

§ 1.555 Fees.

(a) *Definitions of terms.* For the purpose of this section, the following definitions apply:

(1) *Commercial use request* means a request from or on behalf of one who seeks information for a use or purpose that furthers the commercial, trade or profit interests of the requester or the person on whose behalf the request is made. To determine whether a request properly belongs in this category, consideration must be given to the use to which a requester will put the documents requested. Where the use of the records sought is not clear in the request or where there is reasonable cause to doubt the use to which the requester will put the records sought, additional information may be sought from the requester before assigning the request to a specific category.

(2) *Direct costs* means those expenditures which VA actually incurs in searching for and duplicating (and in the case of commercial use requests, reviewing) documents to respond to a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request. Direct costs include, for example, the salary of the employee performing work, *i.e.*, the basic rate of pay for the employee, plus 16 percent of that rate to cover benefits, and the cost of operating duplicating machinery. Not included in direct costs are overhead expenses such as costs of space, and heating or lighting of the facility in which the records are stored.

(3) *Duplication* means the process of making a copy of a document necessary to respond to a FOIA request. Such copies can take the form of paper copy, microform, audiovisual materials or machine readable documentation (e.g., magnetic tape or disk), among others. The copy provided must be in a form that is reasonably usable by requesters.

(4) *Educational institution* means a preschool, a public or private elementary or secondary school, an institution of graduate higher education, an institution of undergraduate higher education, an institution of professional education, and an institution of vocational education, which operates a program or programs of scholarly research. To determine whether a request properly belongs in this category, the

request must be evaluated to ensure that it is apparent from the nature of the request that it serves a scholarly research goal of the institution, rather than an individual goal of the requester or a commercial goal of the institution.

(5) *Non-commercial scientific institution* means an institution that is not operated on a *commercial* basis (as that term is referenced under *Commercial use request* of this paragraph) and which is operated solely for the purpose of conducting scientific research, the results of which are not intended to promote any particular product or industry.

(6) *Representative of the news media* means any person actively gathering news for an entity that is organized and operated to publish or broadcast news to the public. The term *news* means information that is about current events or that would be of current interest to the public. Examples of news media entities include television or radio stations broadcasting to the public at large, and publishers of periodicals (but only in those instances when they can qualify as disseminators of *news*) who make their products available for purchase or subscription by the general public. These examples are not intended to be all inclusive. As traditional methods of news delivery evolve (e.g., electronic dissemination of newspapers through telecommunications services), such alternative media will be included in this category. *Freelance* journalists may be regarded as working for a news organization if they can demonstrate a solid basis for expecting publication through that organization, even though not actually employed by it. A publication contract would be the clearest proof, but the requester's past publication history can be considered also. In any case, freelancers who do not qualify for inclusion in the *representative of the news media* category may seek a reduction or waiver of fees under paragraph (f) of this section.

(7) *Review* means the process of examining documents located in response to a *commercial use request* (see definition of commercial use request in this section) to determine whether any portion of any document located is permitted

§ 1.555

38 CFR Ch. I (7-1-10 Edition)

to be withheld. It also includes processing any documents for disclosure in response to a *commercial use request*, e.g., doing all that is necessary to excise them and otherwise prepare them for release. The term *review* does not include time spent resolving general legal or policy issues regarding the application of exemptions.

(8) *Search* means all the time spent looking for material that is responsive to a request, including page-by-page or line-by-line identification of material within documents. Searches may be done manually or by computer using existing programs. The most efficient and least expensive manner of searching for material will be used to minimize costs to VA and the requester. For example, line-by-line searches will not be conducted when duplicating an entire document is the least expensive and quicker method of complying with a request. The term *search* does not cover the time spent to review documents to determine whether all or portions thereof can be withheld under one of the nine categories of exemptions identified in § 1.554 of this part.

(b) *Fees to be charged.* (1) Except as provided in paragraphs (c), (d), (f) and (g) of this section, the Department of Veterans Affairs will charge fees that recoup the full allowable direct costs for responding to each request from the public. Such fees will be charged in accordance with the schedule of fees in paragraph (e) of this section, and other requirements or restrictions in this regulation. The most efficient and least costly methods will be used to comply with requests for documents made under the FOIA.

(2) If it is estimated that charges for duplication determined by using the fee schedule in § 1.555(e) of this part are likely to exceed \$25, the requester will be notified of the estimated amount of fees, unless the requester has indicated in advance his or her willingness to pay fees as high as those anticipated. Such notice will offer the requester the opportunity to confer with Department personnel with the object of reformulating the request to meet his or her needs at a lower cost.

