

Study: Federal agencies ignore public's right to information

By Josh Hicks, Washington Post

President Obama promised a more transparent government on Day One of his first term, and his attorney general issued a memorandum less than two months later urging all heads of executive departments to err on the side of openness when it comes to disclosure.

But an audit by the George Washington University-based National Security Archive has found that nearly 70 percent of government agencies haven't updated their Freedom of Information regulations since Eric Holder sent out that letter, and well over half haven't done so since Congress and President George W. Bush approved the Open Government Act of 2007, which mandated certain changes.

The study also found that 17 out of 99 agencies have not properly posted their regulations on their FOIA websites, as required by the Electronic FOIA Amendments law of 1996.

The National Security Archive sent FOIA requests asking those 17 agencies for their FOIA regulations, but only seven responded after three months. The law requires agencies to respond within 20 business days.

The archive noted that even among agencies that have updated their FOIA regulations, the new guidelines do not always reflect the law or the president's pledge.

Tom Blanton, the archive's director, said during an interview that the audit findings "demonstrate with some tangible measures the level of bureaucratic resistance to open

government.” But he described the lack of agency compliance as more of an opportunity for executive action rather than a condemnation of the Obama administration.

“Outdated agency regulations really mean there’s an opportunity here for a second-term Obama to standardize best practices and bring all the agencies up to his day-one openness pledge,” Blanton said in a statement posted on the archive’s website.

The National Security Archive is a nonprofit institution that collects and publishes declassified U.S. government files, especially those relating to U.S. foreign policy. It claims to file more FOIA requests than any other group.