

**Department of the Interior**  
**Departmental Manual**  
Freedom of Information Act Handbook  
(383 DM 15)

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**Effective Date: October 1, 2008**

**Chapter 9: Customer Service**

**Originating Office:** Office of the Chief Information Officer

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9.1 General. This Chapter provides policy and procedures for improving customer service to the FOIA community. Employees should respond courteously and appropriately to all formal requests or potential requests for agency records filed under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). Bureaus/offices (bureaus) are responsible for ensuring that all requests are processed in a customer-friendly and timely manner. Communication with the requester and quality customer service are key elements for a successful FOIA program.

9.2 Background.

A. In December 2005, the Administration issued Executive Order (EO) 13392, “Improving Agency Disclosure of Information.” The purpose of the EO was to improve the processing of FOIA requests, eliminate any existing backlogs, and enhance customer service. The EO directs agencies to process FOIA requests in an efficient and appropriate manner and to achieve “tangible and measurable” improvements in FOIA processing. EO 13392 is the first citizen-centered and results-oriented FOIA policy designed to improve both service and performance.

B. In accordance with EO 13392, bureaus are required to establish FOIA Requester Service Centers (Centers) and FOIA Public Liaisons in order to facilitate better agency communications with FOIA requesters and improve customer service. Consistent with the EO, FOIA requesters will be treated as customers seeking a service from the Government and should be provided excellent service. This is primarily done through prompt, courteous, and informative communication.

9.3 Policy.

A. In accordance with DOI’s FOIA regulations (43 CFR § 2.2) and EO 13392, bureaus will make records available to the public to the greatest extent

possible consistent with the spirit of the FOIA and Privacy Act, while at the same time protecting sensitive information.

B. Bureaus will provide requesters with citizen-centered ways to learn about the FOIA process, agency records that are publicly available (e.g., on the bureau's website), and the status of their FOIA requests.

C. All FOIA requests must be responded to within the statutory 20 workdays or 30 workdays if an extension has been taken. Bureaus will send the requester an interim response in the event they are unable to meet the statutory time limits and provide requesters with their appeal rights (see Chapter 3 of this Handbook for additional information). The bureaus will also keep the requester informed regarding the status of his/her request at all times.

D. While a particular request may be filed in DOI Headquarters, the regional and field offices of a bureau may be asked to provide any responsive documents to the lead individual coordinating the reply. Alternatively, one bureau (typically the Bureau FOIA Officer) may be asked to consolidate a FOIA response on behalf of DOI. If bureaus are asked to search and review their records and provide them to another bureau for coordination and/or response to the requester, they will do so in accordance with the due date established by the lead office unless there are extenuating circumstances.

E. Bureaus will respond to telephone requests for information related to a particular request or the bureau/DOI's FOIA program promptly. Employees will be courteous and helpful when responding to the public. Remember, DOI does not accept oral FOIA and/or Privacy Act requests; these must be submitted in writing. This protects the requester, the employee, and the bureau.

#### 9.4 Roles of FOIA Requester Service Centers and Public Liaisons.

A. Normally, the requester contacts the individual identified in the bureau's correspondence concerning his/her FOIA request--generally, the FOIA Officer/Contact for the region/field. However, as mandated by the EO, the requester may also contact the Center to seek information concerning the status of his/her request. Consistent with the EO's "service-oriented" policies, the staff should try to answer FOIA-related questions above and beyond those related to the status of the request, as appropriate. Bureaus must have appropriate staff in the Centers to receive and respond to inquiries from FOIA requesters.

B. In addition to the staff in the Centers, the EO requires agencies to designate FOIA Public Liaisons. If the requester is not satisfied with the information provided by the Center, he/she may then call the FOIA Public Liaison who is designated for that bureau. Public Liaisons are supervisory officials to whom requesters can raise concerns about the service received from the Centers. The FOIA Public Liaison need not be the rating supervisor of the person(s) who answers the telephone at the Center. For the purposes of implementing the EO, the FOIA Public Liaison will serve as the supervisor of the Center. The Public Liaison will make every effort to ensure a service-oriented response to FOIA requests and related inquiries. This includes assisting, as appropriate, in reducing delays and resolving disputes. The FOIA Public Liaisons will also work closely with DOI's Chief FOIA Officer in improving the Department's FOIA program. The individuals named as FOIA Public Liaisons are in addition to and separate from the Center personnel.

C. In DOI, for the most part, the Backup for the Bureau FOIA Officer serves as the first point of contact that a requester can call concerning the status of a request (i.e., the Center) and the Bureau FOIA Officer as the FOIA Public Liaison. The Bureau FOIA Officer should fill one of these positions, but not both. Further, if the Backup FOIA Officer assists a requester who contacts the Center, he/she will not be able to assist the same individual on that matter again. In other words, consistent with the EO, a FOIA requester has the right to talk to two different individuals concerning a particular request.

D. In DOI, we have also established Departmental FOIA Liaisons located in the Office of the Chief Information Officer, the third place a requester can contact for information concerning his/her request. See <http://www.doi.gov/foia/liason.html> for a list of DOI's Centers and Public Liaisons.

#### 9.5 Responsibilities of FOIA Requester Service Centers and Public Liaisons:

A. Individuals assigned to serve in the Centers and as FOIA Public Liaisons must:

- (1) Be knowledgeable about the FOIA and have taken DOI-approved annual FOIA training;
- (2) Be knowledgeable about the bureau's FOIA program;
- (3) Be knowledgeable about the Department's FOIA policies/procedures;

(4) Have the ability to locate information pertaining to the status of any requests within the bureau's purview and to respond professionally to requesters in need of assistance;

(5) Have the ability to access and use the EFTS;

(6) Make every effort to respond to the requester promptly, i.e., if not the same day, within 24 hours whenever possible; and

(7) Be familiar with the bureau's organizational structure and mission.

B. In the event an individual designated as the point of contact for the bureau's Center or as the FOIA Public Liaison plans to be out of the office on leave or otherwise, he/she is responsible for ensuring that a backup is assigned to respond to inquiries from requesters. If no one is available at the bureau level, please contact the Departmental FOIA Office to make other arrangements.

C. If the bureau needs to make a change to its Center or Public Liaison position, the FOIA Officer should contact the Department's FOIA Office (OCIO) immediately so the information on DOI's FOIA website can be updated.