



SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

2022 CHIEF FOIA OFFICER REPORT

2022 Chief FOIA Officer Report

Social Security Administration

Section I: Steps Taken to Apply the Presumption of Openness

The guiding principle underlying DOJ's FOIA Guidelines is the presumption of openness.

Please answer the following questions in order to describe the steps your agency has taken to ensure that the presumption of openness is being applied to all decisions involving the FOIA. You may also include any additional information that illustrates how your agency is working to apply the presumption of openness.

A. FOIA Leadership

1. The FOIA requires each agency to designate a Chief FOIA Officer who is a senior official at least at the Assistant Secretary or equivalent level. Is your Chief FOIA Officer at or above this level?

Yes

2. Please provide the name and title of your agency's Chief FOIA Officer.

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B. FOIA Training:

3. The FOIA directs agency Chief FOIA Officers to ensure that FOIA training is offered to agency personnel. *See* 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(j)(2)(F). Please describe the efforts your agency has undertaken to ensure proper FOIA training is made available and used by agency personnel.

Under the direction of SSA's Chief FOIA Officer, the FOIA team offered numerous trainings to agency personnel throughout Fiscal Year 2021. In addition to training agency personnel who provide support directly and indirectly to the FOIA processing, we also sent SSA FOIA analysts to several trainings hosted by the American Society of Access Professionals. Internal trainings include the following:

- **Presentations to agency components concerning the FOIA regulations and FOIA exemptions;**

- **Presentations to agency personnel (including the agency’s FOIA coordinators) concerning proper disclosure of agency records;**
- **Examinations and review of new case law;**
- **Trainings related to communications with the FOIA requesters; and**
- **Trainings related to timely dispositions of Fee Waiver and Expedited Processing requests.**

4. Did your FOIA professionals or the personnel at your agency who have FOIA responsibilities attend substantive FOIA training during the reporting period such as that provided by the Department of Justice?

Yes

5. If yes, please provide a brief description of the type of training attended and the topics covered.

- **Weekly FOIA Staff Meetings – Our weekly meetings include, but not limited to FOIA appeals, exemptions, recent Federal court cases, partial disclosures, FOIA fees and fee waivers, requirements for perfected requests under the FOIA, communications with the requester, and Office of Government Information Services (OGIS) inquiries.**
- **Bi-monthly FOIA/Privacy Act (PA) coordinator meetings – Discussions included the interface between the FOIA and the PA, FOIA fees, and fee waivers. We also discussed cases that may be of public interest or may become common.**
- **The Virtual American Society of Access Professionals (ASAP) Annual Training – Included sessions on FOIA exemptions, best practices, and updates from the courts.**
- **ASAP National Training Conference.**
- **Training provided by SSA’s Office of General Law (OGL) – Discussions on 7114(b)(4) and interplay of FOIA/PA, section 1106 of the Social Security Act, and FOIA search and scope.**

6. Provide an estimate of the percentage of your FOIA professionals and staff with FOIA responsibilities who attended substantive FOIA training during this reporting period.

100% of our FOIA professionals attended substantive training during this reporting period.

7. OIP has directed agencies to “take steps to ensure that all of their FOIA professionals attend substantive FOIA training at least once throughout year.” If your response to the previous question is that less than 80% of your FOIA professionals attended training, please explain your agency’s plan to ensure that all FOIA professionals receive or attend substantive FOIA training during the next reporting year.

N/A

8. Did the personnel at your agency who have FOIA responsibilities attend training in federal records management during this reporting period?

Yes.

C. Outreach:

9. Did your FOIA professionals engage in any outreach or dialogue with the requester community or open government groups regarding your administration of the FOIA? Please describe any such outreach or dialogue, and, if applicable, any specific examples of how this dialogue has led to improvements in your agency's FOIA administration.

