

< WatchBlog: Following the Federal Dollar

Freedom of Information Act—How Open is Public Access to Government Data?

Posted on March 18, 2021



The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) establishes a legal right for individuals and organizations to request access to government information. In FY 2019, federal agencies reported that they processed [nearly 878,000](#) FOIA requests for government information, an increase of 32% since FY 2012.

In honor of Sunshine Week—an annual observation that promotes open government—today's WatchBlog post looks at our recent reports on agencies' implementation of laws that seek to improve the public's access to government information.

What does the government disclose as part of open government laws?

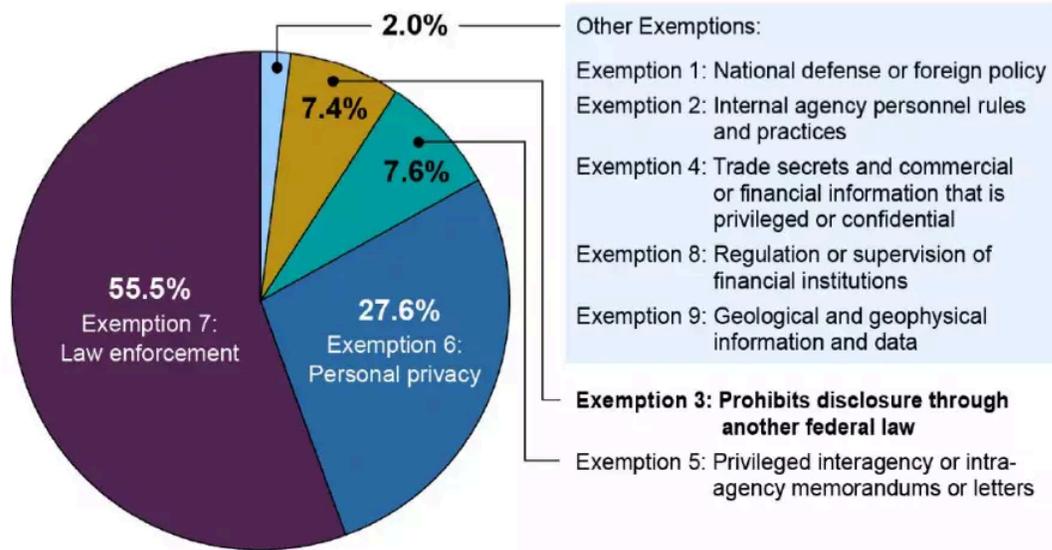
FOIA requires agencies to publicly post certain information without waiting for specific requests and report on these disclosures annually. These proactive disclosures include final opinions, administrative staff manuals, and records that have been requested 3 or more times.

In [our March report](#), we assessed agency policies related to these disclosures. Among other things, we found that the Department of Housing and Urban Development did not report proactively disclosing any records from FY 2017 through 2019. Similarly, we found that the Veterans Health Administration and the Federal Aviation Administration did not report the number of records disclosed for all required categories in FY 2019.

We made 8 recommendations to help improve compliance with these requirements.

What might the government not disclose under FOIA?

FOIA requires agencies to [provide the relevant records](#) in response to a request unless an exemption applies to limit the disclosure of that information, such as withholding classified national defense or foreign policy information. The graphic below provides more detail on FOIA’s 9 exemptions.



Source: GAO analysis of FOIA.gov data. | GAO-21-148

In FY 2019, agencies denied approximately 34,000 requests based on exemptions. More than half of these requests were related to law enforcement and investigations.

The exemption, which authorizes agencies to withhold information on the basis of a federal law not otherwise covered in other exemptions, accounts for 7.4% of FOIA exemptions government-wide. In [our January report](#), we reviewed agencies’ use of 256 federal laws citing this exemption in FY 2010 through 2019. We found that agencies’ use of this exemption more than doubled since FY 2012.

Data Transparency and Quality

In our work we have also recommended openness and accountability to comply with other laws:

- The OPEN Government Data Act requires federal agencies to make their data available in a format that can be automatically read and processed by a computer and to publish their data on the agency’s website and on Data.gov. In October, [we reported](#) on the federal government’s progress toward

implementing the OPEN Government Data Act, and made 3 recommendations to help improve further implementation.

- The Digital Accountability and Transparency Act of 2014 (DATA Act) calls for improving the transparency and quality of federal spending data. A key component of data quality is effective data governance, which means having a framework for ensuring that an agency's data are transparent, accessible, and of sufficient quality for policymaking and informing the public. In [our December report](#), we found that the 4 agencies we selected had made substantial progress in establishing specific aspects of a data governance framework, and made 9 recommendations to address other key milestones.

-
- Comments on GAO's WatchBlog? Contact blog@gao.gov.

