

OpenTheGovernment.org - Media Giraffe Profile

OpenTheGovernment.org

Patrice McDermott - Director



"Why Secrecy Matters: Openness in government helps saves lives and strengthens democracy. For instance, thanks to transparency law and public attention brought by media coverage, body armor that had been distributed to U.S. troops despite failing ballistics tests was recently recalled."

OpenTheGovernment.org website, commenting on its Sept. 1, 2005 "Secrecy Report Card."

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About

*MGP interview with Patrice McDermott
November 18, 2008*

A collaboration of over 240 groups and individuals have just released "Moving Toward a 21st Century Right-To-Know-Agenda: Recommendations to President-elect Obama and Congress." The 98-page document lists ways for the Obama administration to create a more transparent government. The writing of the report was overseen by OMB watch, which is housed with Openthegovernment.org. Patrice McDermott chaired the panel responsible for writing the chapter, "Creating a Government Environment for Transparency."

McDermott says it's a fairly common practice to issue something like this before a new administration. "Everyone tries to get their ideas in front of transition people," she says. And how did they go about actually getting it to Obama? The process was a little more ethereal than sticking it in the mail. McDermott says they have good ties to John Podesta, the head of the transition team and a long supporter of transparency issues, and the report worked its way to him.

If McCain had won, he would have received the same report, though with the obvious change to the sub heading of the title. And would he have been receptive? She says yes, that McCain has a background in some of these issues, both with the torture issue and in campaign finance transparency.

She says they haven't yet heard from Obama, and that sometimes groups have the opportunity to meet with the transition team, but they haven't had one so far. Instead, the report worked its way in, and they've "heard the language pop up" in transition documents. If the staff at the center wasn't able to personally get it into his hands, she says that it's still getting there.

The collaboration involved liberals, conservatives, libertarians--many coming together in September for a big meeting in Baltimore. She calls the process of keeping all these threads together a "major undertaking" by a small OMB staff. "A lot of kudos goes out to them."

McDermott has been involved in access issues since 1994. After receiving her doctorate in political science at the University of Arizona, she decided to retool it with a library degree, and went on to teach at a library school. This led to a job in the National Archives, then to a position at OMB Watch, then to the American Library Association for four years where she worked on privacy and Patriot Act issues. She took the position as director of Openthegovernment.org in 2006.

UPDATES:

September 20, 2006: Patrice McDermott succeeded Rick Blum as director.

OpenTheGovernment.org is a coalition of 50 open-government advocates including individuals, journalists, consumer and good-government groups, environmentalists, labor and others. They say they are "united out

of a concern for what U.S. News and World Report called a "shroud of secrecy" descending over our local, state and federal governments. We're focused on making the federal government a more open place to make us safer, strengthen public trust in government, and support our democratic principles."

It's annual "Secrecy Report Card," identifies trends in public access to information, documenting lack of transparency in military procurement, new private inventions, and the scientific and technical advice that the government receives, among other areas. On September 2, 2006, OpenTheGovernment.org released its Secrecy Report Card 2006, available at:
<http://www.openthegovernment.org/otg/SRC2006.pdf>

Key issues are democracy, environment-health-safety, national security and public trust and accountability. The group encourages people to contact OpenTheGovernment.org and tell stories about their advocacy defending the public's right to know, accessing public information and standing up against secrecy. It also provides a set of "advocacy basics" for fighting government secrecy.

Groups represented on the OpenTheGovernment steering committee include: AFL-CIO, American Association of Law Libraries, Center for American Progress, Electronic Frontier Foundation, Federation of American Scientists, Fund for Constitutional Government, Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, People For the American Way, the National Freedom of Information Coalition, and Society of Professional Journalists. Co-chairs are Tom Blanton of the National Security Archive and Gary D. Bass of OMB Watch.

OpenTheGovernment.org's fiscal sponsor is the non-partisan, non-profit Fund for Constitutional Government and it is housed with OMB Watch, which is also a 501(c)3 not-for-profit focused on government accountability and citizen participation.

The website maintains a current list of feature stories submitted by coalition members which the group says "highlight the human impact of open government and government secrecy."

The group's steering-committee members include Steve Aftergood, of the Federation of American Scientists and David Sobel of the Electronic Frontier Foundation. Funding comes from the Angelina Fund, the CS Fund, the Educational Foundation of America, the HKH Foundation, the the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Open Society Institute, the Stewart R. Mott Charitable Trust (through Philanthropic Ventures Fund), the Warsh-Mott Legacy Fund and the Fund for Constitutional Government, the National Security Archive and OMB Watch.

EARLIER ENTRIES:

On Sept. 1, 2005, OpenTheGovernment.ORG released its "2005 Secrecy Report Card", which it said documented "the alarming expansion (with few limits) of secrecy in government." The report detailed 50 government restrictions on "sensitive but unclassified" information.

(See the group's About Us page, and its news-release archives page.

Links

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