

# White House Inflated Transparency Achievements

**Transparency advocates skeptical of new plan announced by White House**



White House / AP

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The White House inflated its transparency accomplishments and has fallen behind schedule on several open government initiatives, an independent audit found last month.

According to the [report](#) by the Open Government

Partnership, the Obama administration has made slow progress declassifying routine national security records and improving access to public documents under the Freedom of Information Act.

The Obama administration claimed in a [March progress report](#) that it had completed 24 of its 26 commitments since 2011. However, according to the Open Government Partnership report the Obama administration has completed less than half of those goals, including the two examples cited above.

The United States was a founding partner of the International Open Government Partnership, a voluntary group of 60 nations working to improve government transparency, in 2011. The independent assessment was part of a two-year review of participating nations.

However, the Obama administration announced Thursday it has committed to an ambitious new set of transparency goals that watchdog groups say would be major steps forward, if accomplished.

The White House released a draft “[national action plan](#)” to improve government transparency. The action plan includes improving access to government data, developing common practices within federal agencies for Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, and creating a government-wide portal for FOIA requests.

Patrice McDermott, the executive director of OpenTheGovernment.org, said in a statement that the plan is “simultaneously inspiring and disappointing.”

“The Administration’s latest promises to make it easier for the public to ask for and receive government information show that the government can work with civil society to create a realistic plan to increase openness and accountability,” she said.

“At the same time, however, the windows of opportunity for securing a legacy of openness are beginning to close.”

Kenneth Bunting, the executive director of the National Freedom of Information Coalition, commended the Obama Administration’s commitment to improving openness but said its report “was a tad self-congratulatory for my tastes.”

“Unless there is a sea change, I am afraid this administration’s legacy on openness will be marred by its overzealousness in going after leakers, whistleblowers, and journalists,” Bunting said in a statement.

The Committee to Protect Journalists released in October a [scathing report](#) by former *Washington Post* executive editor Leonard Downie, Jr. that found the Obama administration’s crack-down on whistleblowers and leakers has created “a tremendous chilling effect” on national security reporting.

FOIA experts applauded the administration’s commitment to improving access to public records.

“At last, the Obama Administration seems willing to act responsibly in implementing its FOIA policy,” said Daniel Metcalfe, the executive director of the Collaboration on Government Secrecy at American University’s Washington College of Law.

As previously reported by the *Washington Free Beacon*, President Barack Obama entered office promising to run “the most transparent administration in history,” but federal agencies [largely ignored](#) directives from the Justice Department to reform their FOIA practices.

The Justice Department’s Office of Information Policy said earlier this year that it had not challenged a single agency for misusing a FOIA exemption since 2009.

Metcalfe said the Obama administration’s plan is a recognition of the poor job the

administration has done thus far.

“The FOIA regulation provision, for one, is a flat repudiation of Justice’s blatant position (as a transparent defense of its own regulation inaction) that FOIA regulations are ‘not important,’” Metcalfe said. “And the adoption of a government-wide portal, an idea advanced by OGIS while flatly rejected by Justice, shows that the White House can recognize a good idea even if the agency nominally in charge of FOIA administration cannot.”

Some transparency advocates say the plan lacks one fundamental goal.

“While these plans do give the transparency community reason to be cautiously optimistic, it is important to note that there is no mention of proactive disclosure anywhere in the plan,” The Sunlight Foundation’s Ginger McCall wrote. “Proactive disclosure [is integral](#) to any effective transparency plan. It meaningfully increases public access while easing the burden on FOIA processing by eliminating duplicative request processing.”

Attorney General Eric Holder directed all federal agencies in 2009 to operate with a presumption of openness, but that proved difficult to enforce across a federal government with scores of agencies with their own bureaucratic cultures and entrenched predilections for secrecy.

A government-wide FOIA portal has long been on the wish list of transparency advocates, but until now it has never had the muscle of the executive branch behind it.

In 2012 the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Commerce, and the National Archives and Records Administration launched a cross-agency [FOIA portal](#), the first of its kind. Watchdog groups [hailed](#) the project as a model for the future.

However, only three agencies collaborated on the project, and some watchdog groups said the Justice Department was opposed to the plan.