Can FOIA be fixed?

By Chase Gunter  |  Oct 20, 2017
A federal advisory committee that includes members of open government groups is looking to make the Freedom of Information Act work more smoothly for agencies and for those requesting information through the law.

Convened by the Office of Government Information Services at the National Archives, the FOIA groups have been meeting regularly since they were established in 2014. At an Oct. 19 meeting, three subcommittees offered ideas on how agencies can do better at locating FOIA materials, managing requests and making proactive disclosures.

Some common threads appeared across subcommittees' recommendations, such as increasing the use of e-discovery tools, making better use of technologies to search digital records and providing more information explaining the FOIA process online.

"There's a whole lot of information about FOIA searches that is not publicly available," said search subcommittee chair Nate Jones, director of the FOIA Project for George Washington University's National Security Archive. "There's nothing saying, 'agency x, how do you conduct a FOIA search?' ... Without this information, it's hard to find best practices and see what's working and what's not working."
Jones wants the National Archives and the Office of Information Policy at the Department of Justice to collect information on FOIA searches agency by agency. The subcommittee also recommended better integration between FOIA offices and agency technology offices, and increasing their access and proximity to the records themselves.

The Efficiency and Resources Subcommittee backed the use of technology to cluster related requests and forming teams of subject matter experts to handle specific information. It also recommended adopting a single centralized, department-wide FOIA tracking system, using commercial technology if necessary.

Additionally, the subcommittee proposed agencies make better use of interns or temporary staff to conduct time-consuming tasks that require limited training, such as data entry, and to stand up career programs to build a FOIA career pipeline for younger employees.

The Proactive Disclosure Subcommittee, which is charged with ways to handle agencies' universal releases (such as Cabinet secretaries' daily schedules) and develop a universal format for disclosing FOIA logs, recommended that agencies focus on publishing FOIA logs on a regular basis.

The next step is the broader committee members will meet again to vote on the recommendations in January 2018 and produce a final report for agencies in April 2018.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chase Gunter is a staff writer covering civilian agencies, workforce issues, health IT, open data and innovation.

Prior to joining FCW, Gunter reported for the C-Ville Weekly in Charlottesville, Va., and served as a college sports beat writer for the South Boston (Va.) News and Record. He started at FCW as an editorial fellow before joining the team full-
FEATURED

CONGRESS
Funding bill clears Congress, heads for president's desk
The $1.3 trillion spending package passed the House of Representatives on March 22 and the Senate in the early hours of March 23. President Trump is expected to sign the bill, securing government funding for the remainder of fiscal year 2018.

2018 FED 100
The 2018 Federal 100
This year's Fed 100 winners show just how much committed and talented individuals can accomplish in federal IT. Read their profiles to learn more!

CENSUS
Trump campaign taps census question as a fundraising tool
A fundraising email for the Trump-Pence reelection campaign is trying to get supporters behind a controversial change to the census -- asking respondents whether or not they are U.S. citizens.
NEW FROM FCW

10 tips for agencies looking to address cyber threats

USAF head praises OTAs, but warns on micromanagement

U.S. indicts Iranian hackers

EIS contractors want more time for transition

Trump signs spending bill

MOST POPULAR ARTICLES

10 tips for agencies looking to address cyber threats

House Republicans renew Holman Rule

USAF head praises OTAs, but warns on micromanagement
# MORE FROM 1105 PUBLIC SECTOR MEDIA GROUP

## Defense Systems
- Raytheon’s Dave Wajsgras wins FCW's 2018 Eagle Award
- DARPA seeks resilient constellation of satellites
- GSA opens VETS 2 IT services contract

## Federal Soup
- Congress averts third gov’t shutdown this year, OKs $1.3 trillion budget
- Lawmakers can cut individual fed’s pay under new rule
- Congress announces $1.3 trillion spending bill; aims to avoid shutdown

## GCN
- DARPA wants collaborating satellite constellations
- Oregon governor signs data breach law
- Lessons from a government blockchain pilot

## Government Cloud Insider
- FedRAMP updates vulnerability scan guidance
- Explainer: Fog computing
- Has TIC outlived its usefulness?

## Government Cyber Insider
- Can IoT transmissions be securely encrypted?

## Washington Technology
- General Dynamics secures $628M DHS IT services order