Questions for the Record Submitted to
Assistant Secretary Joyce A. Barr by
Senator Vitter
Senate Committee on the Judiciary
May 6, 2015

Question 4:

According to the Testimony of Mr. Blanton, the State Department has a $1 Billion IT budget. How do you justify the speed with which your agency processes FOIA requests when this budget indicates plentiful resources to address the problem?

Answer:

The Department's $1.6 billion IT budget covers a wide variety of requirements, including the periodic technological refresh of computers and server equipment at all of our domestic facilities and overseas missions; personal communication devices such as cell-phones and Blackberries; the operations, maintenance and security of the Department's intranet platform and electronic outreach efforts; and the development systems designed to standardize and improve management processes, ranging from logistics and human resources to passport and visa processing.

Personnel costs are the largest share of the FOIA Office's operating budget, and are funded out of Diplomatic and Consular Programs. Though the Department's FOIA Office has identified technological solutions that could aid in their work, the increase in the Department's FOIA backlog is

more complicated than a simple lack of IT resources. In recent years, the FOIA office has seen a significant workload increase (nearly 20,000 requests in 2014, growing over 300 percent since 2008) as well as an increase in litigation over open cases, while funding constraints have meant that the office's resources haven't kept pace with this increasing demand. Once a case enters litigation, reaching resolution is far more labor intensive due to additional requirements. Additionally, the Department deals with many complex FOIA requests requiring coordination across bureaus and posts overseas and must thoroughly review responses to prevent the release of sensitive and potentially damaging information.

The Department continues to determine what will be needed to meet the Administration's Open Government Directive, requiring agencies to reduce their backlogs of FOIA requests by 10 percent each year. The Department's goals related to FOIA compliance for the near future are twofold: to reduce the open FOIA case backlog and deploy enhanced technology on the unclassified networks to improve workflow. In the coming months, the Department will seek to determine the appropriate response and whether an increase in staffing and/or funding is required to meet these needs to both reduce this backlog and to ensure that the FOIA office has the IT capabilities to handle the growing workload going forward.