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Michigan remains cloudy during Sunshine Week

by John Elchert, MPA President,
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For the past ten years, The Michigan Press Association has given the Rep. Peter Petallia Memorial Sunshine Award to public servants that strive to promote and protect transparency in government. The award is named after former State Representative Peter Pettalia of Presque Isle who embodied all good things in governing especially support of the citizens in his community and an understanding of the importance of keeping them informed through a transparent government.

This year, we are sad to report that there are no Sunshine Awards being given. Michigan continues to linger in the basement statistically on matters of openness when compared to other states. Despite this fact truly little has been done to shine the sun on government activity in our state.

Government transparency is essential to maintaining the public's trust and ensuring accountability. Transparency allows citizens to understand how their government operates, how their tax dollars are being spent, and how decisions are made on their behalf.

From township level government to big cities and counties all the way up to the state Capitol transparency is treated as a burden and a thing to be avoided by government officials. Exceedingly prohibitive costs, lengthy delays and complete exemptions foster this attitude.

Government transparency is not just a matter of ethics, but also of efficiency and effectiveness. When government officials operate in secrecy, it becomes more difficult for citizens to participate in the decision-making process and provide valuable input. Transparency allows for greater collaboration between government and the public, leading to better policies and outcomes for all.

To improve government transparency in Michigan, several steps can be taken. Primarily, the state's FOIA laws must be revised to lower costs and speed up response and production of FOIA requests. We must also press lawmakers to remove the exemptions in the law for the legislature and the Governor.

Government transparency is a fundamental component of a functioning democracy. In Michigan, it is crucial that legislators move to increase transparency and ensure that government officials are held accountable to the people they serve. By improving transparency, we can strengthen democracy, build trust in government, and create a more just and equitable society for all.

The Michigan Press Association urges you to contact your state legislators and let them know you want FOIA to be considered an essential service... not a burden.