Topics

[Government Operations](#)[Veterans Health Administration](#)[Department of Housing and Urban Development](#)[Freedom of information](#)[Freedom of information requests](#)[Government transparency](#)[Federal spending transparency](#)[Strategic Issues](#)

GAO Contacts



Michelle Sager

Managing Director

Strategic Issues

 sagerm@gao.gov

Related Posts

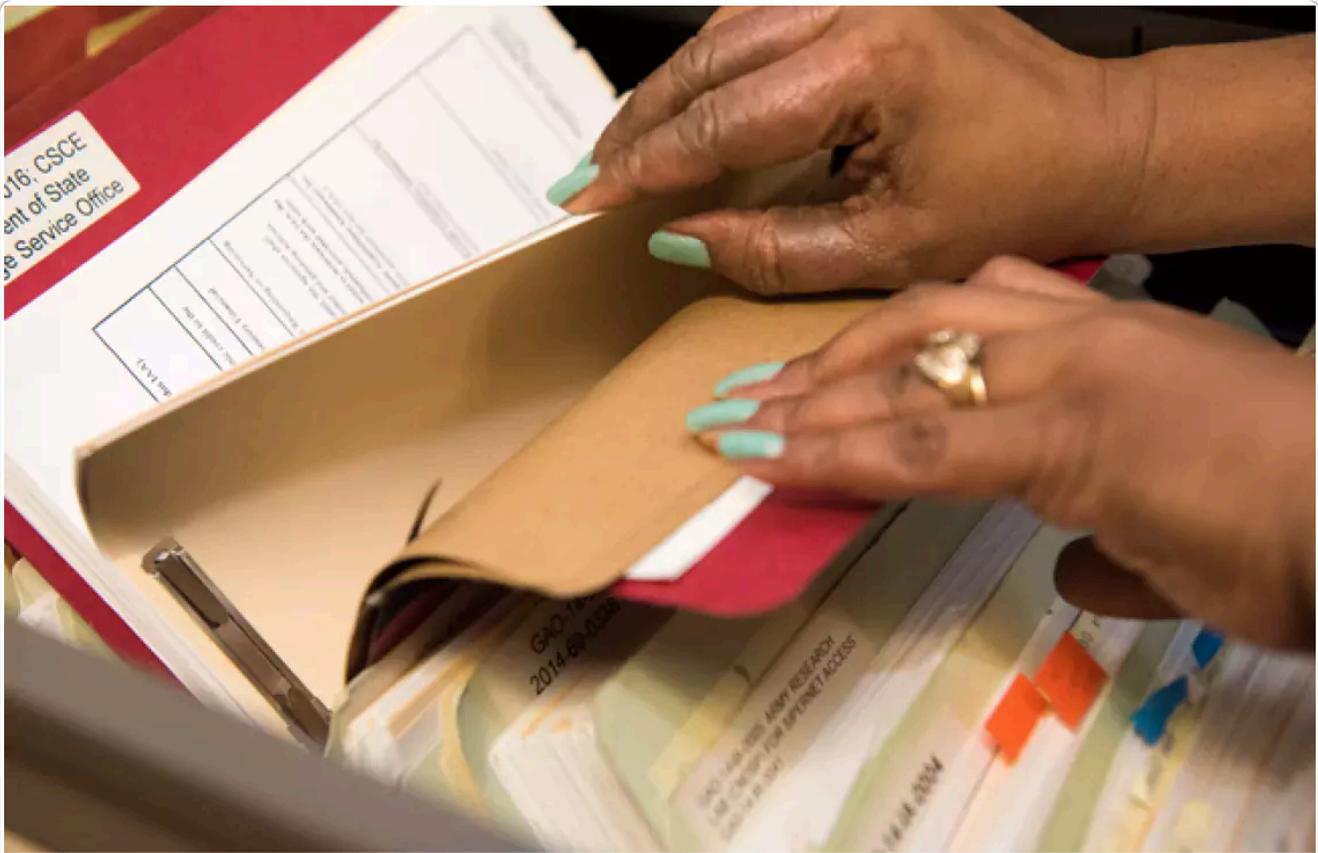


Blog Post

FOIA Backlogs Hinder Government Transparency and Accountability

THURSDAY, MARCH 14, 2024

Each year, media outlets, businesses, and members of the public file hundreds of thousands of...



