

Groups demand public voice on Homeland Security procedures

On August 26, 2003, 75 organizations representing librarians, journalists, scientists, environmental groups, privacy advocates, and others sent a letter to Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge calling on the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to allow public input on procedures for "safeguarding" and sharing a vaguely defined set of information between firefighters, police officers, public health researchers and federal, state, and local governments.

The letter asks Ridge to release a draft version of the new procedures, which would not themselves contain classified information, for the public to comment on. It also requests that DHS address public comments in writing a final version. The letter expresses concern that the procedures may cut a broad swath of information out of the public domain, including such items as maps of environmental contamination, that is not classified but which may be perceived as "helpful to a terrorist or potentially helpful in responding to or preventing an unknown future attack."

The signatories are also concerned that the procedures would subject millions of persons inside and outside of government to nondisclosure agreements and impose criminal penalties for disclosing information improperly. The procedures could, moreover, cut out the ability of journalists, community groups, and others to inform the public of activities of federal, state and local governments.

The law that created DHS, the Homeland Security Act, included a provision that required the federal government to safeguard and share "homeland security information" with government officials, public health professionals, firefighters, and others in order to respond to a terrorist attack. But, under the auspices of fighting terrorism, DHS is poised to write, without guarantees for public input, procedures that could sweep up otherwise publicly avail-

able information that has nothing to do with terrorism into a zone of secrecy, while subjecting millions of Americans to confidentiality agreements.

Reed Amendment fails

On September 10, 2003, Senator Jack Reed's (D-Rhode Island) amendment to the Senate Appropriations bill failed to pass the Senate. Reed's amendment would have added \$35 million for libraries to the Appropriations bill, bringing the amount for Improving Literacy Through School Libraries program to the president's request of \$27.5 million. It would have also added enough money to ISTA to fund the new LSTA formula as well as to fund Native American and Hawaiian American allocations.

Reed offered the amendment on the Senate floor, and it was voted down by a count of 47 yeas and 49 nays. A list of senators who voted for and against the amendment can be found in ALAWON Volume 12, number 80 at www.ala.org/washoff/alawon.

Please thank your senators if they voted for the amendment, and remind all senators of the vital importance of libraries to our communities and our children. Please also reiterate the need for the higher House numbers for library programs.

We appreciate the efforts of all those who made calls or sent faxes on this important amendment. The funds appropriated for the Literacy Through School libraries program and the library and museum programs in the Museum and Library Services Act are higher in the FY2004 bill as approved by the House than in the Senate bill. When the two bills are conferenced, there will be a greater difference.

Note: Your efforts will still be needed after the Senate bill passes and the bills go to conference. We will publish the names of conferees when they are announced, however, usually conferees are members of the Labor HHS Education Appropriations Subcommittees, as well as the two chairs of the full Senate and House Appropriations Committees. Stay tuned to ALAWON for all the upcoming news and details. ■

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