Yes, one of SSA's staff members is on the FOIA Advisory Committee (FAC), which consists of both cabinet level and non-cabinet level agency representatives along with representatives from the requester community. This committee discusses issues relating to the FOIA from both requester and agency perspectives and makes recommendations to improve FOIA for both.

D. Other Initiatives:

10. Describe any efforts your agency has undertaken to inform non-FOIA professionals of their obligations under the FOIA. In particular, please describe:

- how often and in what formats your agency provides FOIA training or briefings to non-FOIA staff; and
- if senior leaders at your agency received a briefing on your agency's FOIA resources, obligations and expectations during the FOIA process?
- **Office of Privacy and Disclosure staff presented several FOIA trainings to non-FOIA professionals about SSA's obligations under the FOIA. The formats include a Power Point presentation, Case Studies, exemptions overview, and FAQs.**
- **We provided training to the component FOIA liaisons who are new to this position. Such trainings included what constitutes a record, applicable exemptions, how to use the FOIAonline platform to respond to requests for record searches, the twenty-day response time limitations, and how to calculate fees, if applicable.**
- **We presented interesting FOIA requests, trends, and exemptions to non-FOIA professionals during the bi-monthly FOIA/PA Coordinators' meetings.**

11. Optional -- If there are any other initiatives undertaken by your agency to ensure that the presumption of openness is being applied, please describe them here.

We took the opportunity during Sunshine Week to provide an agency-wide Intranet web message, OGC Internal broadcast from the Chief FOIA Officer, and a banner on our public-facing FOIA website. We did so to draw attention to the importance of openness in government.

Section II: Steps Taken to Ensure that Your Agency Has an Effective System in Place for Responding to Requests

The DOJ's [FOIA Guidelines](#) emphasize that “[a]pplication of the proper disclosure standard is only one part of ensuring transparency. Open government requires not just a presumption of disclosure, but also an effective system for responding to FOIA requests.” It is essential that agencies effectively manage their FOIA program.

Please answer the following questions to describe the steps your agency has taken to ensure that the management of your FOIA program is effective and efficient. You should also include any additional information that describes your agency's efforts in this area.

1. For Fiscal Year 2021, what was the average number of days your agency reported for adjudicating requests for expedited processing? Please see Section VIII.A of your agency's Fiscal Year 2021 Annual FOIA Report.

The average number of days to adjudicate any requests for expedited processing was 5.

2. If your agency's average number of days to adjudicate requests for expedited processing was above ten calendar days, according to Section VII.A of your agency's Fiscal Year 2021 Annual FOIA Report, please describe the steps your agency will take to ensure that requests for expedited processing are adjudicated within ten calendar days or less.

N/A

3. The FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 required all agencies to update their FOIA regulations within 180 days. In 2016, OIP issued Guidance for Agency FOIA Regulations and the accompanying Template for Agency FOIA Regulations to assist agencies in updating their regulations in accordance with the statute. Has your agency updated its FOIA regulations in accordance with the FOIA Improvement Act of 2016? If not, what is your agency's plan to update your regulations?

We have drafted updated FOIA regulations that are pending for internal agency review and clearance before they are provided to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) for review.

4. Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) generally document your agency's internal processes for administering the FOIA beyond your FOIA regulations and FOIA Reference Guide. As noted in OIP's [guidance](#), having SOPs can improve the consistency and quality of an agency's FOIA process. SOPs can also serve as a significant resource for incoming FOIA professionals and a way to preserve much of the agency's institutional knowledge on administering the FOIA from how to handle requests from start-to-finish, to identifying and making proactive disclosures, to maintaining a FOIA website. Does your agency have up-to-date internal SOPs for your FOIA administration?

No

5. If not, please provide a timeline for when your agency plans to develop or update its SOPs.

The SOPs are included in the draft FOIA regulation currently pending internal agency review.

6. Has your agency established alternative means of access to first-party requested records outside of the FOIA process?

Yes

7. If yes, please provide examples. If no, please explain if such opportunities exist at your agency and whether there are any challenges in establishing alternative means of access.

