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Description of document: United States Agency for Global Media (USAGM)
Standard Operating Procedure on Voice of America
editorials, April 2019-December 2020

Requested date: 30-December-2020

Release date: 07-October-2022

Posted date: 23-September-2024

Source of document: Freedom of Information Act Request
The Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG)
FOIA/Privacy Act Officer
Office of the General Counsel
330 Independence Avenue, SW, Suite 3349
Washington, DC 20237
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U.S. AGENCY FOR
GLOBAL MEDIA

Office of the General Counsel
Freedom of Information Act Office

330 Independence Avenue SW | Washington, DC 20237 | usagm.gov

October 7, 2022

Via email

RE: Request Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act – FOIA21-104

This letter is in response to your Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request dated December 30, 2020 that you mailed to the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM). The Agency was not aware of your mailed request due to COVID 19, as most of the federal government including USAGM was on full teleworking status. The Agency became aware of your request on August 13, 2021.

In your request, you asked for:

“[A] copy of each policy and Standard Operating Procedure on VOA Editorials and/or the formulation of VOA Editorials. I wish to limit this request to the timeframe April 1, 2019 through December 29, 2020.”

The Agency has completed its search for and review of records responsive to your request. Enclosed are copies of documents responsive to your request. We have made redactions to the information under FOIA Exemptions (b)(6) (protecting information, the release of which would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy) and (b)(5) (protecting deliberative and pre-decisional materials, the release of which would harm the deliberative process).

The Agency is waiving all fees for this request and the enclosed records are provided to you at no charge.

This concludes the Agency’s response to your request, and it is now closed.



For further assistance or to discuss any aspect of your request, you may contact me at foia@usagm.gov or 202-920-2442. You also may contact USAGM'S FOIA Liaison, Stephen McGinley, with questions about pending FOIA matters at smcginley@usagm.gov or 202-920-2366. Additionally, you may contact the Office of Government Information Services (OGIS) at the National Archives and Records Administration to inquire about the FOIA mediation services they offer:

Office of Government Information Services National Archives
and Records Administration
8601 Adelphi Road-OGIS
College Park, Maryland 20740-6001
E-mail: ogis@nara.gov;
Telephone: 202-741-5770
Toll free: 1 877-684-6448
Facsimile: 202-741-5769

Finally, if you are not satisfied with this response to your request, you may file an administrative appeal with the Agency by writing to: Chairperson, Access Appeal Committee, USAGM, Suite 3349, 330 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20237. Your appeal **must be transmitted by email within 90 days** of the date of this letter.

Again, should you have any questions regarding your request, please contact me at 202-920-2442 or the Office of the General Counsel at the above address or at foia@usagm.gov.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "James McLaren".

James McLaren
Acting Deputy General Counsel

Enclosure



U.S. AGENCY FOR
GLOBAL MEDIA

MEMORANDUM FOR: Network Directors/Presidents
FROM: Kelu Chao, Acting CEO
DATE: May 20, 2021
SUBJECT: Program Review and Procedures for Violations of Journalistic Standards

As I outlined in my welcome message as Acting Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM), my highest priority is reaffirming the firewall, the highest standards of professionalism, the sacred editorial independence, and the journalistic integrity of the USAGM networks. I am writing to provide updates on the agency's program review and procedures for responding to journalist lapses—two agency processes that uphold and advance the priority I mentioned above. These processes firmly honor the firewall and journalistic independence of the networks.

There has been considerable interest in these processes from outside stakeholders. They were both highlighted in last year's [OIG Inspection of USAGM Journalistic Standards and Principles](#); the ongoing GAO review of USAGM governance and network oversight is looking into both of them as well. In addition, Congress has been very engaged in these oversight matters, and it included language touching on both in the FY 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) (Section 1299Q), which mandates the CEO:

(23) To—

(A) require annual content reviews of each language service of Voice of America, the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, and each grantee network, consisting of a review of at least 10 percent of available unique weekly content from any selected week from the previous year, which shall be conducted, to the extent practicable, by fluent language speakers and experts without direct affiliation to the language service being reviewed, who are seeking any evidence of inappropriate or unprofessional content, which shall be submitted to the Office of Policy [and] Research, the head and Board of the respective language service, and the Chief Executive Officer;

(B) submit to the appropriate congressional committees a list of anomalous reports, including status updates on anomalous services during the 3-year period commencing on the date of receipt of the first report of biased, unprofessional, otherwise problematic content; and

(C) launch a review, using external, native-language and regional experts, the results of which are to be reported to the appropriate congressional committees, if a widespread pattern of violations of the principles, standards, or journalistic code of ethics of a language service or grantee network has been identified.

