

Respond to FOIA Requests Quickly and Accurately

November 23, 2018

Journalists, government watchdog organizations, and ordinary citizens are armed with a powerful tool to shed light on U.S. government activities: Freedom of Information laws. The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and similar open records or “sunshine” laws in all 50 states require government agencies to make certain information available to the public upon request. Agencies now must also proactively post information that is of general public interest online even without a request.

Depending on who you ask, Freedom of Information laws work to varying degrees of success or not at all. A look at the disparate views on the effectiveness of these laws helps us pinpoint the difficulties that stand in the way of achieving a truly transparent government in the United States.

The white paper, *The Quest for a Transparent Government: 50 years of FOIA and Public Records Acts*, addresses challenges government agencies face when striving toward greater transparency today through an overview of:

Managing increased administrative burdens introduced by key amendments and additions to the Freedom of Information Act;

- Solutions to complications in the internal processes many agencies use to respond to FOIA requests;
- Technology that controls and manages the complex digital era demands that threaten to overwhelm government FOIA processes and personnel.



The image shows the cover of a white paper titled "FOIA: 50 YEARS OLD, BUT STILL NOT IN THE 21ST CENTURY..." and two open pages from the document. The cover features the Zylab logo and a stack of papers. The open pages show text and a flowchart. The flowchart has four main steps: 1. Request received, 2. Request assigned, 3. Request processed, and 4. Request completed. Each step has sub-points. The right page shows a blue-tinted image of a road or tunnel.

DOWNLOAD OUR WHITE PAPER
FOIA: 50 years old,
but still not in the 21st century

DOWNLOAD NOW

Disagreements About FOIA’s Effectiveness

Any person, group, or organization has a right to request and receive documents relevant to whichever inner workings of government agencies they specify – unless that information is subject to one or more exemptions or exclusions laid out by FOIA (which applies only to federal agencies) and the individual state Freedom of Information (FOI) laws.

In many ways, FOIA and FOI laws can be considered highly successful. Responses to public records requests have unearthed critical revelations and continue to illuminate important issues that would undoubtedly otherwise remain hidden to the public. Government officials who know that details of their activities and communications are open to public scrutiny are motivated to act accordingly.

Yet, many reporters, activist organizations, and others claim government officials often use the numerous, vaguely written exemptions to FOI laws in a heavy-handed manner. They say officials deliberately deny legitimate requests for public records and agencies inappropriately redact and withhold information.

It's true that many agencies fail to timely respond to every request. The [2017 Summary of Annual FOIA Reports](#) shows that all federal agencies combined left 111,344 requests backlogged last year. The number of FOIA appeals and lawsuits also continued in an upward yearly trend. Often, when forced to take a second look, agencies release additional records, which clearly indicates that a less-than-ideal FOIA response system is currently in place.

But Does That Mean Government Agencies are Deliberately Withholding Information?

The situation certainly looks bad. And bad characters in governments have hidden dastardly deeds before. But we know that's not the real story going on here. Our experiences working closely with government agency employees and FOIA personnel have shown us that they work extremely hard to fulfill their duties in responding to public records requests.

Unfortunately, the deck is stacked against them. They struggle to cope with mountains of decentralized data, much of which is difficult to access. Bogged down by rudimentary search tools, agency employees are unable to accurately locate many records that are responsive to requests. They're not equipped with adequate technology to collect, review, and redact the ever-increasing amounts of electronic files they need to gather from various digital sources such as social media, emails, text, chat, calendars, websites, and so on.

As the world has grown and continues to grow increasingly digital, these complications will multiply accordingly and continue to overwhelm the well-intentioned efforts of FOIA personnel.

That's why the time is now to step up and make the necessary changes to equip government agency personnel with the advanced technology they need.

Government agencies can meet and overcome these challenges, Agency personnel can search for and locate records with proven efficiency and accuracy. Technology can automate the most time-consuming tasks in responding to FOIA requests and aid agency personnel in making more efficient and accurate decisions about withholding or redacting exempt information.

Curious how? We invite you to read the white paper, [The Quest for a Transparent Government:](#)

50 years of FOIA and Public Records Acts, and find out.