- **If an individual is requesting information from their own file, they can visit their local Social Security office.**
- **Many records are available to first-party requesters via a *my* Social Security account.**

8. Did your agency conduct a self-assessment of its FOIA administration during the reporting period? If so, please describe the methods used, such as reviewing Annual Report data, using active workflows and track management, reviewing and updating processing procedures, etc.

Note: In September 2017, OIP released a FOIA Self-Assessment Toolkit as a resource for agencies conducting a self-assessment of their FOIA program. The Toolkit is available on OIP's website for all agencies to use.

Yes, we conducted a self-assessment. We used the data from our 2020 Annual Report and modified some case processing procedures in order to move cases more efficiently through the review process. We also used our data to identify the training needs and addressed them accordingly.

9. The FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 requires additional notification to requesters about the services provided by the agency's FOIA Public Liaison. Please provide an estimate of the number of times requesters sought assistance from your agency's FOIA Public Liaison during FY 2021 (please provide a total number or estimate of the number).

We received 6,270 emails to our FOIA Public Liaison mailbox and about 1,040 phone calls in FY 2021.

10. Has your agency reviewed its FOIA-related staffing capabilities to identify resources needed to respond to current and anticipated FOIA demands?

Yes.

11. Optional - Please describe:

- the best practices used to ensure that your FOIA system operates efficiently and effectively
- any challenges your agency faces in this area.

Best Practices

- **We use a multiple tracking system so that simple and complex cases can be split amongst appropriate FOIA analysts in a quick, but balanced way. This specialized case assignment is based on analysts' expertise to reduce the learning curve, consolidate duplicate requests, and reduce processing time.**
- **We used the agency's Skills Connect program, which provides highly motivated part-time detailees from other agency components to assist with the processing of simple FOIA requests and projects remotely.**
- **We continue to use FOIAonline to facilitate our search efforts with responsive components, communication with requesters, and uploading and transmitting documents.**
- **We also have continued the incoming case review process to catch and eliminate duplicate cases before they are entered into the system. We are also able to better identify items mis-categorized as FOIA requests by the requesters, such as first-party requests.**
- **We modified the way we monitor our FOIA Public Liaison mailbox by clearly marking which emails concerned the Privacy Act (PA) and which concern the FOIA. Such marking allows the PA Division to quickly identify the PA requests and handle them appropriately. This modification frees up the FOIA team and allows more time to focus on the FOIA work.**

Challenges

- **Many responses still have to be sent via the United States Postal Service (USPS). As a result of slower processing/mailing times from the USPS, many requesters did not receive their responses or there was a delay in receiving them. This led to a significant uptick in our FOIA Public Liaison mailbox traffic as requesters were inquiring about the status of their requests.**
- **One challenge we faced this year is experienced by all Federal agencies using the FOIAonline application. Multiple updates and system slowness caused work stoppage completely for several days and severely limited the system functionality on several occasions. Such application/system issues, completely outside SSA control, led to longer processing time.**

Section III: Steps Taken to Increase Proactive Disclosures

The Department of Justice has long focused on the need for agencies to work proactively to post information online without waiting for individual requests to be received.

Please answer the following questions to describe the steps your agency has taken to increase the amount of material that is available on your agency websites. In addition to the questions below, you should also describe any additional steps taken by your agency to make and improve proactive disclosures of information.

1. Please describe what steps your agency takes to identify, track, and post (a)(2) proactive disclosures

We use the FOIAonline Released Document Report to identify documents that are of public interest and should be included in the electronic Reading Room. In addition, analysts recommend documents that are good candidates for proactive disclosure. We also have some documents that are automatically updated and posted at certain times of the year.

2. Provide examples of any material that your agency has proactively disclosed during the past reporting year, including records that have been requested and released three or more times in accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(2)(D). Please include links to these materials as well.