(3) Each administration and staff office upon approval of the Secretary is authorized to contract with private

sector services to locate, reproduce, and disseminate records in response to FOIA requests when that is the most efficient and least costly method. If a contractor is used, the ultimate cost to the requester can be no greater than it would if the administration, staff office, or field facility performed the task, itself. In no case may an administration, staff office, or field facility contract out responsibilities which the FOIA provides that they alone may discharge, such as determining the applicability of an exemption, or determining whether to waive or reduce fees.

(4) When documents that would be responsive to a request are maintained for distribution by agencies operating statutory-based fee schedule programs, in which the agency is required to set the level of fees for particular types of records, such as the National Technical Information Service or the Government Printing Office, the requester of such documents will be informed of the steps necessary to obtain records from those sources, rather than from VA.

(c) *Restrictions on assessing fees.* With the exception of commercial use requests no charges will be assessed for the first 100 pages of duplication and the first two hours of search time. Moreover, no fees are to be charged any requester, including commercial use requesters, if the cost of collecting the fee is equal to or greater than the fee itself. These provisions work together so that, except for commercial use requests, fees will not be assessed until the free search and duplication have been provided. For example, if a request takes two hours and ten minutes of search time and results in 105 reproduced pages of documents, fees can be charged for only 10 minutes of search time and for only five pages of reproduction. If this cost were equal to or less than the cost to VA of billing the requester and processing the fee collected, no charges would be assessed. (NOTE: The cost of collecting fees are VA's administrative costs of receiving and recording a requester's remittance, and processing the fee for deposit in the Treasury Department's special account. The cost is determined to be negligible. The per-transaction costs to

Department of Veterans Affairs

§ 1.555

the Treasury to handle such remittances is negligible and will not be considered in the Department's determination.)

(1) For purposes of the restriction on assessing fees, the word *pages* refers to one-sided paper copies of the standard sizes 8½" × 11" or 8½" × 14" or 11" × 14". Accordingly, requesters will not be entitled to 100 microfiche or 100 computer disks free. One microfiche containing the equivalent of 100 pages or 100 pages of computer printout might meet the terms of the restriction.

(2) The term *search time* in this context is based on manual searches. To calculate the *computer search time* for the purpose of applying the two-hour search restriction, the hourly cost of operating the computer's central processing unit will be combined with the operator's hourly salary, plus 16 percent of the salary. When the cost of the search (including the operator time and the cost of the computer to process a request) equals the equivalent dollar amount of two hours of the salary of the person performing the search, *i.e.*, the operator, charges will begin to be assessed for a computer search.

(d) *Categories of requesters and fees to be charged each category.* There are four categories of FOIA requesters: Commercial use requesters; educational and non-commercial scientific institutional requesters; requesters who are representatives of news media; and all other requesters. Specific levels of fees will be charged for each of these categories as follows:

(1) *Commercial use requesters.* When a request for documents for commercial use is received, the full direct costs of searching for, reviewing for release, and duplicating the records sought will be charged to the requester. Commercial use requesters are not entitled to two hours of free search time nor 100 free pages of reproduced documents. Moreover, the commercial use requester will be charged the cost of searching for and reviewing records even if there is ultimately no disclosure of records. The requester must reasonably describe the records sought.

(2) *Educational and non-commercial scientific institution requesters.* These requesters will be charged only for the cost of reproduction, excluding charges

for the first 100 pages. In order to be considered a member of this category, a requester must show that the request is being made as authorized by and under the auspices of a qualifying institution and that the records are not sought for a commercial use. If the request is from an educational institution, the requester must show that the records sought are in furtherance of scholarly research. If the request is from a non-commercial scientific institution, the requester has to show that the records are sought in furtherance of scientific research. Information necessary to support a claim of being categorized as an educational or non-commercial scientific institution requester will be provided by the requester, and the requester must reasonably describe the records sought.

(3) *Representatives of news media.* These requesters will be charged for the cost of reproduction, only, excluding charges for the first 100 pages. To be included in this category, a requester must fall within the definition of a representative of the news media specified in paragraph (a)(vi) of this section, and the request must not be made for commercial use. A request for records supporting the news dissemination function of the requester will not be considered to be a request that is for commercial use. Requesters must reasonably describe the records sought.

(4) *All other requesters.* Any requester that does not fit into any of the categories in this section will be charged fees which recover the full reasonable direct cost of searching for and reproducing records that are responsive to the request, except that the first 100 pages of reproduction and the first two hours of search time will be furnished without charge. In addition, under certain circumstances specified in paragraph (f) of this section, fees will be waived or reduced at the discretion of field facility heads, their designee, or responsible Central Office officials. Requests from VA beneficiaries, applicants for VA benefits, or other individuals for records retrievable by their name or other personal identifier will initially be processed under 38 U.S.C. 5701 and 5 U.S.C. 552a and will be assessed fees in accordance with the applicable fee provisions of § 1.526(i) or

§ 1.555

38 CFR Ch. I (7–1–10 Edition)

§ 1.577(f) of this part. To the extent that records are not disclosable under these provisions, the disclosure of such records will be evaluated under §§ 1.550 through 1.559 of this part, and fees will

be assessed under paragraph (e) of this section. Requesters must reasonably describe the records sought.

