



August 10, 2020

VIA EMAIL

FOIA Office
Administration for Children and Families
330 C Street SW, 4th Floor
Washington, DC 20201
FOIA@acf.hhs.gov

Re: Expedited 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.

In the midst of a rapidly spreading coronavirus outbreak, the government has imposed drastic restrictions on immigration.¹ Public reporting indicates that authorities have been using family separation as a tactic to discourage immigrants. In one instance, officials threatened to deport three children to a country where they have no guardian, unless their mother agreed to give up her legal claim to asylum.² In another situation, officials pressured parents to separate from their children, placing the parents in detention and potentially deporting or removing them, while the children stayed with selected sponsors.³ Advocates have decried these actions as inhumane,⁴ and experts are concerned that family separation can have long-lasting negative effects on children.⁵

¹ Michelle Hackman, et al., *Trump Administration Changes Rules for Migrant Children During Pandemic*, Wall St. J. (May 22, 2020, 6:00 AM), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-administration-changes-rules-for-migrant-children-during-pandemic-11590141601>.

² Molly O'Toole, *Family Separation Returns Under the Cover of the Coronavirus*, L.A. Times (May 27, 2020, 3:00 AM), <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2020-05-27/family-separation-coronavirus-trump-immigration>.

³ Julia Ainsley, *Faced with Choice, Migrant Parents in ICE Detention Refuse to Separate from Children*, NBC (May 18, 2020, 6:41 PM), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/faced-choice-migrant-parents-ice-detention-refuse-separate-children-n1209841>.

⁴ Julia Ainsley, *Family Separation is Back for Migrants at the U.S.-Mexican Border, Say Advocates*, NBC (May 15, 2020, 6:05 PM), <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/immigration/family-separation-back-migrants-u-s-mexican-border-say-advocates-n1208186>.

⁵ Ajay Chaudry, et al., *Facing Our Future: Children in the Aftermath of Immigration Enforcement*, Urban Inst., Feb. 2010,



American Oversight seeks records to shed light on the extent to which the government is separating families in the midst of a public health crisis.

Requested Records

American Oversight seeks expedited review of this request for the reasons identified below and requests that your agency produce the following records as soon as practicable, and at least within twenty business days:

Any records reflecting any directive, order, decision, protocols, or guidance regarding any circumstances under which families are separated. This encompasses policies referred to as “zero tolerance,” “binary choice,” and any others which cause children to be separated from parents or guardians.

This includes but is not limited to separations which occur under the following circumstances:

- i. Children who are separated from parents or guardians residing in the United States, in order to be deported or removed to a country where they have no designated guardian
- ii. Parents who remain in custody with Immigration and Customs Enforcement while their children are placed with sponsors by the Office of Refugee Resettlement

American Oversight believes your agency is best positioned to determine where responsive records may reside. However, we request that at a minimum, you search:

Specified Officials:

1. Immediate Office of the Assistant Secretary for the Administration for Children and Families
2. Immediate Office of the Director of the Office of Refugee Resettlement
3. Division of Children’s Services

Please provide all responsive records from January 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

<https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/28331/412020-Facing-Our-Future.PDF>.

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.”⁶ The public has a significant interest in family separation, as demonstrated by the extensive media coverage.⁷ Records with the potential to shed light on this matter would contribute significantly to public understanding of operations of the federal government, including the extent to which a public health crisis is being exploited to reinstate family separation. 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.⁸ 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.⁹

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.¹⁰ 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

⁶ 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii).

⁷ See, e.g., Brian Stetler, *The Media Surges to the Border as Family Separation Crisis Grows*, CNN (Jun. 18, 2018, 12:13 PM), <https://money.cnn.com/2018/06/18/media/media-border-surge-separation-policy/index.html>. See, also, O’Toole, *supra* note 2, and Ainsley, *supra* note 3.

⁸ See 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii).

⁹ American Oversight currently has approximately 16,200 page likes on Facebook and 104,200 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited Jul. 8, 2020); American Oversight (@weareoversight), TWITTER, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited Jul. 9, 2020).

¹⁰ News, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/blog>.

waivers;¹¹ 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;¹² posting records regarding potential self-dealing at the Department of Housing & Urban Development and related analysis;¹³ posting records and analysis relating to the federal government’s efforts to sell nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia;¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

Accordingly, American Oversight qualifies for a fee waiver.

