

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

August 11, 2014

Society of Professional Journalists
3909 N. Meridian Street
Indianapolis, IN 46208

To The Society of Professional Journalists:

On behalf of the President, thank you for your letter and for sharing your concerns. You've raised important points that I would like to address head-on.

This Administration has dedicated significant time and resources to upholding the President's commitment to lead an open and responsive government. And we've made important progress expanding access to the President and his aides, protecting whistleblowers, simplifying government websites, streamlining FOIA requests, and disclosing previously classified information.

Simply put, we've backed up – with action – the President's ambitious, early and ongoing commitment to transparency. While there is more work to do, the White House and federal agencies are far more accessible and accountable than ever before. Consider below a sample of our successes in this endeavor:

Processing More FOIA Requests Than Ever Before

Under the Administration's presumption of openness and in addition to disclosing more information online proactively, we are processing more FOIA requests than ever before and have made significant improvements to what has historically been a frustrating process, including reducing the average number of days it takes to process a request.

Recognized for Transparency by Organizers of Sunshine Week

The President received an award from the organizers of Sunshine Week for his Administration's historic improvements to the FOIA process. The President and Attorney General have emphasized the importance of agencies taking affirmative steps to identify records of interest to the public and proactively post them online so there is no need to submit a FOIA request. And, to hold agencies accountable, DOJ now requires annual reports and quarterly updates on key metrics.

Fought for and Won Better Protections for Whistleblowers

For 13 years, whistleblower advocates tried and failed to pass the Whistleblower Protection Enhancement Act. This Administration, working with Congress, got it done and the President signed it into law in November 2012. Additionally, the President signed the 2013 NDAA, which provided unprecedented whistleblowing protections to federal contractors.

Directed National Security Agencies to De-Classify Additional Materials

The President issued executive orders that limit new classifications and established the National Declassification Center (NDC) in late December 2009. The accompanying Presidential Memorandum provided a deadline of December 31, 2013, for the declassification processing of approximately 400 million pages of backlogged records – in spite of Congressional requirements requiring page by page review of approximately one-third of those records. The NDC met the deadline for the declassification processing of national security information within that backlog, and the center is implementing systems and methodologies to prevent future backlogs.

The Administration is also establishing an open and uniform system for placing controls on “sensitive but unclassified” information, which will require statutory or regulatory authority for any such designations. The President established a commission to do a comprehensive review of over classification, and we are working to implement the commission’s recommendations.

We’ve also created “IC on the Record,” which provides immediate, ongoing and direct access to factual information related to the foreign intelligence mission of the U.S. Intelligence Community.

Simplifying Government Websites and Engaging the Public

The White House and GSA solicited ideas from the public on how to make websites more user friendly and launched the U.S. Government’s Digital Government Strategy to deliver better digital services to the American people. The Administration put every dollar of Recovery Act spending online and launched a “Taxpayer Receipt,” allowing citizens to see exactly where their tax dollars go.

Increasing Access for Reporters Covering the President’s Fundraising Activities

For years, reporters appealed for access to fundraisers that Presidents attended at private homes. The President listened to reporters’ calls and now the press has increased access to these events.

For First Time in History, White House Releases Information on White House Visitors

The White House not only reversed prior limits on access to presidential records, it has voluntarily posted daily public schedules, staff salaries, and ethics waivers to the White House website and for the first time in history, anyone visiting our website can see the 3.5 million visitors to the White House. This approach stands in stark contrast to the previous administration, which took this issue to the Supreme Court in order to keep these records secret.

These historic efforts represent only a few of the many steps we’ve taken – at the President’s direction – to empower citizens to participate in their democracy and fulfill our obligation to

ensure that independent journalists have access to the White House and insight into the priorities we're fighting for.

The President's commitment to transparency and the crucial role of the independent press is unwavering. The President has set an historically high standard of transparency that is part of the legacy to which future presidents will aspire and the President and his Administration are justifiably proud of these accomplishments.

However, I don't expect you to be satisfied. In fact, you wouldn't be doing your important job as professional, independent journalists if you aren't constantly advocating for more access and more transparency. That's why there will always be a healthy, natural tension between journalists and the White House. But, I am personally committed to ensuring that this tension doesn't prevent a robust and honest discussion of the issues in a way that leads to even greater transparency in the future.

I look forward to continue working with you to ensure we live up to the President's standard and build on the historic progress this Administration has already made.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Josh Earnest". The signature is stylized and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "E".

Josh Earnest
White House Press Secretary