



April 17, 2020

VIA EMAIL

Michael Sarich
Veterans Health Administration
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
(005R1C) VACO
Washington, DC 20420
vhfoia2@va.gov

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, American Oversight makes the following request for records.

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, and the disease it causes, COVID-19, has been declared a public health emergency at both the national and international levels.¹ Since late 2019, the virus has spread to dozens of countries, sickened millions of thousands of people, and resulted in more than 100,000 deaths.² This is a rapidly evolving situation that is demanding coordinated attention and action across the federal government. Yet President Trump has divided the medical community, and even his own advisors, by promoting controversial and unproven treatments.³ This has raised questions about President Trump's motivations and the politicization of medical and scientific decision-making.⁴

¹ *Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Summary*, CTRS. FOR DISEASE CONTROL & PREVENTION, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/summary.html>.

² *Coronavirus Map: Tracking the Global Outbreak*, N.Y. TIMES (Apr. 1, 2020, 8:14 AM), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/world/coronavirus-maps.html>.

³ Peter Baker, et al., *Trump's Aggressive Advocacy of Malaria Drug for Treating Coronavirus Divides Medical Community*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 6, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/us/politics/coronavirus-trump-malaria-drug.html>.

⁴ See, e.g., Lisette Voytko, *Trump Has 'Small,' 'Distant Link' To Sanofi, French Drugmaker Of Hydroxychloroquine*, FORBES (Apr. 7, 2020, 12:55 PM), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lisettevoytko/2020/04/07/trump-has-small-distant-link-to-sanofi-french-drugmaker-of-hydroxychloroquine/#2169e7fb7260>; Philip Bump, *Trump's Promotion of Hydroxychloroquine is Almost Certainly About Politics, Not Profits*, WASH. POST (Apr. 7, 2020, 11:24 AM),



American Oversight seeks to shed light on how outside entities and private interests have influenced the administration’s handling of potential coronavirus treatments in the midst of a public health crisis.

Requested Records

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

All communications (including emails, email attachments, text messages, calendar invitations, calendar entries, meeting notices, meeting agendas, or talking points), as well as any summaries of or notes taken during any oral communications, between (a) the government officials listed in Column A below, and (b) the individuals listed in Column B below.

Column A: Government Officials	Column B: External Individuals
i. Richard Stone, Executive in Charge	i. Larry Ellison, including anyone communicating on his behalf, such as an executive or special assistant or scheduler
ii. Lawrence Connell, Chief of Staff	ii. Dr. Mehmet Oz
iii. Steven Lieberman, Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Health	iii. Rudy Giuliani, including anyone communicating on his behalf, including but not limited to Jo Ann Zafonte, Christianne Allen, or Beau Wagner
iv. Lucille Beck, Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Policy and Services	iv. Dr. Vladimir Zelenko
v. Valerie Mattison Brown, Assistant Deputy Secretary for Health, Policy, and Planning	v. Ben Shapiro
vi. Maria Llorente, Assistant Deputy Secretary for Patient Care Services	vi. Alex Jones
vii. Carter Mecher, Senior Medical Adviser, Liaison to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention	vii. Gregory Rigano
	viii. Dr. Ramin Oskoui
	ix. Dr. Stephen Smith
	x. Dr. William Grace
	xi. Dr. Marc Siegel
	xii. Roberto Mignone, including anyone communicating on his behalf, such as an executive or special assistant or scheduler
	xiii. Nitin Saigal

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/04/07/trumps-promotion-hydroxychloroquine-is-almost-certainly-about-politics-not-profits/>.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> xiv. Chirag Patel, including anyone communicating on his behalf, such as an executive or special assistant or scheduler xv. Ken Fisher, including anyone communicating on his behalf, such as an executive or special assistant or scheduler xvi. Bernard Marcus, including anyone communicating on his behalf, such as an executive or special assistant or scheduler xvii. Any employee of Fox News, such as Laura Ingraham, Steve Doocy, Brian Kilmeade, Ainsley Earhardt, Tucker Carlson, Sean Hannity, and Lou Dobbs, including but not limited to anyone communicating under the domain foxnews.com, foxbusiness.com, newscorp.com, foxinc.com, fox.com, Murdoch.com, newsamerica.com, newscorporation.com xviii. Any employee of One America News Network, including but not limited to anyone communicating under the domain oann.com xix. Any employee of Job Creators Network, including but not limited to anyone communicating under the domain jobcreatorsnetwork.com xx. Any employee of Physicians for Reform, including but not limited to anyone communicating under the domain physiciansforreform.org xxi. Dr. Robin Armstrong
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Please provide all responsive records from March 1, 2020, through the date of the search.

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. 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."⁵ The public has a significant interest in the federal government's response to the coronavirus, including the influence of drug companies and other interested parties involved in developing and marketing vaccines and treatments for the virus and the disease it causes. Records with the potential to shed light on this matter would contribute significantly to public understanding of operations of the federal government, including whether and to what extent business interests are taking priority over public health. 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.⁶ 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.⁷

American Oversight has also demonstrated its commitment to the public disclosure of documents and creation of editorial content through numerous substantive analyses

⁵ 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii).

⁶ See 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii).

⁷ American Oversight currently has approximately 15,400 page likes on Facebook and 102,400 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited Mar. 17, 2020); American Oversight (@weareoversight), TWITTER, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited Mar. 17, 2020).

posted to its website.⁸ 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 what those records demonstrated regarding the Department's process for issuing such waivers;⁹ 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;¹⁰ posting records regarding potential self-dealing at the Department of Housing & Urban Development and related analysis;¹¹ posting records and analysis relating to the federal government's efforts to sell nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia;¹² and 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.¹³

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:

⁸ *News*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/blog>.

⁹ *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>.

¹⁰ *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>.

¹¹ *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>.

¹² *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>.

¹³ *Sessions' Letter Shows DOJ Acted on Trump's Authoritarian Demand to Investigate Clinton*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/sessions-letter>.

- 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 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵
- 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,¹⁶ and many agencies

¹⁴ 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).

¹⁵ See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, No. 14-cv-765, slip op. at 8 (D.D.C. Dec. 12, 2016).

¹⁶ 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

have adopted the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) Capstone program, or similar policies. These systems provide options for searching 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 Christine Monahan at foia@americanoversight.org or

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>.

(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,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Austin R. Evers". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the left.

Austin R. Evers
Executive Director
American Oversight