



NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION

CHIEF FOIA OFFICER REPORT

March 2012 to March 2013

Section I: Steps Taken to Apply the Presumption of Openness

The guiding principle underlying the President's FOIA Memorandum and the Attorney General's FOIA Guidelines is the presumption of openness.

Describe the steps your agency has taken to ensure that the presumption of openness is being applied to all decisions involving the FOIA. To do so, you should answer the questions listed below and then include any additional information you would like to describe how your agency is working to apply the presumption of openness.

1. Did your agency hold an agency FOIA conference, or otherwise conduct training during this reporting period?

The NSF FOIA and Privacy Officer conducts bi-weekly FOIA/PA training for all new employees, and for subgroups of employees as needed.

Did your FOIA professionals attend any FOIA training, such as that provided by the Department of Justice?

Yes, the FOIA Officer and the staff assistant for FOIA attended the ASAP National Training Conference in March of 2012.

In his 2009 FOIA Guidelines, the Attorney General strongly encouraged agencies to make discretionary releases of information even when the information might be technically exempt from disclosure under the FOIA. OIP encourages agencies to make such discretionary releases whenever there is no foreseeable harm from release.

2. Did your agency make any discretionary releases of otherwise exempt information?

Yes.

3. What exemptions would have covered the information that was released as a matter of discretion?

Exemption 5.

4. Provide a narrative description, or some examples of, the types of information that your agency released as a matter of discretion.

Typically, deliberative material whose disclosure would be unlikely to discourage future candor in recommendations. Examples may include suggestions for minor, non-substantive changes to a draft document, or drafts that are nearly identical to final documents and would not reveal substantive deliberations, or deliberative materials whose content has been effectively disclosed.

5. Describe any other initiatives undertaken by your agency to ensure that the presumption of openness is being applied.

The FOIA Officer reviews responsive records prior to disclosure, and discretionary disclosure is an integral part of the review, and of the General Counsel's determination on appeals. Various factors go into this decision-making. These include the age of the document, the sensitivity of the issues being discussed in the documents, and the potential for harm to the agency deliberative process.

Section II: Steps Taken to Ensure that Your Agency Has an Effective System in Place for Responding to Requests

As the Attorney General emphasized in his FOIA Guidelines, "[a]pplication of the proper disclosure standard is only one part of ensuring transparency. Open government requires not just a presumption of disclosure, but also an effective system for responding to FOIA requests."

This section should include a discussion of how your agency has addressed the key roles played by the broad spectrum of agency personnel who work with FOIA professionals in responding to requests, including, in particular, steps taken to ensure that FOIA professionals have sufficient IT support.

Describe here the steps your agency has taken to ensure that its system for responding to requests is effective and efficient. To do so, answer the questions below and then include any additional information that you would like to describe how your agency ensures that your FOIA system is efficient and effective.

1. Do FOIA professionals within your agency have sufficient IT support?

Yes.

2. Do your FOIA professionals work with your agency's Open Government Team?

Yes.

3. Has your agency assessed whether adequate staffing is being devoted to FOIA administration?

Yes, with the continuing, increasing volume and complexity of FOIA records requested the staffing level is an issue. NSF added additional FOIA support personnel during the FY 2010 reporting period. With impending budget decreases and FTE limits, we expect

that the current level of support will remain steady. However, we will continue to examine the issue in 2013.

4. Describe any other steps your agency has undertaken to ensure that your FOIA system operates efficiently and effectively, such as conducting self-assessments to find greater efficiencies, improving search processes, streamlining consultations, eliminating redundancy, etc.

NSF administrative processes are reviewed and further systematized to create greater efficiency in handling routine steps. The NSF FOIA database is continually reviewed for efficiency and updated with any additional requirements. NSF's core business processes for research proposal electronic receipt and processing allow for electronic access to most all awarded proposal records. This provides the FOIA Officer with direct access to requested records. Most redacting is done electronically.

Section III: Steps Taken to Increase Proactive Disclosures

Both the President and Attorney General focused on the need for agencies to work proactively to post information online without waiting for individual requests to be received.

Describe here the steps your agency has taken both to increase the amount of material that is available on your agency website, and the usability of such information, including providing examples of proactive disclosures that have been made during this past reporting period (i.e., from March 2012 to March 2013). In doing so, answer the questions listed below and describe any additional steps taken by your agency to make and improve proactive disclosures of information.

