

Sunshine in Government Initiative

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The Honorable Harry Reid
Majority Leader
United States Senate
S-221
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
United States Senate
S-230
Washington, DC 20510

May 21, 2007

Dear Senator Reid and Senator McConnell:

The members of the Sunshine in Government Initiative (SGI) would like to express their strong support for S. 849, The Openness Promotes Effectiveness in our National Government Act, or OPEN Government Act, which makes common sense reforms to the way federal agencies process requests for documents under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). We urge the Senate to pass this bipartisan legislation soon.

The legislation has bipartisan support and was reported from the Senate Judiciary Committee by voice vote. It is sponsored by Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-VT) and Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX) and co-sponsored by Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-OH), Sen. Ben Cardin (D-MD), Sen. Russell Feingold (D-WI), Sen. Johnny Isakson (R-GA), Sen. John Kerry (D-MA), Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-LA), and Sen. Arlen Specter (R-PA). Similar legislation (H.R. 1309) passed the House of Representatives by a vote of 308 – 117.

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.**

Open government laws such as FOIA help shed light on otherwise unseen problems and allow the public to make informed choices in their communities. Unfortunately, after 40 years FOIA is beginning to show its age. The FOIA has not been updated in more than a decade. While FOIA requests for public documents continue to stream into federal agencies, the federal government's response is slowing. Too often the public receives the documents they need too late, or not at all. And the problem is getting worse.

This legislation contains some common sense reform such as giving requesters a tracking number to follow the status of their requests online, creating an ombudsman to help requesters, imposing consequences on federal agencies for missing statutory deadlines and increasing agency accountability for FOIA decisions.

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The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press · Society of Professional Journalists

We hope you will support the common sense open government reforms contained in S. 849. If you have any questions regarding this letter, please do not hesitate to contact Claudia James at (202) 393-1010.

Sincerely,

The Sunshine in Government Initiative

cc: The Honorable Patrick Leahy
The Honorable Arlen Specter