



Let's celebrate Sunshine Week and the right to open government

A Letter-to-the-Editor

Submitted by:

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This week (March 10-16) is Sunshine Week, an annual non-partisan celebration of access to public information about government actions and what this access can mean to you and me. We in Alabama have just had a wonderful demonstration of the importance of government transparency.

On March 8, the Alabama Supreme Court nullified an insurance premium increase targeting teachers and education employees, ruling that a state agency violated the Open Meetings Act. The court's decision last week was more than academic. As a result, over \$130 million in escrow will go back to those affected by the premium increase because much of the agency's discussion about premiums was not open to the public, as the law requires. Instead, the deliberations occurred in a closed session under the guise of "training".

Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis famously wrote in 1913 that "sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectant", emphasizing the need for governmental decision-making to occur in public. At the same time, Justice Brandeis stressed that civic groups should take an active role in providing information to voters. The League of Women Voters of Alabama reminds citizens that the access provided by open meetings laws and the many types of records available through the federal Freedom of Information Act provide key ways for the public to become better informed. In addition, groups like the League provide factual, nonpartisan information and sponsor public discussions on important topics.

Use these resources. Become informed. Participate. Do your part to foster a stronger democracy and let the sun shine in!

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Barbara Caddell is President of the League of Women Voters of Alabama, a nonpartisan political organization that encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy. For additional information on current programs, please visit our website at LWVAL.org.