Procedures for Violations of Journalistic Standards

I am attaching the "USAGM Procedures for Violations of the Principles, Standards, or Journalistic Code of Ethics." These procedures reflect minor administrative modifications (reflecting new NDAA language and the CEO as head of agency) from the previous version that

the former Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) approved on March 12, 2020. Prior to Board approval, these procedures were developed in close coordination with network leadership, including their general counsels. These procedures lay out a phased approach for response, depending on the severity of the violation. Please familiarize yourselves with these procedures and review them with your key editorial staff members.

Program Review

Beginning in 2019, USAGM distributed to networks “Expectations for Network Program Review” that established baseline standards for conduct and oversight of program reviews. These standards have been written to allow networks flexibility in conducting program reviews, while also fulfilling statutory requirements and sharing best practices.

In 2020, each network submitted their program review reports from the previous cycle. Then USAGM’s Office of Policy and Research (OPR) facilitated conversations between then-CEO Grant Turner and each network head on the process and findings of program review.

USAGM has now revised the “Network Program Review Guidelines” document for two reasons: to incorporate feedback from our networks and to comply with new provisions of the FY 2021 NDAA. Please review these standards and flag any constraints you may have in meeting them, particularly the new NDAA requirements about the scope of the reviews.

In addition, please submit your 2020 program review materials, as outlined in the expectations document, by June 25, 2021:

- An overview of the network’s process for conducting program reviews, including specific evaluation criteria, and an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the process;
- A schedule for all reviews conducted in the previous year and an explanation for any reviews not conducted;
- A summary of the most important findings of the reviews and the network’s highest priority action items;
- Copies of the reports for all program reviews conducted; and
- A status report on any services that have been found to have biased, unprofessional, or other problematic content within the past three years.

These may be emailed to (b) (6) in OPR. If the volume of material makes email prohibitive, please work with (b) (6) on an alternate delivery method.

Thank you for your support in upholding the quality and integrity of your network’s programming. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me or Chief Strategy Officer Shawn Powers, (b) (6)

Attachments:

1. USAGM Procedures for Violations of the Principles, Standards, or Journalistic Code of Ethics
2. Network Program Review Guidelines

NETWORK PROGRAM REVIEW GUIDELINES

USAGM's Office of Policy and Research

May 2021

Summary: Program reviews are evaluations of the quality of a selection of programming of the networks' language services based upon both internal and external feedback. The program review also addresses the political and media environment in the target market. The review aims, in full compliance with the firewall, to provide network leadership and USAGM an independent evaluation of the work of each language service.

The guiding principle underlying program reviews is to seek a constructive dialogue with the service members and their management such that all parties understand, and ultimately implement, recommendations and best practices identified during the review. These recommendations are linked to and reinforced by an individual service's strategic plan, which is intended to track improvements and performance beyond the program review process itself.

USAGM's Office of Policy and Research (OPR) proposes the following framework of baseline expectations for each network's program review process:

1. Language Service Self-Assessment: The program review process should begin with a language service self-assessment, to be managed by the service director with input from others, that highlights key accomplishments, challenges, and problems that need to be addressed. This self-assessment should reference previous program reviews and strategic plans and be included in the final report. The self-assessment should assume existing/continued staffing and resources and identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges.
2. Evaluation Criteria: Each network should have a formal set of criteria against which each service's programming is judged. These criteria should cover the following areas:
 - a. Journalistic Standards – balance/objectivity, accuracy, comprehensiveness
 - b. Relevance – market focus, timeliness, usefulness, uniqueness
 - c. Presentation Quality – formats/organization, talent, language
 - d. Technical Quality – use of videos/images/graphics, use of sound, use of text, studio settings, branding/cross-promotion
 - e. Audience Engagement – interactivity, service participation

Each network has the flexibility to design their own evaluation criteria, as long as they cover the major categories listed here. Instances of inappropriate or unprofessional content should be flagged in accordance with the "USAGM Procedures for Violations of the Principles, Standards, or Journalistic Code of Ethics," codified as policy in March 2020.

3. Frequency: Each USAGM language service should be reviewed at least once a year. More frequent reviews can be conducted as warranted for high-profile services, special coverage, where problems have previously been identified, or other reasons. For networks

dealing with just one language, multiple reviews should occur covering different platforms (radio, television, digital) or programming elements (news, current affairs).

