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Access Across America Final Report

"I walked away with story ideas, resources and more confidence in ways to get the information I'm after. Thank you so much for coming!"

- Session participant, Kennewick, Wash.

Overview

The Access Across America tour stopped at 56 locations in 32 states, serving more than 1,000 journalists and citizens. I drove from town to town in a rented Chevy Impala for 45 days, April 27 through June 10, presenting two-hour training sessions to 28 SPJ chapters, four open-government coalitions and two dozen small news organizations. The goal: provide practical tips for accessing records and bolster journalists' confidence and passion for holding government accountable and making their communities better.

Finances

Expenses totaled \$12,345 (\$95 over the \$12,250 budget), coming to about \$12 per person served, a cost-effective training method in the SPJ training program. Handouts cost \$4,100 and the rest paid for lodging, gas, rental car and meals. The trip was funded by a \$8,250 grant from the SDX Foundation and a \$4,000 grant from the National Freedom of Information Coalition. Also, the University of Arizona School of Journalism provided Cuillier's time and supplies, including the projector and interactive response clickers.

People served

During the tour attendees use handheld response devices to answer questions during the presentation and then saw the group results instantly posted in the PowerPoint. Response was voluntary and anonymous, resulting in 771 people answering some or all of the 12 questions, out of 1,009 people (response rate of 76 percent). The typical attendee was a young reporter at a small daily newspaper covering local government with some experience in accessing records. About 18 percent had never requested a local or state public record and 53 percent had never requested a record from a federal agency. A third of the attendees reported that they did not know how to request public records. See Appendix A, pages 5-7, for details.

Impact

Evaluations

Feedback forms were filled out by 602 of the attendees. The scores and open-ended responses were overwhelmingly positive. The open-ended responses are attached as Appendix B, pages 8-18. Here are the mean average scores of the three closed-ended questions, on a scale of 1-5:

Value/usefulness of content	4.7
Value/usefulness of handouts	4.8
Quality of presentation	4.8

Follow-up questions

One month after the sessions, I e-mailed the 672 attendees who provided their contact information in the sign-in sheets to ask them if they had used the tips since the sessions. I received more than 70 e-mails and phone calls from people who attended the sessions and wanted to express their thanks and explain how they used the information from the sessions. A list of the responses is provided in Appendix C, pages 19-24. Some examples:

- *The News Virginian* submitted more than 40 public records requests following the session, leading to about a dozen stories they would not have gotten otherwise. City Editor Tony Gonzalez said, “I think we’ve felt the difference. It’s working. Your workshop spurred the improvements.”
- Emily Parkhurst from *The Forecaster* in Falmouth, Maine, said she used the strategies to get records for exposing excessive restraint of children in schools. “Thank you again for your helpful presentation. It was truly inspiring.”
- Freelancer Audrey McCrone submitted her first public records request following a session in Ohio, asking for county elections information. “Thanks so much for coming to Cleveland! You changed my life by doing so... this is quite thrilling to me!”

Promotion

The tour garnered publicity for SPJ and NFOIC. Several organizations videotaped it and posted it online, and many blogged about the tour. Some provided local news coverage. Here are some examples:

- The Virginia Coalition for Open Government posted the session in 13 parts on YouTube, as well as tips from the session.
<http://www.youtube.com/user/VaCo4OpGo>
- An *Associated Press* story out of Vermont: “Experts say Vermont right-to-know laws need work”
<http://www.businessweek.com/ap/financialnews/D9G02I2G0.htm>
- VTDigger, an investigative reporting site hosted by a citizen journalist, wrote about the session, saying “Reporters are cops on the right-to-know beat.”
http://vtdigger.org/2010/06/01/digger-dirt-reporters-are-cops-on-the-right-to-know-beat/?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter
- Community Newspaper Holdings Inc. blog by David Joyner, “Open government advocate delivers powerful message.”
<http://www.cnhinews.com/node/3845>
- Cronkite School Reynolds Center videotaped the session in Phoenix and posted it online.
<http://businessjournalism.org/2010/05/24/how-to-access-public-records-with-ua-prof-david-cuillier/>
- Rio Grande (New Mexico) SPJ chapter blog: “FOI event with David Cuillier earns kudos”
<http://www.nmspj.org/?p=923>
- Dangerous Intersections blog, by Erich Vieth: “How to force access to public records though freedom of information acts”
<http://dangerousintersection.org/2010/06/10/how-to-force-access-to-public-records-through-freedom-of-information-acts/>

Observations and lessons learned

Lack of access knowledge

The No. 1 problem in this country isn't that government is denying record requests. The problem is that not enough journalists are submitting record requests. Small news organizations need much more training in access. In some newsrooms the reporters didn't know they could ask for public records. Many are fresh out of college – often non-journalism majors who never had journalism courses and who lack newsroom mentors because veterans have been laid off. Many of these journalists had never heard of SPJ. These journalists are flying under our radar because they don't attend conferences or training opportunities.

Secrecy in law enforcement

Secrecy is spreading throughout the country, particularly among law enforcement. I came across communities that literally had secret police – no access to jail logs, arrest reports, 911 logs, incident reports or scanner traffic. For example:

- One newspaper had a pile-up on the interstate and couldn't get it in the paper until three days later because the PIO couldn't be reached.
- One paper gets its cops news from scanner bugs – people in the community who listen to the police scanner and post what they hear online.
- In most communities the reporters can't see complete incident reports – they rely on PIOs to tell them what is happening.

Allies among citizens

Citizens are active in fighting for open government. I ran across individuals and groups who care about access. I also encountered some outstanding journalists and news organization who are doing great work. Journalism is NOT dead.

Scheduling and logistics

Some observations that might be of help in future training programs:

- Small news organizations preferred quick, one-hour sessions, usually in the afternoon or as a brown-bag lunch.
- SPJ chapters tended to prefer two-hour evening sessions for members and the public, usually weeknights Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday. Nobody likes Friday nights or Sundays, and Mondays are not that popular. Some chapters in metro areas prefer lunch weekday sessions to attract journalists clustered downtown. Rural chapters preferred Saturday sessions when people can drive from remote locations.
- Chapters need three or more months to prepare ahead of time, but newsrooms often will schedule a session in a week or two, particularly at small organizations. A few chapters won't follow through, but most are excellent.
- Nearly every venue had a projector, screen and Internet connection, although having those in the car served as a valuable backup (along with an extension cord).
- National and Alamo will provide unlimited mileage with no limit on range within the United States for sedans. Other companies charge for extra miles and limit the range. Rent at a location away from an airport to save in airport taxes and find coupons online.