1. Provide examples of material that your agency has posted this past year.

NSF continually updates its public database of awards with abstracts of awarded proposals, resulting publications, and final reports on research results. Research is also highlighted on the agency web site at [nsf.gov](http://www.nsf.gov).

2. Beyond posting new material, is your agency taking steps to make the posted information more useful to the public, especially to the community of individuals who regularly access your agency's website, such as soliciting feedback on the content and presentation of the posted material, improving search capabilities on the site, creating mobile applications, providing explanatory material, etc.?

Yes. NSF employs a variety of social media tools to share news about NSF-funded research, especially exciting new findings; funding opportunities offered by the Foundation; job openings at NSF and more. NSF can also be followed on the social media sites listed: <http://www.nsf.gov/social>.

3. If so, provide examples of such improvements.

NSF has updated its award search database to provide more efficient data queries for the public.

4. Describe any other steps taken to increase proactive disclosures at your agency.

In addition to social media efforts, NSF's Open Government Plan seeks out additional records that may be added to the NSF public web site. See <http://www.nsf.gov/open/>.

Section IV: Steps Taken to Greater Utilize Technology

A key component of the President's FOIA Memorandum was the direction to "use modern technology to inform citizens about what is known and done by their Government." In addition to using the internet to make proactive disclosures, agencies should also be exploring ways to utilize technology in responding to requests. In 2010 and 2011, agencies reported widespread use of technology in receiving and tracking FOIA requests and preparing agency Annual FOIA Reports. For 2013, as we did in 2012, the questions have been further refined and now also address different, more innovative aspects of technology use.

Electronic receipt of FOIA requests:

1. Can FOIA requests be made electronically to your agency?

Yes.

2. If your agency is decentralized, can FOIA requests be made electronically to *all* components of your agency?

NA.

Online tracking of FOIA requests:

3. Can a FOIA requester track the status of his/her request electronically?

No.

4. If so, describe the information that is provided to the requester through the tracking system. For example, some tracking systems might tell the requester whether the request is "open" or "closed," while others will provide further details to the requester throughout the course of the processing, such as "search commenced" or "documents currently in review." List the specific types of information that are available through your agency's tracking system.

NA.

5. In particular, does your agency tracking system provide the requester with an estimated date of completion for his or her request?

All requesters are provided an estimated response time in the agency email of acknowledgement.

6. If your agency does not provide online tracking of requests, is your agency taking steps to establish this capability?

This capability has been requested and is under review for funding, security and privacy concerns.

Use of technology to facilitate processing of requests.

7. Beyond using technology to redact documents, is your agency taking steps to utilize more advanced technology to facilitate overall FOIA efficiency, such as improving record search capabilities, utilizing document sharing platforms for consultations and referrals, or employing software that can sort and de-duplicate documents?

Yes.

8. If so, describe the technological improvements being made.

NSF has installed the Accellion software to securely provide FOIA responses and document sharing for FOIA referrals and consultations.

Section V: Steps Taken to Improve Timeliness in Responding to Requests and Reduce Backlogs

The President and the Attorney General have emphasized the importance of improving timeliness in responding to requests. This section addresses both time limits and backlog reduction. Backlog reduction is measured both in terms of numbers of backlogged requests or appeals and by looking at whether agencies closed their ten oldest requests and appeals. *For the figures required in this Section, please use those contained in the specified sections of your agency's 2012 Annual FOIA Report.*

1. Section VII.A of your agency's Annual FOIA Report, entitled "FOIA Requests – Response Time for All Processed Requests," includes figures that show your agency's average response times for processed requests. For agencies utilizing a multi-track system to process requests, there is a category for "simple" requests, which are those requests that are placed in the agency's fastest (non-expedited) track, based on the low volume and/or simplicity of the records requested. If your agency does not utilize a separate track for processing simple requests, answer the question below using the figure provided in your report for your non-expedited requests.

- a. Does your agency utilize a separate track for simple requests?

No, but NSF plans to implement one during 2013.

- b. If so, for your agency overall, for Fiscal Year 2012, was the average number of days to process simple requests twenty working days or fewer?

NA.

c. If your agency does not track simple requests separately, was the average number of days to process non- expedited requests twenty working days or fewer?

No.

