are likely to contain responsive records.

In addition to the records requested above, American Oversight also requests records describing the processing of this request, including records sufficient to identify search terms used and locations and custodians searched and any tracking sheets used to track the processing of this request. If you FOIA questionnaires or certifications completed by individual custodians or components to determine whether they possess responsive materials or to describe how they conducted searches, we also request any such records prepared in connection with the processing of this request.

American Oversight seeks all responsive records regardless of format, medium, or physical characteristics. In conducting your search, please understand the terms “record,” “document,” and “information” in their broadest sense, to include any written, typed, recorded, graphic, printed, or audio material of any kind. We seek records of any kind, including electronic records, audiotapes, videotapes, and photographs, as well as letters, emails, facsimiles, telephone messages, voice mail messages and transcripts, notes, or minutes of any meetings, telephone conversations or discussions. Our request includes any attachments to these records. **No category of material should be omitted from search, collection, and production.**

Please search all records regarding agency business. **You may not exclude searches of files or emails in the personal custody of your officials, such as personal email accounts.** Records of official business conducted using unofficial systems or stored outside of official files is subject to the Federal Records Act and FOIA.⁹ **It is not adequate to rely on policies and procedures that require officials to move such information to official systems within a certain period of time;**

⁹ 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).

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, through negligence or willfulness, failed to meet their obligations.¹⁰

In addition, please note that in conducting a “reasonable search” as required by law, you must employ the most up-to-date technologies and tools available, in addition to searches by individual custodians likely to have responsive information. Recent technology may have rendered HHS’s prior FOIA practices unreasonable. **In light of the government-wide requirements to manage information electronically by the end of 2016, it is no longer reasonable to rely exclusively on custodian-driven searches.**¹¹ Furthermore, agencies that have adopted the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Capstone program, or similar policies, now maintain emails in a form that is reasonably likely to be more complete than individual custodians’ files. For example, a custodian may have deleted a responsive email from his or her email program, but HHS’s archiving tools would capture that email under Capstone. Accordingly, American Oversight insists that HHS use the most up-to-date technologies to search for responsive information and take steps to ensure that the most complete repositories of information are searched. American Oversight is available to work with you to craft appropriate search terms. **However, custodian searches are still required; agencies may not have direct access to files stored in .PST files, outside of network drives, in paper format, or in personal email accounts.**

Under the FOIA Improvement Act of 2016, agencies must adopt a presumption of disclosure, withholding information “only if . . . disclosure would harm an interest protected by an exemption” or “disclosure is prohibited by law.”¹² If it is your position that any portion of the requested records is exempt from disclosure, American Oversight requests that you provide an index of those documents as required under *Vaughn v. Rosen*, 484 F.2d 820 (D.C. Cir. 1973), *cert. denied*, 415 U.S. 977 (1974). As you are aware, a *Vaughn* index must describe each document claimed as exempt with sufficient specificity “to permit a reasoned judgment as to whether the material is actually exempt under FOIA.”¹³ Moreover, the *Vaughn* index “must describe *each* document or

¹⁰ See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, No. 14-cv-765, slip op. at 8 (D.D.C. Dec. 12, 2016) (“The Government argues that because the agency had a policy requiring [the official] to forward all of his emails from his [personal] account to his business email, the [personal] account only contains duplicate agency records at best. Therefore, the Government claims that any hypothetical deletion of the [personal account] emails would still leave a copy of those records intact in [the official’s] work email. However, policies are rarely followed to perfection by anyone. At this stage of the case, the Court cannot assume that each and every work related email in the [personal] account was duplicated in [the official’s] work email account.” (citations omitted)).

¹¹ 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>.

¹² FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 § 2 (Pub. L. No. 114-185).

¹³ *Founding Church of Scientology v. Bell*, 603 F.2d 945, 949 (D.C. Cir. 1979).

portion thereof withheld, and for *each* withholding it must discuss the consequences of disclosing the sought-after information.”¹⁴ Further, “the withholding agency must supply ‘a relatively detailed justification, specifically identifying the reasons why a particular exemption is relevant and correlating those claims with the particular part of a withheld document to which they apply.’”¹⁵

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 it is your position that a document contains non-exempt segments, but that those non-exempt segments are so dispersed throughout the document as to make segregation impossible, please state what portion of the document is non-exempt, and how the material is dispersed throughout the document.¹⁶ Claims of nonsegregability must be made with the same degree of detail as required for claims of exemptions in a *Vaughn* index. If a request is denied in whole, please state specifically that it is not reasonable to segregate portions of the record for release.

You should institute a preservation hold on information responsive to this request. American Oversight intends to pursue all legal avenues to enforce its right of access under FOIA, including litigation if necessary. Accordingly, HHS is on notice that litigation is reasonably foreseeable.

To ensure that this request is properly construed, that searches are conducted in an adequate but efficient manner, and that extraneous costs are not incurred, American Oversight welcomes an opportunity to discuss its request with you before you undertake your search or incur search or duplication costs. By working together at the outset, American Oversight and HHS can decrease the likelihood of costly and time-consuming litigation in the future.

Where possible, please provide responsive material in electronic format by email or in PDF or TIF 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.