Recommendations

1. Develop on-the-road training

This tour illustrated how powerful and cost-effective on-the-road training can be. It reaches people at small news organizations who would normally not attend conferences or other training opportunities. I recommend incorporating on-the-road training into the newsroom training program, perhaps sending regional trainers around for a week at a time (45 days straight might be a bit much). Also, I would recommend a strong publicity campaign – sending press releases out to the local media a week or so before a community visit.

2. Create a national FOI training center

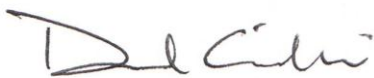
This country needs a national FOI training center to foster access knowledge among journalists, citizen journalists, high school students, and other people. Currently, different groups provide pieces of training, but we have no center. A center might:

- Coordinate regional trainers who would travel a week a year visiting newsrooms, coalitions, SPJ chapters and community groups.
- Produce online training modules in accessing records that anyone can use. Some state coalitions have produced online videos and other training materials, but the amount and quality are inconsistent.
- Coordinate national Sunshine Week. ASNE has done a great job leading Sunshine Week but have had to cut back in recent years.
- Produce booklets and classroom materials for citizens, K-12 schools and college classrooms.
- Work with the federal Office of Government Information Services to provide training for government employees (the OGIS director said they would be very interested in this).

This probably would not be under the auspices of SPJ, but SPJ could be an integral part in supporting the startup and training for journalists.

Final thoughts

It was an honor to have been provided this opportunity. I thank the Society of Professional Journalists, the Sigma Delta Chi Foundation, the National Freedom of Information Coalition, and the University of Arizona School of Journalism, for making this happen. I also thank the SPJ headquarters staff: Joe Skeel and Chris Vachon who supported the idea, Heather Porter who coordinated the details, Scott Leadingham who helped promote it, and Billy O’Keefe who created the great website. I also thank the dedicated coordinators for each event and the 1,009 people who showed up. It was the most rewarding experience in my professional life, and I hope it helped foster freedom of information. That is what it’s all about.



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Appendix A

Attributes of attendees and their experience

Turning Technologies handheld response devices, which look like small calculators, were handed out to the audience for use during the presentations (provided by the University of Arizona School of Journalism). Twelve multiple-choice questions were included in the PowerPoint slides and audience members could respond with the clickers. The group results then showed up as bar charts in the PowerPoint for everyone to see, and the computer captured the data. The responses were anonymous and voluntary, resulting in 771 people answering some or all of the questions out of 1,009 attendees (76 percent response rate). Here is a breakdown:

Gender (*n* = 666)

Female	346	52%
Male	320	48%

Age (*n* = 653)

18-30	254	39%
31-40	109	17%
41-50	105	16%
51-60	131	20%
61-70	46	7%
71 or older	8	1%

Workplace (*n* = 540)

Weekly	37	7%
Small daily (<50,000)	174	32%
Mid-size daily (51,000-149,000)	74	14%
Large daily (150,000 and higher)	30	6%
Television/radio	41	8%
Other	184	34%

Job (*n* = 626)

Reporter	261	42%
College student	91	15%
Editor/producer	96	15%
Educator	43	7%
Online only	24	4%
Copy editor/designer	24	4%
Photographer	16	3%
Other	71	11%

Beat (*n* = 347)

Government/town	142	41%
Criminal justice	40	12%
Education	32	9%
Features	32	9%
Business	23	7%
Sports	13	4%
Science/health	11	3%
Other	54	16%

Years of journalism experience (*n* = 640)

None	81	13%
Less than 3	103	16%
3-10	178	28%
11-20	93	15%
21 or more	185	29%

Experience in accessing public records (*n* = 654)

No experience	141	22%
Some experience	320	42%
More than most people	134	21%
Very experienced	59	9%

Last time requested a local/state public record (*n* = 667)

Past two days	105	16%
Past week	102	15%
Past month	122	18%
Past year	117	18%
Past three years	53	8%
More than three years	49	7%
Never	119	18%

Last time requested a federal public record (*n* = 680)

Past two days	13	2%
Past week	12	2%
Past month	44	7%
Past year	116	17%
Past three years	71	10%
More than three years	67	10%
Never	357	53%

If you don't use public records, why not? (n = 620)

Don't know how	205	33%
No time	138	22%
Nobody really cares	129	21%
Not enough benefits	40	6%
Too many hassles	16	3%
Doesn't apply to me	92	15%

Over the past two years, the prevalence of denials has... (n = 621)

Increased substantially	30	5%
Increased slightly	61	10%
Stayed the same	213	34%
Decreased slightly	32	5%
Decreased substantially	7	1%
Doesn't apply to me	278	45%

Over the past two years, my company's willingness to sue for records has... (n = 589)

Increased substantially	35	6%
Increased slightly	57	10%
Stayed the same	130	22%
Decreased slightly	58	10%
Decreased substantially	75	13%
Doesn't apply to me	234	40%

Appendix B

Evaluation sheet open-ended comments

Below are all 360 written comments provided on the feedback sheets. The first group of comments contains praise and appreciation (312 comments). The second group includes the comments that provide recommendations and suggestions for improvement (48 comments).

Praise and thanks

A friendly and comprehensive presentation. Thank you.

A very good reminder that we should not forget our role in being the watchdog on behalf of our readers.

A+++++! Would buy from again!

Absolutely great for students!

As someone new to the journalism world, this was very useful for getting a grasp on what my rights are to information and how I can access it.

Awesome - funny, inspiring. So glad to have attended. Thanks (and Amen!)

Bear down!

Bravo!

Clickers kept it more engaging; info was excellent!

Clickers very cool, engaging - would not do without them!

Clickers were fun but not necessary. Thanks!

Clickers were nice way to engage audience! Love it. Nicely done, Mr. Cuillier!

