



Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council

DEVOTED TO PROTECTING WISCONSIN'S TRADITION OF OPEN GOVERNMENT

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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March 7, 2013

State Freedom of Information Council bestows annual “Opee” Awards

As part of national [Sunshine Week](http://sunshineweek.org) (sunshineweek.org), March 10-16, the Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council acknowledges advocacy groups on opposite sides of the political spectrum, as well as media outlets large and small, in its seventh annual round of awards highlighting open government in Wisconsin. Meanwhile, the Milwaukee Police Department earned the Council's No Friend of Openness Award.

“This was a year of deep contention, one that cast into sharp relief the critical importance of our state's traditions of transparent government,” said Bill Lueders, council president. “We saw more than ever how our openness laws serve to hold public officials accountable, but also enable them to earn the public's trust.”

Five Openness Awards (“the Opees”) are being given to six groups and individuals for 2012-13. Four of the awards are positive; the No Friend of Openness Award is not.

The winners will be invited to receive their awards at the third annual [Wisconsin Watchdog Awards Dinner](#) in Madison on April 24. The event is presented jointly by the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism, Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council and Madison Pro Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists.

The honorees are:

Citizen Openness Award (the “Copee”): The Center for Media and Democracy and the MacIver Institute. Both the liberal CMD, devoted to “exposing corporate spin and government propaganda,” and the conservative MacIver Institute, which champions free markets and limited government, found themselves fighting state legislators over access to records. CMD and Common Cause successfully sued five Republican lawmakers to force the release of emails from their personal accounts that dealt with government business. And MacIver is suing a Democratic state lawmaker who seeks to shield identifying information from thousands of emails.

It is through such battles that the records law stays strong.

Political Openness Award (the “Popee”): UW-Extension Local Government Center. Over the last 21 years, this little-known public resource has been educating local public officials on the state's open records and meetings laws. It puts on workshops around the state for county and village officials, presents at various local government groups, and produces a range of fact sheets and other materials. The Center's good work can be seen at <http://lgc.uwex.edu/>.

Media Openness Award (the “Mopee”): Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. Wisconsin's largest newspaper showed courage and integrity in standing up to the Milwaukee Police Department and its openness-averse chief, Edward Flynn. Reporters including Gina Barton, Ben Poston, John Diedrich and Bruce Vielmetti brought to light the shocking case of a man who died in police custody while begging for medical help, exposed deep flaws with the MPD's crime reporting system, and examined how a group of cops routinely conducted illegal strip searches of black motorists.

The paper also pulled back the veil on lax oversight of the state's managed forest program (Raquel Rutledge), efforts to stack the state Judicial Commission (Patrick Marley), and mismanagement that left the Wisconsin Funeral Trust more than \$20 million in debt (Cary Spivak and Don Walker).

And, on top of all this, the Journal Sentinel won a legal battle against records charges that the Wisconsin Supreme Court deemed illegal (and which some records-keepers want to revive).

Open Records Scoop of the Year (the “Scoop”): Matt Johnson, Vernon County Broadcaster. The editor of this small-town paper made multiple records request to ferret out the story about village of Readstown Police Chief Shay Larson, who was placed on administrative leave in late 2011 and found guilty last September of three felony counts of misconduct in public office. Johnson's dogged reporting, which documented not only Larson's transgressions but the village's failure to address recurring complaints, can be seen at <http://tinyurl.com/b7tggtf>.

No Friend of Openness Award (the “Nopee”): The Milwaukee Police Department. The MPD, led by Chief Edward Flynn, had a banner year of non-disclosure. It battled requests with delays and denials, including taking 10 months to release a squad video of a dying arrestee. It eliminated daily press briefings in favor of a PR-oriented website. And it fought all the way to the Wisconsin Supreme Court for the right to charge records requesters for blacking out information, and lost. This after the department arrested working photojournalists on two separate occasions in 2011. Let's hope Chief Flynn and the MPD see the light and change their ways in 2013.