4. **Scope:** Reviews should examine samples of content from a selected time-span, with efforts made to ensure diversity of programming types, staff, and stringers. While the quantity of programming reviewed may vary according to the size and output of the service, each review should consider at least 3 hours of original programming or 10 percent of a service's average weekly original output, whichever is greater.¹
5. **Reviewers:** To ensure objectivity, reviews should be conducted by an office that reports directly to the network head, outside of the programming or editorial chain of command. To the extent practicable, reviews should be conducted by fluent language speakers and experts without direct affiliation to the language service being reviewed. Ideally, reviews should draw from multiple experts representing a range of experience – journalistic, media, regional, technical, etc. Every review should include at least some expert external to the language service in question (either an outsider, or another network employee with the requisite expertise and language proficiency). Translations should be provided where reviewers are not proficient in language. To manage costs, machine translations may be used where they are feasible and reasonably accurate.
6. **Meetings:** Results of the evaluation should be presented to the service to facilitate a robust discussion on how to follow up. Meetings should include relevant service staff (as determined by the network), leadership, and representatives of offices that support or coordinate with the services (e.g., Training, HR, TSI, Newsroom). Some networks also use this opportunity to present other data relevant to the service's performance, including research, digital analytics, impact evidence, progress on service goals, analysis of the media and political environment, etc. Final reports should be updated to reflect the outcome of this collective review and discussion, including the addition of any relevant data shared in preparation for or during the meeting.
7. **Action Plans:** The reviewing office should facilitate the development of a plan for performance improvements and, if needed, to correct any deficiencies found in the reviews. These action plans should identify the responsible offices and expected timeframes and should be revisited at regular intervals to ensure progress.
8. **Documentation:** Results of the evaluation should be written up into a formal report that combines feedback from both internal and external sources and action plans. Reports should include the review schedule, list of experts involved, scope of content assessed, key findings, action items for the language services, and any additional requests or action

¹ The FY 2021 NDAA calls for “annual content reviews of each language service of Voice of America, The Office of Cuba Broadcasting, and each grantee network, consisting of a review of at least 10 percent of available unique weekly content from any selected week from the previous year, which shall be conducted, to the extent practicable, by fluent language speakers and experts without direct affiliation to the language service being reviewed, who are seeking any evidence of inappropriate or unprofessional content, which shall be submitted to the Office of Policy Research, the head and Board of the respective language service, and the Chief Executive Officer.”

items for USAGM. These reports should be provided to the network heads and to USAGM (OPR).

9. Reporting to USAGM:

- An overview of the network's process for conducting program reviews, including specific evaluation criteria, and an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the process;
- A schedule for all reviews conducted in the previous year and an explanation for any reviews not conducted;
- A summary of the most important findings of the reviews and the network's highest priority action items;
- Copies of the reports for all program reviews conducted; and
- A status report on any services that have been found to have biased, unprofessional, or other problematic content within the past three years.²

Following this submission, meetings will be scheduled between the CEO, network head, and other key USAGM and network staff to discuss the results and any further action needed.

10. Verification: Several features of this process will help to ensure that it is accurate and credible:

- Objective, clear evaluation criteria;
- Independence of reviewing office;
- Use of internal and external experts;
- Open discussion of results;
- Involvement of other offices;
- Agreement on follow up actions;
- Monitoring of follow up actions; and
- Documentation of results.

² Reports should provide sufficient detail to satisfy relevant Congressional requirements, including: (1) The 2021 NDAA, which requires USAGM to "submit to the appropriate congressional committees a list of anomalous reports, including status updates on anomalous services during the 3-year period commencing on the date of receipt of the first report of biased, unprofessional, or otherwise problematic content;" and (2) The Agency's annual appropriations legislation, which requires the CEO to "notify the Committees on Appropriations within 15 days of any determination by the USAGM that any of its broadcast entities, including its grantee organizations, provides an open platform for international terrorists or those who support international terrorism, or is in violation of the principles and standards set forth in section 303(a) and (b) of such Act or the entity's journalistic code of ethics."