(e) *Schedule of fees:*

| Activity | Fees |
|---|--|
| (1) Duplication of documents by any type of reproduction process to produce plain one-sided paper copies of a standard size (8½" × 11"; 8½" × 14"; 11" × 14"). | \$0.15 per page. |
| (2) Duplication of non-paper records, such as microforms, audiovisual materials (motion pictures, slides, laser optical disks, video tapes, audiotapes, etc.) computer tapes and disks, diskettes for personal computers, and any other automated media output. | Actual direct cost to the Agency. (See paragraph (a)(2) of this section and, if costs are likely to exceed \$25.00, paragraph (b)(2) of this section. |
| (3) Duplication of documents by any type of reproduction process not covered by paragraphs (e)(1) and (2) of this section to produce a copy in a form reasonably usable by the requester. | Actual direct cost to the Agency. (See paragraph (a)(2) of this section and, if costs are likely to exceed \$25.00, paragraph (b)(2) of this section. |
| (4) Document search by manual (non-automated) methods | Basic hourly salary rate of the employee(s) performing the search, plus 16 percent. (If costs are likely to exceed \$25.00, see paragraph (g)(2) of this section.) |
| (NOTE—If a department, staff office or field station uses exclusively a single class of personnel, e.g., all administrative/clerical or all professional/executive, an average rate for the range of grades involved may be used). | |
| (5) Document search using automated methods, such as by computer | Actual direct cost to perform search. (See paragraph (c)(2) of this section, and, if costs are likely to exceed \$25.00, see paragraph (g)(2) of this section.) |
| (6) Document review (use only for commercial use requesters) | Basic hourly salary rate of employee(s) performing initial review to determine whether to release document(s) or portions of records, plus 16 percent. |
| (NOTE. Charge for document reviews covers only the time spent reviewing the document(s) at the initial administrative level to determine applicability of a specific FOIA exemption to a particular record or portion of a record. It does not cover any review incurred at the administrative appeal level once the initial exemptions are applied. However, records or portions of records withheld in full under an exemption which is subsequently determined not to apply may be reviewed again to determine the applicability of other exemptions not previously considered. The cost for such a subsequent review may be properly assessed). | |
| (7) Other charges: Certifying that records are true copies; Sending records by special methods such as express mail. | Where applicable, assess under provisions of §§ 1.526(i) and (j) of this part, otherwise actual direct cost of service performed. |

(f) *Waiving or reducing fees.* (1) Fees for records and services provided in response to a FOIA request will be waived or reduced when it is determined by responsible Central Office officials or field station heads or their designee that furnishing the document(s) is in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations or activities of the government and is not primarily in the commercial interest of the requester.

(2) The following factors will be considered in sequence in determining

whether disclosure of information is in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to the public understanding of the operations or activities of the government:

(i) The subject of the request: Whether the subject of the requested records concerns the operations or activities of the government;

(ii) The informative value of the information to be disclosed: Whether the disclosure is likely to contribute to an understanding of government operations or activities;

(iii) The contribution to an understanding of the subject by the public likely to result from disclosure; Whether disclosure of the requested information will contribute to public understanding; and

(iv) The significance of the contribution to public understanding: Whether the disclosure is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of government operations or activities.

(3) The following factors will be considered in sequence in determining whether disclosure of information is primarily in the commercial interest of the requester:

(i) The existence and magnitude of a commercial interest: Whether the requester has a commercial interest that would be furthered by the requested disclosure; and, if so

(ii) The primary interest in disclosure: Whether the magnitude of the identified commercial interest of the requester is sufficiently large, in comparison with the public interest in disclosure, that disclosure is primarily in the commercial interest of the requester.

(4) An appeal from an adverse fee waiver or reduction determination will be processed in the same manner as described in § 1.557 of this part.

(g) *Other administrative considerations to improve assessment and collection of fees—(1) Charging interest—notice and rate.* The Department of Veterans Affairs may charge interest to those requesters who fail to timely pay fees assessed in accordance with these regulations. Determination to charge interest will be made by the responsible Central Office official or field facility head or designee. Interest will be assessed on the unpaid bill beginning on the 31st day following the day on which the original billing was sent. Interest will be at the rate prescribed in section 3717 of title 31 U.S.C., and will accrue from the date of the billing. Accounting procedures ensure that a requester who has remitted the full amount within the time period is properly credited with the payment. The fact that the fee has been received by VA, even if not processed, will suffice to stay the accrual of interest.

