



January 31, 2019

**VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL**

Sam Kaplan  
Chief Privacy Officer/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.

On January 24, 2019, DHS announced that the agency had implemented the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), a policy that would require migrants seeking asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border to wait in Mexico while their cases are pending.<sup>1</sup> As part of the MPP, which was first announced in December 2018, the policy orders non-Mexican migrants seeking asylum back to Mexico while their asylum requests process in U.S. immigration courts.

A *Vox* report notes that the initial rollout of the policy only applies at the San Ysidro port of entry, where Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers will screen those who enter without documentation pursuant to regular procedures.<sup>2</sup> However, instead of holding migrants in CBP and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) custody, the government will give asylum-seekers a notice to appear before an immigration judge 45 days ahead, bypassing the typical asylum screening interview. For the court date, the migrant will return to the port of entry and be escorted to an immigration courthouse in San Diego for the hearing, and then must return to Mexico while they await another hearing.

American Oversight seeks records to shed light on DHS's activities and coordination to implement the MPP.

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<sup>1</sup> *Migrant Protection Protocols*, DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY, Jan. 24, 2019, <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2019/01/24/migrant-protection-protocols>.

<sup>2</sup> Dara Lind, *The US Is Sending Some Legal Asylum Seekers Back to Mexico*, VOX, Jan. 25, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/2019/1/24/18196537/asylum-trump-mexico-remain-return-deport>.



**Requested Records**

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

1. All final talking points prepared for Secretary Nielsen regarding the MPP and issues related to it, such as plans for lodging asylum seekers in Tijuana, plans for transporting migrants to and from Tijuana, expansion of the protocol to additional ports of entry, etc. This request includes talking points prepared for intergovernmental meetings, cable news appearances, Congressional engagements, or any other official events for which final talking points were prepared.
2. Any final legal analyses relating to the MPP prepared by or provided to DHS officials.
3. All communications, meeting notices, meeting agendas, informational materials, talking points, or other materials exchanged with the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City regarding the MPP.

For this portion of the request, please provide all responsive documents from December 1, 2018, through January 31, 2019.

4. All communications (including email messages, email attachments, text messages) with the White House Office, including any individual with an email address ending in @who.eop.gov, regarding the MPP.

For this portion of the request, please provide all responsive documents from December 1, 2018, through January 31, 2019.

5. All email communications between or among (1) any DHS official in Column A, below, and (2) any employee or representative of the organizations in Column B, below, including messages where such individuals were carbon copied or blind carbon copied. This request includes all prior messages (whether incoming or outgoing) reflected in any responsive emails and any attachments to any responsive emails.

<b><u>Column A (DHS Officials)</u></b>	<b><u>Column B (Outside Organizations)</u></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Kirstjen Nielsen, Secretary</li><li>• Chad Wolf, Chief of Staff</li><li>• Christina Bobb, Executive Secretary</li><li>• John Mitnick, General Counsel</li><li>• Michael Dougherty, Assistant Secretary, Border, Immigration, and Trade Policy</li><li>• Julie Kirchner, Citizenship and Immigration Services Ombudsman</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Federation for American Immigration Reform (including any emails sent to or received from an address ending in @fairus.org)</li><li>• Immigration Reform Law Institute (including any emails sent to or received from an address ending in @irli.org)</li><li>• Center for Immigration Studies (including any emails sent to or received from an address ending in @cis.org)</li></ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NumbersUSA (including any emails sent to or received from an address ending in @numbersusa.com)</li> <li>• The Remembrance Project (including any emails sent to or received from an address ending in @theremembranceproject.org)</li> <li>• Heritage Foundation (including any emails sent to or received from an address ending in @heritage.org)</li> </ul>
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Please provide all responsive records from December 1, 2018, through January 25, 2019.

6. Records sufficient to identify any procedures, standards, guidance, policies, and rules for the supervision and lodging of unaccompanied minors under the Migrant Protection Protocol.

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 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**

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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).

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.**

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

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<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>.

<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).

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 DHS before it undertakes a search or incurs 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.

### **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> Specifically, there has been great public interest in Trump administration treatment of asylum applicants at the southern border, and particularly in

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<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.

<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).

the effects of the MPP.<sup>14</sup> Immigration advocates have characterized this radical change in the processing of asylum claims as a “due process disaster for asylum seekers,” noting that asylum seekers waiting in Mexico “would encounter substantial barriers to accessing U.S. attorneys.”<sup>15</sup> The requested records have the potential to shed light on the specifics of this new policy and the administration’s position and plans for its implementation. And, as discussed below, American Oversight has the capacity and intention to inform a broad audience about government activities that are the subject of these records.

This request is primarily and fundamentally for non-commercial purposes.<sup>16</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 promote their availability on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.<sup>17</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, American Oversight promptly posted the records to its website<sup>18</sup> and published an analysis of what the records reflected about DOJ’s process for ethics waivers.<sup>19</sup> As another example, American Oversight has a project called “Audit the Wall,” where the

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<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Andrew Johnson, *DHS Secretary Nielsen to Tour San Ysidro Port of Entry, Evaluate Migrant Protection Protocols*, NBC 7 SAN DIEGO (Jan. 28, 2019, 5:48 PM), <https://www.nbcsandiego.com/news/local/Secretary-Kirstjen-Nielsen-Homeland-Security-San-Ysidro-Port-of-Entry-Tour-Migrant-Protection-Protocols-504999822.html>; Andrew deGrandpre et al., *Trump Administration to Start Sending Asylum Seekers to Wait in Mexico*, WASH. POST, Jan. 24, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-administration-to-start-sending-asylum-seekers-back-to-mexico/2019/01/24/53961fb0-2022-11e9-8e21-59a09ff1e2a1\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-administration-to-start-sending-asylum-seekers-back-to-mexico/2019/01/24/53961fb0-2022-11e9-8e21-59a09ff1e2a1_story.html); Richard Gonzales, *U.S. Is Rolling Out Its ‘Remain in Mexico’ Policy on Central American Asylum-Seekers*, NPR (Jan. 24, 10:37 PM), <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/24/688470513/u-s-plans-to-enforce-remain-in-mexico-policy-on-central-american-asylum-seekers>.

<sup>15</sup> Kate Smith, *As Soon as Friday, Asylum Seekers Will Be Forced to Wait in Tijuana for Their Day in Immigration Court*, CBS NEWS (Jan. 24, 2019, 10:30 PM), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/catch-and-return-immigration-officials-asylum-seekers-tijuana-to-wait-2019-01-24/>.

<sup>16</sup> 6 C.F.R. § 5.11(k)(1)(ii), (3)(i)–(ii).

<sup>17</sup> American Oversight currently has approximately 12,100 page likes on Facebook and 49,700 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited Jan. 30, 2019); American Oversight (@weareoversight), TWITTER, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited Jan. 30, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> *DOJ Records Relating to Solicitor General Noel Francisco’s Recusal*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/document/doj-civil-division-response-noel-francisco-compliance>.

<sup>19</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>.

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>20</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 Hart Wood at [foia@americanoversight.org](mailto:foia@americanoversight.org) or 202.873.1743. 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,

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

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<sup>20</sup> *Audit the Wall*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/audit-the-wall>.