USAGM Procedures for Violations of the Principles, Standards, Or Journalistic Code of Ethics

May 19, 2021

In the interest of ensuring the U.S. Agency for Global Media's (USAGM) effective oversight of the news networks, responding effectively to external inquiries concerning a broadcast or posting, and meeting our obligations to notify Congress¹ and other relevant stakeholders of significant violations of the principles, standards, or the entity's journalistic code of ethics, USAGM has established the following procedures. These procedures, which build on the documented editorial and program review guidelines maintained by each network and the USAGM Office of Policy and Research (OPR), are guidelines which shall be interpreted in a manner that is at all times fully respectful of the firewall and consistent with the journalistic independence of the individual networks.²

As with any news organization, questions, concerns, or comments relating to content may come from multiple sources, including: subjects of stories; third parties with special interest in the story; the audience; or from within an organization or network. Regardless of the source, each network has and must maintain processes to receive and respond to alleged violations of the network's principles, standards, or journalistic code of ethics.

Verification:

Each network shall develop and implement appropriate procedures consistent with these guidelines. Reports of a potential violation sent to the network will be directed to the responsible network office/employee for review and investigation. The reviewing office will make a determination whether a violation has occurred in accordance with the network's procedures. Any further action to be taken will depend on the severity of the violation:

1. **Minor correction** – Decisions addressing minor corrections will remain at the network or language service/division level, in accordance with the network's documented procedures for corrections.
2. **Single story or series with significant violation(s) of the principles, standards, or journalistic code of ethics** – Decisions addressing significant violations and deciding whether to correct or retract the story will be handled in accordance with the network's procedures and raised to a sufficiently senior level in the network.³ The network leadership will advise USAGM's Office of the CEO (OCEO), OPR, and Office of the

¹ A recurring provision in the Agency's annual appropriation act calls upon the agency to "notify the Committees on Appropriations within 15 days" of any determination by the Agency "that any of its broadcast entities, including its grantee organizations... is in violation of the principles and standards set forth in subsections (a) and (b) of section 303 of the United States International Broadcasting Act of 1994 (22 U.S.C. 6202) or the entity's journalistic code of ethics." When notified of a lapse, the USAGM CEO, in consultation with the General Counsel and Office of Congressional Affairs, will determine whether it meets the requirement for Congressional notification and, if required, proceed with such notification.

² They shall never be implemented in a manner in any given situation which causes a network to deviate from the highest standards of professional journalism.

³ E.g. senior editorial staff; senior management; and/or leadership; this is in addition of the involvement of a standards editor where applicable.

General Counsel (OGC) of the report and its resolution. This information is considered confidential.⁴ If the investigation reveals larger editorial problems within the service, the relevant network will review a sample of service programming, following documented network best practices for program reviews, to determine whether additional measures are necessary.

3. **Individual journalist with a pattern of violations** – If the investigation reveals a pattern of violations by an individual journalist, networks will take all appropriate actions; recommendations with respect to disciplinary action will be determined by each network in accordance with the network's procedures and relevant law, rules, and regulations, in a manner consistent with the highest standards of professional journalism. The network will notify USAGM's OCEO, OPR, and OGC of the investigation's findings and recommendations. In the event that a response to external inquiries is required, the network will coordinate and work with USAGM in crafting the response.⁵ USAGM and/or the relevant network may decide to launch a wider review of service content, potentially involving external experts, in order to determine whether problems are more widespread.
4. **Widespread pattern of violations of the principles, standards, or journalistic code of ethics of a service or network over a significant period of time** – USAGM will launch a review of a random sample of service programming, using language-qualified journalism experts external to the organization wherever possible. The USAGM CEO will consult the network to obtain information on any previous reviews relevant to the situation, and then make the determination as to whether this review will be conducted by the relevant network's program review office (with oversight from USAGM), by OPR, or any other means, depending on the details of the situation and the demonstrated capacity of the program review operation at the relevant network.

The network will provide a confidential report to USAGM's OCEO, and, if applicable, the network's Board of Directors, at the conclusion of any investigation, to the extent required by these guidelines; such report shall indicate the results of the investigation and the resolution.

⁴ Such materials shall at a minimum be treated as deliberative and business sensitive.

⁵ Nothing shall cause any network to take any actions in violation of legal rights and obligations of any network or employee, including privacy and other legal and potential legal protections.



IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE FOR THE *CURATION+* MODEL OF VOA EDITORIALS

The U.S. Agency for Global Media's (USAGM) Office of Policy manages the publication of materials in accordance with the statutory requirement for the agency to offer a "clear and effective presentation of the policies of the United States Government...including editorials, broadcast by the Voice of America, which present the views of the U.S. government." This content is published as "VOA Editorials," and marked as reflecting the views of the U.S. government.

