



ATTORNEY GENERAL'S OFFICE EMPLOYEE PRESENTED WITH FIRST AMENDMENT FREEDOM FIGHTER AWARD

by Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott

OPEN AND TRANSPARENT GOVERNMENT IS both fundamental to our democracy and essential to inspiring the confidence and accountability that taxpayers deserve from their government. Fortunately, the State of Texas has some of the nation's most robust public information laws. As the state agency charged with administering and enforcing the Texas Public Information Act, the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) is committed to ensuring that public records and other information are accessible to all Texans.

Given our demonstrated commitment to transparency and accountability in government, we were particularly thrilled when the Baylor Lariat recently honored our Open Records Division by selecting Hadassah Schloss for this year's First Amendment Freedom Fighter Award. A long-serving and dedicated member of our Open Records Division's staff, Hadassah was formally presented this distinguished award when she attended the School of Journalism, Public Relations & News Media's student awards banquet at Baylor University.

As the OAG's Cost Rules Administrator, Hadassah regularly fields calls from Texans who need help gaining access to public records and other information from a variety of state, local and municipal government entities. When one of these governmental bodies seeks to avoid responding to an individual's public information request,

Hadassah and her colleagues in the Open Records Division are often the requestor's first line of defense.

In an average day, Hadassah cheerfully answers Texans' questions about the rules governing the costs of producing requested records, reviews cost estimates from governmental bodies that demanded excessive deposits from citizen requestors, and fields inquiries from government officials seeking an exemption from the standard cost rules. Although responding to requests for help keeps Hadassah awfully busy, she also works to improve government transparency by teaching classes about the cost rules, which helps ensure that officials do not overcharge Texans for public information.

Never one to miss an opportunity to espouse the virtues of open government, when Hadassah spoke to journalism students at the awards banquet, she reminded her audience that democracy can only function in the sunshine. Journalists who encounter obstacles during their quest for information should not let interference from government officials dissuade them from pursuing their stories, she told the students.

Indeed, by developing a working understanding about the Public Information Act, any Texan can use that knowledge as a key that opens a vault of information. The overwhelming majority of the complaints Hadassah receives each year stem from

a misunderstanding of the law and the cost rules – a misunderstanding that can be avoided by learning about the Public Information Act.

For example, Hadassah recently fielded complaints from two separate journalists after misinformed municipal officials demanded \$10 for a one-page police report. Once Hadassah placed a phone call to inquire about the inflated charges, the city secretary explained that she was not aware the OAG sets the rules that govern the amount agencies are authorized to charge. Thanks to Hadassah's quick action, the reporters received full refunds from the city.

In another notable case, county officials would not allow a requestor to inspect public records unless a \$730 payment was submitted in advance. After Hadassah received a phone call from the requestor, she contacted the county to educate the misinformed officials about the cost rules and the applicable limits when citizens want to inspect public records. The \$730 mishap occurred because documents sought by the requestor were public – but contained certain information that had to be redacted before the records could be reviewed. The county was allowed to charge 10 cents for each page containing information that had to be redacted. County officials had made a mistake when they attempted to charge the requestor for all the documents – not just the documents that had to be redacted. After

Hadassah explained the rules, the county lowered its estimate, and the requestor was able to inspect all the information upon payment of \$21.50 for 215 redacted pages.

When Hadassah received the First Amendment Freedom Fighter Award in May, it marked the third time she was recognized for her dedication to open government. In 1996, Hadassah received the James Madison Award from the Freedom of Information Foundation of Texas. Hadassah also received the 2006 Open Doors Award from the Fort Worth Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists.

Thanks to Hadassah and the other public servants who share her commitment to open and transparent government, Texas is at the forefront of sunshine states. And that's a good thing – because as stewards of the taxpayers' money, government agencies are obligated to operate in a manner that's transparent, accountable and inspires public confidence.

The Attorney General's Open Government Hotline at (877) OPEN-TEX fields more than 6,000 calls per year from citizens wishing to file complaints or seeking general information about how the open government laws work. To obtain more information about the Attorney General's efforts to enhance open government statewide, access the agency's website at www.texasattorneygeneral.gov.

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