Application for Expedited Processing

Pursuant to 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(6)(E)(1), American Oversight requests that your agency expedite the processing of this request.

I certify to be true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief that the information requested is urgently needed in order to inform the public concerning actual or alleged government activity, and American Oversight is primarily engaged in disseminating the information it received from public records requests to the public.

Recent reporting indicates that the government has routinely relied on family separation as a tactic to discourage immigrants. In one instance, authorities threatened to deport

¹¹ *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>.

¹² *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>.

¹³ *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>.

¹⁴ *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>.

¹⁵ *Sessions’ Letter Shows DOJ Acted On Trump’s Authoritarian Demand to Investigate Clinton*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/sessions-letter>.

three children to a country where they have no guardian, unless their mother gives up her legal claim to asylum.¹⁶ In another situation, the government informed parents that they must be divided from their children, unless they waive the “court-ordered option” to protect minors from the coronavirus crisis in detention centers.¹⁷ Numerous studies have demonstrated that family separation has lasting negative effects. Children undergo behavioral changes, including shifts in their eating and sleeping habits, frequent crying, and increased fear, anxiety, or anger.¹⁸ They also experience developmental difficulties, including regression and reversal of developmental milestones.¹⁹ As a result, children may suffer permanent damage to their mental and physical health.

Moreover, I certify to be true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief that there is an urgent need to inform the public. The extensive media coverage on this topic demonstrates that the public has an immense interest in it. American Oversight’s request seeks information that can shed light on the government’s actions, including the extent to which a public health crisis is being exploited to reinstate family separation policies.

I further certify that American Oversight is primarily engaged in disseminating information to the public. 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. Similar to other organizations that have been found to satisfy the criteria necessary to qualify for expedition,²⁰ American Oversight “gathers information of potential interest to a segment of the public, uses its editorial skills to turn the raw material into a distinct work, and distributes that work to an audience.”²¹ American Oversight uses the information gathered, and its analysis of it, to educate the public through reports, press releases, and 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.²² As discussed previously, American Oversight has demonstrated its commitment to the public disclosure of documents and

¹⁶ See O’Toole, *supra* note 2.

¹⁷ See Ainsley, *supra* note 3.

¹⁸ See Chaudry, et al., *supra* note 5.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ See *ACLU v. U.S. Dep’t of Justice*, 321 F. Supp. 2d 24, 30–31 (D.D.C. 2004); *EPIC v. Dep’t of Defense*, 241 F. Supp. 2d 5, 15 (D.D.C. 2003).

²¹ *ACLU*, 321 F. Supp. 2d at 29 n.5 (quoting *EPIC*, 241 F. Supp. 2d at 11).

²² American Oversight currently has approximately 16,200 page likes on Facebook and 104,200 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited Jul. 8, 2020); American Oversight (@weareoversight), TWITTER, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited Jul. 9, 2020).

creation of editorial content,²³ including specifically with respect to documents related to the coronavirus.²⁴

Accordingly, American Oversight's request satisfies the criteria for expedition.

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 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,

²³ See generally *News*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/blog>; see, e.g., *DOJ Civil Division Response Noel Francisco Compliance*, 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>; *Audit the Wall*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/audit-the-wall>; *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>; *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>; *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>; *Sessions' Letter Shows DOJ Acted On Trump's Authoritarian Demand to Investigate Clinton*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/sessions-letter>.

²⁴ *'We Are Flying Blind': Health Officials' Late February Emails Show Rising Coronavirus Concerns*, AMERICAN OVERSIGHT, <https://www.americanoversight.org/we-are-flying-blind-health-officials-late-february-emails-show-rising-coronavirus-concerns>.

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.²⁵ 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.²⁶
- 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,²⁷ and many agencies 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

²⁵ 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).

²⁶ See *Competitive Enter. Inst. v. Office of Sci. & Tech. Policy*, No. 14-cv-765, slip op. at 8 (D.D.C. Dec. 12, 2016).

²⁷ 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>.

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 Hart Wood at foia@americanoversight.org or 202.873.1743. Also, if American Oversight's request for expedition is not granted or its

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