

Editor's group endorses national shield law

RESTON, Va. - By an overwhelming majority, the board of directors of the American Society of Newspaper Editors has for the first time voted to endorse the concept of a national shield law for reporters. A national shield law would protect reporters from being forced to reveal confidential sources of information. Thirty-one states already have shield laws.

"The public always benefits from the free flow of information," said Rick Rodriguez, ASNE president, and executive editor of The Sacramento (California) Bee. "It stands to reason if a reporter thinks he or she will be sent to jail every time sensitive or embarrassing information gets out, there will be a chilling effect on the news gathering process."

"If journalists must risk jail any time they receive information in confidence, the sources of that information will dry up," said Andy Alexander, chair of the ASNE Freedom of Information Committee and Washington Bureau chief for Cox Newspapers. "And those confidential sources frequently are brave citizens who have turned to the press as a last resort to expose government corruption or misconduct."

The resolution approved by the ASNE board states: "RESOLVED that the ASNE Board supports the concept of a federal shield law for reporters as embodied in the "Free Flow of Information Act," [H.R. 581/S. 340] provided that the final draft of such legislation offers sufficient protection against the compelled disclosure of sources without eroding freedom of the press."

Rodriguez said a law that protects reporters from having to divulge sources to whom they promised confidentially will help further the public's right to know. "At the same time, we need to police ourselves to make sure that we don't overuse or misuse anonymous sources. It happens far too often and undercuts our credibility," he added.

The ASNE board took the shield law vote as Time magazine journalist Matthew Cooper and New York Times reporter Judith Miller exhausted their appeals of a contempt of court ruling for protecting their confidential sources. On July 6, Cooper agreed to testify, saying that his source had freed him from their confidentiality agreement. Miller refused to testify and a judge ordered her to be jailed.

"The jailing of Judy Miller highlights the urgent need for Congress to follow the lead of dozens of states and enact a federal shield law. In the absence of federal protection, an increasing number of journalists will be incarcerated for their 'crime' of relying on confidential sources to provide them with information that is helpful to the public. The public is the real loser in this sad saga."

The American Society of Newspaper Editors, with about 750 members, is the principal organization of American newspaper editors. It is active in a number of areas, including open government, freedom of the press, journalism credibility and ethics, newsroom management, diversity and readership.

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