

# Sunshine in Government Initiative

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## PRESS RELEASE

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### **SGI Applauds House Panel's Approve of H.R 1309 to Promote FOIA Reform**

The Sunshine in Government Initiative applauds the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee for approving the Freedom of Information Act Amendments of 2007 (H.R. 1309), the most comprehensive legislation to reform the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in a decade.

"Today's vote was an important step toward making FOIA work better," said Rick Blum, the coalition's coordinator. Chairman William Lacy Clay (D-MO), Chairman Henry Waxman (D-CA) and Rep. Todd Platts (R-PA) have put together bipartisan reforms that should help end longstanding backlogs and delays in obtaining documents through FOIA. "Open government is a nonpartisan issue," Blum noted. "We look forward to quick action on the House floor."

The Committee's approval of H.R. 1309 reflects the recognition that FOIA has become less reliable and effective in helping the public open the doors of government. On December 14, 2005, President Bush signed an executive order improving implementation of FOIA. Since then, agencies have largely made little progress in reducing backlogs and delays in responding to FOIA requests.

Rep. Lamar Smith (R-TX) introduced a separate broad FOIA reform bill, H.R. 1326. The only difference between the two pieces of legislation is that Clay bill includes a section stating that the policy of the federal government is to disclose records. Both pieces of legislation advance the cause of requesters and add momentum for Congress to enact FOIA legislation this year.

The bill would alter the way the government handles requests for public documents. It does not affect the substantive exemptions already written into law allowing the government to withhold documents based on national security, privacy or other concerns. Among the specific reforms, the bill (1) helps FOIA requesters obtain timely responses to their requests by restoring meaningful deadlines for agency action, (2) requires agencies to create FOIA hotlines and request tracking systems to help the public follow up on requests, (3) creates an independent ombudsman to help resolve disputes and encourage alternatives to litigation, (4) makes it easier for requesters to recover attorney fees when litigation is unavoidable, and (5) penalizes agencies for delaying responses.

**The Sunshine in Government Initiative** is a coalition of media groups committed to promoting policies that ensure the government is accessible, accountable and open. Public oversight is the ultimate safeguard of democracy. It is the inalienable right of citizens to examine and judge their government; and that right is served when news media act on behalf of the public to gain access to information.

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