



July 16, 2019

VIA ONLINE PORTAL

Sabrina Burroughs  
FOIA Officer  
U.S. Customs & Border Protection  
90 K Street NW  
9th Floor, Mail Stop 1181  
Washington, DC 20229-1181  
Via FOIAOnline

**Re: Freedom of Information Act Request**

Dear FOIA Officer:

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

In the last year, reports have indicated that the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has subjected journalists to secondary screening and intimidating treatment, and has pressed to access the electronic files of journalists at ports of entry.<sup>1</sup> These reports follow earlier reporting that at least one CBP field office has created a database to track and monitor journalists (as well as immigrant advocates and lawyers).<sup>2</sup> The Department of

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<sup>1</sup> Seth Harp, *I'm a Journalist but I Didn't Fully Realize the Terrible Power of U.S. Border Officials Until They Violated My Rights and Privacy*, THE INTERCEPT (June 22, 2019, 8:00 AM), <https://theintercept.com/2019/06/22/cbp-border-searches-journalists/> (journalist describing incident of being detained by agents Moncivias and Pomeroy and pressed to give access to electronic data at Austin, Texas international airport on May 13, 2019); Nate Abaurrea (@NateAbaurrea), TWITTER (May 24, 2019, 7:35 PM), <https://twitter.com/NateAbaurrea/status/1132113040151760896> (journalist describing detention and searching by an Officer West at a San Diego, California pedestrian port of entry on May 24, 2019); Ryan Devereaux, *Journalists, Lawyers, and Activists Working on the Border Face Coordinated Harassment from U.S. and Mexican Authorities*, THE INTERCEPT (Feb. 8, 2019, 11:42 AM), <https://theintercept.com/2019/02/08/us-mexico-border-journalists-harassment/> (depicting a Border Patrol officer taking a picture of a journalist on December 29, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Tom Jones et al., *PHOTOS: Leaked Documents Show Government Tracking Journalists, Immigration Advocates*, NBC SAN DIEGO, Mar. 7, 2019, <https://www.nbcsandiego.com/multimedia/PHOTOS-Leaked-Documents-to-NBC-7-Investigates-506782041.html> (The documents retrieved by NBC are titled "San Diego



Homeland Security Office of the Inspector General (DHS OIG) is reportedly investigating CBP's reported targeting and tracking of journalists and activists.<sup>3</sup>

### **Requested Records**

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

1. Any pictures taken by CBP agents Moncivias or Pomeroy at the Austin, Texas international airport on May 13, 2019.<sup>4</sup>
2. All text messages and email messages (including emails and attachments) sent by CBP agents Moncivias or Pomeroy, who reportedly are or were employed at the Austin, Texas international airport, from May 12, 2019 to May 20, 2019.<sup>5</sup>
3. Any pictures taken by CBP officer West at any San Diego, California port of entry on May 24, 2019.<sup>6</sup>
4. All text messages and email messages (including emails and attachments) sent by CBP officer West, who reportedly is or was employed at a San Diego, California port of entry, from May 23, 2019 to May 30, 2019.<sup>7</sup>
5. All photos taken by CBP officers along the San Diego, California border with Tijuana, Mexico on December 29, 2018.<sup>8</sup>

American Oversight requests that all photographs, video, or audio recordings be produced in their native format with original metadata preserved to the extent possible.

### **Fee Waiver Request**

In accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii) and your agency's regulations, American Oversight requests a waiver of fees associated with processing this request for records.

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Sector Foreign Operations Branch: Migrant Caravan FY-2019, Suspected Organizers, Coordinators, Instigators and Media" and are dated January 9, 2019.").

<sup>3</sup> Geneva Sands & Priscilla Alvarez, *Watchdog Investigating CBP Amid Report the Agency Targeted Journalists, Activists*, CNN (Mar. 7, 2019, 7:55 PM), <https://www.cnn.com/2019/03/07/politics/inspector-general-customs-and-border-protection-tracking-journalists/index.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Harp, *supra* note 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> Abaurrea, *supra* note 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> Devereaux, *supra* note 1.

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. 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 operations or activities of the government.”<sup>9</sup> The public has a significant interest in understanding whether and to what extent a federal law enforcement agency and its officers are monitoring or tracking journalists. Records with the potential to shed light on this matter would contribute significantly to public understanding of operations of the federal government, including whether CBP has directed its officers to target journalists for screenings and data collections, or whether CBP has merely failed to provide guidance directing its officers and agents not to target journalists. The public has a right to know whether one of the nation’s largest law enforcement agencies has adopted a policy or practice of using its powers to intimidate journalists whose reporting it deems critical of the agency’s actions. American Oversight is committed to transparency and makes the responses agencies provide to FOIA requests publicly available, 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>10</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>11</sup>

American Oversight has also demonstrated its commitment to the public disclosure of documents and creation of editorial content through numerous substantive analyses posted to its website.<sup>12</sup> Examples reflecting this commitment to the public disclosure of documents and the creation of editorial content include the posting of records related to an ethics waiver received by a senior Department of Justice attorney and an analysis of

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<sup>9</sup> 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii).