2. Sections XII.D.(2) and XII.E.(2) of your agency's Annual FOIA Report, entitled "Comparison of Numbers of Requests/Appeals from Previous and Current Annual Report – Backlogged Requests/Appeals," show the numbers of any backlog of pending requests or pending appeals from Fiscal Year 2012 as compared to Fiscal Year 2011. You should refer to those numbers when completing this section of your Chief FOIA Officer Report. In addition, Section VII.E, entitled "Pending Requests – Ten Oldest Pending Requests," and Section VI.C.(5), entitled "Ten Oldest Pending Administrative Appeals," from both Fiscal Year 2011 and Fiscal Year 2012 should be used for this section.

a. If your agency had a backlog of requests at the close of Fiscal Year 2012, did that backlog decrease as compared with Fiscal Year 2011?

Yes, 36 in 2012; 42 in 2011.

b. If your agency had a backlog of administrative appeals in Fiscal Year 2012, did that backlog decrease as compared to Fiscal Year 2011?

NSF has no backlog of appeals.

c. In Fiscal Year 2012, did your agency close the ten oldest requests that were pending as of the end of Fiscal Year 2011?

No.

d. In Fiscal Year 2012, did your agency close the ten oldest administrative appeals that were pending as of the end of Fiscal Year 2011?

NA.

3. If you answered "no" to any of the above questions, describe why that has occurred. In doing so, answer the following questions then include any additional explanation:

Request Backlog:

a. Was the lack of a reduction in the request backlog a result of an increase in the number of incoming requests?

No.

b. Was the lack of a reduction in the request backlog caused by a loss of staff?

Yes.

c. Was the lack of a reduction in the request backlog caused by an increase in the complexity of the requests received?

Yes.

d. What other causes, if any, contributed to the lack of a decrease in the request backlog?

Administrative Appeal Backlog:

None.

- a. Was the lack of a reduction in the backlog of administrative appeals a result of an increase in the number of incoming appeals?
 - b. Was the lack of a reduction in the appeal backlog caused by a loss of staff?
 - c. Was the lack of a reduction in the appeal backlog caused by an increase in the complexity of the appeals received?
 - d. What other causes, if any, contributed to the lack of a decrease in the appeal backlog?
4. OIP has issued **guidance** encouraging agencies to make interim releases whenever they are working on requests that involve a voluminous amount of material or require searches in multiple locations. By providing rolling releases to requesters agencies facilitate access to the requested information. If your agency had a backlog in Fiscal Year 2012, please provide an estimate of the number of cases in the backlog where a substantive, interim response was provided during the fiscal year, even though the request was not finally closed.

50

Use of FOIA's Law Enforcement "Exclusions"

In order to increase transparency regarding the use of the FOIA's statutory law enforcement exclusions, which authorize agencies under certain exceptional circumstances to "treat the records as not subject to the requirements of [the FOIA]," 5 U.S.C. § 552(c)(1), (2), (3), please answer the following questions:

1. Did your agency invoke a statutory exclusion during Fiscal Year 2012?

No.

2. If so, what was the total number of times exclusions were invoked?

NA.

Spotlight on Success

Out of all the activities undertaken by your agency since March 2012 to increase transparency and improve FOIA administration, describe here one success story that you would like to

highlight as emblematic of your agency's efforts. The success story can come from any one of the five key areas.

The FOIA report figures alone do not provide the full picture of the FOIA processing workload at the NSF. Most FOIA requests to NSF are for funded grant proposals, and each request typically requests multiple proposals. Because these proposals may contain confidential, proprietary business information that may be protected by exemption 4, NSF is required by E.O. 12,500 and NSF's regulations at 45 CFR 612.8 to do a submitter notice to each submitter of every proposal requested. These notices provide an opportunity to object to disclosure and say why. Most notices generate a back and forth conversation with submitters. NSF then makes a determination whether information is disclosable or not. A request for ten proposals is the same amount of processing effort as ten requests for one proposal.

To provide a snapshot of this work, during the month of September 2012 NSF received 33 FOIA requests and created and processed 162 submitter notifications. Of these 33 requests, two are pending and the two requesters have received partial responses. For the entire reporting period NSF generated 931 submitter notification letters.

This highlights the administrative efforts to provide excellent, responsive service to the FOIA requester community with very limited staff.