

February 19, 2013

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

The undersigned organizations, concerned with government openness and accountability, are writing to ask you to bring renewed attention to issues that continue to plague government-wide implementation, compliance, and enforcement of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

We strongly agree with your statements in the January 21, 2009 Memorandum that the FOIA “encourages accountability through transparency,” and “is the most prominent expression of a profound national commitment to ensuring an open Government.” However, as we have discussed with you and your staff, delays and other barriers in FOIA practice at the agency level continue to prevent the public from timely access to information about the federal government’s activities.

As you likely know, a February 4th, 2013 letter from the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee to the Office of Information Policy at the Department of Justice brings attention and focus on some of the issues that continually frustrate FOIA requesters and are major concerns for the transparency community. In particular, the letter asks OIP to provide the Committee with detailed information about its actions related to outdated FOIA regulations, excessive fee assessments, growing FOIA backlogs, and the misuse of exemptions. This letter is an excellent step towards identifying where a lack of oversight and attention on the part of OIP is contributing to these problems, and we look forward to Congressional oversight hearings.

Your Administration has set high standards for implementation of the FOIA. You and the Attorney General have set a clear standard of the presumption of openness, and directed agencies to take affirmative steps to make government information more available to the public. Given the continued issues requesters have with the FOIA, however, it appears that these principles and policies are not receiving the requisite attention by high-ranking agency officials to ensure they are followed.

By renewing attention to and strengthening oversight of implementation of the FOIA, your Administration can help usher in the new era of open Government you and we want to effect. We hope you will join with the transparency community in paying close attention to the answers OIP delivers to the questions posed by the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, and will act quickly to address any issues.

Thank you in advance for your attention to this issue of critical importance to transparent and accountable government. To discuss these issues in greater detail, please contact Patrice McDermott, Executive Director of OpenTheGovernment.org, at pmcdermott@openthegovernment.org or 202-332-6736.

Sincerely,

American Association of Law Libraries

American Association of University Professors

American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression

American Library Association

American Society of News Editors

Article 19

Association of American Publishers

Association of Research Libraries

Bill of Rights Defense Committee – BORDC

Californians Aware

Cause of Action

Center for Effective Government (formerly OMB Watch)

Center for Media and Democracy

Center for Science and Democracy at the Union of Concerned Scientists

Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington – CREW

Defending Dissent Foundation

DownsizeDC.org, Inc.

Electronic Frontier Foundation – EFF

Electronic Privacy Information Center – EPIC

Essential Information

First Amendment Coalition

Freedom of Information Center at the Missouri School of Journalism

Freedom to Read Foundation

Friends of the Earth

Government Accountability Project – GAP

iSolon.org

The James Madison Project

Liberty Coalition

Mine Safety and Health News

Mississippi Center for Freedom of Information

National Coalition Against Censorship

National Coalition for History

National Freedom of Information Coalition

National Press Club

National Priorities Project

National Security Archive

OpenTheGovernment.org

Project On Government Oversight – POGO

Reporters Without Borders

Society of American Archivists

Society of Professional Journalists

Special Libraries Association

Student Press Law Center

Sunlight Foundation

Taxpayers for Common Sense

Tully Center for Free Speech at Syracuse University

Utah Foundation for Open Government

Washington Civil Rights Council

Washington Coalition for Open Government