



Resolving FOIA Disputes Through Targeted ADR Strategies

Committee on Collaborative Governance

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1 The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)¹ makes available to any person, upon request,
2 any reasonably described agency record that is not exempt under nine specified categories.
3 Congress has stated: “disclosure, not secrecy, is the dominant objective of the Act.”² FOIA
4 provides a two-level agency process for decisions on requests for access to agency records: (1)
5 an initial determination that is ordinarily made by the component of the agency with primary
6 responsibility for the subject matter of the request; and (2) an appeal to an authority under the
7 head of the agency in the case of an adverse initial determination. A requester’s formal
8 recourse following an adverse determination on appeal (or the agency’s failure to meet the
9 statutory time limits for making a determination) is a suit in federal district court to challenge
10 the agency action or inaction. Attaining the highest level of compliance at the agency level,
11 without the need for resort to litigation, has long been recognized as a critical FOIA policy
12 objective. A series of amendments to the Act over the years has provided for more detailed
13 monitoring of agency compliance and established agency mechanisms to promote compliance.
14 Despite these efforts, several hundred agency FOIA determinations adverse to requesters are
15 challenged annually in federal courts,³ and it is widely assumed that a substantial number of

¹ 5 U.S.C. § 552, as amended.

² Openness Promotes Effectiveness in our National [OPEN] Government Act of 2007, Pub. L. No. 110-175, 121 Stat. 2524 (codified at 5 U.S.C. § 552), § 2(4). See also Presidential Memorandum of January 21, 2009, Freedom of Information Act, which stated, “The [FOIA] should be administered with a clear presumption: In the face of doubt, openness prevails.” 74 Fed. Reg. 4683 (Jan. 26, 2009).

³ The year 2012 saw the highest number of FOIA requests in the history of the law: a striking 650,000 requests were filed with agencies throughout the Executive Branch by individuals and organizations seeking government information. Data from the Administrative Office of the United States Courts indicate that the number of FOIA cases has varied within a range of 280 to 388 over fiscal years 2007 through 2013. Annual agency FOIA litigation costs hover around \$23 million—a conservative estimate by some accounts.

16 other non-compliant agency FOIA determinations are not taken to court by requesters,
17 primarily for reasons of cost and delay that inhere in federal court litigation.

18 The Administrative Conference considered the potential value of “alternative dispute
19 resolution” (ADR) in relation to FOIA disputes in 1987, at a time when federal agency use of
20 ADR processes was not as common as today, and concluded that the data then available did not
21 clearly establish the need for either an independent administrative tribunal to resolve FOIA
22 disputes or the appointment of a FOIA ombudsman within the Department of Justice.
23 However, the Conference noted that greater reliance on informal approaches to FOIA dispute
24 resolution could result in more effective handling of some FOIA disputes without resort to court
25 litigation.⁴

26 The OPEN Government Act of 2007 reflected concerns that some agencies, as a whole,
27 were not implementing FOIA as Congress intended. Significantly, the 2007 legislation included,
28 for the first time in FOIA’s history, provisions that directed agency FOIA officers to “assist in the
29 resolution of disputes” between the agency and a FOIA requester.⁵ This legislation created in
30 each agency the positions of a Chief FOIA Officer and FOIA Public Liaisons, and established the
31 Office of Government Information Services (OGIS) in the National Archives and Records
32 Administration, to perform a broad range of functions aimed at improving FOIA compliance and
33 providing assistance to requesters. Those two developments are the only government-wide
34 FOIA dispute resolution process changes subsequent to the earlier Administrative Conference
35 study.

36 **The Role of the Office of Government Information Services**

37 OGIS has been in operation since September 2009. Acting, in effect, as a “FOIA
38 ombudsman,” OGIS has a hybrid mission that includes: identifying and resolving individual FOIA
39 disputes between requesters and agencies through mediation services; reviewing agency FOIA

⁴ See ACUS Statement #12, 52 FR 23636 (June 24, 1987).

⁵ OPEN Government Act of 2007, *supra* note 2, 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(6)(B)(ii).

40 policies, procedures and compliance with FOIA; and making recommendations to Congress and
41 the President to improve the administration of FOIA.

