Dissemination of Information Concerning Consumer Complaints Through Agency Databases and Data Sets

Committee on Administration and Management

Draft Recommendation

Some federal agencies maintain records of consumer complaints and feedback on products and services offered by private entities. Taking advantage of recent technological developments, several agencies have recently begun to make such information available to the public through online searchable databases and downloadable data sets that contain complaint narratives or provide aggregate data about complaints. Examples of such online searchable databases include: the Consumer Product Safety Commission’s database of consumer product incident reports ("Saferproducts.gov"); the National Highway and Traffic Safety Administration’s database of recalls, investigation, and complaints ("Safercar.gov"); and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau’s database of financial products and services complaints ("Consumer Complaint Database").¹

As documented by the Executive Office of the President’s National Science and Technology Council, agencies are constantly improving databases that publish consumer complaints and information, and are gradually developing best practices for such disclosures.²

Two policy considerations are significant in this process. Agencies must have the flexibility to

¹ Other examples located by the Administrative Conference include: the Department of Transportation’s monthly data sets on the number and types of complaints against airlines ("Air Travel Consumer Report") (only aggregated data about complaints is made public, with the exception of animal incident reports, for which a narrative description is provided); the Food and Drug Administration’s database of reports of suspected device-associated deaths, serious injuries, and malfunctions ("MAUDE"), as well as its downloadable data sets of adverse events and medication errors ("FAERS"); the Federal Trade Commission’s consumer complaints database ("Consumer Sentinel") (only aggregated data about complaints is made public); and the Federal Communications Commission’s database of unwanted calls and consumer complaints ("Consumer Complaints at the FCC") (complaint narratives are not provided).

provide information to the public to facilitate informed decisionmaking. At the same time, agencies should ensure that the public is aware of any limitations on the quality, integrity, objectivity, or reliability of information published. The following recommendations aim to promote the widespread availability of such information while ensuring the continued integrity of complaints databases and data sets.

RECOMMENDATION

Agencies that make consumer complaints publicly available (whether in narrative or aggregated form) through online databases or downloadable data sets should, to the extent permitted by law:

1. adopt written policies governing the public dissemination of consumer complaints through databases or downloadable data sets;

2. publish those policies online;

3. ensure that users are informed of the source(s), context, and procedures taken to ensure data quality, and any limitations on the integrity, objectivity, or reliability of the database or downloadable data set, including whether the information has been verified or authenticated by the agency; and

4. adopt procedures to ensure that subjects publicly identified in consumer complaints databases or downloadable data sets are given the opportunity to post responses where practicable or request corrections or retractions, as appropriate.

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