

# Sunshine in Government Initiative

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## **SGI Recommends Steps to Ramp Up the Independent FOIA Ombudsman**

The Sunshine in Government Initiative is today releasing recommendations for developing the independent Office of Government Information Services within the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). Created by Congress last year, the Office serves as an independent mediator and analyst into problems the federal government has fulfilling requests for public records under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). SGI is recommending that in tight budget times, a small scale OGIS should begin immediately and be built out as resources and experience permit.

The Sunshine in Government Initiative (SGI) is a coalition of ten media groups promoting openness and accountability in government. Members of the SGI coalition include: **American Society of Newspaper Editors, Associated Press, Association of Alternative Newsweeklies, Coalition of Journalists for Open Government, National Association of Broadcasters, National Newspaper Association, Newspaper Association of America, Radio-Television News Directors Association, Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, and Society of Professional Journalists.**

SGI intends these recommendations to help the National Archives jump start the Office when Congress appropriates resources to pay for the Office.

"If done right, this office will help individual requesters, like free lance journalists, researchers and historians to gain reasonably quick access to accessible documents. Some requests for information are voluminous and can be handled in phases. Some would lend themselves to quick fulfillment with a little expert help and mediation. The goal is to get information out without undue fuss, and avoid having to go to court to push agencies along," added Tonda Rush, director of public policy of the National Newspaper Association, which represents community newspapers and pushed especially hard for the independent ombudsman.

"This office could really break through some logjams," said SGI Coordinator Rick Blum, "but it is important to set it up so it is not immediately overwhelmed with mediation requests from frustrated requesters. That is why we recommend OGIS at first focus on requesters whose purposes are to disseminate information to the public. It will gain experience and also help to fulfill FOIA's real mandate: to make records public."

The recommendations focus on ways the Archives can effectively provide fair, authoritative mediation services as a way of giving the public an alternative to costly litigation to resolve FOIA disputes. SGI recommends that NARA create criteria for selecting cases to mediate that both reach many requesters and avoid overwhelming the mediation system. Many agencies are plagued with delays in processing requests and backlogs of many years for even simple requests.

The entire set of recommendations can be read at SGI's website, [www.sunshineingovernment.org](http://www.sunshineingovernment.org).

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