<sup>10</sup> See 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii).

<sup>11</sup> American Oversight currently has approximately 12,200 page likes on Facebook and 54,200 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited May 29, 2019); American Oversight (@weareoversight), TWITTER, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited May 29, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> News, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/blog>.

what those records demonstrated regarding the Department’s process for issuing such waivers;<sup>13</sup> posting records received as part of American Oversight’s “Audit the Wall” project to gather and analyze information related to the administration’s proposed construction of a barrier along the U.S.-Mexico border, and analyses of what those records reveal;<sup>14</sup> posting records regarding potential self-dealing at the Department of Housing & Urban Development and related analysis;<sup>15</sup> posting records and analysis relating to the federal government’s efforts to sell nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia;<sup>16</sup> posting records and analysis regarding the Department of Justice’s decision in response to demands from Congress to direct a U.S. Attorney to undertake a wide-ranging review and make recommendations regarding criminal investigations relating to the President’s political opponents and allegations of misconduct by the Department of Justice itself and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.<sup>17</sup>

Accordingly, American Oversight qualifies for a fee waiver.

### **Guidance Regarding the Search & Processing of Requested Records**

In connection with its request for records, American Oversight provides the following guidance regarding the scope of the records sought and the search and processing of records:

- Please search all locations and systems likely to have responsive records, regardless of format, medium, or physical characteristics. For instance, if the request seeks “communications,” please search all locations likely to contain communications, including relevant hard-copy files, correspondence files, appropriate locations on hard drives and shared drives, emails, text messages or other direct messaging

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<sup>13</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>; *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>14</sup> *See generally Audit the Wall*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/audit-the-wall>; *see, e.g., Border Wall Investigation Report: No Plans, No Funding, No Timeline, No Wall*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/border-wall-investigation-report-no-plans-no-funding-no-timeline-no-wall>.

<sup>15</sup> *Documents Reveal Ben Carson Jr.’s Attempts to Use His Influence at HUD to Help His Business*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/documents-reveal-ben-carson-jr-s-attempts-to-use-his-influence-at-hud-to-help-his-business>.

<sup>16</sup> *Investigating the Trump Administration’s Efforts to Sell Nuclear Technology to Saudi Arabia*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigating-the-trump-administrations-efforts-to-sell-nuclear-technology-to-saudi-arabia>.

<sup>17</sup> *Sessions’ Letter Shows DOJ Acted On Trump’s Authoritarian Demand to Investigate Clinton*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/sessions-letter>.

systems (such as iMessage, WhatsApp, Signal, or Twitter direct messages), voicemail messages, instant messaging systems such as Lync or ICQ, and shared messages systems such as Slack.

- 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 for records includes any attachments to those records or other materials enclosed with those records when they were previously transmitted. To the extent that an email is responsive to our request, our request includes all prior messages sent or received in that email chain, as well as any attachments to the email.
- Please search all relevant records or systems containing records regarding agency business. Do not exclude records regarding agency business contained in files, email accounts, or devices in the personal custody of your officials, such as personal email accounts or text messages. Records of official business conducted using unofficial systems or stored outside of official files are subject to the Federal Records Act and FOIA.<sup>18</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, by intent or through negligence, failed to meet their obligations.<sup>19</sup>
- Please use all tools available to your agency to conduct a complete and efficient search for potentially responsive records. Agencies are subject to government-wide requirements to manage agency information electronically,<sup>20</sup> and many agencies have adopted the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Capstone program, or similar policies. These systems provide options for searching

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<sup>18</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>19</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).

<sup>20</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>.

emails and other electronic records in a manner that is reasonably likely to be more complete than just searching individual custodian files. For example, a custodian may have deleted a responsive email from his or her email program, but your agency's archiving tools may capture that email under Capstone. At the same time, custodian searches are still necessary; agencies may not have direct access to files stored in .PST files, outside of network drives, in paper format, or in personal email accounts.

- 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 a request is denied in whole, please state specifically why it is not reasonable to segregate portions of the record for release.
- Please take appropriate steps to ensure that records responsive to this request are not deleted by the agency before the completion of processing for this request. If records potentially responsive to this request are likely to be located on systems where they are subject to potential deletion, including on a scheduled basis, please take steps to prevent that deletion, including, as appropriate, by instituting a litigation hold on those records.

### **Conclusion**

If you have any questions regarding how to construe this request for records or believe that further discussions regarding search and processing would facilitate a more efficient production of records of interest to American Oversight, please do not hesitate to contact American Oversight to discuss this request. 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 your agency can decrease the likelihood of costly and time-consuming litigation in the future.

Where possible, please provide responsive material in an electronic format by email. Alternatively, please provide responsive material in native format or in PDF 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.

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, please contact Dan McGrath at [foia@americanoversight.org](mailto:foia@americanoversight.org) or

202.897.4213. 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