



SEARCHLIGHTS AND SUNGLASSES

# LEARNING LAYER

## Reviewing Sunshine Laws

All states, the District of Columbia and the federal government are subject to open meetings laws, called “Sunshine laws.” In addition to securing freedom of access to public documents and data, these laws require public officials to hold certain meetings in public. That doesn’t always mean the public has a right to speak, says the [Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press](#). What else isn’t included? Discussions allowed to be private include the hiring, firing or disciplining of employees, meetings with attorneys and discussions regarding the purchase or sale of property.

Ask students to examine this [map of Sunshine laws](#) and then choose from these activities:

**Flashlight:** Look up your state’s open records law. Create an [infographic](#) showing what’s interesting or surprising. (Ask the class if the best graphics should be posted online, and, if so, where.)

**Spotlight:** Watch the [video of Waldo Jaquith](#), the award-winning “open government technologist” who developed the White House’s [Ethics.gov](#) tool. What does he say is wrong with state government open meeting and records laws? How does he propose to fix it? Find an appropriate online forum and post your opinion about Jaquith’s project. Turn in the link.

**Searchlight:** Think of public records you would need to have to tell an important story. How would you [ask for those records in your state](#)? Would you consider a [lawsuit](#) against a government agency to obtain a public record? Locate your state FOI group through the [National Freedom of Information Coalition](#) at the University of Missouri. The [Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press](#) and the [Student Press Law Center](#) also provide useful tools. Could they help you? What would be the factors in making a decision about suing? To complete the assignment, submit your public records act request.

**Extra credit:** What’s happening with Freedom of Information in your state since 9/11? If you can get access to [Academic Search Complete](#) on your campus, see if there is scholarship on the subject. Has your state group done [an FOI audit recently in your state](#)? Write a proposal for your school to spearhead such an audit.

