



Sunshine Week is March 11-17

By Marsha Shuler, NFPW First Amendment Chair

It's the one week a year where the national emphasis is on bringing attention to a problem that should get our attention on a regular basis. The barriers to the public's right to know are growing daily.

Information is power for the people — power to hold their government and its officials accountable for their actions.

So, during this week I would like to encourage affiliates and their members to do whatever they can to raise public awareness of their rights and how they are being violated as well as what good can come from letting the sun shine in. I'm sure many of you have stories to tell.

Personally, I'm fighting the good fight on two fronts — state and federal — on one simple request for information involving the hurricane preparedness of hospitals in south Louisiana. It's important information for residents of the area who lived through Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

The federal government is actually blocking the state release of the hospital survey findings. Louisiana has a good public records law with a quick turnaround once requests are made. Officials here were poised to release the information until the federal government stepped in using a questionable exception to the federal Freedom of Information Act claim it is not public data. I appealed that decision and months later still have no response and no information.

It's just another example of the problems with FOIA which in its implementation is more designed to keep information out of the public's hands.

Doing something to fix federal FOIA problems is critical to an informed public that can hold government accountable for its actions. NFPW is working with other professional communications groups to clear up government logjams that needlessly delay release of documents.

During this week of special focus, I encourage affiliates and their individual members to do whatever they can to bring attention to the importance of letting the sun shine in. One thing affiliates might do is urge all their members of Congress to support reform of the Freedom of Information Act. HR 1306 in the House will soon be joined by a companion Senate bill. It would create, among other things, an ombudsman office in the federal government to help iron out bureaucratic snags in the release of information.

People also can write editorials, columns or stories, make speeches, schedule programs, etc. Do what you can. It's important to all of our freedoms.

Check out the www.sunshineweek.org for more ideas.