Dave is a great presenter, an informed speaker and a passionate defender of the public's right to access.

Fabulous session. Terrific talk. Great stuff. Well worth the price of admission.

Dave is hilarious and inspiring

David Cuillier's examples were really valuable in showing how being persistent pays off with great, award-winning stories. He touched upon a news organization's willingness to sue as it pertains to public records, but I think he could better address how the state of our industry (news) affects our ability to get our requests met. The people and agencies we cover KNOW about our downsizing, over-worked staff (doing the job of two or more people), and our dwindling audiences. I am hopeful all of this will get better as the transition into convergence. But in the meantime, we need to be aware of how our collective strength is perceived. Love the idea of FOI First on Fridays!!

David has a particularly effective speaking style that translates to students and pros alike. This was very helpful.

David was great and inspiring. Thank you!

Doug Clifton had a great opening. David got our batteries charged. We won't take "no" for an answer!

This was a wonderful program. We need more of this.

Effing awesome!

Engaging presentation.

Engaging speaker, concrete examples, great resources in handouts. Thank you!

Engaging speaker. Extremely useful resources and information. What a great presentation.

Enjoyable

Enjoyed and learned a lot.

Enjoyed it greatly. Always good to look at an issue from a different perspective. Comments from attendees helpful.

Enjoyed last part of “how to ask” and “if they say no” more than what kinds of things you might FOIA.
Enjoyed the presentation and learned a lot that will be helpful in my future.

Enlightening!

Enlightening, inspiring and entertaining.

Entertaining and informative

Entertaining and informative. Never thought I’d need to do this - but now I just might. Good tidbits on tracking people info.

Entertaining, Enlightening, Thorough.

Excellent - even for the jaded reporter.

Excellent - Great presentation.

Excellent and great resources.

Excellent and inspirational - would be great to take some of this information to general public.

Excellent and useful presentation.

Excellent information and presentation. We need this. A real shot in the arm.

Excellent job!

Excellent job. Plenty of useful information. Suggestion: More involvement from audience.

Excellent overview. Appreciate the broader perspective.

Excellent presentation - useful and entertaining.

Excellent presentation all around.

Excellent presentation on timely and important topic.

Excellent presentation with lots of valuable information.

Excellent presentation!

Excellent presentation! Thanks.

Excellent presentation! Very informative!

Excellent presentation.

Excellent presentation. Will be ripping this off and sharing with my students.

Excellent seminar. Good ideas. Thanks.

Excellent summary of situation, solutions and specifics. I think our staff will be able to use this information. Practical, informational - glad you came!

Excellent talk. Very practical and useful information. Engaging speaker.

Excellent!

Excellent!

Excellent! Thank you.

Excellent. Thanks so much.

Excellent! Very helpful info.

Excellent! Very informative and thanks for all the resources!

Excellent!!!

Excellent.

Excellent. A real pep talk.

Excellent. I’m new to journalism, but I feel inspired.

Excellent. Inspiring. A big challenge. Thanks.

Exceptional presentation! Great job.

Extremely informative and useful information and resources. Hope we can have more workshops like this.

Extremely informative, great presentation will benefit immensely from suggested websites. Presenter made presentation lively!!

Extremely well done. Lots of useful information presented clearly.

Fantastic resources in handouts. Great ideas. Great strategies!

Fantastic. Extremely. Beneficial.

Fascinating and well presented. The day went quickly and made me inspired. Thanks!

FOIA is a stronghold of any valuable and pertinent information. Great presentation.

Funny and informative session. Interesting and very useful info.

Glad to see that SPJ is doing this kind of thing. Sad to say that companies aren't supporting their own interests, but you're doing the Lord's work.

Good motivation and informational.

Good presentation. Lived up to its billing.

Good seminar. Useful.

Good stuff. Really appreciate the suggestions.

Good stuff. The nitty gritty of reporting. Thanks. I'm jazzed, excited!

Good suggestions.

Good use of humor and informality combined with information. Was amazingly fresh-sounding after having done this seminar dozens of times!

Got some great story ideas and I feel inspired again. Thank you!

Great ideas! I learned a lot about an unfamiliar topic.

Great ideas. Exciting reporting

Great ideas. Thanks!

Great info presented in an entertaining way. Dave Cuillier is a walking FOI encyclopedia.

Great info! I'm all inspired to go do something now.

Great info, great presentation and likeability!

Great information; good to know this information is available and how to find it.

Great job! Thank you!

Great job! Wished it would have started at 6:30 and I wish I had brought more staffers!

Great job.

Great message, important information, great presentation.

Great presentation - Thank you so much!

Great presentation of resources and methods; Fruitful discussion.

Great presentation!

Great presentation!

Great presentation!

Great presentation! A lot of good valuable information for a complex topic.

Great presentation! I learned a lot and will take it back to my newsroom.

Great presentation! Really enjoyed!

Great presentation! Very engaging. I learned a lot, truly.

Great presentation! Very helpful and motivating!

Great presentation! Very useful and informative!

Great presentation. All journalists should see this!

Great presentation. Motivational.

Great presentation. Thanks!

Great program.

Great questions/interactivity

Great resources and information presented in a compelling, digestible way. Thanks.

Great seminar! You have given me great ideas and the tools to get leads for stories. Thanks!

Great speaker! Very engaging.

Great speaker, capable of relaying the information in a clear and approachable way.

Great speaker. Extremely helpful information.

Great stuff!

Great techniques to know - a great reminder of the things we all need to know. A great refresher - and some new ideas to get records.

Great workshop. I would definitely suggest this to journalists!

Great!

Great!

Great!

Great! Do you come to college campuses?

Great.

Great. Very informative. Dave has a wide range of knowledge. Highly useful program.

High quality.

How-to workshops are always valuable to reporters. This was excellent.

I already knew most of the information, but this is a good reminder.

I am excited to try getting records. Motivating and informative.

I appreciated your humor and willingness to answer questions during the session.

I came away with a bunch of new story ideas and there were many examples of documents and tactics that never occurred to me. Thanks!

I could listen to David Cuillier speak all day! Great presenter with excellent information. Thanks!

I enjoyed the reminders about what journalism and reporting are really all about.

