

Open government is key to honest government

By Ken Paulson

When government fails, it's the rare public official who says, "Oops. My fault."

That's human nature, particularly for officials in the public eye who may have to run for office again. No one wants to be held directly responsible for letting the public down.

Case in point is the recent catastrophe in Texas, when unexpected winter storms left 4 million homes without power, ruptured pipes and tainted the water supply for many.

Texas' energy grid essentially collapsed. While Texas Gov. Greg Abbott was quick to blame frozen wind turbines, the cause was much more complex than that. To truly understand how things went so terribly wrong will require time, study and research.

So, too, with the coronavirus vaccine distribution. In some states, residents are frustrated with the slow roll-out of vaccines. Is it poor distribution? Politics? A flawed strategy? These are literally matters of life and death.

But how do you get to the truth when public officials so rarely step up to take direct responsibility for failures?

The answer is public records. And public meetings. And access to the information that taxpayers deserve.

States throughout the country have laws that guar-



antee access to government records and meetings. But the details vary widely and there are many statutory exceptions. New challenges to access emerge every year in virtually every state.

The need to fight for government transparency is reaffirmed each year during Sunshine Week, a national awareness event overseen by the News Leaders Association and keyed to the March 16 birthday of James Madison. The fourth president of the United States drafted the Bill of Rights – including the guarantee of a free press – in 1791.

That journalism connection reflects the role news media play in the free flow of information, but it unfortunately can also leave the public with a sense that Sunshine Week reflects the concerns of a single industry.

To the contrary, access to government information is critical to every American who cares about the quality of his or her community, state and nation.

It's important to see gov-

ernment employees – including elected officials – as the people we hire through our tax dollars to do a good job for all of us. If you run a business or hire a contractor, you wouldn't hesitate to demand a full understanding of how something went wrong. That should be exactly our relationship with government.

Getting that information, though, requires public meetings where residents can ask questions. It also means access to the documents that led to a poor decision. Words on paper can be much more forthright than the dissembling of politicians.

It's critical that we hold government accountable, for better or worse. (It's also important to acknowledge when government leaders are doing a good job.)

How can you help? I have two suggestions.

First, keep doing exactly what you're doing at this moment. Read and support your local newspaper. Local journalists, more than anyone else, will stand up for your right to information. Facebook will not be going toe-to-toe with your mayor.

Second, when you believe government isn't doing its job, demand an explanation. Ask to see the documents. Attend public meetings. And above all, support legislative efforts to make government more transparent.

It's too easy for officials who have failed us to point fingers, blame the media and wait for their side of the partisan fence to rally to their defense. We deserve better. We all pay taxes to support the work of government. We should get our money's worth.

Ken Paulson is the director of the Free Speech Center at Middle Tennessee State University, a lawyer and a former editor-in-chief of USA Today.



Deaths — continued from Page 1

Shirley K. Petro
1937-2021

The family will receive visitors from 3:00 pm to 7:00 pm on Friday, March 19, at Needham-Storey-Wampner Funeral Service, Rybolt Chapel, Swayzee. A funeral service to celebrate Petro's life will take place at 11:00 am on Saturday, March 20, 2021, at the funeral home. Pastor Jeff Stedje will be officiating with burial following at Grant Memorial Park.

Sara Jane Carlson
1959-2021

Funeral services were held at Needham-Storey-Wamp-

ner, North Chapel, on Sunday, March 14 at 3:00 pm.

William Earl Whitaker 1928-2021
Funeral services were held at Needham-Storey-Wampner, Storey Chapel, on Monday, March 15 at 11:00 am. Burial followed at Riverside Cemetery.

Carolyn Jo Dyer
1937-2021

Funeral services were held at First Church of God, Marion, on Thursday, March 11 at 12:30 pm. Burial followed after the Celebration of Life.

Willa Mae (Willie) Haisley
Funeral services were held at Armes-Hunt Funeral Home, Fairmount, on Tuesday, March 16 at 1 pm. Burial followed at Park Cemetery.

Dorothy L. Poling
1923-2021

Friends and family may call from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. on Saturday, March 20, at Raven-Choate Funeral Home. A Celebration of Life Service will begin at 12:00 p.m. with Pastor Gary Bingham officiating. A private burial will take place at Gardens of Memory

COVID

still be worn and social distancing should still be adhered to.

"We can't get careless, and we can't let our guard down," Moore said. "There is still a dangerous enemy out there ready to bite."

There are still many concerns regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the rising number of COVID-19 variants. While there have not been any reported in Grant County, Moore, and Dr. Shankaran Srikanth of MGH, stated that remaining vigilant, and getting vaccinated, will be the key to finally getting back to normal.

"It's wonderful that our numbers are so low...but the most important thing from here on out to keep it low is

going to be how many of us choose to get vaccinated," Dr. Shankaran Srikanth of MGH added. "That's the bottom line. Not to (lessen) the importance of social distancing and hand-washing and mask wearing, those are all obviously important. But the most important thing that will make us (stay) blue...is going to be vaccination. We are not out of the woods yet. We are in a much better situation than we were several months ago, but we are not out of the woods yet."

"The next phase of this disease is a disease of choice," Moore added. "We as a society, if we make the (right) choices, we can contain this. We don't want to twist anybody's arm, but we want to say we believe in it, and we be-

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lieve in it because we have a commitment to ourselves, to our families, and to our society to make this a better place."

Moore closed the meeting by thanking Marion General Hospital for their tireless commitment in the fight against COVID-19 over the past year.

"I want to thank our hospital. (It) has been such a tremendous community leader in leading the way with our schools, helping with the health department and business community, and keeping the community informed and actively involved. The hospital has been a wonderful partner. We thank you for what you've done for our community."

The next COVID-19 Business Update is scheduled for Thursday, April 8, at 3:30 p.m.

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