Chairman Peters Opening Statement As Prepared for Delivery
Full Committee Hearing: Modernizing the Government's Classification System
March 23, 2023

Every year, a whopping 50 million new classified documents are created. Classified materials typically fall into one of three categories, confidential, secret, or top secret, based on their perceived sensitivity.

Although there are existing requirements to automatically declassify documents after 25 years, in practice that process is ineffective, and there is currently a backlog of hundreds of millions of pages that are awaiting declassification.

Along with outdated technology, the result is an overburdened classification system that costs taxpayers more than $18 billion a year to maintain.

Experts, both within and outside of the federal government, estimate that between 50 and 90 percent of all classified materials could be made public without compromising national security, and that the over-classification of documents reduces transparency and erodes public confidence in the federal government.

Today's hearing is an opportunity for the Committee to hear from experts on how Congress can modernize the classification system to improve efficiency and promote better transparency for the American people.

We'll be discussing proposed reforms, including several recommendations from the National Archives' Public Interest Declassification Board, to help streamline our nation's classification and declassification processes.

For example, investing in advanced technology, such as artificial intelligence and machine learning, could help agencies better manage classified information, better serve the public, and meet the needs of the future.

Other proposed reforms could help reduce the number of classified materials and levels of classification, establish automated declassification tools, and provide an expedited declassification request process for lawmakers, all of which would improve transparency and ensure Congress and the public can help hold federal agencies more accountable.

I'm interested in pursuing bipartisan legislation to help tackle some of these concerns, and I hope my colleagues will join me in those efforts. I appreciate the engagement of Ranking Member Paul and his staff and believe we can find a bipartisan path forward on these important issues.

I look forward to having a productive discussion with our expert witnesses today to help us get more information and begin that process.