

# A costly, chaotic mess in Washington, thanks to new privacy law

By James Coates  
Chicago Tribune

WASHINGTON — A new federal law guaranteeing a citizen's right to privacy has collided head-on with a new law guaranteeing him access to government information. Federal officials describe the result as chaos.

Civil servants are now undergoing "re-education" because of widespread complaints that many of them were refusing information to all who sought it, incorrectly saying the privacy act demanded such secrecy.

Under this law, government agencies are prohibited from making files containing information about an individual available to another person or agency without the individual's consent. Bureaucrats who violate the law face fines of up to \$5,000. Reporters, members of Con-

gress and ordinary citizens have all complained that lower-level civil servants have misused the new law either out of confusion or in a desire to conceal something, officials of the Office of Management and Budget acknowledged.

Further, the law — which went on the books Sept. 27 — has produced other problems.

To the Internal Revenue Service, for example, the Privacy Act means the agency now will have to store for five years about one million files on people. Formerly it simply burned the files.

## Two-edged threat haunts bureaucrats

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Section A Page 17

—From Page 16

past paid millions in taxes after officials provided local governments with their names and addresses.

The cost to taxpayers of storing records, publicizing what files the government has, and paying salaries for jobs the act

created could be as high as \$1 billion next year. Future costs should run about \$300 million annually.

A spokesman for OMB — the agency supposed to coordinate the effort to implement the act — described another unplanned side effect: "It is going to take us months

to educate government people to start providing information again to people who need it and have a right to it."

Ruth Matthews, a staff member with the House Subcommittee on Information, put it less kindly.

"We hear that a lot of small-minded and low-ranking govern-

ment employees are using the Privacy Act as an excuse to flood the bureaucrat's inclination to hide things for the sake of hiding things."

The problem is that federal bureaucrats still haven't figured out what they were supposed to make public under the Freedom of Information Act of 1966, sev-

eral sources said.

Amendments this year to that act require government agencies to tell citizens the contents of files kept on them and to divulge many other files showing how the government operates.

A public information officer in the Agriculture Department

gave this description of how bureaucrats try to cope with the two measures at the same time:

"If you call somebody up and he's not in his office, half the time he'll be at a meeting about the Freedom of Information Act. The rest of the time he's at a seminar about the Privacy Act."

—Turn to Page 17, Col. 1