Implementation of this mandate is guided by a 2018 memorandum between the Department of State and USAGM that prioritizes the proactive curation and strategic re-purposing of existing content from U.S. government agencies and officials. This curation-centered approach aims to utilize the best content and materials from throughout the U.S. government, for strategic re-purposing and publication. At the same time, it preserves the opportunity for USAGM's Office of Policy to produce original content, either at the request of the Department of State or driven by audience interest in our target markets. We refer to this approach as *CURATION+*.

The following procedures will guide how the Office of Policy curates and, upon request, creates original content that presents U.S. government policies clearly and effectively. There are two paths to publication and dissemination of Office of Policy content:

1. The Director of the Office of Policy or his/her designate will establish a routine (weekly or bi-weekly) meeting (in-person or by telephone) with a representative from the State Department's Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs (R) to discuss which policy issues to prioritize for key markets. R will invite other State offices, as appropriate, to join these meetings, which will serve to provide editorial guidance for VOA Editorials.
2. The Office of Policy will then curate existing content (speeches, statements, interviews, etc.) from across the U.S. government and, in consultation with key stakeholders from R, produce editorials (audio, video, graphic/visual, or text) for VOA's language services. These editorials will be designed to meaningfully connect with target audiences, based on analysis from USAGM's Office of Policy and Research. If pre-existing and/or pre-cleared content is inadequate, as determined by the head of the Office of Policy, the Office of Policy will create original content by conducting interviews with policymakers in consultation with R. Prior to publication and dissemination, a representative from R will review curated editorials to coordinate clearance within the Department and ensure that the content accurately reflects an authoritative view from key governmental stakeholders. R will strive to conduct this review and clearance within one business day.

3. Requests from any State Department office or bureau for the generation of original editorial content on a particular topic and/or reflecting a particular policy priority should be coordinated through and approved by R. R will determine if the request is of sufficient value to U.S. government policy messaging priorities. Once approved by R, the Office of Policy will determine if the request is feasible (i.e. if sufficient resources are available to produce the requested content) and within the Office of Policy’s statutory mandate. If so, the Office of Policy will proceed with generating the original content, clearing the content with the State Department, and working with the language services on a dissemination strategy. Clearance of this original content would continue to be facilitated by R, which will strive to clear the content with relevant State bureaus within two business days.

Dissemination will be prioritized by a data-driven strategy that aims to maximize the effectiveness of VOA Editorials to inform foreign audiences about U.S. policy priorities. This will include a market-by-market review of VOA services to assess the types of content, the frequency, and the best format for Office of Policy curated materials for each VOA market. The result of this review will be catalogued and revisited routinely to ensure the Office of Policy stays current with the needs of the language services.



This guide should be reviewed at least annually to assess if any updates are required due to changes in the media landscape and/or dissemination strategies.



**Office of Inspector General
United States Department of State**

May 1, 2020

UNCLASSIFIED

Mr. John Lansing
Chief Executive Officer and Director
U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM)
330 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20237

Dear Mr. Lansing:

Reference is made to your responses of April 15, 2020 to Recommendations 2 [REDACTED] contained in the Office of Inspector General (OIG) report USAGM *Targeted Inspection of the Governance of the United States Agency for Global Media (ISP-18-19-22)*. On the basis of information contained in your responses, OIG considers (b) (5) [REDACTED] pending further action and Recommendations 2 and [REDACTED] are closed, no further action required (see enclosed resolution analysis). Please note that the closing of a recommendation does not relieve the action entity of its responsibility to complete implementation or inform OIG when changed circumstances substantially affect implementation.

(b) (5)

formats to oig-isp-compliancestaff@state.gov. If you have any questions or would like to discuss this issue further, please contact (b) (6) [REDACTED]

Sincerely,

(b) (6)

Compliance Unit

Enclosure: As stated.

cc: USAGM = Daniel Resenholtz

U.S. Department of State, Office of Inspector General, 1700 N. Moore St., Arlington, Virginia 22209

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OIG Resolution Analysis
Targeted Inspection of the Governance of the United States Agency for Global Media
(ISP-IB-19-22)

Recommendation 2: The U.S. Agency for Global Media, in coordination with the Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, should develop a clear policy and accompanying standard operating procedures to meet its statutory requirement to present U.S. policy on voice of America through editorials and other means. (Action: USAGM, in coordination with R)

USAGM Response (4/15/2020): As mentioned in the Agency's response of December 6, 2019, the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM) drafted a standard operating procedure (SOP) for generating and publishing editorial content in close consultation with the Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, U.S. Department of State (DOS). After review by relevant stakeholders, on April 10, 2020, DOS and USAGM approved the SOP, entitled *Implementation Guide for the Curation+ Model of VOA Editorials* (Attachment 1). A record of clearances is provided with the SOP. This SOP, together with the MOU between USAGM and DOS on VOA editorials (Attachment 2), establish the policy and procedures for USAGM to meet its statutory requirement to present U.S. policy via Voice of America (VOA) in close partnership with DOS.