The FOIA staff released 27 documents that are available in SSA's electronic FOIA Reading Room, under proactive disclosures (<https://www.ssa.gov/foia/readingroom.html>). The releases included hearing statistics, training materials, representative payee information, records management self-assessments, and Consultative Examiner oversight reports. In addition, SSA proactively posts data related to Social Security Disability applications.

3. Does your agency disseminate common types of material outside of the FOIA, including online databases where the public may access them? If yes, please provide examples and, if applicable, statutory authority.

We also disseminate common types of material outside of the FOIA. The agency posts multiple datasets to www.data.gov every year for the public to access. They are available at www.data.gov by searching SSA. Additionally, the agency's policy publications component posts the agency public Programs Operations Manual to the following website: <https://secure.ssa.gov/apps10/>. From this page, the public can view Emergency Messages issued by various component offices.

4. Beyond posting new material, is your agency taking steps to make the posted information more useful to the public, especially to the community of individuals who regularly access your agency's website?

Yes.

5. If yes, please provide examples of such improvements. In particular, please describe steps your agency is taking to post information in open, machine-readable, and machine-actionable formats, to the extent feasible. If not posting in open formats, please explain why and note any challenges.

We simplified document names so it is clear what documents are easily searchable once posted. We began an ongoing project in 2017 to update our FOIA website to make it more organized and user friendly. We also reviewed the documents to verify if they were Section 508 compliant.

Most of our documents are posted as searchable pdfs.

6. Does your proactive disclosure process or system involve any collaboration with agency staff outside the FOIA office? If so, describe the interaction.

Other agency staff provide us with updated documents at certain intervals to post the most current information for the Proactive Disclosures page. From the electronic Reading Room, the public may select links to pages maintained by other agency components, e.g., the public POMS.

Optional - Please describe:

- Best practices used to improve proactive disclosures
- Any challenges your agency faces in this area.

As stated above, we use the FOIAonline Released Document Report to identify documents that are of public interest and should be included in the Reading Room. In addition, analysts recommend documents that are good candidates for proactive disclosure.

Section IV: Steps Taken to Greater Utilize Technology

A key component of FOIA administration is using technology to make information more accessible. In addition to using the internet to make proactive disclosures, agencies should also be exploring ways to utilize technology in responding to requests.

Please answer the following questions to describe how your agency is utilizing technology to improve its FOIA administration and the public's access to information. You should also include any additional information that describes your agency's efforts in this area.

1. Has your agency reviewed its FOIA-related technological capabilities to identify resources needed to respond to current and anticipated FOIA demands?

In light of the recently announced sunset of the EPA's FOIAonline program at the end of FY 2023, we are in the process of reviewing our FOIA-related technological capabilities to identify resources needed to respond to current and anticipated FOIA demands.

2. Please briefly describe any new types of technology your agency began using during the reporting period to support your FOIA program.

We updated the eDiscovery tool Veritas which allows us to perform keyword searches in the processing of large volume requests, e.g., emailed communications. This eliminates the need for analysts to review emails that are not responsive. As such, using Veritas reduces processing time.

3. OIP issued guidance in 2017 encouraging agencies to regularly review their FOIA websites to ensure that they contain essential resources, and are informative and user-friendly. Has your agency reviewed its FOIA website(s) during the reporting period to ensure it addresses the elements noted in the guidance?

Yes

4. Did all four of your agency's quarterly reports for Fiscal Year 2021 appear on your agency's website and on FOIA.gov?

No

5. If your agency did not successfully post all quarterly reports, with information appearing on FOIA.gov, please explain why and provide your agency's plan for ensuring that such reporting is successful in Fiscal Year 2022.

Prior to the Fiscal Year 2021 4th quarter posting, all quarterly reports were sent to DOJ OIP for posting on their website. We linked our FOIA webpage to DOJ to

display the reports. Starting with the 4th quarter of Fiscal Year 2021, SSA is now able to post our quarterly reports directly to FOIA.gov. We will update our website so that anyone seeking the quarterly reports going forward will be directed to the FOIA.gov link.