42 The Administrative Conference undertook a study in 2013 to examine the issues and
43 other case characteristics that most commonly lead to litigated FOIA disputes, and to consider
44 whether particular types of ADR approaches are likely to be especially effective in resolving
45 identified types of FOIA cases or issues in an efficient and effective manner short of litigation.
46 The current study reviewed FOIA cases closed in federal district courts in fiscal years 2010
47 through 2013 in order to categorize the bases for the most common types of FOIA lawsuits.
48 Review of cases was supplemented by other case data and interviews with individuals whose
49 experience with the FOIA process could give an understanding of the varying dimensions and
50 perspectives of that process.

51 The Conference's study found wide variation in the form and substance of FOIA disputes
52 between requesters and agencies, in the motivation, resources, and sophistication of
53 requesters, and in the missions and the level of interest in agency records. The interplay of
54 these variables has led to the conclusion that no simple formula for linking a particular set of
55 case characteristics with particular ADR approaches is likely to be very fruitful. Instead, it
56 appears that the most important targeting should be directed toward the dispute resolution
57 mechanism itself. It is vital that OGIS, a mechanism external to the agencies that is open to all
58 issues, all requesters, and all agencies, have appropriate FOIA dispute resolution authority,
59 expertise, and resources.

60 In practice, OGIS's caseload is determined by whoever happens to contact OGIS,
61 typically by telephone or e-mail inquiries, some of which come from individuals who have never
62 filed a FOIA request. Often such individuals seek only modest help, such as where to file or
63 what form to use to obtain the desired records or information. Many of these inquiries are
64 handled routinely on the day they are received. OGIS classifies such contacts as "Quick Hits."
65 This service, along with the informational resources on the OGIS website, is frequently

66 sufficient to assist the least sophisticated users of FOIA and should be continued. This is a low
67 cost/high value function that has instant payoff for a broad constituency.

68 **OGIS Caseload**

69 Although many inquiries to OGIS are routine in nature, others are not. Also, the issues
70 involved in an inquiry sometimes turn out to be more complicated than initially realized. In
71 such cases, OGIS will gather information from the requester and make a preliminary
72 assessment of the case, to decide whether it seems appropriate for an OGIS contact with the
73 relevant agency to find out the status of the case and whether the agency has taken a position.
74 Since the statute does not place any duty on the agency to participate in the OGIS mediation
75 process, OGIS depends on agency cooperation. The relatively small fraction of agency denials
76 that are appealed to the courts, together with agency success rates in FOIA litigation, may serve
77 as a disincentive to agencies to participate meaningfully in a dispute resolution process at this
78 point.

79 Although the Office of Information Policy (OIP) in the Department of Justice (DOJ)
80 historically considered itself to have a role as “FOIA ombudsman,” the legislation that created
81 OGIS clearly assigned a mediation role to OGIS and, in effect, a “FOIA ombudsman”
82 responsibility.⁶ Underlying this policy decision was the fact that DOJ, including OIP, historically
83 had both a FOIA compliance promotion function and a responsibility to represent agencies in
84 lawsuits arising under FOIA. Under the OPEN Government Act of 2007, OGIS has statutory
85 responsibility to promote compliance but possesses no agency representation responsibilities.

86 OGIS has implemented its ombudsman responsibility through facilitating
87 communications between a requester and the agency, helping the parties address factors
88 contributing to delay, or actually engaging in a mediating process to achieve a resolution
89 satisfactory to both sides. The recommendations addressed to OGIS that follow are intended to

⁶ However, the legislation (OPEN Government Act of 2007, *supra* note 2) does not use the term “FOIA ombudsman.”

90 optimize the use of its resources. OGIS encourages requesters to complete the agency
91 administrative appeal process prior to significant OGIS engagement, so as to give the agency an
92 opportunity to reconsider its initial decision to deny a request. Whether or not a requester has
93 exhausted the agency appeal process, if the unresolved issues appear meritorious, OGIS
94 assistance should focus on enabling the requester and the agency to engage in a discussion that
95 resolves those issues or deters litigation, either through reconsideration of the agency position
96 or through the agency providing a fuller, more informative explanation for its position.

97 The OPEN Government Act of 2007, in addition to authorizing OGIS to provide
98 mediation services to resolve FOIA disputes, provided that OGIS, at its discretion, may offer
99 advisory opinions if mediation has not resolved the dispute.⁷ However, OGIS has not yet
100 chosen to exercise this authority.⁸ The statutory linkage of OGIS advisory opinions to its
101 mediation function is not ideal because a requester's or an agency's anticipation of OGIS's
102 taking a public position in a particular case in which OGIS seeks to serve as a neutral mediator
103 may discourage parties from participating in mediation. It therefore is important for OGIS to
104 distinguish between expressing views on systemic issues or identifying broad trends or patterns
105 and issuing advisory opinions that address the facts of individual cases it has sought to mediate.
106 In appropriate cases, issuance of an advisory opinion may forestall potential litigation, and OGIS
107 should make the parties aware of this authority.⁹ Factors such as potential breadth of
108 application and frequency of occurrence of an issue, along with consideration of caseload
109 manageability, should be among the primary, though not the exclusive, determinants for OGIS

⁷ 5 U.S.C. § 552(h)(3).

