

Sunshine Week column 2026

People are requesting more government records than ever. Why are they getting less?

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More Americans are filing Freedom of Information Act requests than ever, topping 1.5 million in 2024 and on track for another record in 2025. This will mark the third consecutive year that FOIA requests have reached [seven figures](#).

But more requests does not necessarily equal more access to public government information.

In an age when trust in government is at an [all-time low](#), the surge in FOIA requests has been driven in part by rising public interest in government accountability. But the growth has also been impacted by an increase in requests by [advocacy groups](#) and [corporations](#), as well as technology making it easier than ever for Americans to find out information about what's going on in their government.

As the volume of records requests has swelled, so has the portion of those requests that are rejected or otherwise incomplete. A [growing number](#) of requests considered processed is driven by administrative closures such as rejections for technicalities or claims of "no responsive records" rather than the release of meaningful information. The likelihood of a requester receiving everything they asked for is [lower than ever](#).

Even when the government does release records, information is [increasingly obscured](#). Of the requests that actually made it to a substantive review last year, the majority were only partially released, often heavily redacted under broad exemptions. During the 2024 fiscal year, which is the most recent available, just 12.1% of processed FOIA requests were [fully granted](#).

Despite the increased processing volume, the backlog of unresolved cases has [swelled](#) as more requests than ever continue to flood the system. The 2024 fiscal marked the third year that [backlogged cases](#) topped 200,000.

Just three agencies account for the bulk of that, and the same agencies continuing to receive the most requests are also saddled with the most appeals and largest backlog.

The Department of Homeland Security alone accounted for [more than half](#) of all FOIA requests received, processed and appealed in most recent years.

Over the past decade since the [FOIA Improvement Act of 2016](#) was signed into law, agencies have tried a wide range of tactics to address the flood of requests. This has ranged from formalizing [plans to reduce backlog](#) and [proactively posting](#) commonly requested information to attempts to push back on disclosure.

As a part of these efforts, agencies have also [ramped up](#) the number of "[still interested](#)" letters sent to requesters. They often close cases just days later due to lack of response.

Reliance on exemptions to justify request rejections, redactions and partial fulfillment has [grown](#) along with the volume. Categories once used narrowly are now often the first response. The refusal to even acknowledge whether records exist [increasingly](#) undercuts the FOIA process before it even begins.

Modern technology has presented some opportunities to alleviate the burdens on agencies. They are increasingly relying on [artificial intelligence](#) to help with redactions and increase processing speed to chip away at the backlog, though the Chief Records Officer at the National Archives and Records Administration has [warned](#) that AI is no substitute for a “professional’s judgement on application of exemptions and foreseeable harm.” On the flip side, AI and automation have also compounded the issue by [contributing](#) to the [influx of requests](#).

These struggles are not unique to the current administration, nor limited to the federal government.

State and local public records processes often face even more burdens. Often, due to short staffing, the individuals subject to records requests are also responsible for the decision of whether to release them.

While federal law mandates a 20-business-day response window, state-level sunshine rules vary from a few days to about a month. The actual [time it takes for a request to be fulfilled](#), however, can be much longer, spanning hundreds of days or even years — leaving information locked away long after it would be most valuable to the public who rely on it.

That gap between what the law promises and what it delivers is worth caring about regardless of who you voted for, because it affects every freedom you think you have.

Governments can only be held accountable when we know what’s happening inside of them.

That's what freedom of information laws were built to prevent and right now, they're losing ground. Sunshine Week is an annual celebration of transparency and an opportunity to cherish the right all Americans share to access government information.

Together, we can hold power to account and shine a light on government transparency.

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