

FOIA - Information Request Workflow

Scenario: FOIA Workflow with National Security Data

The core process remains the same, but the **Review and Processing** stage becomes significantly more complex due to the potential application of **FOIA Exemption (b)(1)**, which protects classified national security information.

Step	Action	Description
1. Request Intake & Logging	Receive and Log	The FOIA office receives the request, assigns a unique tracking number, and dates the request.
2. Initial Review & Acknowledgment	Screen and Acknowledge	The request is acknowledged. The FOIA professional screens the request and, based on the subject matter, identifies the potential presence of sensitive or classified records.
3. Search & Collection	Identify Custodians	The FOIA professional identifies relevant offices and employees. For national security topics, this always includes offices designated to hold classified information .
	Direct Search (Secure)	Custodians are instructed to search both unclassified and classified systems/records. Access to certain search areas may require a security clearance for the FOIA professional and/or the custodian.
	Gather & Segregate Records	All potentially responsive documents are collected. Classified records are handled and stored under strict security protocols (e.g., in secure containers or SCIFs) and are segregated from unclassified material.
4. Classification Review & Processing (Critical Step)	Initial Review	The FOIA professional (if cleared) or a subject matter expert reviews the responsive documents.

	Mandatory Consultation	If the records are currently classified, or if the subject matter involves classified programs, the FOIA office must consult with the Original Classification Authority (OCA) or designated Classification Management Officer (CMO) .
	Declassification Review	The OCA or CMO formally reviews the classified information to determine if it can be declassified or if it must remain classified under FOIA Exemption (b)(1) (classified under an Executive Order). This step often involves a separate, formal declassification referral process.
	Apply Other Exemptions	The FOIA office then reviews the remaining unclassified material for all other applicable exemptions (e.g., Exemption (b)(5) for internal agency deliberations, Exemption (b)(6) for personal privacy).
	Redact & Prepare Segregable Portions	All exempt material, including classified information, is redacted. Even if the bulk of a document is classified, the agency must release any reasonably segregable unclassified portions.
5. Final Response & Release	Prepare Release Package	The package includes the redacted records and a final response letter. The letter must cite Exemption (b)(1) as the legal basis for withholding the classified material.
	Deliver Records	The released documents are transmitted to the requester. If the released records were originally classified but declassified for release, the FOIA office must ensure the version released is the unclassified, redacted copy .
6. Closure and Retention	Close Request	The administrative file is closed, documenting the classified nature of the withheld material and the declassification authority consulted.
7. Appeal Processing (If Applicable)	Receive Appeal	An appeal is filed regarding the use of Exemption (b)(1) or other exemptions.

Review & Determine (Senior Review)	The administrative appeal is reviewed by a senior official, often with a higher-level security clearance, to re-examine the classification decision and the application of Exemption (b)(1).
Issue Appeal Decision	The office issues the final appeal decision.

Entities Involved in the FOIA Workflow (with National Security Data)

Based on the detailed workflow, here are the key entities:

1. **Requester:** The individual or entity submitting the FOIA request.
2. **FOIA Office (FOIA Professional):** The primary processing unit for FOIA requests. This includes the individual FOIA Analyst/Specialist and the overall office management.
3. **Records Custodians (Subject Matter Experts - SMEs):** Agency personnel in various departments who possess the requested records. For national security, this often means personnel with security clearances in relevant divisions.
4. **Original Classification Authority (OCA) / Classification Management Officer (CMO):** The authorized official(s) responsible for classifying information, or overseeing classification decisions and declassification reviews. This is a critical entity for national security data.
5. **Legal Counsel (Optional but often involved):** Agency attorneys who provide legal advice on the application of exemptions, especially in complex or contentious cases, or during appeals.
6. **Appeals Officer/Office:** A separate, higher-level authority responsible for reviewing administrative appeals of initial FOIA determinations.

Explanation of the Diagram:

- **Swimlanes:** Each vertical column represents a specific entity or group responsible for a set of tasks.
- **Actions/Tasks:** Rectangular boxes within each swimlane represent individual steps or processes performed by that entity.
- **Decisions:** Diamond shapes represent decision points where the workflow can diverge based on certain conditions (e.g., "Clarify Request?", "Identifies Classified Material?").
- **Flow/Interactions:** Arrows indicate the direction of information flow or the sequence of steps between entities.
- **Key Symbols:**
 - **Lock icon:** Emphasizes the secure handling of classified information, particularly during record searches and declassification review.

- **Gear/Cog icon:** Can symbolize processing or administrative actions within an office.

This diagram clearly shows how the FOIA Office acts as the central hub, coordinating with various internal and external entities, with the OCA/CMO playing a crucial role when national security information is involved.

Swimlane Diagram: FOIA Workflow with National Security Data

