



September 20, 2018

**VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL**

Michael Marquis  
Freedom of Information Officer  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Hubert H. Humphrey Building, Room 729H  
200 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20201  
[FOIARequest@hhs.gov](mailto:FOIARequest@hhs.gov)

**Re: Freedom of Information Act Request**

Dear Freedom of Information Officer:

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552, and your agency's implementing regulations, American Oversight makes the following request for records.

In the wake of Hurricane Maria, which devastated Puerto Rico and the Caribbean on September 20, 2017, many have questioned the adequacy of the federal government's response efforts.<sup>1</sup> Initially, the official death toll from Hurricane Maria was listed at 64 people, but after facing criticism, Puerto Rico's Governor Ricardo Rosselló commissioned a study by George Washington University's Milken Institute of Public Health to determine the number of excess deaths that resulted from the storm.<sup>2</sup> On August 28, 2018, the government of Puerto Rico officially raised its Hurricane Maria death toll to 2,975 after the Milken study was finalized.

American Oversight seeks records reflecting agency communications that are likely to include discussion of fatality statistics and the hurricanes that hit Puerto Rico in 2017 in order to shed light on whether, and to what extent, political calculations factored into the official death counts for Hurricane Maria and related agency actions.

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<sup>1</sup> Nicole Einbinder, *How the Response to Hurricane Maria Compared to Harvey and Irma*, FRONTLINE (May 1, 2018),

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/how-the-response-to-hurricane-maria-compared-to-harvey-and-irma/>.

<sup>2</sup> Amy Wang, *Sorry, Mr. President: The Hurricane Maria Death Toll in Puerto Rico Didn't Grow by 'Magic.'*, WASH. POST, Sept. 15, 2018,

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2018/09/15/sorry-mr-president-hurricane-maria-death-toll-puerto-rico-didnt-grow-by-magic/?utm\\_term=.87062da2f545](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2018/09/15/sorry-mr-president-hurricane-maria-death-toll-puerto-rico-didnt-grow-by-magic/?utm_term=.87062da2f545).



**Requested Records**

American Oversight requests that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) produce the following within twenty business days:

All email communications of any political appointees\* or career members of the Senior Executive Service (SES) in (1) the Immediate Office of the Secretary, (2) the Office of the Deputy Secretary, (3) the Office of the Chief of Staff, (4) the Office of Intergovernmental and External Affairs (IEA) at Headquarters and the Region 2 IEA Office, and (5) the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response with any of the following entities, including messages where those individuals were carbon copied or blind carbon copied, that contain any of the terms in Column A and any of the terms in Column B. This request includes email attachments.

- White House Office (including anyone with an email address ending in @who.eop.gov);
- Government of Puerto Rico (including anyone with an email address ending in @pr.gov, @prfaa.pr.gov, @salud.pr.gov, @prema.pr.gov, @aasp.pr.gov, @icf.gobierno.pr, or @justicia.pr.gov);
- Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) (including anyone with an email address ending in @fema.dhs.gov); or
- Center for Disease Control (including anyone with an email address ending in @cdc.gov).

Column A	Column B
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hurricane* *</li> <li>• Huracán</li> <li>• Maria</li> <li>• María</li> <li>• Irma</li> <li>• “Puerto Rico”</li> </ul> <p>**This search term may be limited to records reflecting communications with the government of Puerto Rico, and American Oversight is willing to negotiate dropping this term entirely.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5174(e)(1)</li> <li>• “funeral assistance”</li> <li>• “funeral expenses”</li> </ul>

Please provide all responsive records from September 20, 2017, through the date of the search.

\*“Political appointee” should be understood as any person who is a Presidential Appointee with Senate Confirmation (PAS), a Presidential Appointee (PA), a non-career SES, any Schedule C employees, or any persons hired under Temporary Non-Career SES

Appointments, Limited Term SES Appointments, or Temporary Transitional Schedule C Appointments.

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 your agency uses 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 are subject to the Federal Records Act and FOIA.<sup>3</sup> **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; 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.**<sup>4</sup>

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 your agency’s prior FOIA practices unreasonable. **In light of the government-wide requirements to**

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<sup>3</sup> 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).

<sup>4</sup> 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)).

manage information electronically by the end of 2016, it is no longer reasonable to rely exclusively on custodian-driven searches.<sup>5</sup> 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 your agency's archiving tools would capture that email under Capstone. Accordingly, American Oversight insists that your agency 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.”<sup>6</sup> 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.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the *Vaughn* index “must describe *each* document or portion thereof withheld, and for *each* withholding it must discuss the consequences of disclosing the sought-after information.”<sup>8</sup> 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.’”<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup> Claims of nonsegregability must be made with the same degree of detail as required

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<sup>5</sup> 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>.

<sup>6</sup> FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 § 2 (Pub. L. No. 114-185).

<sup>7</sup> *Founding Church of Scientology v. Bell*, 603 F.2d 945, 949 (D.C. Cir. 1979).

<sup>8</sup> *King v. U.S. Dep’t of Justice*, 830 F.2d 210, 223-24 (D.C. Cir. 1987) (emphasis in original).

<sup>9</sup> *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)).

<sup>10</sup> *Mead Data Central*, 566 F.2d at 261.

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, you are 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 hopes to 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 your agency's implementing regulations, 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 public understanding of those operations. Moreover, the request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.

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 activities of the government. The disclosure of the information sought under this request will document and reveal the operations of the federal government, including how the federal government has responded to reports of a substantial death toll attributed to Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico. The disclosure of the requested information may further reveal the response of federal agency employees to the president's public statements about the death toll count in Puerto Rico.<sup>11</sup> The matter of the federal government's response to Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, and the government's reaction to death toll reports, are a topic of widespread public interest, as demonstrated by the significant media coverage these matters have received.<sup>12</sup> The American people deserve to know whether their government has accurately assessed deaths from a natural disaster or whether political considerations have affected government activities. And, as described

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<sup>11</sup> See Ben Kamisar, *FEMA Administrator Brock Long Defends Trump on Puerto Rico Death Toll Study*, NBC NEWS (Sept. 16, 2018, 10:15 AM), <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/fema-administrator-defends-trump-puerto-rico-death-toll-study-n909991>.

<sup>12</sup> See *id.*; Einbinder, *supra* note 1; Wang, *supra* note 2.

below, American Oversight has the intention and ability to disseminate the records it receives to a broad audience.

This request is primarily and fundamentally not for commercial purposes, but rather the primary interest is in public disclosure of responsive records. 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 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.<sup>13</sup> 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,<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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 your agency 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 Dan McGrath at [foia@americanoversight.org](mailto:foia@americanoversight.org) or (202) 897-4213. Also, if American

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<sup>13</sup> American Oversight currently has approximately 11,900 page likes on Facebook and 45,100 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited Sept. 17, 2018); American Oversight (@weareoversight), TWITTER, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited Sept. 17, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> *DOJ Civil Division Response Noel Francisco Compliance*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/document/doj-civil-division-response-noel-francisco-compliance>.

<sup>15</sup> *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>.

<sup>16</sup> *Audit the Wall*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/audit-the-wall>.

Oversight's request for a fee waiver is not granted in full, please contact us immediately upon making such a determination.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Austin R. Evers", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the left.

Austin R. Evers  
Executive Director  
American Oversight