6. The FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 requires all agencies to post the raw statistical data used to compile their Annual FOIA Reports. Please provide the link to this posting for your agency's Fiscal Year 2020 Annual FOIA Report and, if available, for your agency's Fiscal Year 2021 Annual FOIA Report.

<https://www.ssa.gov/foia/annualreports.html>

7. Optional - Please describe:

- Best practices used in greater utilizing technology
- Any challenges your agency faces in that area

Best Practices

We have worked with our Information Technology staff to improve the quality of keyword searches in Veritas in response to requests for email communications. Using Genband and softphone allows us to contact the requesters from an US Government phone number. We have also leveraged the functionality in FOIAonline to communicate with the requesters within the portal, which is especially helpful during the pandemic. Collectively these items allow us to process cases more efficiently.

Challenge

The sunseting of FOIAonline by the EPA requires us to search for and obtain a new FOIA case management solution within the next two years. This does not allow much time for OPD to ensure we have appropriate funding to procure, acquire, and implement a new case management solution. We will also need to learn the new solution and train FOIA analysts and FOIA coordinators before FOIAonline is decommissioned.

Section V: Steps Taken to Improve Timeliness in Responding to Requests and Reducing Backlogs

The Department of Justice has emphasized the importance of improving timeliness in responding to requests. This section of your Chief FOIA Officer Report addresses both time limits and backlog reduction. Backlog reduction is measured both in terms of numbers of backlogged requests or appeals and by looking at whether agencies closed their ten oldest requests, appeals, and consultations.

For the figures required in this Section, please use the numbers contained in the specified sections of your agency's 2020 and 2021 Annual FOIA Reports.

A. Simple Track:

Section VII.A of your agency's Annual FOIA Report, entitled "FOIA Requests – Response Time for All Processed Requests," includes figures that show your agency's average response times for processed requests. For agencies utilizing a multi-track system to process requests, there is a category for "simple" requests, which are those requests that are placed in the agency's fastest (non-expedited) track, based on the low volume and/or simplicity of the records requested.

1. Does your agency utilize a separate track for simple requests?

Yes

2. If your agency uses a separate track for simple requests, according to Annual FOIA Report section VII.A, was the agency overall average number of days to process simple requests twenty working days or fewer in Fiscal Year 2021?

Yes, the average number of days to process a simple request was 18.

3. Please provide the percentage of requests processed by your agency in Fiscal Year 2021 that were placed in your simple track. Please use the following calculation based on the data from your Annual FOIA Report (processed simple requests from Section VII.C) divided by (requests processed from Section V.A. x100)

96.5%

4. If your agency does not track simple requests separately, was the average number of days to process all non-expedited requests twenty working days or fewer?

N/A

B. Backlogs:

When answering these questions, please refer to your Fiscal Year 2021 Annual FOIA Report, Sections XII.D-E, which compare the numbers of requests and appeals received, processed, and backlogged between Fiscal Years 2020 and 2021.

Backlogged Requests

5. If your agency had a backlog of requests at the close of Fiscal Year 2021, according to Annual FOIA Report Section XII.D.2, did that backlog decrease as compared with the backlog reported at the end of Fiscal Year 2020?

Yes

6. If not, according to Annual FOIA Report Section XII.D.1, did your agency process more requests during Fiscal Year 2021 than it did in Fiscal Year 2020?

N/A

7. If your agency's request backlog increased during Fiscal Year 2021, please explain why and describe the causes that contributed to your agency not being able reduce its backlog. When doing so, please also indicate if any of the following were contributing factors:

- An increase in the number of incoming requests
- A loss of staff
- An increase in the complexity of the requests received. If possible, please provide examples or briefly describe the requests contributing to your backlog increase.
- Impact of COVID-19 and workplace and safety precautions
- Any other reasons – please briefly describe or provide examples when possible.