⁸ Although either the requester or the agency could ask OGIS for an advisory opinion, OGIS should have discretion to determine whether to initiate the advisory opinion process. An OGIS decision whether or not to issue an advisory opinion would likely not be subject to judicial review. See *Heckler v. Chaney*, 470 U.S. 821 (1985). The statute expressly uses the phrase, "at the discretion of the Office."

⁹ OGIS has described its advisory opinion authority as follows: "OGIS also is authorized to issue advisory opinions, formal or informal. By issuing advisory opinions, OGIS does not intend to undertake a policymaking or an adjudicative role within the FOIA process, but instead will illuminate novel issues and promote sound practices with regard to compliance with FOIA." *Available at* <https://ogis.archives.gov/about-ogis/ogis-reports/the-first-year/the-ogis-mission.htm>.

110 in deciding whether or not to initiate the advisory opinion process. An OGIS advisory opinion
111 might receive judicial consideration in a FOIA suit in which the advisory opinion is before a
112 court, whether in the dispute which led to the opinion or another in which that issue is raised.¹⁰

113 **Role of FOIA Public Liaisons**

114 The FOIA Public Liaison role in each agency was created by the OPEN Government Act of
115 2007 specifically to foster assistance to FOIA requesters. Preventing or resolving FOIA disputes
116 within agencies through the work of Public Liaisons advances the goals of the Act and can
117 relieve the dispute resolution burden of both OGIS and the courts. These agency officials
118 should be given adequate authority and support from agency leadership for carrying out their
119 statutory dispute resolution function, including appropriate training.

120 Agency FOIA Public Liaisons, under the direction of their Chief FOIA Officers, should be
121 encouraged to seek OGIS mediation or facilitation services at any stage in the processing of a
122 request when it appears to the agency that OGIS engagement may aid in the resolution of a
123 request. In such cases, if the requester agrees to participate, OGIS should make its services
124 available whether or not the appeals process has been exhausted or any applicable time limit
125 has expired. This opportunity for agency engagement of OGIS recognizes that (a) once an
126 agency has made a final determination on a request it is less likely than a requester to seek
127 OGIS assistance, and (b) agency-sought OGIS engagement may provide one of the most fruitful
128 settings in which to obtain an informal resolution.¹¹ Whether or not an agency chooses to seek

¹⁰ See *United States v. Mead Corp.*, 533 U.S. 218 (2001) (holding that a court may find persuasive, to some degree, the reasoning of an agency position that itself is not entitled to judicial deference under *Chevron U.S.A. v. Natural Resources Defense Council, Inc.*, 467 U.S. 837 (1984)).

¹¹ OGIS has described its relationship with agency FOIA Public Liaisons as follows:

While the OPEN Government Act's definition of a [FOIA Public Liaison (FPL)] is simple and straightforward, we know that the reality of their positions is anything but. Some agencies have created new FPL positions that are completely dedicated to assisting requesters and resolving disputes. Other agencies — many of them smaller agencies — added the FPL tasks listed in the Act to the already-full plate of someone within the FOIA shop. We've also found that FPLs have a variety of approaches to their job, including everything from agitating for change within agencies to reiterating the party line.

<http://blogs.archives.gov/foiablog/2011/06/09/whats-a-foia-public-liaison>.

129 OGIS assistance, each agency, in any appeal determination letter in which a request is denied in
130 whole or in part, should notify the requester of the availability of OGIS mediation or facilitation
131 services as a non-exclusive alternative to litigation.¹²

132 Congress and the Executive Branch should recognize the largely distinct dispute
133 resolution and compliance promotion roles of OGIS, agency Chief FOIA Officers, and the
134 Department of Justice, as a collective set of administrative mechanisms sharing the goal of
135 avoiding unnecessary FOIA litigation.

