

# **Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights Freedom of Information Act Improvement Plan**

## **A. OVERVIEW OF FOIA OPERATIONS**

The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (ASCR) is a centralized headquarters office with no field locations. The components within ASCR include the Office of Civil Rights, Office of Outreach and Diversity, and Conflict Prevention and Resolution Center.

The Office of Civil Rights receives the highest volume of FOIA requests among all ASCR components; therefore, this office has a full-time FOIA Specialist (Specialist) on staff. The Specialist coordinates and prepares responses to all FOIA requests and appeals received in ASCR. Each component of ASCR has designated a FOIA Point of Contact to assist the Specialist when a request pertains to records of that component. The point of contact is responsible for conducting searches for responsive documents and for providing those documents to the Specialist in a timely manner so that FOIA requests may be responded to within the statutory timeframes.

All requests for records are forwarded to the FOIA Specialist for processing. The Specialist logs the requests into an electronic tracking system and reviews the request to determine which component maintains the records. Once the search for responsive documents is complete, the Specialist corresponds with the requester informing them of approximately how many pages were located and when they can expect to receive a final determination and the responsive documents. The Specialist is responsible for reviewing the responsive records, determining fees, applying exemptions, and redacting documents as appropriate. The Specialist prepares all correspondence, such as acknowledgement, fee estimate, and interim letters to the requesters keeping them informed of the status of their requests.

The Specialist makes contact with FOIA requesters to obtain clarification of their requests and responds to calls from requesters and the general public. The Specialist also prepares responses to congressional inquiries regarding FOIA.

## **B. AREAS SELECTED FOR REVIEW**

ASCR reviewed the following potential improvement areas:

- Improvement of Agency's FOIA Reference Guide
- Electronic FOIA—Automated Tracking and Processing
- Overall FOIA Website Improvement
- Increased Staffing
- Purchase of new equipment

## C. NARRATIVE STATEMENT SUMMARIZING RESULTS OF REVIEW

Many requests and appeals received by ASCR have either a high volume of responsive records or a high volume of documents to search and review.

ASCR currently has six overdue requests. The two major causes of our backlog are the volume of documents requested and the time consuming review and redaction process. When the responsive documents are retrieved, the Specialist will:

- Make two copies of the responsive records.
- On the first copy, review and mark the material to be withheld with a yellow highlighter.
- On the second copy, review side by side, and duplicate the redactions with a black marker.
- Make a copy of the redacted pages to ensure markings are unreadable.
- Shred the copy with the black markings.  
If the requester appeals, the Specialist must make a third copy of the documents and create a duplicate highlighted copy to be sent to the Office of the General Counsel for review.

ASCR believes the following may assist in reducing its FOIA backlog:

- **Better File Organization/Maintenance.** ASCR is currently establishing standard operating procedures for program discrimination complaint files. Implementation of these procedures will reduce the time it takes to locate responsive documents.
- **Utilization of Available Technology.** The Office of Civil Rights is working closely with the Office of Operations to obtain improved copiers. Access to a color copier would relieve some time constraints of the redaction processes. Redacting on a copy that shows the highlighted portions will eliminate the side-by-side review, and speed the black marker redaction. We are also arranging for access to a scanner and printer with color capability to increase efficiency.

## D. AREAS CHOSEN AS IMPROVEMENT AREAS FOR PLAN FOR ASCR

- Improvement of Agency's FOIA Reference Guide
- Electronic FOIA—Automated Tracking and Processing
- Overall FOIA Website Improvement
- Increased Staffing
- Purchase of new equipment

## **E. IMPROVEMENT AREA PLANS**

### **1. Improvement of Agency's FOIA Reference Guide**

**Goal:** ASCR will review the contents of the FOIA Reference Guide posted on the website to ensure that the information is current.

**Target completion:** 12-31-06

**Steps:**

- Review and update the contents of the FOIA reference guide. **(To be completed by 11-30-06).**
- Post revised guide to ASCR FOIA website. **(To be completed by 12-31-06)**

### **2. Electronic FOIA—Automated Tracking and Processing**

**Goal:** ASCR will research the available electronic FOIA tracking systems and redaction tools.

**Target completion:** 02-30-07

**Steps:**

- Review available FOIA systems. **(To be completed by 12-30-06)**
- Provide information to the ASCR FOIA Officer for review. **(To be completed by 1-31-07)**
- If system is found that meets ASCR budget requirements, forward to Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights for approval to purchase. **(To be completed by 2-30-07)**

### **3. Overall FOIA Website Improvement**

**Goal:** ASCR will review the contents of the FOIA website and make changes as necessary.

**Target completion:** 12-31-06

**Steps:**

- Review the contents of the ASCR FOIA website. **(To be completed by 11-30-06)**

- Work with ASCR Webmaster to make necessary revisions, if any. **(To be completed by 12-31-06)**

#### **4. Increased Staffing**

**Goal:** ASCR will provide assistance to FOIA Specialist for clerical duties and redaction assistance when available.

**Target completion:** 12-31-06 (and continuing thereafter).

**Steps:**

- Review staff to find available personnel to provide assistance to FOIA Specialist. **(To be completed by 11-30-06)**
- Provide general instruction to assistant(s) in the processing of FOIA cases. **(To be completed by 12-31-06)**
- FOIA Specialist to begin utilizing the assistant(s) provided by ASCR. **(To be completed by 12-31-06)**

#### **5. Purchase of New Equipment**

**Goal:** ASCR will look into the feasibility of acquiring a scanner or color copier to assist the FOIA specialist in the redaction process.

**Target completion:** 12-31-06

**Steps:**

- Work with the Office of Operations to obtain improved copier equipment. **(To be completed by 9-30-06).**
- Receive approval to purchase new copier equipment. **(To be completed by 10-30-06).**
- Receive and implement new copier equipment **(To be completed by 12-31-06).**

#### **F. IMPROVEMENT TIME PERIODS**

**Areas anticipated to be completed by 12-31-06**

- Improvement of Agency's FOIA Reference Guide
- Overall FOIA Website Improvement
- Increased Staffing

- Purchase of new equipment

**Areas anticipated to be completed after 12-31-06**

- Electronic FOIA—Automated Tracking and Processing