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Group Pushes for More Gov't Documents to Go Online

Grant Gross, IDG News Service

Mar 18, 2010 4:00 pm

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The Sunlight Foundation has launched a campaign to pressure all levels of government in the U.S. to put more information online.

The [foundation](#), a nonpartisan advocate for open government and transparency, launched the [Public=Online campaign](#) Thursday at Google's Washington, D.C., office. About 100 people attended the event, and they came from a wide range of the political spectrum in the U.S., said Jake Brewer, engagement director at the foundation.

A small percentage of government information is now online, a spokeswoman for the Sunlight Foundation said.

Demanding more government transparency shouldn't be an ideological issue, said Jim Harper, director of information policy studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, and webmaster of WashingtonWatch.com. Many libertarians and conservatives want transparency because they believe it will lead to a smaller government, while progressives and liberals believe transparency can show the value of government and expose corruption, he said.

"I'll take that as a win-win," Harper said. "I'd rather have a well-running and noncorrupt government as a libertarian than an overly large and failing government."

The Sunlight Foundation asked U.S. residents to join the campaign and sign a pledge to hold public officials accountable to make more information available online. The pledge will be targeted to each U.S. congressional district.

"Government transparency is critical to creating a better democracy, and of highest importance in how I cast my vote," the pledge says. "I pledge, through my sustained engagement, to hold public officials accountable for being open and transparent."

Too often, when government agencies put data online, they don't do it in a way that is useful to citizens, said participants in the launch event. WashingtonWatch.com recently used dozens of volunteers to get 40,000 congressional funding requests, called earmarks, into an [online database](#), Harper said. Congressional offices

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were required to put their earmark requests online, but they did it in a range of formats, including HTML and scanned PDFs, Harper said.

"The point of Public=Online is to have government give you good data in the first place," he said.

Earlier this week, U.S. Representative Steve Israel, a New York Democrat, introduced the [Public Online Information Act](#), which would require U.S. government agencies to make all public documents permanently available free online.

"POIA is going to take public information by the executive branch out of the dark ages, out of the dark government warehouses, out of the metal file cabinets, and into the sunlight of the Internet," Israel said at a [press conference](#) Tuesday.

Public information should be online and searchable, Israel said. The Freedom of Information Act, or FOIA, is outdated because it requires U.S. citizens to go through a cumbersome process to get paper copies of government information that has not been released, he said. FOIA was passed in 1966, but amended most recently in 2007.

Public documents that get shipped off to a warehouse are "about as public and as transparent and accessible as a nuclear missile silo," Israel said.

POIA will "shift the burden" from the public having to request government information to federal agencies required to make it available, said Ellen Miller, executive director of the Sunlight Foundation.

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