

DEI Program #1: Open government/FOI training programs from NFOIC and state open government coalitions for DEI-represented organizations (national organizations and those with state affiliates/members)

Challenge: Proficiency in state open government laws and policies to gain access to public institutions is challenging and requires knowledge and experience many people and organizations do not possess. Access to public information is guaranteed in the Constitution and in federal and state laws. However, some state and local public agencies and officials create obstacles that hinder or prevent legal access that is a public right. Organizations and individuals that need access may find the process intimidating or lack the knowledge and techniques to be able to correctly request and obtain access. Seeking public records or access to proceedings and officials for research or for stories can be more effective and successful when people have knowledge and training.

Access to public information is critical to enable residents to exercise their voice and their right to keep transparent and accountable, and to participate in conversations about decisions that affect their lives and society. However, access is related to the level of transparency and access in the public institutions that hold our information. And while laws create policies surrounding open government practices are to empower the public and define government's responsibility, how the laws are written, interpreted and practiced (or not) by agencies and officials demonstrates the institution's level of transparency.

Understanding the state's open government laws and strategies for requesting and securing information, and how to make an appeal if that request is denied are critical to successfully obtaining public information. Most organizations do not possess that understanding or capability—even among those who regularly pursue it.

Solution: NFOIC including its national network of state open government and FOI coalition members work with these challenges every day. They work with journalists, public and private organizations and the general public to help them access their public institutions.

- NFOIC recommends and promotes reforms in the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government that improve open government laws and policies.
- NFOIC state FOI coalition members possess that knowledge on a state-by-state basis and assist residents in their jurisdiction everyday.

NFOIC and state open government coalitions would like to offer training and education services to national and state-based DE organizations. Two programs are proposed:

1. Training and education services for organizations and their members that improves gaining access to their public institutions in their state and local communities.
2. Training programs that “train the trainer” where organizations identify a person among their staff or among their constituents who we can train to lead efforts to establish or improve their FOI or open government strategies within the organization.

Diversifying the FOI community and building its next generation

These training programs are part of NFOIC's strategy to help diversify the Freedom of Information (FOI) community and build the next generation of FOI and open government advocates. NFOIC seeks partnerships with national DEI groups and their state chapters, where applicable, representing journalism, media law, civil society, social issues, public policy and individual rights organizations to train and equip them with strategies to successfully access their state and local public institutions and improve accountability.

NFOIC will integrate new voices into the open government challenge, recognizing that information is critical to empowering all groups and new perspectives are essential to healthy civic engagement and democracy. A new, inclusive collaboration advances DEI in improving First Amendment rights and state government transparency.

NFOIC seeks support to help build the next generation of open government and First Amendment advocates through increased diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) represented by ethnicity, generation, gender, sexual identity and professional field.

NFOIC has the capacity to manage these initiatives. For 30 years, NFOIC and its member state FOI coalitions have worked to improve open government laws and increase access to public institutions. Our goal is to strengthen relationships with journalists, attorneys, students, and civil society organizations while introducing a broader audience to the FOI community that helps ensure diversity and inclusiveness —as a democracy should be.

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