

Sunshine in Government Initiative



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PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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SGI Applauds House Panel's Vote to Approve OPEN Government Act

The Sunshine in Government Initiative applauds the House Government Reform Subcommittee on Government Management, Finance and Accountability for approving the OPEN Government Act (H.R. 867), the most comprehensive legislation to reform the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in a decade.

"The vote shows Congress is serious about strengthening open government and re-affirming the public's right to know," said Rick Blum, the coalition's coordinator. The bill's sponsor, Rep. Lamar Smith (R-TX), as well as Chairman Todd Platts (R-PA), Ranking Minority Rep. Edolphus Towns (D-NY) and Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA) have worked hard to get the bill this far. "We appreciate their dedication and their staff's hard work," Blum added. Before approving the measure, the subcommittee accepted an amendment on a bipartisan basis by Rep. Waxman to further strengthen the bill.

The vote comes less than a week after the Senate Judiciary Committee approved a Senate version (S. 394) of the OPEN Government Act. That bill has bipartisan support in the Senate.

The House subcommittee's approval of the OPEN Government Act 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. Today's action recognizes that even the best executive order is no substitute for action by Congress.

The Openness Promotes Effectiveness in our National Government, or OPEN Government Act, makes common sense changes to the way the government handles requests for public documents. 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 mediator 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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