

**EFFECTIVE FOIA
REQUESTING FOR
EVERYONE**

**A National Security
Archive Guide**

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Preface

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) is one of the glories of American democracy, yet—like democracy—making the law actually work requires real effort both inside and outside of government. Based on more than two decades of FOIA experience here at the National Security Archive, we offer this guide to help make the law work for you.

The concept of “publicity for official documents” originated in late-eighteenth-century Europe, when a new parliamentary majority in Sweden and Finland opened up the secret budgets and trade monopolies of its predecessors. The idea that government information belonged to the people was transformational. Today the levels of government transparency across Scandinavia are the greatest in the world, and more than eighty other countries have enacted FOIA laws, most of them just in the past few years. Requesters in those countries could no doubt use a guide like this for their own laws.

Congress passed the US Freedom of Information Act in 1966, after a campaign led by newspaper editors and members of Congress seeking greater accountability for the executive branch. The Watergate scandal resulted in amendments that significantly strengthened the FOIA, including the requirement of greater court review of agency decisions.

US government agencies now answer more than four million requests each year, the majority from veterans, senior citizens, and their families seeking their own records. Most of these requests are handled fairly quickly by the agencies. More difficult are the approximately one million requests that require search and review inside government and precision and persistence by the requester. Here is where our guide should help.

The authors acquired their expertise the hard way, through a half-dozen government-wide audits of agency performance under the FOIA. Supported by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation since 2001, these audits have covered all of the more than ninety federal agencies with formal FOIA operations, plus more than a dozen major agency components that handle large numbers of requests (see <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/foia/audits.htm>). The Archive’s own experience with thousands of FOIA and MDR requests also provides a wealth of data and fundamental lessons that you will find in these pages.

There may come a time when the World Wide Web makes it possible for government to put almost all of its workings online, and FOIA requests will be the exception rather than the rule for acquiring government information. But we are not there yet. Good luck in using this guide, and remember, when you make the FOIA work for you, you are making democracy work for all of us.

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