



April 2, 2021

VIA EMAIL

Texas Department of State Health Services
Open Records Request
1100 West 49th Street
Austin, TX 78756
openrecords@dshs.texas.gov

Re: Public Information Request

Dear Public Information Officer:

Pursuant to the Texas Public Information Act, as codified at Tex. Code ch. 552, American Oversight makes the following request for public records.

On March 10, 2021, Governor Greg Abbott loosened restrictions meant to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus, SAR-CoV-2, and the disease it causes, COVID-19. As a result, masks are no longer required in public, and businesses are permitted to return to full capacity.¹ This drew criticism from the President,² federal health officials,³ and local leadership,⁴ who worried that the decision would lead to more outbreaks of the illness and potentially result in more deaths.

American Oversight seeks records with the potential to shed light on the decision to rescind public health precautions in the midst of a pandemic.

¹ Marissa Martinez, *Texas No Longer Has a Statewide Mask Mandate: But Face Coverings Are Still Required in Some Businesses and Public Places*, Texas Tribune (Mar. 10, 2021, 1:00 PM), <https://www.texastribune.org/2021/03/10/texas-mask-mandate-coronavirus-restrictions/>.

² Alison Durkee, *Biden Slams Texas And Mississippi's 'Neanderthal Thinking' In Dropping Covid-19 Restrictions And Mask Mandate*, Forbes (Mar. 3, 2020, 7:32 PM), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alisondurkee/2021/03/03/biden-slams-texas-and-mississippis-neanderthal-thinking-in-dropping-covid-19-restrictions-and-mask-mandate/>.

³ Benjamin Wermund, *CDC Warns Texas to Expect Increase in COVID Cases, Deaths After Mask Order Lifts*, Houston Chronicle (Mar. 5, 2021, 5:30 PM), <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/politics/texas/article/CDC-warns-Texas-to-expect-increase-in-COVID-16003576.php>.

⁴ Juan Pablo Garnham, *Texas' Local Officials Blast Gov. Greg Abbott for "Irresponsible Action" Of Lifting Coronavirus Restrictions*, Texas Tribune (Mar. 2, 2021, 7:00 PM), <https://www.texastribune.org/2021/03/02/texas-coronavirus-mask-mandate/>.



Requested Records

American Oversight requests that your office promptly produce the following:

All email communications (including email messages, complete email chains, email attachments, calendar invitations, and calendar invitation attachments) sent by the government officials specified below, containing any of the following key terms, from February 24, 2021, to March 17, 2021:

1. "GA-34"
2. "GA 34"
3. Mask
4. Masks
5. Maskless
6. "face covering"
7. "face coverings"
8. Reopen
9. Reopening
10. "return to normal"
11. "business restriction"
12. "business restrictions"
13. "100% capacity"
14. "100 percent capacity"
15. "personal responsibility"
16. Neanderthal
17. Republican
18. Republicans
19. GOP
20. Democrat
21. Democrats

Government Officials:

(including but not limited to emails sent from the specified addresses)

- a. Commissioner John Hellerstedt (john.hellerstedt@dshs.texas.gov)
- b. Deputy Commissioner Jennifer Sims (jennifer.sims@dshs.texas.gov)
- c. Assistant Commissioner of Laboratory and Infectious Disease Services Imelda Garcia (imelda.garcia@dshs.texas.gov)

American Oversight has limited its request to sent messages to reduce the volume of potentially responsive records. American Oversight still requests complete email chains. So, for example, if a government official sent a response to an incoming message containing one of the key terms above, the email chain containing the initially received message and the response is responsive to this request.

American Oversight insists that your office 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; governmental authorities may not have direct access to files stored in .PST files, outside of network drives, in paper format, or in personal email accounts.**

Please search all records regarding official business. **You may not exclude searches of files or emails in the personal custody of your officials, such as personal email accounts.** Emails conducting government business sent or received on the personal account of a governmental authority's officer or employee constitutes a record for purposes of the Texas Public Information Act.⁵

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. If a request is denied in whole, please state specifically that 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 your office 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.

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 you before you undertake your search or incur search or duplication costs. By working together at the outset, American Oversight and your office 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 Tex. Code § 552.267(a), American Oversight requests a waiver of fees associated with processing this request for records because such a waiver “is in the public interest because providing the copy of the information primarily benefits the

⁵ Tex. Code § 552.002(a-2); *see also Adkisson v. Paxton*, 459 S.W.3d 761, 773 (Tex. App. 2015).

general public.” The requested records are directly related to the work of state officials, with the potential to shed light on the decision to lift the statewide mask mandate. This matter is a subject of substantial public interest in Texas.⁶ Accordingly, release of records that may help the public understand the operations and activities of state officials is in the public interest.

Release of the requested records will primarily benefit the public.⁷ As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, American Oversight does not have a commercial purpose and the release of the requested records is not in American Oversight’s financial interest, but is rather in the public interest. American Oversight is committed to transparency and makes the responses governmental authorities provide to public records requests publicly available. As noted, the subject of this request is a matter of public interest, and the public would benefit from an enhanced understanding of the government’s activities through American Oversight’s analysis and publication of these records. 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.⁸

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.⁹ Examples reflecting this commitment to the public disclosure of documents and the creation of editorial content include the posting of records related to the organization’s investigations into misconduct and corruption in state governments;¹⁰ the posting of records related to the Trump Administration’s contacts with Ukraine and analyses of those contacts;¹¹ posting records and editorial content about the federal government’s response to the Coronavirus pandemic;¹² posting records received as part of American Oversight’s “Audit the Wall” project to gather and analyze

⁶ See, e.g., Martinez, *supra* note 1.

⁷ Tex. Code § 552.267(a).

⁸ American Oversight currently has approximately 15,700 followers on Facebook and 106,000 followers on Twitter. American Oversight, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/weareoversight/> (last visited Mar. 25, 2021); American Oversight (@weareoversight), Twitter, <https://twitter.com/weareoversight> (last visited Mar. 25, 2021).

⁹ News, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/blog>.

¹⁰ State Investigations, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/states>.

¹¹ Trump Administration’s Contacts with Ukraine, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/the-trump-administrations-contacts-with-ukraine>.

¹² See generally *The Trump Administration’s Response to Coronavirus*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/the-trump-administrations-response-to-coronavirus>; see, e.g., *CDC Calendars from 2018 and 2019: Pandemic-Related Briefings and Meetings*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/cdc-calendars-from-2018-and-2019-pandemic-related-briefings-and-meetings>.

information related to the administration's proposed construction of a barrier along the U.S.-Mexico border, and analyses of what those records reveal;¹³ 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;¹⁴ and posting records and analysis of federal officials' use of taxpayer dollars to charter private aircraft or use government planes for unofficial business.¹⁵

Accordingly, American Oversight qualifies for a fee waiver. If your office denies our request for a fee waiver, please notify American Oversight of any anticipated fees or costs in excess of \$40 prior to incurring such costs or fees.

Conclusion

We share a common mission to promote transparency in government. American Oversight looks forward to working with your county 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 Emma Lewis at records@americanoversight.org or 202.919.6303. 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,

/s/ Emma Lewis
Emma Lewis
on behalf of
American Oversight

¹³ 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>.

¹⁴ *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>.

¹⁵ See generally *Swamp Airlines: Chartered Jets at Taxpayer Expense*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/swamp-airlines-private-jets-taxpayer-expense>; see, e.g., *New Information on Pompeo's 2017 Trips to His Home State*, American Oversight, <https://www.americanoversight.org/new-information-on-pompeos-2017-trips-to-his-home-state>.