

FBI Accused of Trying To Cripple FOI Act

By Robert Pear

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Fifty-six organizations have charged that the FBI is waging a campaign to "cripple" the Freedom of Information Act.

In a strongly worded letter sent last week to Attorney General Griffin B. Bell, the groups said that amendments proposed by the FBI would virtually exempt the bureau from the disclosure law and would weaken requirements imposed on other agencies.

"If the Freedom of Information Act needs to be changed at all," the groups argued, "it needs to be strengthened, through administrative action, to increase rather than decrease public access to information."

Signers of the letter included activists from a broad cross-section of civil liberties, religious, political, environmental and scholarly groups, as well as the editors of two periodicals, *The Nation* and *The Progressive*.

In a booklet sent last month to key members of Congress, FBI Director William H. Webster proposed sweeping cutbacks in the information act. He said they would preserve and refine the basic principle underlying the law.

Under the suggested changes, the FBI would not have to disclose records of investigations in four top-priority areas — organized crime, terrorism, foreign intelligence and foreign counterintelligence.

The proposals would allow a seven-year delay in release of records pertaining to all other investigations and would empower the FBI to deny files to aliens and persons convicted of a felony.

Webster's proposals did not go through the normal procedures for clearance of legislation. Thus, he said, they do not necessarily represent the views of the Justice Department or the Carter administration.