Fee Waiver Request

In accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) and 45 C.F.R. § 5.54, 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 government operations by the general public in a significant way.¹⁷ Moreover, the request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.¹⁸

¹⁴ *King v. U.S. Dep’t of Justice*, 830 F.2d 210, 223–24 (D.C. Cir. 1987) (emphases in original).

¹⁵ *Id.* at 224 (citing *Mead Data Central, Inc. v. U.S. Dep’t of the Air Force*, 566 F.2d 242, 251 (D.C. Cir. 1977)).

¹⁶ *Mead Data Central*, 566 F.2d at 261.

¹⁷ 45 C.F.R. § 5.54(a).

¹⁸ 45 C.F.R. § 5.54(a).

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 the operations or activities of the government.”¹⁹ The disclosure of the information sought under this request will document and reveal the activities of the federal government, including the process by which HHS and CMS policy decisions with national implications are reached, implemented, and overseen. The American people deserve to know the extent to which nongovernmental organizations are influencing internal HHS and CMS policymaking, and whether policy decisions are being made and implemented pursuant to a sound process. The records requested relate directly to HHS and CMS decision-making regarding the Social Security Act’s “any willing provider”/“free choice of provider” provision, federal communications with state Medicaid agencies concerning interpretation and implementation of that provision, and subsequent, related HHS rulemaking—all related to the administration’s ongoing efforts to limit access to fulsome healthcare options, a subject of substantial public and media interest.²⁰ In this case, disclosure of the requested information would contribute to the understanding of a reasonably broad audience of persons interested in the subject. And, as described in more detail below, American Oversight’s website and social media accounts demonstrate its ability and intention to effectively convey information to the public.

This request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.²¹ 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

¹⁹ 45 C.F.R. § 5.54(b)(1), (2)(i)-(ii).

²⁰ See, e.g., Kimberly Leonard, *Democrats Slam Trump Administration for Conservative Group Input on Planned Parenthood Defunding*, WASH. EXAMINER (Feb. 13, 2018, 7:37 PM), <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/democrats-slam-trump-administration-for-conservative-group-input-on-planned-parenthood-defunding/article/2649016>; Anna North, *The Trump Administration Is Quietly Helping States Defund Planned Parenthood*, VOX (Feb. 20, 2018, 4:39 PM), <https://www.vox.com/identities/2018/2/20/17008402/trump-planned-parenthood-abortion-birth-control-alliance-defending-freedom>; Melissa Deslatte, *Planned Parenthood Sues Over Abortion Clinic License Delay*, US NEWS (Feb. 23, 2018, 12:16 PM), <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/louisiana/articles/2018-02-23/planned-parenthood-sues-over-abortion-clinic-license-delay>; Nate Raymond, *U.S. Court Rules Arkansas Can Block Planned Parenthood Funding*, REUTERS (Aug. 16, 2017, 1:04 PM), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-abortion-arkansas-idUSKCN1AW24S>; Sarah Pulliam Bailey et al., *HHS Releases New Rule on Health Workers’ Religious, Moral Objections*, WASH. POST, Jan. 19, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/to-your-health/wp/2018/01/19/hhs-releases-new-rule-on-health-workers-religious-moral-objections/?utm_term=.d725864c183d; *HHS Should Withdraw Proposal on Health Care Conscience Rights*, AMA WIRE, Apr. 6, 2018, <https://wire.ama-assn.org/ama-news/hhs-should-withdraw-proposal-health-care-conscience-rights>; see also Jessica Ravitz, *Trump Move to Defund Planned Parenthood Fulfills a Promise—And Promises a Battle*, CNN (May 22, 2018, 5:29 AM), <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/22/health/title-x-planned-parenthood-defunding-reax-bn/index.html>.

²¹ 45 C.F.R. § 5.54(b)(3)(i)-(ii).

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.²² American Oversight has demonstrated its commitment to the public disclosure of documents and creation of editorial content. For example, after receiving records regarding an ethics waiver received by a senior DOJ attorney,²³ American Oversight promptly posted the records to its website and published an analysis of what the records reflected about DOJ's process for ethics waivers.²⁴ As another example, American Oversight has a project called "Audit the Wall," where the organization is gathering and analyzing information and commenting on public releases of information related to the administration's proposed construction of a barrier along the U.S.-Mexico border.²⁵

Accordingly, American Oversight qualifies for a fee waiver.

Conclusion

We share a common mission to promote transparency in government. American Oversight looks forward to working with HHS on this request. If you do not understand any part of this request, have any questions, or foresee any problems in fully releasing the requested records, please contact Katherine Anthony at foia@americanoversight.org or 202-897-3918. 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,



Austin R. Evers
Executive Director
American Oversight

²² American Oversight currently has over 11,800 page likes on Facebook, and 44,800 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited Aug. 29, 2018); American Oversight (@weareoversight), TWITTER, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited Aug. 29, 2018).

²³ *DOJ Civil Division Response Noel Francisco Compliance*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/document/doj-civil-division-response-noel-francisco-compliance>.

²⁴ *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>.

²⁵ *Audit the Wall*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/audit-the-wall>.