September 25, 2018

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

Office of General Counsel
Federal Trade Commission
600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20580
E-mail: foia@ftc.gov

Re: Freedom of Information Act Request

Dear FOIA Officer:

I write on behalf of Cause of Action Institute (“CoA Institute”), a 501(c)(3) nonpartisan government oversight organization that uses investigative, legal, and communications tools to educate the public about how government accountability, transparency, and the rule of law protect individual liberty and economic opportunity.¹

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (“FOIA”), 5 U.S.C. § 552, CoA Institute hereby requests access to the following records:

1. The five most recent investigative reports written by the inspector general. Please note that we seek the full reports rather than the highlights included in the Federal Trade Commission (“FTC”) Office of Inspector General (“OIG”) Semiannual Reports to Congress.

2. A list of FTC OIG Investigations closed between January 1, 2012 to the present.²

3. A list of FTC OIG Preliminary Investigations opened between January 1, 2012 to the present.³

Request for a Public Interest Fee Waiver

CoA Institute requests a waiver of all applicable fees. FOIA and applicable regulations provide that the agency shall furnish requested records without or at reduced charge if

¹ See CAUSE OF ACTION INSTITUTE, About, www.causeofaction.org/about/.
² The FTC provided a list for the time period July 1, 2008 to December 31, 2011 in response to a FOIA request. See here: https://www.governmentattic.org/28docs/ListFTC-OIGinvsClosed_2008-2011.pdf
³ For purposes of this request, the term “present” should be construed as the date on which the agency begins its search for responsive records. See Pub. Citizen v. Dep’t of State, 276 F.3d 634 (D.C. Cir. 2002). The term “record” means the entirety of the record any portion of which contains responsive information. See Am. Immigration Lawyers Ass’n v. Exec. Office for Immigration Review, 830 F.3d 667, 677-78 (D.C. Cir. 2016) (admonishing agency for withholding information as “non-responsive” because “nothing in the statute suggests
“disclosure of the information is in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations or activities of the government and is not primarily in the commercial interest of the requester.”

In this case, the requested records unquestionably shed light on the “operations or activities of the government,” as they relate to the OIG’s oversight of the FTC through investigations. And as the OIG’s reports have not yet been made public in their entirety, their release will contribute significantly to the public’s understanding of both the FTC’s actions and the investigative capacity of the OIG.

CoA Institute has both the intent and ability to make the results of this request available to a reasonably broad public audience through various media. Its staff has significant experience and expertise in government oversight, investigative reporting, and federal public interest litigation. These professionals will analyze the information responsive to this request, use their editorial skills to turn raw materials into a distinct work, and share the resulting analysis with the public, whether through the Institute’s regularly published online newsletter, memoranda, reports, or press releases. In addition, as CoA Institute is a non-profit organization as defined under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, it has no commercial interest in making this request.

Request To Be Classified as a Representative of the News Media

For fee status purposes, CoA Institute also qualifies as a “representative of the news media” under FOIA. As the D.C. Circuit recently held, the “representative of the news media” test is properly focused on the requestor, not the specific FOIA request at issue. CoA Institute satisfies this test because it gathers information of potential interest to a segment of the public, uses its editorial skills to turn raw materials into a distinct work, and distributes that work to an audience. Although it is not required by the statute, CoA Institute gathers the news it regularly publishes from a variety of sources, including FOIA requests, whistleblowers/insiders, and scholarly works. It does not merely make raw information available to the public, but rather distributes distinct work products, including articles, blog posts, investigative reports, newsletters, and congressional testimony and statements for the record. These distinct works

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5 See also Cause of Action, 799 F.3d at 1125-26 (holding that public interest advocacy organizations may partner with others to disseminate their work).
7 See Cause of Action, 799 F.3d at 1121.
are distributed to the public through various media, including the Institute’s website, Twitter, and Facebook. CoA Institute also provides news updates to subscribers via e-mail.

The statutory definition of a “representative of the news media” contemplates that organizations such as CoA Institute, which electronically disseminate information and publications via “alternative media[,] shall be considered to be news-media entities.” In light of the foregoing, numerous federal agencies have appropriately recognized the Institute’s news media status in connection with its FOIA requests.10


Record Preservation Requirement

CoA Institute requests that the disclosure officer responsible for the processing of this request issue an immediate hold on all records responsive, or potentially responsive, to this request, so as to prevent their disposal until such time as a final determination has been issued on the request and any administrative remedies for appeal have been exhausted. It is unlawful for an agency to destroy or dispose of any record subject to a FOIA request.11

Record Production and Contact Information

In an effort to facilitate document review, please provide the responsive documents in electronic form in lieu of a paper production. If a certain portion of responsive records can be produced more readily, CoA Institute requests that those records be produced first and the remaining records be produced on a rolling basis as circumstances permit.

If you have any questions about this request, please contact me by telephone at (202) 499-2422 or by e-mail at kevin.schmidt@causeofaction.org. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Kevin Schmidt

KEVIN SCHMIDT
DIRECTOR OF INVESTIGATIONS

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11 See 36 C.F.R. § 1230.3(b) (“Unlawful or accidental destruction (also called unauthorized destruction) means . . . disposal of a record subject to a FOIA request, litigation hold, or any other hold requirement to retain the records.”); Chambers v. Dep’t of the Interior, 568 F.3d 998, 1004-05 (D.C. Cir. 2009) (“[A]n agency is not shielded from liability if it intentionally transfers or destroys a document after it has been requested under the FOIA or the Privacy Act.”); Judicial Watch, Inc. v. Dep’t of Commerce, 34 F. Supp. 2d 28, 41-44 (D.D.C. 1998).