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**NAA CEO Column: Sunshine Week: Encouraging Increased Transparency in Government in 2016**

*By David Chavern, president & CEO, NAA*

Transparency in government is essential to upholding American democracy. When citizens have access to behind-the-scenes information about local and federal administrations, politicians are held accountable. The public is educated and engaged. And our nation is strengthened.

It is popular to pledge honest and open leadership while on the campaign trail, but America does not have the best track record in keeping these promises. In fact, [Pew research](http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/21/open-government-data/) finds that just five percent of Americans believe the government is doing a good job of sharing key information.

Public access to information is vital in preserving the values upon which our nation was founded. It is also critical in enabling journalists to fulfill their role as the watchdogs of society. While citizens and journalists can personally obtain public records through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) system, the process is both outdated and inefficient.

Congress is now considering legislation that would update the Freedom of Information Act in time for its 50th anniversary later this year. The FOIA Improvement Act of 2015 (S. 337) takes a number of important steps to reduce the expense and time required to access key information. The new legislation writes into law the existing presumption of openness rule (agencies can only withhold information if the disclosure would cause specific harm), aims to make requests more efficient by modernizing technology tools and limits the ability of agencies to keep internal deliberations that are more than 25 years old confidential, among other improvements.

This legislation matters because access to government records often results in real change. The [Flint water crisis](http://www.poynter.org/2016/flint-water-crisis-highlights-weaknesses-in-michigans-sunshine-laws/394453/) was first uncovered when researchers at Virginia Tech University requested and researched public information. Our national conversation around veterans’ timely receipt of benefits was likewise sparked by a close study of government documents obtained through the FOIA process.

If the legislation is passed, these missteps can be exposed quicker and amended faster. It is the media’s job to shine a light – but we will continue to remain in darkness for too long unless these improvements are enacted.

There remains much to be done to instill confidence in citizens and ensure those in power are being held responsible for their actions. Amending this act and streamlining the processes by which the public can access government information is an important start.

The stakes are especially high in the midst of an election year, when candidates hold a variety of positions about political openness. But whoever the next leader of the free world is, they must understand their responsibility to remain transparent. They have a duty to the American people that cannot be taken lightly.

It is free, nationwide access to information that keeps Americans educated and ensures that our political leaders are transparent. Since this week has been designated as “Sunshine Week,” an annual national initiative that encourages openness in government and the free flow of information to the public, it is worth reflecting on the role information plays in strengthening our democracy. America can only be a strong nation when its citizens are engaged and informed. In light of Sunshine Week and for the benefit of all citizens, I encourage our leaders to push the FOIA Improvement Act forward.