N/A

8. If you had a request backlog please report the percentage of requests that make up the backlog out of the total number of requests received by your agency in Fiscal Year 2021. Please use the following calculation based on data from your Annual FOIA Report: (backlogged requests from Section XII.A) divided by (requests received from Section V.A) x 100. If your agency has no request backlog, please answer with "N/A."

0.65%.

Backlogged Appeals

9. If your agency had a backlog of appeals at the close of Fiscal Year 2021, according to Section XI.E.2 of the Annual FOIA Report, did that backlog decrease as compared with the backlog reported at the end of Fiscal Year 2020?

No

10. If not, according to section VI.E.1 of the Annual FOIA Report, did your agency process more appeals during Fiscal Year 2021 than it did during Fiscal year 2020?

Yes

11. If your agency's appeal backlog increased during Fiscal Year 2021, please explain why and describe the causes that contributed to your agency not being able reduce its

backlog. When doing so, please also indicate if any of the following were contributing factors:

- An increase in the number of incoming appeals
- A loss of staff
- An increase in the complexity of the requests received. If possible, please provide examples or briefly describe the types of complex requests contributing to your backlog increase.
- Impact of COVID-19 and workplace and safety precautions
- Any other reasons – please briefly describe or provide examples when possible.

Our appeals backlog increased because of the increase in the amount of appeals we received this year. In 2020, the number of appeals, and therefore the backlog, went down significantly because of the COVID-19 impact in closing cases. In 2021, we caught back up on closing cases, increasing the number of appeals we received this year by 259.

12. If you had an appeal backlog please report the percentage of appeals that make up the backlog out of the total number of appeals received by your agency in Fiscal Year 2021. Please use the following calculation based on data from your Annual FOIA Report: (backlogged appeals from Section XII.A) divided by (appeals received from Section VI.A) x100. If your agency did not receive any appeals in Fiscal Year 2021 and/or has no appeal backlog, please answer with "N/A."

3.95%.

C. Backlog Reduction Plans:

13. In the 2021 guidelines for Chief FOIA Officer Reports, any agency with a backlog of over 1000 requests in Fiscal Year 2020 was asked to provide a plan for achieving backlog reduction in the year ahead. Did you agency implement a backlog reduction plan last year? If so, describe your agency's efforts in implementing this plan and note if your agency was able to achieve backlog reduction in Fiscal Year 2021?

In FY 2021, a limited number of employees were authorized to enter SSA office buildings on a limited basis. These employees diligently worked to mitigate the backlogged requests and close most of them in FY 2021. In addition, we hired additional staff to process the backlogged cases. The agency also adjusted team lead workloads to assist in mitigating the backlog of requests. As a result, our backlog was reduced.

14. If your agency had a backlog of more than 1,000 requests in Fiscal Year 2021, please explain your agency's plan to reduce this backlog during Fiscal Year 2022. In particular, please also detail how your agency developed and plans to execute your backlog reduction plan.

N/A

D. Status of Ten Oldest Requests, Appeals, and Consultations:

Section VII.E, entitled “Pending Requests – Ten Oldest Pending Requests,” Section VI.C(5), entitled “Ten Oldest Pending Administrative Appeals,” and Section XII.C, entitled “Consultations on FOIA Requests – Ten Oldest Consultations Received from Other Agencies and Pending at Your Agency,” show the ten oldest pending requests, appeals, and consultations. You should refer to these numbers from your Annual FOIA Reports for both Fiscal Year 2020 and Fiscal Year 2021 when completing this section of your Chief FOIA Officer Report.

OLDEST REQUESTS

15. In Fiscal Year 2021, did your agency close the ten oldest requests that were reported in Section VII.E of your Fiscal Year 2020 Annual FOIA Report?

No

16. If no, please provide the number of these requests your agency was able to close by the end of the fiscal year, as listed in Section VII.E of your Fiscal Year 2020 Annual FOIA Report. If you had fewer than ten total oldest requests to close, please indicate that.

