



Highlights of [GAO-09-260](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requires federal agencies to generally provide the public with access to government information. In December 2005, the President issued Executive Order 13392, to improve agencies' FOIA processing. The order required each agency to review its operations and develop plans for improvement.

Since its establishment, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has accounted for a major and increasing portion of pending FOIA requests governmentwide.

While it has reported achieving a notable reduction since 2006, DHS still possesses the largest backlog of overdue requests in the government. GAO was asked to determine (1) what key steps DHS has taken to enhance its FOIA program, and (2) what opportunities exist to improve the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of FOIA operations across the department. To do this, GAO reviewed DHS's improvement plan; examined policies, procedures, and other documentation; and interviewed agency officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that key practices used by certain DHS components and other agencies be implemented more consistently across the department. DHS concurred with GAO's assessment and recommendations.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, [click on GAO-09-260](#). For more information, contact Gregory C. Wilshusen at (202) 512-6244 or wilshuseng@gao.gov.

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT

DHS Has Taken Steps to Enhance Its Program, but Opportunities Exist to Improve Efficiency and Cost-Effectiveness

What GAO Found

DHS has taken steps to enhance its FOIA program. DHS developed an improvement plan that focused on eliminating its backlog of overdue requests, implementing enhanced training requirements, and deploying more advanced technology. Further, the DHS Privacy Office has initiated actions to ensure policy compliance and provide oversight of FOIA operations throughout the department's component agencies, including developing a departmentwide handbook, monitoring monthly data processing statistics, and instituting relevant training for employees. As a result, DHS has reported reducing its backlog by about 24 percent since implementing its plan.

However, opportunities exist for DHS to improve the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of FOIA processing across the department. Specifically, implementation of the following practices could facilitate the processing of information requests at a number of its major components:

- **Internal monitoring and oversight.** Establishing mechanisms for monitoring and oversight of processing efficiency may help reduce the backlog of open requests.
- **Component-specific training.** Component-specific training could enhance the efficiency of processing within component agencies.
- **Online status-checking services.** Providing requesters with online access to information concerning the status of their requests could contribute to better customer service and higher staff productivity.
- **Electronic dissemination of records.** Releasing records in an electronic format could provide cost savings and increase efficiency.
- **Electronic redaction.** By adopting electronic redaction more broadly, DHS may be able to reduce the staff time otherwise spent manually redacting records, while also improving the consistency of its responses to requests.

By implementing these practices—which are already being used by certain DHS components and other agencies—across major DHS components, the department could further reduce its backlog, increase efficiency, improve customer service, and respond to information requests in a more timely fashion.