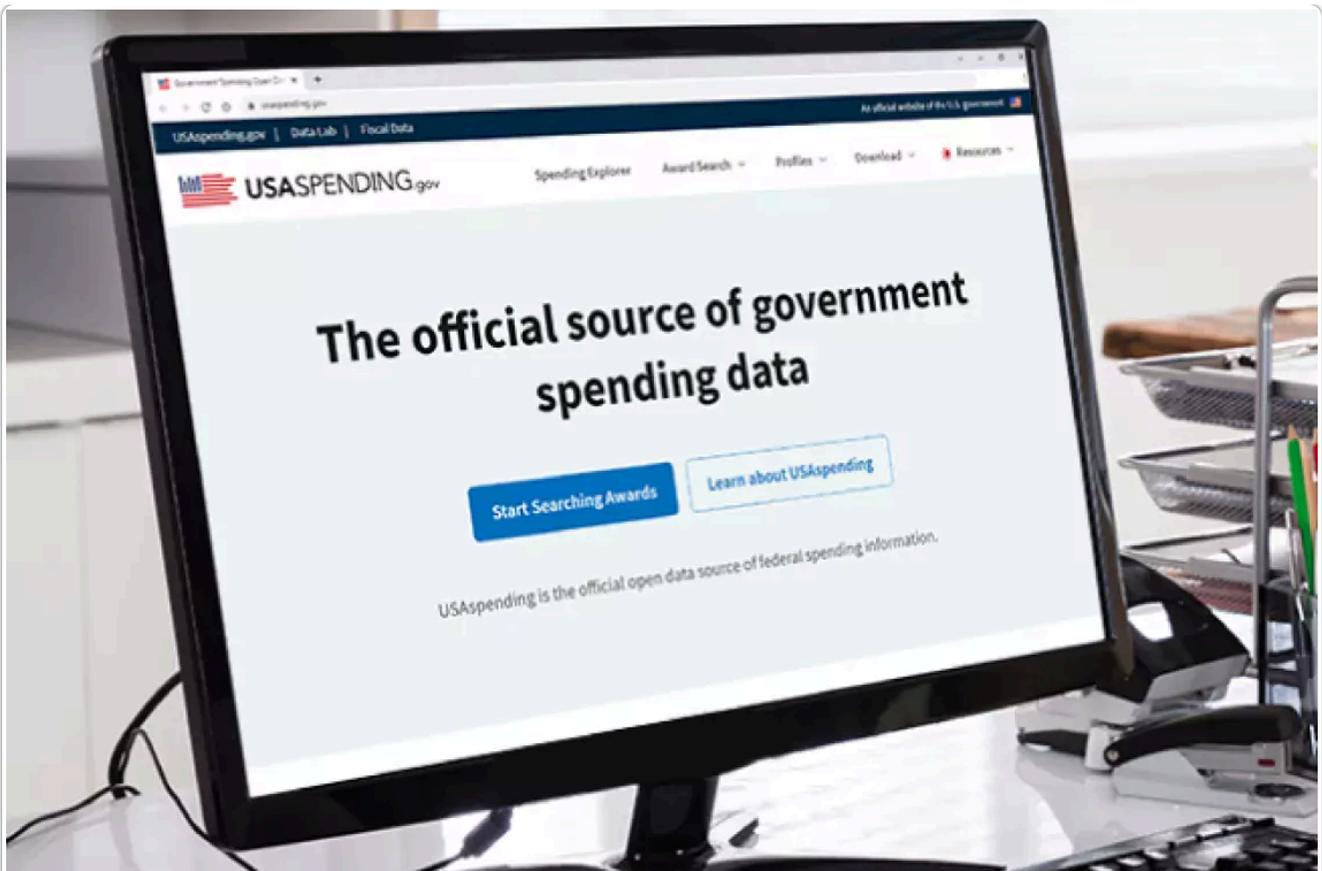
GAO File - 16-022

Blog Post

A Snapshot of Government-wide Contracting for FY 2021 (Interactive Dashboard)

THURSDAY, AUGUST 25, 2022

Note: This blog post was updated on January 15, 2025, to remove a link to FY 2022 data. Prior Note...



Blog Post

Federal Spending Data Quality—Is This As Good As It Gets? Auditors Say It Can Be Better

TUESDAY, JULY 26, 2022

Federal agencies spent \$10.1 trillion in fiscal year 2021. But \$131.8 billion of that was not...

Related Products

Data Governance: Agencies Made Progress in Establishing Governance, but Need to Address Key Milestones

GAO-21-152

Published: Dec 16, 2020

Publicly Released: Dec 16, 2020

Open Data: Agencies Need Guidance to Establish Comprehensive Data Inventories; Information on Their Progress is Limited

GAO-21-29

Published: Oct 08, 2020

Publicly Released: Oct 08, 2020

Freedom of Information Act: Update on Federal Agencies' Use of Exemption Statutes

GAO-21-148

Published: Jan 12, 2021

Publicly Released: Feb 11, 2021

Freedom of Information Act: Federal Agencies' Recent Implementation Efforts

GAO-20-406R

Published: Mar 11, 2020

Publicly Released: Mar 16, 2020



GAO's mission is to provide Congress with fact-based, nonpartisan information that can help improve federal government performance and ensure accountability for the benefit of the American people. GAO launched its WatchBlog in January, 2014, as part of its continuing effort

to reach its audiences—Congress and the American people—where they are currently looking for information.

The blog format allows GAO to provide a little more context about its work than it can offer on its other social media platforms. Posts will tie GAO work to current events and the news; show how GAO’s work is affecting agencies or legislation; highlight reports, testimonies, and issue areas where GAO does work; and provide information about GAO itself, among other things.

Please send any feedback on GAO's WatchBlog to blog@gao.gov.

Receive GAO Updates

Stay informed as we add new reports & testimonies.

Enter Your Email Address

SUBSCRIBE



U.S. Government Accountability
Office

[Press Center](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Inspector General](#)

[Restricted Reports](#)

[Copyright & Terms of Use](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Accessibility](#)

[Sitemap](#)

[FOIA Requests](#)

[Scam Alerts](#)

[No FEAR Act Data](#)

[Health Care Advisory Committees](#)