



August 11, 2020

VIA EMAIL

Dionne Hardy  
Office of Management and Budget  
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Washington, DC 20503  
[OMBFOIA@omb.eop.gov](mailto:OMBFOIA@omb.eop.gov)

**Re: Freedom of Information Act Request**

Dear FOIA Officers:

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.<sup>1</sup> Since late 2019, the virus has spread to dozens of countries, sickened more than 20 million people, and resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths.<sup>2</sup>

Despite this ongoing health crisis, the Trump administration decided this summer to halt funding to the World Health Organization (WHO) while it undertakes global efforts to combat the disease, with the president claiming that the WHO had mismanaged and covered up the spread of the virus.<sup>3</sup> The U.S. is the largest donor to the WHO, and according to the U.N. Secretary General, its funding is “absolutely critical to the world’s efforts” to fight coronavirus.<sup>4</sup> Members of Congress have highlighted that the

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<sup>1</sup> *Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Summary*, Ctrs. for Disease Control & Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/summary.html>.

<sup>2</sup> *Coronavirus Map: Tracking the Global Outbreak*, N.Y. Times (Aug. 11, 2020, 1:55 PM) <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/world/coronavirus-maps.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Drew Hinshaw & Stephanie Armour, *Trump Moves to Pull U.S. Out of World Health Organization in Midst of Covid-19 Pandemic*, Wall St. J. (July 7, 2020, 7:46 PM), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/white-house-says-u-s-has-pulled-out-of-the-world-health-organization-11594150928>; Alice Ollstein, *Trump Halts Funding to World Health Organization*, Politico (Apr. 14, 2020, 9:22 PM), <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/14/trump-world-health-organization-funding-186786>.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*



administration has provided little formal justification for cutting WHO funding, and that this funding pause may run afoul of the Impoundment Control Act.<sup>5</sup>

American Oversight seeks records to shed light on the circumstances surrounding the decision to withhold aid to the WHO.

### **Requested Records**

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

Records sufficient to identify any entities (including but not limited to non-governmental organizations, international organizations, or foreign countries) currently receiving U.S. funding that was previously directed to the World Health Organization.<sup>6</sup>

American Oversight believes that your agency is best positioned to determine where responsive records may reside. However, at a minimum, we believe a search for responsive records should include the immediate front offices of the following: the Office of the Director, the Office of the General Counsel, the Office of Health Programs, and the Office of National Security Programs, as well as any OMB-wide support offices or statutory offices that may play a role in realigning funding.

Please provide all responsive records from March 1, 2020, through the date the search is conducted.

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<sup>5</sup> Letter from Chairman Rep. Engel, U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs to Mike Pompeo, Secretary, U.S. Dep't of State, Apr. 27, 2020, [https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/\\_cache/files/6/e/6ebd95bd-76ff-4eeb-afc8-56ff96206c04/8CD54BDD144026EDC5618B546B0C9054.4-27-2020-ele-letter-to-pompeo-who-doc-request.pdf](https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/_cache/files/6/e/6ebd95bd-76ff-4eeb-afc8-56ff96206c04/8CD54BDD144026EDC5618B546B0C9054.4-27-2020-ele-letter-to-pompeo-who-doc-request.pdf); Caitlin Emma, *Trump Halt to WHO Funding Violates Same Law as Ukraine Aid Freeze, House Democrats Say*, Politico (Apr. 15, 2020, 12:38 PM), <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/15/house-democrats-trump-who-funding-188124>.

<sup>6</sup> Public reporting indicates that State Department has unveiled a plan to reroute WHO funding but has not yet identified specific groups receiving the funding. Responsive records should include, at a minimum, any groups funded by money rerouted from WHO funding. See John Hudson, et al., *Trump Expands Battle with WHO Far Beyond Aid Suspension*, Wash. Post (Apr. 25, 2020, 6:25 PM), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/trump-expands-battle-with-world-health-organization-far-beyond-aid-suspension/2020/04/25/72c754e6-856e-11ea-9728-c74380d9d410\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/trump-expands-battle-with-world-health-organization-far-beyond-aid-suspension/2020/04/25/72c754e6-856e-11ea-9728-c74380d9d410_story.html).

## 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."<sup>7</sup> The public has a significant interest in the federal government's support of and relationship with the WHO, the world's leading international public health organization, and decisions regarding how to use federal funds to advance public health and prevent the spread of communicable diseases, like the coronavirus.<sup>8</sup> Records with the potential to shed light on this matter would contribute significantly to public understanding of operations of the federal government, including how funds previously directed towards the WHO are being repurposed. 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>9</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>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii).

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Yeganeh Torbati, *Trump Administration Officials Warned Against Halting Funding to WHO, Leaked Memo Shows*, ProPublica (Apr. 15, 2020, 1:23 PM), <https://www.propublica.org/article/trump-administration-officials-warned-against-halting-funding-to-who-leaked-memo-shows>; Ollstein, *supra* note 3. *Trump Halts Funding to World Health Organization*, Politico (Apr. 14, 2020, 9:22 PM), <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/14/trump-world-health-organization-funding-186786>.

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

<sup>10</sup> American Oversight currently has approximately 15,600 page likes on Facebook and 104,200 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, Facebook,

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>11</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 what those records demonstrated regarding the Department’s process for issuing such waivers;<sup>12</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>13</sup> posting records regarding potential self-dealing at the Department of Housing & Urban Development and related analysis;<sup>14</sup> posting records and analysis relating to the federal government’s efforts to sell nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia;<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

Accordingly, American Oversight qualifies for a fee waiver.

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<https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited Aug. 11, 2020); American Oversight (@weareoversight), Twitter, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited Aug. 11, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> News, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/blog>.

<sup>12</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>13</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>14</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>15</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>16</sup> *Sessions’ Letter Shows DOJ Acted on Trump’s Authoritarian Demand to Investigate Clinton*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/sessions-letter>.

## 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.
- In conducting your search, please understand the terms “record,” in its 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>17</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>18</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>19</sup> and many agencies

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<sup>17</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>18</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>19</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

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 H. Monahan at [foia@americanoversight.org](mailto:foia@americanoversight.org)

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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>.

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,

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