I feel like breaking some stories now!

I felt like "America" should have been playing in the background at the end of the presentation (I mean that in an awesome way!). Thanks. It spoke to my heart and soul.

I had a cop tell me "speak with the PIO" yesterday. Seeing how bad cops are about giving access and the way everything has gone "PIO" made me feel better about my job.

I haven't been to journalism seminar in years. I found this course to be very refreshing. The info I've learned here I'm hoping to put to use in my field!

I learned a lot about a subject (obtaining records) that I really didn't know too much about. The records for everyday life gave me lots of story ideas.

I learned a lot from the presentation. I will use the information learned in my upcoming stories.

I learned a lot. This should be done more.

I may even join SPJ again!

I may never need to access records, but I feel I could do so successfully. Thank you!

I really enjoyed the session. As a college student, this really puts a fun spin on education.

I wish someone from our local paper had come today. Thank you for the information and encouragement.

I'll use the information quite a bit. Low key while still keeping interest.

I'm a first-year journalism student and I had no idea about any of this so it was an extremely helpful course to relevant information. Thanks for the presentation!

I'm eager to plunge into new stories using this information. Much thanks.

Inspiring words!

Inspiring! (Now could I please see your credentials, in triplicate, including your SPJ card?...)

Interesting, informative, presented well, relevant, Good to be reminded about our role in democracy.

Interesting, useful, excellent resource information

It was interesting and made me think. Thanks!

It was really great. Thanks to SDX!

It was very interesting. I have new ideas, new resources and I feel motivated to request records for my new story ideas next week. Thanks!

Jokes are awesome. Good PowerPoint, useful information. Great job.

Just what I needed. Lots of sources I didn't know about. Thank you.

Kept my attention the whole time. Very valuable information. Thank you for coming!

Learned so much - thanks!

Let's make it a regular feature of NPC or SPJ

Little lengthy, but we made a lot of comments. Very well done - I will be passing along this information and my notes! Thanks so much!

Love interactive portion of the program.

Love the clickers. Excellent!

Love the humor!

Love the quotes you gave. Really kept me engaged.

Loved it and learned a lot. Thanks!

Loved it! Thanks

Loved it. Haven't done much with FOI in awhile and this was a great program to get me thinking more about FOI and how I can use it on my beats.

Loved that you included Indiana-specific info

Loved the clickers, made PowerPoint less of a snoozefest. Excellent cheerleading, inspirational. Some of the tips were a bit general, but still very useful.

Loves the apps. Reminiscent of class: Informative and enjoyable.

Making the pdfs available is great!

Most excellent!

Much appreciated!

Needed an evangelist to rev me up! Great use of examples. Thanks!

Nice stories. Took a tough topic and made it into digestible chunks.

Nice to hear this stuff.

Nice voice. Knows what's going on.

Now that I'm retired I'm finding more uses for the public use of open records. This was helpful.

Outstanding and inspiring information. I really appreciated the specific examples and ideas going forward. Looking forward to sharing the message with my newsroom.

Outstanding, easy-to-use presentation, David! Great information that we can take back and apply in our newsroom immediately. Very motivating, as well.

Perfect.

Please continue to provide these type of programs. They are invaluable to us small-town journalists on the frontlines.

Really enjoyed the interactivity provided by the clicker.

Really enjoyed this. I feel inspired to go find things out.

Really good information

Really good.

Really great program. I'm glad SPJ sponsored this program and offered it in a unique way.

Really informative and interesting.

Really interesting and relatable.

Seminar would be beneficial to citizens of a community.

Something useful for both the inexperienced and experienced journalist.

Spectacular. It was a pleasure!

Terrific!

Terrific, Dave. I'll even audit your courses!

Thank you for a very engaging discussion and presentation. It was a great reminder why public records are important. I came away not only inspired but with practical tips I can use in my newsroom.

Thank you for coming to Cleveland!

Thank you for coming to Corvallis. I really appreciate you taking the time to visit Oregon. Although I am arts and entertainment editor, I hope I can find time to follow up on the restaurant inspection article idea. Also, I write about nonprofit budgets from time to time, so some of these tactics might help get information in that area.

Thank you for taking the time to come to our "small town" paper with this information. It's very helpful to know where to turn for help with FOIA questions.

Thank you for taking the time to share this valuable information with us. I will be applying this info soon.

Thank you for the inspiration and encouragement.

Thank you for visiting. Oklahoma during the late evening hours. Very helpful session. I'll definitely use the info and handouts.

Thank you for your time, info and enthusiasm. Lots of great tips, motivation.

Thank you very much for coming to speak to us. I can't pretend time is not stretched extremely thin these days, and with fewer reporters on staff than there are days of the week, the idea of doing in-depth reporting sometimes seems like pure fantasy. But I really felt motivated and even inspired from your presentation, which makes my workload suddenly seem not so bad. Stories that have been on the backburner might move ahead now that I've gotten some fresh ideas. Again, thank you.

Thank you very much. It is comforting to have all these methods for something that can be very frustrating.

Thank you very much. Very informative.

Thank you!

Thank you!

Thank you!

Thank you!

Thank you!

Thank you! Great inspiration for digging up the dirt.

Thank you! Great inspiration for digging up the dirt.

Thank you!!

Thank you, David!

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Excellent presentation - very informative.

Thank you. This was very helpful and empowering.

Thanks - very interesting.

Thanks for doing this.

Thanks for doing this. I wish more journalists would realize what they can gain access to in their towns.

Thanks for facilitating this event.

Thanks for making materials available

Thanks for your time! I feel like this will help me.

Thanks to Dave and SPJ! We don't get a lot of opportunity for training so this is greatly appreciated.

Thanks!

Thanks!

Thanks!

Thanks!

Thanks!

Thanks! This was excellent. You kept a roomful of journalists enthralled for two hours!

The handout is perfect cliff notes for the presentation. Very helpful!

The presentation was informative and entertaining. I gained a lot of valuable information. I enjoyed hearing about other struggles and success around the country. Tips for requesting information and persuading people to hand it over were extremely useful. Thanks for a great presentation.

The presentation was very informative for a new journalist. As a new journalist, it has helped me find more resources to get information and informed me on things I should have knowledge on.

