

fee will exceed that amount and ask whether you want us to continue to process your request. Also, before we start work on your request under § 402.120, we will generally notify you of our exact or estimated charge for the information, unless it is clear that you have a reasonable idea of the cost.

(b) If you have failed to pay previous bills in a timely fashion, or if our initial review of your request indicates that we will charge you fees exceeding \$250, we will require you to pay your past due fees and/or the estimated fees, or a deposit, before we start searching for the records you want. If so, we will let you know promptly upon receiving your request. In such cases, administrative time limits (i.e., ten working days from receipt of initial requests and 20 working days from receipt of appeals from initial denials, plus permissible extensions of these time limits) will begin only after we come to an agreement with you over payment of fees, or decide that fee waiver or reduction is appropriate.

(c) We will normally require you to pay all fees before we furnish the records to you. We may, at our discretion, send you a bill along with or following the furnishing of the records. For example, we may do this if you have a history of prompt payment. We may also, at our discretion, aggregate the charges for certain time periods in order to avoid sending numerous small bills to frequent requesters, or to businesses or agents representing requesters. For example, we might send a bill to such a requester once a month. Fees should be paid in accordance with the instructions furnished by the person who responds to your requests.

(d) Payment of fees will be made by check or money order payable to "Social Security Administration".

§ 402.185 Waiver or reduction of fees in the public interest.

(a) *Standard.* We will waive or reduce the fees we would otherwise charge if disclosure of the information meets both tests which are explained in paragraphs (b) and (c) of this section:

(1) It is in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the oper-

ations or activities of the government; and

(2) It is not primarily in the commercial interest of the requester.

(b) *Public interest.* The disclosure passes the first test only if it furthers the specific public interest of being likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of government operations or activities, regardless of any other public interest it may further. In analyzing this question, we will consider the following factors:

(1) How, if at all, do the records to be disclosed pertain to the operations or activities of the Federal Government?

(2) Would disclosure of the records reveal any meaningful information about government operations or activities? Can one learn from these records anything about such operations that is not already public knowledge?

(3) Will the disclosure advance the understanding of the general public as distinguished from a narrow segment of interested persons? Under this factor we may consider whether the requester is in a position to contribute to public understanding. For example, we may consider whether the requester has such knowledge or expertise as may be necessary to understand the information, and whether the requester's intended use of the information would be likely to disseminate the information among the public. An unsupported claim to be doing research for a book or article does not demonstrate that likelihood, while such a claim by a representative of the news media is better evidence.

(4) Will the contribution to public understanding be a significant one? Will the public's understanding of the government's operations be substantially greater as a result of the disclosure?

(c) *Not primarily in the requester's commercial interest.* If the disclosure passes the test of furthering the specific public interest described in paragraph (b) of this section, we will determine whether it also furthers the requester's commercial interest and, if so, whether this effect outweighs the advancement of that public interest. In applying this second test, we will consider the following factors:

(1) Would the disclosure further a commercial interest of the requester,

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or of someone on whose behalf the requester is acting? “Commercial interests” include interests relating to business, trade, and profit. Not only profit-making corporations have commercial interests—so do nonprofit corporations, individuals, unions, and other associations. The interest of a representative of the news media in using the information for news dissemination purposes will not be considered a commercial interest.

(2) If disclosure would further a commercial interest of the requester, would that effect outweigh the advancement of the public interest defined in paragraph (b) of this section? Which effect is primary?

(d) *Deciding between waiver and reduction.* If the disclosure passes both tests, we will normally waive fees. However, in some cases we may decide only to reduce the fees. For example, we may do this when disclosure of some but not all of the requested records passes the tests.

(e) *Procedure for requesting a waiver or reduction.* You must make your request for a waiver or reduction at the same time you make your request for records. You should explain why you believe a waiver or reduction is proper under the analysis in paragraphs (a) through (d) of this section. Only FOI Officers may make the decision whether to waive, or reduce, the fees. If we do not completely grant your request for a waiver or reduction, the denial letter will designate a review official. You may appeal the denial to that official. In your appeal letter, you should discuss whatever reasons are given in our denial letter. The process prescribed in § 402.190 of this part will also apply to these appeals.

§ 402.190 Officials who may deny a request for records under FOIA.

Only the Director, Office of Disclosure Policy, SSA, or her or his designee is authorized to deny a written request to obtain, inspect, or copy any social security record.

§ 402.195 How a request is denied.

(a) *Oral requests.* If we cannot comply with your oral request because the Director of the Office of Disclosure Policy (or designee) has not previously

made a determination to release the record you want, we will tell you that fact. If you still wish to pursue your request, you must put your request in writing.

(b) *Written requests.* If you make a written request and the information or record you requested will not be released, we will send you an official denial in writing. We will explain why the request was denied (for example, the reasons why the requested document is subject to one or more clearly described exemptions), will include the name and title or position of the person who made the decision, and what your appeal rights are.

(c) *Unproductive searches.* We make a diligent search for records to satisfy your request. Nevertheless, we may not be able always to find the records you want using the information you provided, or they may not exist. If we advise you that we have been unable to find the records despite a diligent search, this does not constitute a denial of your request.

§ 402.200 How to appeal a decision denying all or part of a request.

(a) *How to appeal.* If all or part of your written request was denied, you may request that the Commissioner of Social Security, 6401 Security Boulevard, Baltimore, MD 21235 review that determination. Your request for review:

(1) Must be in writing;

(2) Must be mailed within 30 days after you received notification that all or part of your request was denied or, if later, 30 days after you received materials in partial compliance with your request; and

(3) May include additional information or evidence to support your request.

(b) *How the review is made.* After reviewing the prior decision and after considering anything else you have submitted, the Commissioner or his or her designee will affirm or revise all or part of the prior decision. The Commissioner (or a designee) will affirm a denial only after consulting with the appropriate SSA official(s), including legal counsel. The decision must be made within 20 working days after