Sunshine Week BRIGHT IDEAS

GROUPS

Sunshine: Without laws government keeps lots of secrets

Laws ensure that ‘democracy thrives in the light of day

Open records pave path to changes
The Newport (R.I.) Daily News and Rhode Island Press Association teamed up to create a Sunshine Week print ad focusing on the state’s open government laws and encouraging people to “Exercise your right to know!” The ads culled key text from the state’s Access to Public Records Act and the Open Meetings Act. RIPA also worked with The Call in Woonsocket to distribute an informational graphic about how to get public information (p. 34).

The Arizona Newspapers Association got right to the point in its member newsletter: “We are urging all members to participate in Sunshine Week.” But ANA didn’t just encourage its members to participate, it also showed them where to get the resources they might need to supplement their coverage. Noting that the Freedom of Information Act was looking a little worn on its 40th anniversary, ANA pointed members to the “Bright Ideas” book, to print ads, and opinion columns created for Sunshine Week 2006. In addition, ANA recommended links to other resources in the Sunshine Week Toolkit.
Investigative Reporters and Editors was one of many journalism associations that supported Sunshine Week by alerting members to the opportunity to reinforce the importance of open government, and by providing information and links to resources to help them participate. IRE’s Web site offered tips for filing requests, backgrounders on state laws, material on how to conduct information audits and links to news stories based on open records. “Members of Investigative Reporters and Editors are among the greatest users of FOIA and Sunshine Laws in the pursuit of journalism, keeping government and business accountable, and being a watchdog for the public interest,” IRE noted.

The Online News Association helped spread the word about Sunshine Week and available resources through its Web site and newsletters to members. With an increasing number of Sunshine Week participants producing Web pages that go beyond simply posting the print news copy, ONA is at the forefront of charting innovative and effective ways to bring the message of public access to government information to the online community.
The National Security Archive at George Washington University released a report during Sunshine Week on the oldest pending federal Freedom of Information Act requests. “The oldest pending request was submitted to the Department of Defense by a graduate student at the University of Southern California in March 1989 asking for records on the U.S. ‘freedom of navigation’ program. So much time has elapsed that the requester, William Aceves, is now a tenured professor at California Western School of Law,” according to the report. Further, the Archive found that the CIA was responsible for 4 of the 10 oldest requests, despite the fact that it receives only 0.08 percent of all federal FOIA requests. The CIA’s poor performance earned it the Archive’s Rosemary Award, named for President Nixon’s secretary, Rosemary Woods. The Web portal FreedomInfo.org – of which the National Security Archive is a founding partner and sponsor – provided links and background information about Sunshine Week for an international audience.
South Dakotans for Open Government hosted a statewide essay contest for adults and students during Sunshine Week with the theme “Equal Rights to All, Special Privileges to None.” The theme was especially meaningful to student winner Charlee Bad Wound, a 17-year-old Native American girl living “in one of the country’s most poverty-stricken reservations.” She wrote: “As a child growing up, I have been faced with equal rights problems, but I know if I voice an opinion I will have helped it just a little bit.”

Common Cause chapters in California and New Mexico were among those marking Sunshine Week. Each invited leading open government advocates and others to participate in panel discussions. As Matt Brix from Common Cause New Mexico noted on the group’s blog: “Now more than ever, this basic creed is being jeopardized in the United States. That’s why the time is now for Americans in every state to remind those in power that they have a responsibility to keep government open to citizens.”
The League of Women Voters announced its Sunshine Week plans the previous November, with the launch of its “Openness in Government: Looking for the Sunshine” project. “The government is becoming less open and more secretive in the name of homeland security at a time when many feel greater accountability is needed,” said then-LWV President Kay J. Maxwell. With funding from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation the League was able to select 14 chapters to host community forums in conjunction with the national teleconference (pp. 44-45). LWV also produced a resource guide for local chapters that wanted to host Sunshine Week or other open government events. The guide includes information about recent threats to federal and state laws, as well as tips for how citizens can get involved at the local level.