The presenter took what could have been a mundane subject and made it interesting. I enjoyed it.

The session reiterated the value of holding government accountable. Found it very interesting and enlightening. The clickers provided an interesting perspective.

The websites shown look very helpful.

This has been a great, informative and inspiring couple of hours. I feel much more capable in going out to get info now than I did when I came in. Thanks for the excellent presentation.

This is fantastic. I wish more journalists from our state could have the benefit of this event and information.

This is the most useful SPJ workshop I've ever attended. I walked away with story ideas, resources and more confidence in ways to get the information I'm after. I will be referring back to my notes and handouts often. Thank you so much for coming!

This one presentation was more helpful and informative than four years of college lectures. Wish I'd had a professor like you in school - Thanks so much!

This really got me thinking.

This session was a great primer for someone like myself, a young journalist with little experience in requesting records. The clickers made the session interesting by allowing us to participate and see what others say. The handout is a great resource.

This was an excellent program. Thank you!

This was very interesting and helpful! I am very happy that I went to this because I learned a lot more than I would in a textbook!

This workshop was very helpful. Great job!

Time well spent. Enjoyed the tone of the presentation. Stealing several story ideas. Thanks.

TY

Useful for non-journalists too!

Very cleverly done - affable speaker and very useful information.

Very effective use of personal experiences.

Very engaging.

Very enjoyable and informative!

Very enjoyable. Thank you!

Very entertaining and engaging. Fun and informative.

Very entertaining and informative. Thank you!

Very funny! Enjoyable!

Very funny. Kept me interested!

Very good at taking questions during, answered questions during that I wouldn't asked after was most helped by handout's links and areas it pointed me toward.

Very good presentation. Interesting speaker, engaging and entertaining. Valuable information - very valuable.

Very good session! Wish I had it in college and/or 20 years ago.

Very good!

Very great info. Interesting way of conveying.

Very helpful

Very helpful

Very helpful and empowering for a novice of the FOI process.

Very helpful and I especially like the detail-oriented advice. Interesting to learn about the psychological aspects of gathering information as well as the law and our rights as reporters and citizens. Some of the strategies are a bit too clean and I would have liked to hear more about how to beat the system.

Very helpful and informative. Appreciate the dedication in the program.

Very helpful and inspiring

Very helpful and interesting.

Very helpful info.

Very informative and encouraging

Very informative and entertaining! Thank you.

Very informative and helpful.

Very informative session that provided many unique ideas that make you think about the power we have if used correctly.

Very informative, delivered with enthusiasm and humor.

Very informative.

Very informative.

Very informative. Great presentation - makes me want to step up my game!

Very informative. Thank you for doing this.

Very informative. Thank you!

Very interesting and inspiring. Makes me want to do more investigations.

Very interesting presentation. The ideas on how to use records for more in-depth reporting - how to look, where to look, when to look - were wonderful. He gave concrete examples of how that info turned into real - and important - stories. A wonderful tool for journalists.

Very interesting, captivating and informative. Thank you!

Very interesting.

Very interesting. Kept my attention, which is hard to do. Thank you!

Very intriguing!

Very knowledgeable and opened up new ways to deal with and take on tough tasks. Thank you!

Very practical. Well organized.

Very valuable and enjoyable too!

Very valuable information! Thank you!

Very worthwhile.

Website source info, insight into general access/denial and ways to deal with agencies all very helpful.

Very informative and useful.

Well done!

Well done.

Well done. Great comments/explanation and advice. Strong content/presentation.

Well done. Informative for older and newer employees. Great motivation.

Well done. Thank you!

Well done. Very informative while still being entertained. Kept interest throughout the presentation.

Well done. Very useful. Thanks.

Well worth giving up a couple of hours on a Saturday. Great ideas and tips. Handout is worth the \$10 alone. Thanks for the push. Love the tips on fighting back, especially the specifics on challenging costs.

Well-presented. Kept us engaged. Humor helps. Gives us a boost of energy to get going on some projects.

Wonderful presentation! Useful information, very well presented. Great handouts, too.

Wonderful!

Works well across a range of skill/experience levels. We are fortunate to have this quality training come to us and expect it to have lasting results.

Worthwhile!

Would love more sessions presented similarly.

Yes, all 5s, but I'm being totally honest. This was a fantastic presentation. Totally relevant and so important as our ranks get smaller and public agencies get more comfortable in the thought that we're not watching them. The clicker got everyone involved and helped us to see perceptions around the room.

You are a good man.

You brought my enthusiasm for daily journalism back to life! Can't wait to try one of these ideas out.

You rock!

You should speak to college journalism programs.

You're a nice guy.

You're hilarious!

Recommendations and suggestions

A little much on the psychology and mind-trick-stuff how to handle clerks.

A little too fast moving through the displays. I know there was a lot of information to get in. Would have liked a little more time for information that was new to me in order to grasp or absorb it.

A much bigger screen would be helpful.

Add "general assignment" to what beat do you cover, or more than 1 of the above or option to have more than 1.

Allow time for group to introduce themselves. They could help each other.

Appreciate the localization. Would be nice to see how records can be used for soft news - entertainment reporting, dining news, etc.

As a pep talk it was good, but could have used more specific nuts-and-bolts how-to info. A tall order, I know. E.g., it's good to be specific about record requests, but how do you find out all that's available?

Business owner. Didn't need info beyond lists for various info. Thanks.

Can we create a listserv?

Clickers were interesting, but it discouraged interactivity; would have liked to hear more from fellow participants.

Get into specifics faster.

Good material, but a bit rudimentary for me.

Good overall presentation. Would have liked more on dealing with law enforcement.

Great discussion - I would have liked to get into more about analyzing data requests, etc. - but I understand we were short on time.

Great presentation. Good content. One spelling error on Washington access resources – “recods” should be “records.”

Great presentation. Would have liked more detail but provided great groundwork.

Great talk! Only problem was running too long - I underestimated the time I needed.

Hoped for a little more “how to” specifics and resources. Overall, a great class.

I actually work for the government now (former journalist), so I'd appreciate the opposite approach of how to make our information more accessible to the general public.

I didn't really care about group data with clickers. Enjoyed hearing real life experiences better! Except for the last question (Nixon) - it was funny!

