



Highlights of [GAO-07-491T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Information Policy, Census, and National Archives, House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

Why GAO Did This Study

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) establishes that federal agencies must provide the public with access to government information, enabling them to learn about government operations and decisions. To help ensure proper implementation, the act requires that agencies annually report specific information about their FOIA operations, such as numbers of requests received and processed and median processing times. In addition, a recent Executive Order directs agencies to develop plans to improve their FOIA operations, including decreasing backlogs.

GAO was asked to testify on the results of its study on FOIA processing and agencies' improvement plans. The draft report on the study is currently out for comment at the agencies involved (and is thus subject to change). For the study, GAO reviewed status and trends of FOIA processing at 25 major agencies as reflected in annual reports, as well as the extent to which improvement plans contain the elements emphasized by the Executive Order. To do so, GAO analyzed the 25 agencies' annual reports and improvement plans.

What GAO Recommends

In its draft report, GAO suggests that the Congress consider additions to the annual reporting requirements and makes recommendations to enhance selected agency improvement plans, among other things.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-491T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Linda Koontz at (202) 512-6240 or koontzl@gao.gov.

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT

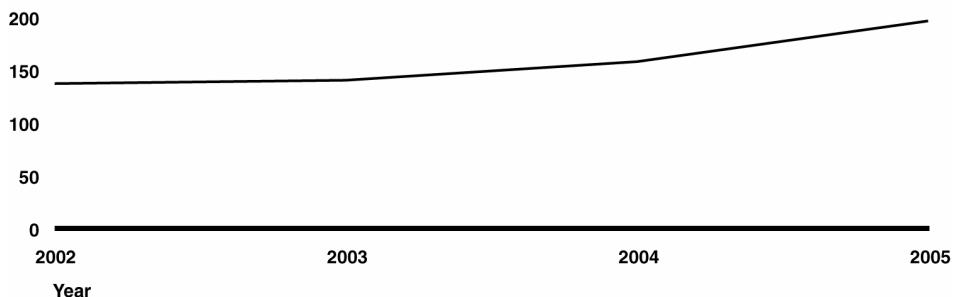
Processing Trends Show Importance of Improvement Plans

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 figure). 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 (for example, one agency did not explicitly address areas of improvement other than backlog), 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



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