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A CITIZENS GUIDE ON
USING THE FREEDOM
OF INFORMATION ACT
AND THE PRIVACY ACT



CONGRESSIONAL
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The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) is the embodiment of the public's right to know about the activities of its government. Transparency is an integral part of a democracy and is necessary to hold a government accountable to its people. FOIA is a foundational transparency law, and one of the most important tools in creating and maintaining a transparent and accountable government. It is the primary mechanism by which the public can gain access to

government information. FOIA has proven to be extremely effective in creating a more transparent federal government. FOIA is a federal law that allows people to request information from the Federal Government. Under FOIA, people may file a request for any existing record at any federal agency for any reason. Agencies subject to FOIA include the Executive Branch departments, agencies, and offices; federal regulatory agencies; and federal corporations. The Legislative Branch and the Judicial Branch are not subject to FOIA. FOIA was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1966. Prior to FOIA's enactment, the public had no formal method to request or receive information from the government. Some government meetings were held in secret and citizens had access only to information that the government chose to make public. Representative John Moss was the first Member of Congress to advocate for a policy that would give the public access to government information. Freedom of information was an important issue for Members of Congress, but it was opposed by the Executive Branch. The Bureau of the Budget's 1965 analysis noted, "The requirement that information be made available to all and sundry, including the idly curious, could create serious practical problems for the agencies." In 1966, Congress passed a freedom of information bill despite the Johnson Administration's opposition. The House unanimously passed the bill on June 20, 1966. Due to the strong support of Congress, President Johnson signed the bill and FOIA became law on July 4, 1966. When FOIA was enacted in 1966, it was revolutionary. It was the third freedom of information law in the world and by far the most comprehensive and powerful. However, constant oversight is necessary to ensure that FOIA remains effective and is implemented properly. The Committee on Oversight and Government Reform is responsible for overseeing FOIA. In 1977, in accordance with its mission to oversee FOIA and strengthen transparency in government, the Committee released the first edition of the Citizen's Guide to Using the Freedom of Information Act and the Privacy Act of 1974. In the forty-six years since FOIA was enacted, there have been numerous amendments to the law to increase its effectiveness. This committee report has been updated to reflect all changes and amendments made to FOIA as of 2012.