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NFOIC throws support behind improvements to Rhode Island's Access to Public Records Act; urges Governor Chafee to sign

General Assembly has passed legislation that better protects requesters, makes more information public and increases fines on non-complying agencies.

COLUMBIA, Mo. (June 15, 2012) – The National Freedom of Information Coalition (NFOIC) has joined other open government advocates and good-government groups in urging Rhode Island Gov. Lincoln Chafee to sign into law a bill that would overhaul the state's 33-year-old public disclosure law.

In a letter to Chafee, NFOIC Executive Director Kenneth F. Bunting wrote that a reform bill on his desk "will bring about greater accountability and more transparency for the citizens of Rhode Island."

Rhode Island enacted its public disclosure law, the Access to Public Records Act (APRA), in 1979, making it the second-to-last state in the nation to adopt a law guaranteeing that most government documents, with narrow exceptions, are available for copying and inspection.

The last significant revisions before the bill now awaiting Chafee's signature were made 14 years ago, according to Steven Brown, Executive Director of Rhode Island ACLU.

Rosanna Cavanagh, executive director of the New England First Amendment Coalition (NEFAC), called it "a significant victory for the public's right to know" when the reform bill was sent to Chafee's desk earlier this week [Wednesday, June 13].

NEFAC and another NFOIC member organization, ACCESS/RI, were among open government advocates and good-government groups involved in months of negotiations with legislators and government agencies regarding changes to the APRA. Other groups pushing the changes were the Rhode Island Press Association, the Rhode Island ACLU and Common Cause Rhode Island.

Rhode Island Atty. Gen. Peter Kilmartin also commended legislators for passing the bill and urged Chafee to sign it.

“Democracy is built on the principle of transparent, open, and accessible government, and is the key to maintaining the public’s trust of its elected officials,” Kilmartin said.
“Government must be accountable to the people.”

The bill, if signed by Chafee, will bolster Rhode Island’s open records law by, among other things, expanding the range of information available to the public and increasing fines on public agencies that knowingly flout the law’s provisions.

It would require that agencies pay the legal fees of citizens and journalists who have to sue to get access to public records, and who eventually win those cases. The reforms also make public personnel records of government officials and employees, except when disclosure would constitute "an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy." It further clarifies that contracts with public employees and pension data are public information.

“The important reforms in this bill will help to ensure that the principle of open, transparent government is more than a platitude in the state of Rhode Island,” Bunting wrote in the letter to Chafee.

The National Freedom of Information Coalition is a national network of state freedom of information advocates, citizen-driven nonprofit freedom of information organizations, academic and First Amendment centers, journalistic societies and attorneys. Its mission is to foster government transparency at the state and local level. A unit of the Missouri School of Journalism, the NFOIC is an affiliate of the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute. NFOIC is based at the University of Missouri, home to the nation’s oldest Freedom of Information Center. For more, visit <http://www.nfoic.org/>.

CONTACT:

Kenneth F. Bunting, Executive Director
NATIONAL FREEDOM OF INFORMATION COALITION
101E Reynolds Journalism Institute
Columbia, MO 65211
573.882.3075; buntingk@missouri.edu