

Bureau of Consumer Financial Protection
1700 G St. N.W. Washington D.C. 20552

Docket Numbers: CFPB-2017-0035 & 2017-0019, CFPB 2017-0036 & 2017-0022
Re: Information Collection Plan for Consumer Complaint and Information Collection System

December 28, 2017

Dear Acting Director,

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to your request for comment on the Generic Information Collection Plan for Consumer Complaint and Information Collection System as to “whether the collection of information is necessary for the proper performance of the functions of the [Consumer Financial Protection] Bureau, including whether the information will have practical utility”.

The undersigned consumer, civil rights, privacy, community, higher education and fair lending organizations have long strongly supported the collection and dissemination of consumer complaint information as an indispensable resource for consumers to empower themselves in the marketplace.

We value the continuous improvements made to the CFPB’s complaint process that have made the system more efficient, such as the consolidation of complaint categories on the intake form. The process is also more accountable with its collection of feedback on the outcome of complaints. Making outcome information available to companies allows them to better understand their customers and more accurately measure customer service performance. Additionally, this helps the Bureau better recognize which companies are consistently offering excellent customer service and which are not living up to the objective of complaint resolution.

The public information provided in the CFPB's online database uses market-based mechanisms to encourage companies to police themselves, lessening the need for regulatory or enforcement activity. The visibility of the complaint information gives companies an incentive to treat consumers fairly and to correct problems promptly on their own, potentially avoiding the need for government intervention. The CFPB complaint information also has an important advantage over other online complaints databases, as the CFPB confirms the consumer's relationship to the company and does not allow companies to spam the database with fraudulent positive or negative reviews.

Collection of firsthand complaint information is a vital part of the Bureau's mandate under the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act. The CFPB has an obligation to "collect, investigate and respond" to consumer complaints.

Access to consumer complaint information allows individuals to make more informed financial decisions, and to recognize the types of problems that have occurred without resolution, compelling consumers to turn elsewhere for a solution.

The CFPB's collection and publication of complaint data has fundamental practical utility by encouraging consumers to seek out information on their own—prior to purchase or borrowing--to help analyze a company's performance when a problem occurs. Empowering consumers to collect information in advance of major financial commitments helps prevent future problems.

It also empowers consumers to report unreasonable, unfair, deceptive, and abusive practices-- post purchase--and alert others in advance of problems. The CFPB's complaint process facilitates responses to individual complaints, which helps to hold companies accountable.

The details of a complaint are invaluable to consumers, researchers and other businesses to put the complaint in context and help prevent further problems. Examining the narrative of a complaint provides consumers with critical information about the specific grievances people experience, as well as a better understanding of how a business handles its customer disputes.

Collection of direct and detailed consumer feedback of how complaints have been handled affords the Bureau credible insight into where consumers have been satisfied with company responses and where breakdowns have occurred in the complaint resolution process. It also allows the Bureau to identify a pattern of problems and, where appropriate, use one of its many tools to generate change based on the type and severity of the complaints.

We have long been impressed by the pains the Bureau has taken to secure consumers' personally identifiable information. We continue to support the practice of obtaining opt-in consent from individuals prior to reporting complaint details. We also support the Bureau's use of algorithms to detect and remove personally identifiable information from complaint submissions, and the reliance on human inspectors to further scrub complaints.

The collection of and public access to complaint information is a vital resource for consumers and serves to support the CFPB's mission to provide the most meaningful information possible for consumers to make wise financial decisions.

Sincerely,

Allied Progress
Americans for Financial Reform
Baltimore Neighborhoods
Bronx Legal Services
Brooklyn Legal Services
California Reinvestment Coalition
Center for Digital Democracy
Center for NYC Neighborhoods
Center for Responsible Lending
Connecticut Fair Housing Center
Consumer Action
Consumer Federation of America
Consumers Union
Consumer Watchdog
Demos
District Council 37 AFSCME Legal Services
Empire Justice Center
HomeSmartNY
JASA/Legal Services for the Elderly in Queens
Legal Services NYC
Long Island Housing Services
Manhattan Legal Services
Massachusetts Communities Action Network
Mobilization for Justice
Nassau/Suffolk Law Services Committee
National Association of Consumer Advocates
National Consumer Law Center (on behalf of its low income clients)
National Fair Housing Alliance
New York Legal Assistance Group
Privacy Times
Prosperity Now
PUBLIC CITIZEN
Public Justice
Queens Legal Services
Reinvestment Partners
Staten Island Legal Services
Tennessee Citizen Action
The Institute for College Access & Success
The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights
U.S.PIRG
Woodstock Institute