



September 27, 2018

**VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL**

Sam Kaplan  
Chief FOIA Officer  
The Privacy Office  
U.S. Department of Homeland Security  
245 Murray Lane SW  
STOP-0655  
Washington, DC 20528-0655  
[foia@hq.dhs.gov](mailto:foia@hq.dhs.gov)

**Re: Freedom of Information Act Request**

Dear Mr. Kaplan:

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552, and the implementing regulations of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), 6 C.F.R. Part 5, American Oversight makes the following request for records.

In May 2017, Julie Kirchner, the former director of the hardline anti-immigration group Federation for American Immigration Reform, was named as the ombudsman of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)<sup>1</sup>. In that role, Ms. Kirchner is required by statute to produce a publicly available annual report to Congress, as well as to “develop guidance to be distributed to all officers and employees of the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services outlining the criteria for referral of inquiries to local offices of the Ombudsman.” Given Ms. Kirchner’s background and her current role providing assistance to those navigating the immigration system, it is important for the public to know what guidance she is providing to USCIS officers and employees, as well as any role she may have played in immigration policy, including the establishment of a “denaturalization task force”<sup>2</sup> within USCIS and the enforcement of President Donald Trump’s travel ban from majority-Muslim nations.

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<sup>1</sup> See Marcelo Rochabrun and Jessica Huseman, *Former Director of Anti-Immigration Group Set to Be Named Ombudsman at U.S. Immigration Agency*, PROPUBLICA, Apr. 28, 2017, <https://www.propublica.org/article/ex-director-anti-immigration-group-to-be-ombudsman-at-immigration-agency>.

<sup>2</sup> See Amy Taxin, *US Launches Bid to Find Citizenship Cheaters*, ASSOCIATED PRESS, June 12, 2018, <https://apnews.com/1da389a535684a5f9d0da74081c242f3>.



## Requested Records

American Oversight requests that DHS produce the following within twenty business days:

1. All guidance distributed by, on behalf of, or at the direction of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Ombudsman Julie Kirchner to officers and employees of the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services outlining the criteria of referral of inquiries to local offices of the Ombudsman, as required by 6 U.S.C. § 272(d)(2).
2. All communications (including emails, email attachments, text messages, messages on messaging platforms (such as Slack, GChat or GoogleHangouts, Lync, Skype, or WhatsApp), telephone call logs, calendar invitations/entries, meeting notices, meeting agendas, informational material, draft legislation, talking points, any handwritten or electronic notes taken during any oral communications, summaries of any oral communications, or other materials) from Ms. Kirchner to any person outside the office of the USCIS Ombudsman containing any of the following terms:
  - a. Denaturaliz\*
  - b. Janus
  - c. “Muslim Ban”
  - d. “travel ban”
  - e. 13769
  - f. 13780

Please note that American Oversight is using the asterisk (\*) to designate the standard use of “wildcards” in the search for responsive records. For example, a search for “denaturaliz\*” would return all of the following: denaturalize, denaturalized, denaturalization, etc. If your agency is unable to search for wildcards, please advise so that we may specifically include the variations that we would like searched.

Please provide all responsive records from May 1, 2017, through the date of the search.

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 DHS 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 is 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 DHS’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.**<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 DHS’s archiving tools would capture that email under Capstone. Accordingly, American Oversight insists that DHS 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.**

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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)).

<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>.

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 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, DHS 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 DHS 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.

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<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) (emphases 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.

## Fee Waiver Request

In accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) and 6 C.F.R. § 5.11(k), 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 relevant government procedures by the general public in a significant way.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.<sup>12</sup>

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.”<sup>13</sup> There is significant interest in the policy changes being enacted by certain policy advisors within DHS, including those like Ms. Kirchner who have relatively low public visibility.<sup>14</sup> The requested records will help American Oversight and the general public understand whether and to what extent Ms. Kirchner is using her position to advance hardline positions on immigration. American Oversight is committed to transparency and makes the responses agencies provide to FOIA requests publicly available. As noted, the subject of this request is a matter of public interest, and the public’s understanding of the government’s activities would be enhanced through American Oversight’s analysis and publication of these records.

This request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.<sup>15</sup> 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>16</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

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<sup>11</sup> 6 C.F.R. § 5.11(k)(1)(i).

<sup>12</sup> 6 C.F.R. § 5.11(k)(1)(ii).

<sup>13</sup> 6 C.F.R. § 5.11(k)(1)(i); *see also* 6 C.F.R. § 5.11(k)(2)(i)-(iv).

<sup>14</sup> *See* Laura Smith, *Another Anti-Immigrant Hardliner Scores a Key Administration Appointment*, MOTHERJONES, May 3, 2017, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2017/05/anti-immigrant-hardliner-job-julie-kirchner-citizenship-trump/>; Marcelo Rochabrun & Jessica Huseman, *Former Director of Anti-Immigration Group Set to Be Named Ombudsman at U.S. Immigration Agency*, PROPUBLICA, (Apr. 28, 2017, 5:20 PM), <https://www.propublica.org/article/ex-director-anti-immigration-group-to-be-ombudsman-at-immigration-agency>.

<sup>15</sup> 6 C.F.R. § 5.11(k)(1)(ii), (3)(i)-(ii).

<sup>16</sup> American Oversight currently has approximately 11,900 page likes on Facebook, and 45,200 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited Sept. 27, 2018); American Oversight (@weareoversight), TWITTER, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited Sept. 27, 2018).

senior DOJ attorney, American Oversight promptly posted the records to its website<sup>17</sup> and published an analysis of what the records reflected about DOJ's process for ethics waivers.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, 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>19</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 DHS 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 Cerissa Cafasso at [foia@americanoversight.org](mailto:foia@americanoversight.org) or 202.869.5244. 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

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<sup>17</sup> *DOJ Civil Division Response Noel Francisco Compliance*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/document/doj-civil-division-response-noel-francisco-compliance>.

<sup>18</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>19</sup> *Audit the Wall*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/audit-the-wall>.