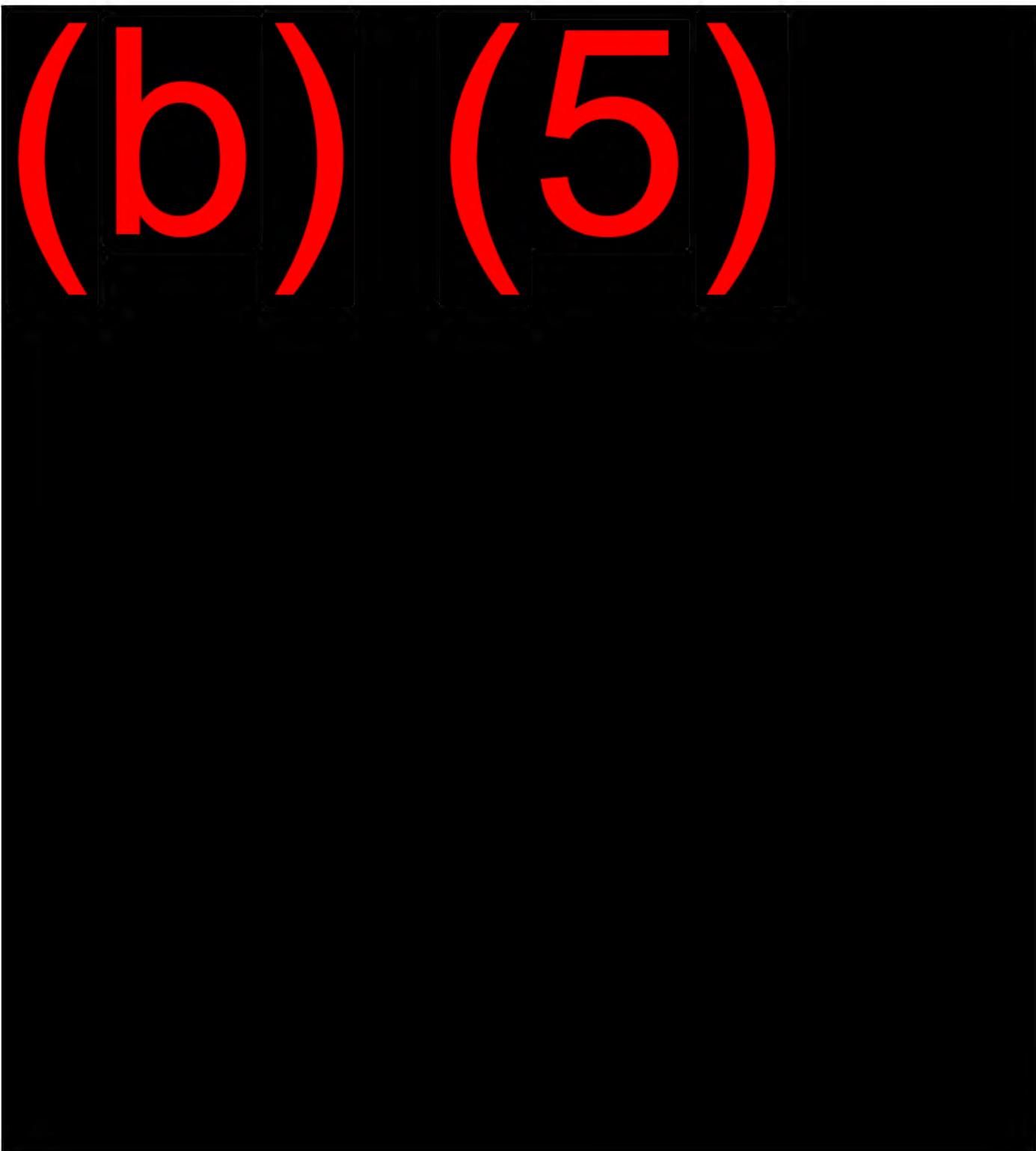
OIG Analysis: The document provided is sufficient to close this recommendation for acceptable implementation,

Status: Recommendation 2 is closed.



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