(2) *Charges for unsuccessful search.* When it is determined by the respon-

sible Central Office official or field facility head or designee, charges for searching may be assessed, even if records are not located to satisfy a request or if records located are determined to be exempt from disclosure. If it is determined that search charges are likely to exceed \$25, the requester will be notified of the estimated amount of fees, unless the requester has indicated in advance a willingness to pay fees as high as those anticipated. Such notice will offer the requester the opportunity to confer with agency personnel with the object of reformulating the request to meet his or her needs at a lower cost.

(3) *Aggregating requests.* When the responsible Central Office official or field facility head or designee reasonably believes that a requester or, on rare occasions, a group of requesters acting in concert, is attempting to break a request down into a series of requests for the purpose of evading the assessment of fees, the responsible Central Office official, or field facility head or designee may aggregate (combine) any such requests and charge accordingly. One element to consider in determining whether a belief would be reasonable is the time period in which the requests occurred. For example, it is reasonable to presume that multiple requests within a 30-day time period that seek portion(s) of the same document(s) is an attempt to avoid payment of charges. For requests made over a longer period, however, such presumption becomes harder to sustain. In each case, there must be a solid basis for determining that aggregation is warranted. Caution will be exercised before aggregating requests from more than one requester. There must be a concrete basis on which to conclude that the requesters are acting in concert and are acting specifically to avoid payment. In no case will multiple requests on unrelated subjects from one requester be aggregated.

(4) *Advance payments.* The Department of Veterans Affairs may not require a requester to make an advance payment, *i.e.*, payment before work is commenced or continued on a request, unless:

(i) The allowable charges that a requester may be required to pay are

§ 1.556

38 CFR Ch. I (7-1-10 Edition)

likely to exceed \$250. Then, the Department of Veterans Affairs should either notify the requester of the likely cost and obtain satisfactory assurance of full payment, or require an advance payment of an amount up to the full estimated charges in the case of requesters with no history of payment; or

(ii) A requester has previously failed to pay a fee charged in a timely fashion (*i.e.*, within 30 days of the date of the billing). Then, the Department of Veterans Affairs may require the requester to pay the full amount owed, plus any applicable interest as provided in paragraph (g)(1) of this section, or to demonstrate that he or she has, in fact, paid the fee, and to make an advance payment of the estimated fee before the Department begins to process a new request or a pending request from that requester.

(iii) If a requester is required to make advance payments, as described in this section, the time limits prescribed in §1.553a of this part, for responding to initial requests and appeals from initial denials, will begin only after the Department has received the advance fee payments.

(5) *Debt collection.* In the event of non-payment of billed charges for disclosure of records, the procedures authorized by the Debt Collection Act of 1982 (Pub. L. 97-365) may be used. This may include disclosure to consumer reporting agencies and use of collection agencies.

(Authority: 5 U.S.C. 552(a)(4)(A))

[53 FR 10377, Mar. 31, 1988]

§ 1.556 Requests for other reasonably described records.

Each administration, staff office, and field facility head will designate an employee(s) who will be responsible for initial action on (granting or denying) requests to inspect or obtain information from or copies of records under their jurisdiction and within the purview of §1.553. This responsibility includes maintaining a uniform listing of such requests. Data logged will consist of: Name and address of requester; date of receipt of request; brief description of request; action taken on request, granted or denied; citation of the spe-

cific section when request is denied; and date of reply to the requester. In the field a denial of any such request may be made only by the Director or the designated employee and in Central Office only by the administration or staff office head or designee. The letter notifying the requester of the denial will be signed by the official making the denial decision. Any legal question arising in a field station concerning the release of information will be referred to the appropriate Regional Counsel for disposition as contemplated by §13.401* of this chapter. In Central Office such legal questions will be referred to the General Counsel. Any administrative question will be referred through administrative channels to the appropriate administration or staff office head. All denials or proposed denials at the Central Office level will be coordinated with the Director, Information Service as well as the General Counsel.

[40 FR 12658, Mar. 20, 1975]

§ 1.557 Administrative review.

(a) Upon denial of a request, the responsible Department of Veterans Affairs official or designated employee will inform the requester in writing of the denial, cite the specific exemption in §1.554 upon which the denial is based, set forth the names and titles or positions of each person responsible for the denial of such request, and advise that the denial may be appealed to the General Counsel.

(b) The final agency decision in such appeals will be made by the General Counsel or the Deputy General Counsel.

[40 FR 12658, Mar. 20, 1975, as amended at 55 FR 21546, May 25, 1990]

§§ 1.558-1.559 [Reserved]

**SAFEGUARDING PERSONAL INFORMATION
IN DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
RECORDS**

NOTE: Sections 1.575 through 1.584 concern the safeguarding of individual privacy from the misuse of information from files, records, reports, and other papers and documents in Department of Veterans Affairs

*EDITORIAL NOTE: At 42 FR 41410, Aug. 17, 1977, §13.401 was removed.