I dislike using “FOI” to refer to state sunshine or open records laws as it contributes to the confusion of state laws with FOIA. I liked some of the realistic, psychological practical hints. Good presentation.

I work for a community college newspaper of 15,000 students, as editor in chief. I was hoping for a little more focus on open records/meetings in public universities. However, I found the information shared to be extremely useful, and it helped to build confidence in our fledgling student media organization. Thanks!

I'd like to have heard more specific information regarding Minnesota law.

Knowing more about the state laws for New Mexico would be helpful. It went a little long. Humorous and engaging. Also very helpful booklet.

Lots of useful examples. Great technique with clickers since there are many practitioners there seems to be an opportunity to go into more specific areas experiences. Engaging, compelling presentation.

Suggestion: Host should have handout of attendee names e-mails.

More in-depth suggestions for experienced reporters

More Q&A, more discussion among participants would be great. Good stuff.

Nice format. Maybe a few more examples of successful FOI requests and hurdles. Can't get enough of those! Also, thanks for the encouragement. I needed it!

Nice work! Very accessible presentation. Wonderful knowledgeable presenter. Keep it up. Would like more specific examples of how hunches turn into record requests turn into stories.

Nice work, Dave. I wish there would have been more time for details on strategies. War stories from audience was of less interest.

Ran a little long and late especially without dinner. I came directly from work so appetizers weren't enough. Presentation amazingly helpful. Wish we could have files of the PowerPoint!

Session did run long. Some specific audience questions should be saved for end-of-presentation Q&A or after session.

Should be based on concrete problems identified by audience.

Some ideas (e.g., dealing with people you need to get copies from) assume that everyone is a glib speaker. Many secretaries will just say, “My boss told me never to give out that information and so I'm not going to,” or “the cost is 25 cents per page, take it or leave it. I'm not going to argue with you. If you keep bothering me, I am going to call security. Now pay 25 cents per page or get out.”

Terrific presentation with lots of helpful strategies. Only problem - inherent in a “touring” program -

was some lack of specificity about our state's laws and challenges. But overall, great!

Terrific presentation, but maybe more places for question as you go from one category to the next. Thank you! It would have been good for Charles to have done some research and been aware of local laws and on-going struggles with gov's office ahead of workshop. To save time and offer tailored local presentation.

The clicker was "meh". But otherwise an excellent and insightful presentation.

The clickers are good, but go faster.

There was some lack of coordination between the powerpoints and the booklet, which was confusing.

Interesting presentation, but I would've liked to hear more in-depth about strategy and less intro.

This is great, especially for people who have some or little experience with records access. I'd love to know more about how to collect information on private organizations, such as businesses. Thank you for your work!

Too much time spent on negotiating tactics, but I learned a lot before that.

Too rushed at the end - went into overtime

Very helpful - would love to see this on a podcast - geared toward students. Thanks, David!

Wanted more details about Virginia FOIA law/restrictions.

Was hoping to hear more about how to battle and speed up FOIAs. We have a lot of federal agencies in NM. Sounds like it's just a tough row.

Would have been better if David had used the microphone that was provided. Thanks for coming!

Would have liked to see more nuts and bolts relevant to Vermont specific law.

Appendix C

E-mail responses from attendees following the sessions

Below are some of the e-mails I received following the sessions explaining how people applied what they learned in the training session to their reporting.

Hi David,

Just wanted to share an experience I had with a records request. Some college officials were giving me crap about accessing a claim filed against the college. They said the claim wasn't an open record. Using some of the info from the seminar, I explained why it was. They still wouldn't budge. So what did I do? I sent an open records request - the angry one I knew would get quick results. A week later, I had the claim in my hands.

Cheers!

Jorge Barrientos, Education Reporter, The Bakersfield Californian

Mr. Cuillier,

I got a lot out of your seminar and have since obtained May and June copies of my mayor's calendar. My boss is going to show me how to look up restaurant reports on the Internet, hopefully tomorrow.

Thanks so much for making me aware of these government records. I have been checking court records for years but want to do more with city government.

A G D, Aldittes@aol.com

Hi David,

I thought you might be interested to see the story that came out of my FOIA request.

Here's a link: <http://www.theforecaster.net/content/pnms-restraintsinmaineschools-071410>

I'm hoping this might get people talking and possibly pave the way to the schools releasing these forms or some documentation that shows how often this is happening.

Thank you again for your helpful presentation. It was truly inspiring. Also, we're starting to collect restaurant inspection forms on a regular basis as well.

Take care,

Emily Parkhurst, Reporter, The Forecaster

Dr. Cuillier,

Thank you for offering your public records presentation at The Courier in Findlay, Ohio, recently. I've already put your sound advice to work by making numerous public records requests, which immediately caught the attention of many officials and resulted in a few golden nuggets of info. Oftentimes working the same beat, or even the same job, can tend to get a bit stale after a while and foster a more laid back attitude. I just wanted to let you know that a few of us have taken the opportunity offered by your lecture to professionally rejuvenate. For me, the embers were stirred again and I appreciate it.

Sincerely,

Joy Brown, City Government Reporter

I just wanted to say that since attending your session on public records, I've held the line. In fact, our Centralia council recently fired our city manager and they wouldn't tell us why, nor would they release his performance evaluation after two public records requests. So I got the attorney general's ombudsman involved. Although he wasn't successful in prodding the city attorney to release the evaluation, yet, it made for an interesting council reaction story.

We'll see what develops next.

Adam Pearson, The Chronicle, Centralia, WA

David,

I haven't had much call before to use FOIA or formal record requests. I'm fortunate to have a couple local governments that require little more than an oral request or a simple e-mail.

However, I passed your idea about requesting e-mails on to a reporter who was looking into the reasons a local police chief agreed to step down. We have no inkling of what happened, and it seems like a good time to pop the e-mail request to see if it shakes anything loose.

I also just this week used the RCFP FOIA tracker you told us about. I used the letter generator for a request to OSHA. Although the area director seemed friendly enough, I used the "Neutral-tone" letter.