RECOMMENDATION

136 **Recommendations to the Office of Government Information Services (OGIS)**

137 1. OGIS, a part of the National Archives and Records Administration, should continue to
138 provide its “Quick Hit” service and the informational resources on its website, as principal
139 means of assisting the least sophisticated users of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

140 2. Requesters may appropriately seek assistance from OGIS at any stage of the FOIA
141 process. However, because the opportunity for a FOIA appeal within the agency is an
142 important component of the process, OGIS should continue to encourage requesters to
143 complete that step prior to significant OGIS engagement.

144 3. OGIS should continue to provide both facilitation and mediation assistance to
145 requesters and agencies, depending on the nature of the issues in dispute.

¹² OGIS itself has recommended such notice in the following form:

As part of the 2007 FOIA amendments, the Office of Government Information Services (OGIS) was created to offer mediation services to resolve disputes between FOIA requesters and Federal agencies as a non-exclusive alternative to litigation. Using OGIS services does not affect your right to pursue litigation.

Available at <https://ogis.archives.gov/about-ogis/working-with-ogis/Standard-OGIS-Language-for-Agencies.htm>. OIP also has encouraged agencies to follow this practice. *Available at* <http://www.justice.gov/oip/foiapost/2010foiapost21.htm>.

146 (a) For delay issues, OGIS assistance should focus on practical steps that, with agency
147 cooperation, might facilitate processing of the request.

148 (b) For substantive issues, whether or not the requester has exhausted the agency
149 appeal process, if the unresolved issues in the request appear meritorious, OGIS
150 assistance should focus on enabling the requester and the agency to engage in a
151 discussion that resolves the dispute without litigation, either through agency
152 reconsideration of its position or through provision of a more informative explanation of
153 the agency's decision.

154 4. In appropriate situations, OGIS should make use of its statutory, discretionary
155 authority to issue advisory opinions. In implementing this authority, OGIS should distinguish
156 between issuance of an advisory opinion in connection with (a) a systemic issue or
157 identification of a broad trend or pattern, and (b) an individual case, for which OGIS taking a
158 position on an issue could be perceived to undercut its ability to act as a neutral mediator. In
159 order to evaluate the potential costs and benefits of exercising this authority, OGIS should
160 explore issuance of advisory opinions in selected cases. Factors such as potential breadth of
161 application and frequency of occurrence of an issue, along with consideration of caseload
162 manageability, should be among the primary, though not the exclusive, determinants for OGIS
163 in deciding whether or not to initiate the advisory opinion process.

164 5. To the extent that agency and OGIS resources permit, OGIS should consider ways to
165 acquire better data from both agencies and requesters on the kinds of issues that have led to
166 recurring or protracted FOIA disputes. Such efforts may include working with agencies and
167 others to create a database of consistent information on litigated issues and contacting former
168 litigants to gain a better understanding of their awareness and usage of OGIS or other sources
169 of dispute resolution services.

170 **Recommendations to Agencies**

171 6. All agencies, acting in a spirit of cooperation, should affirmatively seek to prevent or
172 resolve FOIA disputes to the greatest extent possible. In addition, all agencies, through their
173 FOIA Public Liaisons under the direction of their Chief FOIA Officers, should seek OGIS
174 mediation or facilitation services at any stage in the processing of a request when it appears to
175 the agency that OGIS engagement may aid in the resolution of that request. As early in the
176 dispute resolution process as possible, the agency should provide the requester and OGIS with
177 sufficient detail about its position to enable the requester to make a knowledgeable decision on
178 whether to pursue the request further.

179 7. All agencies, in any appeal determination letter in which a request is denied in whole
180 or in part, should notify the requester of the availability of OGIS mediation or facilitation
181 services as a non-exclusive alternative to litigation. Agency websites and FOIA regulations
182 should call attention to the dispute resolution services available from OGIS.

183 8. All agencies should take steps to maximize the effectiveness of their FOIA Public
184 Liaisons in fulfilling the dispute resolution function that the Act assigns to Public Liaisons.
185 Agency websites, as well as initial response letters to FOIA requests, should call attention to the
186 problem resolution assistance available from Public Liaisons. In addition, agency leadership
187 should provide adequate authority and support to Public Liaisons and should ensure they
188 receive necessary training, including in dispute resolution, and are made aware of the services
189 offered by OGIS.

190 9. Upon request by the Director of OGIS, all agencies should cooperate fully with OGIS
191 efforts to mediate or otherwise facilitate the resolution of individual FOIA disputes. Similarly,
192 agencies should cooperate with efforts by OGIS to obtain consistent and comparable data
193 relating to FOIA litigation, to the extent permitted by law and agency resources.