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Transparency Tools: 10 Things You Can Do Today to Help Improve Government in Hawaii

By Tom McAuliffe, 3/5/2009 9:25:10 AM

Transparency has been in the news lately both at the local and national level. For the current Hawaii legislative session, the Grassroot Institute provided model legislation calling on state government agencies to fully embrace transparency by allowing citizens to see how their tax dollars are spent via a searchable website.

It's déjà vu as SB 659 sponsored by Senator Les Ihara, Jr. and HB 1840 sponsored by Representative Gene Ward make their way through the process because during the last session the legislature passed a very similar measure.

According to the law, the state was to establish a website listing all transactions over \$25,000. Unfortunately passing a law is not enough to get results, as two months after the deadline the web site has still not surfaced.

Luckily, the Institute has a secret weapon in award-winning investigative journalist Don Ray, who is on assignment with the organization searching for overlooked stories in Hawaii.

In a recent presentation to GRIH members, Ray discussed some tools and techniques citizens can use to help pry open the doors of information within state and local government agencies.

"Recognize that the root of most of our pressing issues lies in a government that has sealed itself tightly and become immune from any 'outside' forces. Understand that your fate is equally sealed because you've allowed yourself to become an outsider," he said. "But there are some things you can do to help increase your chances of getting the information you seek."

Condensed from his talk, here are ten things you can do to pry open the padlock politicians and government officials have placed on their iron door of secrecy:

- 1. Educate yourself and others — ignorance leads to complacency. Complacency leads to apathy. Apathy leads to helplessness. Helplessness leads to hopelessness. Hopelessness is the last stop before slavery. Ignorance isn't bliss forever.
- 2. Overcome obstacles — every time you hear the words "no," "I can't," "you can't," "it's not allowed," or "there's nothing we or you can do," get ready for a fight by taking a stand. Decide then and there that you won't buy into

this drivel.

- 3. Don't react. Instead, respond — a response requires thinking and strategizing. Success come those who develop the ability to respond. Your "response ability" is your responsibility.
- 4. Be patiently impatient or impatiently patient — you will fail if you are either patiently patient or impatiently impatient. Be calm, calculated, polite and yet very persistent. You will outlast them and, at the same time, disarm them.
- 5. Know your rights — just because they tell you it's the law or the regulation doesn't mean that it's true. When someone denies you something, tell them that's OK with you, but you need to have a copy

of the specific law denying it. They'll probably say they don't know the law. Ask for someone who knows it.

- 6. Ask for everything — these bureaucrats have lulled the public into a state of helpless apathy. You paid for the glass barrier that keeps you out. Start by requesting the purchasing documents for that stupid piece of glass.
- 7. Figure out the system at play — there are laws and rules, and then there are the "unspoken," "unwritten" rules. While referees oversee the football game or boxing match, there are no referees for the betting games in the background.
- 8. Look for victims and enemies — the people most likely to want to help you (and least likely to rat you out) are former employees, people who didn't get promoted and the family members of such victims and enemies. They already want to help.
- 9. Take legal action — the statutes here in Hawaii have practically no teeth, but there are provisions that make it very easy to take agencies to court. These provisions can put the cost burden on the agency that denies you access. Know the laws and win.
- 10. Get out of your comfort zone — nothing is going to change unless you participate in a calculated and effective way. Commit your free time to pursuing information from any government agency.

"There's power in numbers. If you don't have time, make time," said Ray. "If you can't make time, reach in your pocket and support organizations that are committed to taking action. Invest in your own survival," he asserted. Ray, who has authored several books on the subject, should know because he's traveled the world helping people and organizations to do as he says and as he does. For the continuing adventures of our intrepid reporter please visit his Sunshine Chronicles Blog site at

<http://www.sunshinechronicles.wordpress.com>

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