The rush to eliminate the option for paper information is leaving many Americans with no options at all.

Federal and state governments are increasingly digitizing services in order to cut costs. At the same time, businesses are charging customers steep fees for paper statements and services. The reality is that these “paperless policies” are deepening the digital divide and disenfranchising millions of Americans.

Consumers for Paper Options is committed to preserving the right of every American to continue receiving paper-based communications. The option to receive paper information is critically important for millions of Americans — especially for seniors, the 30 percent of citizens without online access and those with cybersecurity concerns. Yet these Americans are being left behind as the government goes “paperless” in order to cut costs.

Our coalition of paper-based communication interests is joining forces with a number of organizations representing consumers, seniors and postal labor. Our shared goal is to protect the right to paper options for critical information and services.

It’s crucial to preserve paper-based options. Our message to policymakers is that we can go digital without discriminating against Americans who may not, or cannot, use technology. We can, and should, embrace technology, bridge the digital divide and achieve significant efficiency gains — without shifting costs to consumers who can least afford them.

The following information will provide you with an overview of several important aspects of this issue.

For more information, visit www.paperoptions.org.
Federal Information Access for Americans Facing the Digital Divide

Paper-based communications are critically important for millions of Americans—especially for seniors and the 30 percent of citizens without online access. Yet the Federal government is forcing Americans to go “paperless” in order to cut costs. It is crucial to preserve paper-based options for Americans without online access, as well as those concerned about online security and ID theft.

We can go digital without discriminating against Americans who need paper options.

Federal “Digital Only” Policy Ignores Millions of Americans

The government’s rush to “digital only” information threatens to disenfranchise millions of Americans—from low-income individuals to senior citizens and others who don’t have internet access or simply prefer personal transactions to divulging information online.

Just look at the facts from a 2011 Department of Commerce study:

- As many as 30 percent of Americans aren’t online, and 45 percent of seniors do not own a computer.
- Just four out of 10 low-income households have wired Internet access at home.
- Only slightly more than half of all African American and Hispanic households have wired Internet at home—compared with 72 percent of whites.

Short-Sighted Federal Decisions to “Go Paperless”

- **Social Security Checks**
  The federal government is phasing out paper federal benefits checks. Effective March 2013, all recipients will either be switched to direct deposit or provided with the electronic debit option known as Direct Express. Many seniors are uncomfortable with the direct deposit process, have concerns about privacy and growing cybersecurity threats, or simply do not have a bank account. Plus, Direct Express cards carry ATM fees—levying a new tax on those who can least afford it.

- **Social Security Earnings Statements**
  The Social Security Administration has ended the mailing of annual earnings statements for all workers ages 25-60. These statements, which began in 1999, allowed Americans to make informed retirement decisions and check the accuracy of the government’s estimates. The new online estimator will only be seen by a small percentage of wage-earners. Millions of others will miss out on what the GAO considers an “important financial literacy tool.”

- **Savings Bonds**
  Families have been giving children paper savings bonds since 1935, but that tradition ended in 2011. Now they have to go online, create an account and transfer money. Treasury officials have lost millions, if not billions, of dollars in sales to individuals who are not comfortable enough with computers. Once a physical symbol of hard work and patriotism, savings bonds have become yet another virtual casualty of the digital age.

- **Tax Forms**
  The IRS no longer mails tax forms—overlooking the 30 million Americans who file their returns by mail. While the new policy makes sense for taxpayers already e-filing, citizens who don’t have access to computers, or the skills to use them, face a challenge. Others are concerned about security. With the GAO indicating identity theft due to electronic tax filing has risen 480 percent since 2008, who can blame them?

Time to Get Government Policy Right

Let’s get government policy right. Policies need to reflect the digital divide as well as rapidly growing cybersecurity threats that make many Americans think twice about online transactions. In fact, more than 70 percent of Americans want the option to continue receiving paper-based government documents, according to a recent poll by Wilson Research.

Allowing citizens to continue receiving paper, unless they specifically choose electronic-only, is a positive and empowering way to bridge the digital divide and save millions of federal dollars—without shifting cost burdens to citizens who can least afford them.
Consumers Overwhelmingly Support Paper Options, New Poll Shows

Consumers for Paper Options Calls on Congress to Review Agency Actions

WASHINGTON - Resisting the government’s aggressive effort to push electronic-only distribution of information and services, a new poll shows a majority of American consumers strongly support the option of receiving critical government communications on paper. In a recent poll, 72% of consumers surveyed said they would like for the government to continue to provide paper copies of essential documents like Social Security checks, SS annual earnings statements and IRS tax forms. The government has either eliminated – or will soon eliminate – the paper version of each of these important documents.

The poll also revealed that even when the elimination of paper-based documents is presented as a cost-saving measure, 72% of respondents of all political affiliations believe that the government should continue to provide important paper-based documents and records. Consumers for Paper Options (CPO) called on Congress to conduct basic oversight hearings into recent Administration decisions in this area.

“A strong majority of consumers want their important documents and records on paper,” said the CPO’s Executive Director John Runyan. “Even a majority of active internet users want the ability to choose how they receive their information. With almost 30 percent of households without internet access, the government cannot simply eliminate paper-based information and expect citizens to just deal with it. Heedlessly pursuing this policy will unnecessarily complicate the lives of many citizens. It will also expose them to greater risks of cyber fraud and ID theft.”

Consumers are also critical of private sector practices in this area. Eighty-three percent of respondents agreed that private sector financial institutions should not charge for paper-based financial statements. “Financial institutions which are not attuned to public sentiment in the area risk customer backlash,” Runyan said.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) recently criticized the Social Security Administration’s decision to eliminate the Statement of Annual Earnings, describing the statement as a “key financial literacy tool.” “A citizen’s ability to opt out of paper and into electronic delivery is the only way to ensure consumers can get the information they need in a format that works for them,” Runyan said.

Consumers are just beginning to realize that the government is making major shifts in the delivery of important information. This shift won’t be fully appreciated until the Social Security Administration phases out paper checks next year. Citizens are clearly concerned about these developments and the poll reveals the strength of that opposition.

Consumers for Paper Options urges Congress to review the Administration’s recent actions to eliminate important paper-based documents and records and to conduct oversight into these decisions. “When millions of Americans stop receiving paper Social Security checks next year and receive a debit card in its place, I suspect Congress will hear about it,” said Runyan. “Congress should insist on giving consumers a choice in how they receive critically important information,” he added.

*Sept 12-13, 2011 N=1000 Registered Voters, Sponsored by Consumers for Paper Options (www.paperoptions.org)