I'll try to remember to write you how these turn out. Thanks again for coming to help us out.
Ben Timberlake, Staff Writer, Press Enterprise

The meeting was very informative. One of the key things I took from it was the advice to ask to see a list of documents received or submitted. I called up Shepherdstown's municipal clerk and found out that they do maintain a FOIA request record (but not many people are submitting FOIA requests to Shepherdstown Town Hall), and that they also keep a record of every document filed with Town Hall. I have checked it weekly since then. My access to this information has already contributed to two small stories, and I foresee it will help me to be more anticipatory as opposed to reactionary in my coverage of Shepherdstown's municipal politics.

Mike Theis

Thank you so much for coming to the Tri-Cities and talking with us about public records. It was one of the most helpful SPJ workshops I've ever attended. Thanks.

Molly Kelleher, KEPR Action News Reporter

Dave,

Just wanted to thank you for a wonderful and informative presentation last night. I wrote this on the evaluation but I'll say it again — I think I learned more useful information from that 2-hour session than I did during four years of college.

My fellow Sandusky Register reporters and I all went home inspired and ready to dig into some documents. We're also implementing your "FOIA on Fridays" idea. Great suggestion!

I plan to pass this information along to some of my professors at the University of Toledo — they have a basic communications program, but unfortunately there's not much focus on journalism and they've cut staff down to the bare bones.

Thanks again for all your help.
Annie Zelm, Sandusky Register

Didn't get to speak with you yesterday, but I wanted to thank you again for the several instances where your help's made me more confident as I "sought the truth" from my sources. This is Marlon Walker. You first met me in 2007 at the Reporters Institute. I was also the tall guy at yesterday's access workshop (I also brought two coworkers from Middle Georgia along for the ride).

The story I spoke about where I FOIA'd the e-mails from the city officials? Yep, got that after an e-mail exchange with you. It put the fear of God in them. They've given me everything I've requested since.

Today I submitted a more detailed FOIA request asking for what was in the personnel files of the top folks in the city – from their original job applications to their salary histories. Needless to say, they weren't too happy to see me and my manila folder at City Hall.

Again, many thanks for what you do. You'll hear from me again soon.
Marlon A. Walker, Houston/Peach County Government, The Telegraph

David,

We're using your tips in a couple ways.

First, we've instituted the weekly FOI across our four-person news staff. We have a GoogleDoc where we log in the information you recommended (doc requested, who we reached, how/when they responded, general notes about the process). That is helping with the "document state of mind." If you wanted, I could share that document with you to view -- let me know.

Our city council reporter also left the office last night with a set of blank request forms for her night meeting.

After the conference, I spent most of a night going through the databases and FOI ideas in the packet. I bookmarked many of the sites and passed them around to our reporters.

We're in the process of re-establishing our reporters' coverage area, to better make sure that topics and institutions don't fall through the cracks, and part of that process will now include regular checks of certain state databases and other sites where every once in a while we'll pick up a story just by staying vigilant in our checks.

When I returned from the conference my initial thought was that it was "more inspiring than informative." Now I'm thinking that it was both. A big part of FOI is learning who and how to submit requests, which strikes me as really enjoyable, regardless of whether the documents make their way to me.

Thanks again, and let me know if you want to see our staff FOI log.

Tony, AGonzalez@newsvirginian.com

Hi David (follow-up e-mail from Tony Gonzalez),

Wanted to shoot you an update on FOIA efforts at The News Virginian since the conference. According to our binder we've put out 40 requests in a little over 2 months (in addition to informal requests that don't get properly logged).

Of those, I'd estimate we've landed or enhanced about a dozen stories, with a few more promising but still pending. I send you this unsolicited note in part because I wanted to check on our progress myself. I think we've felt the difference.

Getting some reporters on board hasn't been easy. I tend to check in on Wednesday to see if anything has been requested that week -- and we don't have a penalty system in place (which seems silly). But it's working. Your workshop spurred the improvements.

A few stories:

- o (This one was sort of already developing)

http://www2.newsvirginian.com/news/2010/jun/27/special_report_abuse_cited_at_liberty_point-ar-297466/

- o Quick turn news story with some Taser details

http://www2.newsvirginian.com/news/2010/jun/10/police_stand_behind_taser_use-ar-297630/

- o Commissioner takes parting shot

http://www2.newsvirginian.com/news/2010/jul/03/planner_takes_parting_shots_on_way_out-ar-297402/

On this last story the commissioner was under the impression that only e-mails were subject to FOIA, not physical letters. We taught him a lesson.

Tony, AGonzalez@newsvirginian.com

Thanks for the great presentation last night. Several of my interns said they had no idea they could request documents like the ones you talked about or how to use FOIA. It's given me some ideas for stories we could do as well.

Jody Beck, director, Scripps Howard Foundation Wire

Mr. Cuillier,

Since your seminar I have filed to see the job application of our secretary at the borough and was denied the document. I know it exists because I am a Councilwoman shut off from information but we have policy that the job application must be completed before interviews are conducted for hiring and she was hired since I have been on council. The application must also remain on file of all employees. I filed an appeal.

Sincerely, Francene Tearpock-Martini

Hello Mr. Cuillier,

Thanks so much for coming to Cleveland! You changed my life by doing so, as the very next week I filed my first FOI request with the Cuyahoga County Board of Elections. I was so excited about this, not that it needed to be done necessarily, but it was that I [at last] knew exactly which law to cite from the Ohio Revised Code concerning open records because of the booklet you left for us and a hyperlink I found there. This is quite thrilling to me!

I used the mean letter, and it got me next-day results.

“Unlocking the Power of Public Records” I cannot say enough good things about. What a wealth of handy information for journalists such as me, truly. Thank you dearly for bringing this along on your trip, best of all free to our members who had the keen pleasure of listening to your speech.

Best wishes,

Audrey McCrone, Board Member, Cleveland Pro Chapter

I really enjoyed the FOIA workshop last month. I also put the information packet to good use when requesting a copy of the contract for my local school superintendent. My request was promptly granted with no redactions.

Sandie Warwick

I am happy to write that your tips and information really help me obtain the information I needed!! As I stated in earlier e-mail I really learned a lot!! I will be forever grateful. Thank you.

