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**Senate Judiciary Committee Approves OPEN Government Act:  
Significant Step Toward Strengthening the Freedom of Information Act**

Earlier this morning the Senate Judiciary Committee approved the OPEN Government Act (S. 394). This act is the most comprehensive legislation to reform the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in a decade. The nine media organizations comprising the Sunshine in Government Initiative applaud this step toward improving open government laws.

With bipartisan support of Senators John Cornyn (R-TX) and Patrick Leahy (D-VT), the Openness Promotes Effectiveness in our National Government, or OPEN Government Act, makes common sense changes to the way the government handles requests for public documents.

The Senate Judiciary Committee's approval of the OPEN Government Act reflects the recognition that FOIA has become a "less reliable, less effective, and less timely tool," as National Newspaper Association public policy director Tonda Rush recently told Congress on behalf of the Sunshine in Government Initiative.

The OPEN Government Act expands upon the president's December 2005 executive order improving implementation of FOIA. The Judiciary Committee's action recognizes that even the best executive order is no substitute for Congress to act to strengthen FOIA.

Among the specific reforms, the bill (1) helps FOIA requesters obtain timely responses to their requests by restoring meaningful deadlines for agency action, (2) requires agencies to create FOIA hotlines and request tracking systems to help the public follow up on requests, (3) creates an independent mediator to help resolve disputes and encourage alternatives to litigation, (4) makes it easier for requesters to recover attorney fees when litigation is unavoidable, and (5) penalizes agencies for delaying responses.

The Sunshine in Government Initiative is a coalition of media groups committed to promoting policies that ensure the government is accessible, accountable and open. Public oversight is the ultimate safeguard of democracy. It is the inalienable right of citizens to examine and judge their government; and that right is served when news media act on behalf of the public to gain access to information.

Members of the Sunshine in Government Initiative:

American Society of Newspaper Editors  
The Associated Press  
The Association of Alternative Newsweeklies  
Coalition of Journalists for Open Government  
National Newspaper Association  
Newspaper Association of America  
Radio-Television News Directors Association  
The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press  
Society of Professional Journalists