## “Bright tips for public support, Sunshine Week”

By **David Cuillier**, *Brechner Freedom of Information Project*

We would like to think that the public appreciates investigative reporting and the right to access public records, but sometimes they need to be reminded.

National Sunshine Week, March 10-16, is a great opportunity to do so — a news peg for highlighting freedom of information. It’s a cause everyone can support. As Stanford’s James Hamilton calculated in his “Democracy’s Detectives” book, for every dollar spent on records-based investigative reporting, society reaps $287 in benefits. That is a phenomenal return on investment.

Here are ideas for educating your community on the role of public records in your reporting, their lives and our shared democracy:

* Secrecy stories. Write about the state of access in your community. Publish embargoed stories, op-eds and other materials from the Sunshine Week website, [sunshineweek.org](https://sunshineweek.org/).
* Transparency audit. Send requests to cities or schools in your community. Report how well (or not) they respond, and why it matters. The Society of Professional Journalists offers audit tips at [spj.org/foitoolkit.asp](http://spj.org/foitoolkit.asp).
* Records for life. Highlight public records that help people in their everyday lives, such as IRS 990 forms, police reports and drinking water quality results.
* Log jam. Acquire record request logs from local agencies, including disposition. Report what percent are fulfilled, and how fast (or slow).
* Social media. Tag #SunshineWeek on social media. Find suggested posts in the Sunshine Week website’s [social media toolkit.](https://sunshineweek.org/toolkit)
* Get graphic. Produce editorial cartoons, graphics and multimedia projects to educate the public on how to get records.
* Gatherings. Host a webinar or in-person gathering; teach people how to acquire records and why documents matter in your reporting. Put your event on the [Sunshine Week website’s calendar.](https://sunshineweek.org/event-submission-form)
* Transparency tag. Insert a [Sunshine Week logo](https://sunshineweek.org/graphics) into print and online stories that use public records. Add a note to readers that the story was produced with access to public records.
* Encourage editorials. Urge the opinion folks in your shop to write op-eds or air public service announcements.

When covering transparency, it’s useful to understand the public’s perspective. Most people support FOI in general, but attitudes change quickly when personal privacy or national security are implicated. Studies suggest strong public support for journalists’ access to public records regarding government finances and public safety, such as dam inspection data, but little support for open divorce files or property tax records.

In 2018, a report from Open The Government (now part of the Project On Government Oversight) provided sample language and key points that resonate with the public when communicating about freedom of information ([tinyurl.com/FOImessage](http://tinyurl.com/FOImessage)), including:

* Focus on how access holds government accountable.
* Acknowledge reasonable justifications for some secrecy, such as national security.
* Highlight that voters on both sides of the political aisle begrudge politicians playing by their own rules to enrich themselves, and that transparency discourages that.

It’s also helpful to hammer home records sourcing. A 2021 experiment by University of Florida researcher Jessica Sparks found that subtly citing public records as a source in a news story does not increase credibility or trust in the story or media. Instead, reporters or editors should make it obvious with a prominent breakout “doc box,” linking to the actual records and explaining how they were acquired.

Sunshine Week will celebrate its 20th anniversary next year. The American Society of News Editors launched Sunshine Week in 2005 with support from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. ASNE later merged with the Associated Press Media Editors to form the News Leaders Association; however, that association is set to dissolve in June 2024. Anticipating the change, coordination of Sunshine Week transferred to the University of Florida’s Brechner Freedom of Information Project on Dec. 8.

Now, the tradition continues in collaboration with the SPJ, Muckrock, Radio Television Digital News Association, and many other partner organizations and newsrooms — including yours, if you join us!

For more ideas, visit the Sunshine Week website or these tips at [tinyurl.com/brightideas06](http://tinyurl.com/brightideas06).

*David Cuillier, Ph.D. (he/him), is director of the Joseph L. Brechner Freedom of Information Project at the University of Florida and co-author of “The Art of Access: Strategies for Acquiring Public Records.” He can be reached at* [cuillierd@ufl.edu](mailto:cuillierd@ufl.edu)*.*

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