Julia Newton

I promised to send you info on my latest public records requests, so here it is. Following your lecture in May, news began to come to a head regarding economic development leadership, or lack thereof, in our community. We've had entities competing, with a county program and the chamber attempting to take the helm, the latter of which has done a poor job. It was obvious to me that things were being hashed out in private among officials, which has always been the case, as partially evidenced by city council meetings that feature little or no discussion but usually voting consensus among all members on most issues.

I submitted public records requests to 22 city and county officials regarding all e-mails and other correspondence sent and received by them during May. The response was sporadic. Most everyone submitted records, with many of them forwarded e-mails that everyone else had received. It is evidence that most of the officials left things out that they should have given me, as indicated by their correspondence I received from other colleagues. Overall I am positive that correspondence has been withheld across the board. Some nuggets of info was gleaned, including evidence that some illegal meetings with a quorum of officials have secretly taken place, and so the effort was still worth it.

The fallout from my requests has also been interesting. The requests seemed to be the talk of the town the day I delivered them. I think they worried some people and caused some anger. Some people approached me and blurted out that they'd give me everything they had. But on the flip side, some people were all in favor of what I was doing and were eager to release the info they had.

If you have any questions for me or want more insight, just let me know. Thanks!

Sincerely,

Joy Brown, The Courier, Findlay, Ohio

David,

I wanted to thank you so much for coming to Belen and giving both our papers staff, the Valencia County News-Bulletin and Socorro's El Defensor Chieftain, a workshop that was very informative. The information and resources you provided to us are so valuable to us as reporters and I know what we learned from you will help make us better journalists.

It was a boost we needed and now we are pumped up and ready to go!

So thank you again,

Jackie Schlotfeldt, El Defensor Chieftain Editor

Mr. Cuillier,

Thanks for reaching out! The Access Across America session was most definitely beneficial. Like I said at the event, I come from a lifestyle magazine writing background - not exactly hard news - and am now a legal reporter. I've referenced the booklet you handed out numerous times over the past couple weeks and overall have been thinking more about how to locate and incorporate public information into my stories. Some examples:

- Looking up where inmates are located/their release date on the Federal of Bureau Prison's site
- Calling up local police departments and requesting information from their police reports of various incidents in which civil cases have subsequently been filed
- Requesting the number of marriage licenses issued at various courthouses and the number of civil ceremonies held there to determine if courthouse weddings are on the rise with the Recession (they're not)

These are fairly basic things, and I'm almost embarrassed to admit that I wasn't doing more of this before your seminar, but it's the truth! Even my editor has made a couple comments like, "Good thinking to check the police report." Probably the most important take away for me though was just hearing from an expert that all this information is out there and that I can and should ask for it. Definitely gave me confidence.

Thank you again, and all the best,

Anna Vitale, Journalist/Communications Specialist

Hi David,

Thanks for your email, and for the great presentation last month. I definitely have been using some of the tips from the presentation in my reporting, especially to submit records requests to state agencies.

Funny that you emailed today, because in our office, we've been trying to figure out a public records quandary. The databases we subscribe to only allow us to search the registered license plates of some, but not all, states. Do you know of a resource where we could search for license plates in all 50 states?

Thanks,

Melanie Mason, The Dallas Morning News

Hi, David,

Last week we had a guy commit suicide when police showed up at his rural house to question him about his relationship with a young girl. We knew nothing about him. I used the pipl.com search you recommended and found he had been a licensed barber in a nearby town, and had just recently retired. That allowed me to go to that town and start knocking on doors. Eventually, I found people who knew him well enough to write a profile on him - plus some tips that might help us down the road, since police say the investigation is ongoing.

Susan Schwartz

Dear Mr. Cuillier,

I enjoyed the presentation very much and I think we'll have many options for the future. We shared the information with our newsroom, including options for our website such as the neighborhood map showing crimes block by block. Our webmaster was able to find a site with information for Brainerd.

Thank you again for all the information. It was nice to be encouraged about journalism again.

Sincerely,

Renee Richardson, Senior Reporter, Brainerd Dispatch

Hi Dave,

Yes, we have implemented many of the tips from your session. I basically did a shortened version of your presentation for all of our reporters, using your handouts and some of the slides from your Powerpoint.

Over the past month, we've filed about a dozen public records requests for a variety of topics, from city pool inspections to the percentage of rape kits that get processed. The information is just now starting to come in, and I think we'll have some great stories as a result of the session. Thanks again for all of your hard work, and for sharing this information.

Jerry (KXLY Spokane)

I really enjoyed your session, David. I'm a former newspaper reporter who leaped to the "dark side" (government communications and public involvement) about 15 years ago.

I always find it valuable to be reminded what information citizens want so we can provide as much of that as possible on the front end -- before they have to ask for it.

In my three years at the Port of Tacoma, we've launched Web, e-newsletters and social media tools that highlight upcoming commission agenda items, then stream those meetings live and on demand through our website to engage more citizens earlier in the decision-making process.

What I heard in talking with some of the citizen activists who attended your session is that they want more detailed information and documents available on the Web. We're looking at how we can add new interactive tools to our website to make that information available in searchable, easy-to-read formats.

I just wanted you to know that you're reaching the full spectrum of public engagement when you talk about openness and relevant documents.

Tara Mattina, Public Affairs Manager, Port of Tacoma

David,

I really enjoyed your session on May 11th. I thought the information you presented was extremely valuable, in an easily digestible format. I've shared your handbook with several colleagues. I was at SPJ's Scripp's Leadership Institute this weekend in Indianapolis, and was singing the program's praises! Regardless if you're on the road with this program every year, I'd love to make this type of presentation an annual event for MN SPJ. I also suggested that SPJ consider putting an edited version of your presentation on the Web as part of its new online training program.

Thanks again for your great presentation in Minnesota!

Sarah Bauer

Hi David,

I wanted to let you know that I've posted your ideas and some of the recommended links with your idea of "FOI First on Friday" on our Intranet here at The Oklahoman. I plan to post similar types of items in the future, so I hope you might create a listserv where I could receive updates.

I thought you did an outstanding job with the session here in Oklahoma City, and congratulations on completing your marathon training! You must be proud of your achievement in doing this. Thank you again for coming here.

Sincerely, Joe Hight