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Transparency is the new black

There was a point not long ago when the only time you saw the word "transparency" in print was if you were looking at ads for new windows for your home or what was known in the dark ages as color slide film for your camera.

Well, not anymore.

Today, it's becoming nearly impossible to read a story about our federal, state or local governments without finding the word "transparency" or its cousin "transparent" in there somewhere, or at least so it seems.

In fact, a Google News search for stories containing the words "transparency" and "government" turned up nearly 17,000 hits Friday afternoon; "transparent" and "government" turned up 9,400 more.

If you think we're complaining, then think again. After the last eight years of increased government secrecy at the federal level, that's a very good thing, indeed.

All of which brings us to the fifth-annual national observance of Sunshine Week, a banding together of journalists, academics, students, good-government advocates and others to bring attention to the importance of open government in our society. This year, the American Society of Newspaper Editors – working hand in hand with the National Freedom of Information Coalition and the Society of Professional Journalists' FOI Committee – coordinated a national survey of all 50 states to gauge whether state governments are doing enough online to provide essential information to its citizens.

In short, survey teams scoured state government Web sites for 20 specific types of public records, including audit reports; bridge inspection reports; disciplinary actions against attorneys and physicians; hospital and nursing home inspection documents; school bus inspections and campaign finance reports among them.

And how did the states fare?

The most frequently found information on state government Web sites were school test scores (49 states) and department of transportation projects and contracts (48); conversely, death certificates were available in only five states and gas pump overcharge records in eight.

Texas led the national survey with a perfect 20-for-20 score. It was followed by New Jersey (18), North Carolina (17) and Kentucky, New York and Utah (all with 16).

Mississippi earned the distinction of having the least useful Web site in the country, providing information in only four of the 20 categories. It was joined near the bottom by Indiana, Montana, Oregon and Wyoming (all tied at seven.)

Unfortunately, New Hampshire didn't fare much better, satisfying the survey in only eight categories. (See today's story for a more detailed breakdown.)

While New Hampshire's performance is disappointing, it's somewhat mitigated by the fact that many states across the country have taken great strides in making what we would argue is essential information available to its citizens.

If there is a lesson here, it is that federal and state open-government laws are not there just for investigative reporters and watchdog organizations to dig up scandals and otherwise keep tabs on the operation of government.

They are there to ensure that you – just an ordinary citizen – can have access to that very same information should it ever become important to your daily life.

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