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Dear Members of the Joint Committee on State Administration and Regulatory Oversight,

Thank you for providing the opportunity to testify today in support of House Bill 2772 and Senate Bill 1676. My name is Justin Silverman. I am the executive director of the New England First Amendment Coalition, a non-profit created in 2006 specifically to help citizens better understand their government and the work it does.

While much of our work now is for the benefit of journalists and improving their access to public records, it's important to remember that this access — or lack of access, in this case — is a concern for all citizens in Massachusetts. The ability to gather news and inform communities, to understand government and engage with elected leaders, is essential to the democratic process. Yet in my role as executive director I regularly speak with journalists and community members from throughout the state who are frustrated at the inability to obtain information about their government, information that is public by law but in reality is unobtainable and essentially secret. For these individuals, it's not clear who to contact to make a request for records. The records themselves cost too much. Litigation, most often the only way to force compliance with the law, is expensive and simply not an option for nearly everyone who contacts my organization looking for help. Bills 2772 and 1676 provide that help.

With this legislation, for example, the concerned father who is getting the runaround from school officials over policies affecting his children will have a designated point-person to help fulfill his request. That same parent won't be charged hundreds of dollars in copying costs when electronic files of those policies exist. The journalist from a small suburban newspaper who successfully appealed a denial of records but still hasn't received those records can use the attorneys' fees provision to help find a lawyer to litigate on his behalf. This is what bills 2772 and 1676 offer: Common sense solutions to help fix a broken public records system.

On behalf of the New England First Amendment Coalition, thank you for your time and consideration.

Justin Silverman
Executive Director