FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT

Processing Trends Show Importance of Improvement Plans

What GAO Found

Based on data in annual reports from 2002 to 2005, the public continued to submit more requests for information from the federal government through FOIA. Despite increasing the numbers of requests processed, many agencies did not keep pace with the volume of requests that they received. As a result, the number of pending requests carried over from year to year has been steadily increasing (see fig.). Agency reports also show great variations in the median times to process requests (less than 10 days for some agency components to more than 100 days at others). However, the ability to determine trends in processing times is limited by the form in which these times are reported: that is, in medians only, without averages (that is, arithmetical means) or ranges. Although medians have the advantage of providing representative numbers that are not skewed by a few outliers, it is not statistically possible to combine several medians to develop broader generalizations (as can be done with arithmetical means). This limitation on aggregating data impedes the development of broader pictures of FOIA operations, which could be useful in monitoring efforts to improve processing and reduce the increasing backlog of requests, as intended by the Executive Order.

The improvement plans submitted by the 25 agencies mostly included goals and timetables addressing the four areas of improvement emphasized by the Executive Order: eliminating or reducing any backlog of FOIA requests; increasing reliance on dissemination of records that can be made available to the public without the need for a FOIA request, such as through posting on Web sites; improving communications with requesters about the status of their requests; and increasing public awareness of FOIA processing. Most of the plans (20 of 25) provided goals and timetables in all four areas; some agencies omitted goals in areas where they considered they were already strong. Although details of a few plans could be improved, all the plans focus on making measurable improvements and form a reasonable basis for carrying out the goals of the Executive Order.

Total FOIA Requests Pending at End of Year, 2002–2005

Requests pending in thousands

Source: GAO analysis; FOIA annual reports for fiscal years 2002-2005 (self-reported data).