We closed nine of the ten oldest requests.

17. Beyond work on the ten oldest requests, please describe any steps your agency took to reduce the overall age of your pending requests.

We used the agency’s Skills Connect program to solicit detailees to assist with the processing of simple FOIA requests (under the guidance and management of experienced FOIA analysts), freeing up the experienced FOIA analysts to work on their oldest complex requests and appeals.

The agency also hired some additional employees to work on the FOIA caseload.

TEN OLDEST APPEALS

18. In Fiscal Year 2021, did your agency close the ten oldest appeals that were reported pending in Section VI.C.5 of your Fiscal Year 2020 Annual FOIA Report?

No

19. If no, please provide the number of these appeals your agency was able to close by the end of the fiscal year, as listed in Section VII.C.(5) of your Fiscal Year 2020 Annual FOIA Report. If you had less than ten total oldest appeals to close, please indicate that.

We closed nine of the ten oldest appeals.

20. Beyond work on the 10 oldest appeals, please describe any steps your agency took to reduce the overall age of your pending appeals.

We used the agency's Skills Connect program to solicit detailees to assist with the processing of simple FOIA requests (under the guidance and management of experienced FOIA analysts), freeing up the experienced FOIA analysts to work on their oldest complex requests and appeals.

The agency also hired some additional employees to work on the FOIA caseload.

TEN OLDEST CONSULTATIONS

21. In Fiscal Year 2021, did your agency close the ten oldest consultations that were reported pending in Section XII.C of your Fiscal Year 2020 Annual FOIA Report?

Yes

22. If no, please provide the number of these consultations your agency was able to close by the end of the fiscal year, as listed in Section XII.C of your Fiscal Year 2020 Annual FOIA Report. If you had less than ten total oldest consultations to close, please indicate that.

N/A

E. Additional Information on Ten Oldest Requests, Appeals, and Consultations & Plans:

23. Briefly explain any obstacles your agency faced in closing its ten oldest requests, appeals, and consultations from Fiscal Year 2020.

The request and appeal we were not able to close this year were due to ongoing court cases that remained pending at the end of Fiscal Year 2021.

24. If your agency was unable to close any of its ten oldest requests because you were waiting to hear back from other agencies on consultations you sent, please provide the date the request was initially received by your agency, the date when your agency sent the consultation, and the date when you last contacted the agency where the consultation was pending.

N/A

25. If your agency did not close its ten oldest pending requests, appeals, or consultations, please provide a plan describing how your agency intends to close those "ten oldest" requests, appeals, and consultations during Fiscal Year 2022.

The agency is working to complete the ongoing court cases for the remaining request and appeal we were not able to close by the end of Fiscal Year 2021.

F. Success Stories

Out of all the activities undertaken by your agency since March 2021 to increase transparency and improve FOIA administration, please briefly describe here at least one success story that you would like to highlight as emblematic of your agency's efforts. The success story can come from any one of the five key areas, but should not be something you have reported in a prior year. As noted above, these agency success stories will be highlighted during Sunshine Week by OIP. To facilitate this process, all agencies should use bullets to describe their success story and limit their text to a half page. The success story is designed to be a quick summary of key achievements. A complete description of all your efforts will be contained in the body of your Chief FOIA Officer Report.

In Fiscal Year 2021, we worked to overcome the negative impact of COVID-19 on our FOIA processing and improved our responses by doing the following:

- **We posted a “special notice” on our public FOIA website alerting requesters to possible delays in FOIA case processing due to the impact of COVID-19 and further encouraged requesters to submit requests electronically.**
- **A limited number of employees were permitted to return to the workplace to process FOIA requests (i.e., uploading them to FOIAonline, as needed, and mailing responses via US postal mail, when email could not be used).**
- **We worked out a systematic way to process incoming and outgoing mail with limited resources to remove delays from limited building access.**
- **We improved communications with requesters by utilizing email and phone messages instead of using postal mail.**