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# EDITORIAL: Transparency bill helps public and the cops

By: The Gazette editorial board Mar 7, 2019

Transparency in government provides a major distinction between a free society and one in which authorities can destroy individuals in the cover of darkness.

Among 50 states and the District of Columbia, few if any jurisdictions provide less government transparency than does Colorado. Ask any reporter, researcher or private detective who has worked in another state and that person will attest to the flaws in Colorado's open records laws.

Government secrecy becomes especially dangerous and disturbing when it provides undue cover to authorities in law enforcement, who make decisions that determine whether certain individuals continue to live free or to live at all. In law enforcement, we must always err on the side of transparency for the sake of protecting officers, victims and suspects alike.



For that reason, we applaud State Rep. David Williams, R-Colorado Springs, for championing House Bill 1119. Williams is the only Republican who supported the bill and ensured the one non-Democratic vote needed for the bill to survive and move to the Senate, and we're not sure why.

The bill is simple. It would subject to open records laws all internal investigation files of peace officers, if the investigation involves "in-uniform" or "on-duty" conduct involving a member of the public.

The bill requires some information redaction of material irrelevant and inappropriate in terms of the public's right to know, such as personal addresses, emails and phone numbers. It also authorizes a file custodian to provide a summary file of internal investigations as a first step, while ensuring any member of the public can subsequently request and receive the entire file.

The bill allows a custodian to deny files involving ongoing internal investigations.

The need for this bill is obvious. Suspects, cops, and innocent bystanders are often falsely accused, or suffer the consequences of actions misrepresented intentionally or inadvertently. Public inspection of details provides the ultimate check on the process and the greatest potential the truth might surface.

Visualize an officer-involved shooting in which a peace officer stands accused of drawing a gun too fast and firing in haste. Now imagine a reporter or self-appointed sleuth scrutinizes an internal investigation file and reports detailed information. The reporting sparks the memory of a reader, who recalls the shooting victim talking about a covert plan for suicide-by-cop. Suddenly, the officer has hope of a just outcome in her favor.

Or, imagine an unjust shooting by officers from a department hiding important details. Only the imagination limits what can go wrong when government authorities keep secrets from the public.



"Government transparency is a nonpartisan issue that Republicans champion because we are the party for the people and not for a few insiders who don't want the accountability that every law-abiding taxpayer deserves," Williams tells us.

"Good cops want this common-sense measure because it will shine a light on their outstanding professionalism while those not cut out for using a gun and a badge can apply elsewhere."

The public needs and deserve this transparency, as do the men and women who risk their lives daily enforcing the law.

Our state's open records laws need a massive overhaul, for the sake of the liberty protected by transparency. We can start by passing HB 1119 and asking the governor to sign it into law.

The Gazette Editorial Board

