

Highlights of [GAO-05-648T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Government Management, Finance, and Accountability, Committee on Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) establishes that federal agencies must provide the public with access to government information, thus enabling them to learn about government operations and decisions. To help ensure appropriate implementation, the act requires that agencies report annually to the Attorney General, providing specific information about their FOIA operations. GAO has reported previously on the contents of these annual reports for 25 major agencies.

GAO was asked to describe the FOIA process and discuss the reported implementation of FOIA.

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

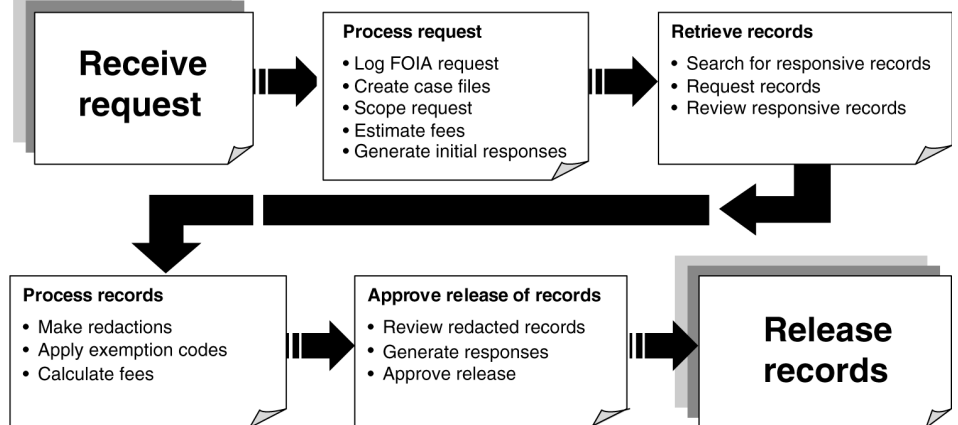
Implementation of the Freedom of Information Act

What GAO Found

Although the specific details of processes for handling FOIA requests vary among agencies, the major steps in handling a request are similar across the government. Agencies receive requests, usually in writing (although they may accept requests by telephone or electronically), which can be submitted by any organization or member of the public. Once requests are received, the agency responds through a process that includes several phases: initial processing, searching for and retrieving responsive records, preparing responsive records for release, approving the release of the records, and releasing the records to the requester. Figure 1 is an overview of the FOIA process, from the receipt of a request to the release of records.

According to data reported by agencies in their annual FOIA reports, citizens have been requesting and receiving an ever-increasing amount of information from the federal government through FOIA. The number of requests that agencies received increased by 71 percent from 2002 to 2004. Further, agencies reported they have been processing more requests—68 percent more from 2002 to 2004. For 92 percent of requests processed in 2004, agencies reported that responsive records were provided in full to requesters. However, the number of pending requests carried over from year to year—known as the backlog—has also been increasing, rising 14 percent since 2002.

Figure 1: Overview of Generic FOIA Process



Source: GAO analysis of agency information.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-648T.

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.