

March 10, 2021

## **Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council names ‘Opee’ winners**

This year’s Openness in Government (Opee) Awards recognize Wisconsin’s largest newspaper for its dogged records-based coverage of the pandemic and its commitment to the cause of transparency in government, as well as a government agency that led the way in providing a maximum amount of information on COVID-19.

Other winners include a municipal judge who has pushed the village he lives in to become more open and an unnamed litigant who fought for the right to obtain records anonymously.

The awards, presented annually by the Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council, recognize outstanding efforts to protect the state’s long tradition of open government, and highlight some of the threats to it. They are being announced in advance of the American Society of News Editors’ national [Sunshine Week](http://sunshineweek.org) ([sunshineweek.org](http://sunshineweek.org)), March 14-20. This is the 15th consecutive year that Opees have been awarded.

“COVID-19 has forced wholesale changes in how government officials conduct the public’s business,” said Bill Lueders, Council president. “Maintaining a maximum amount of transparency, as the state’s openness laws require, is more important than ever.”

The Council, founded in 1978, is a nonprofit group that consists of about two dozen members representing media and other public interests. Sponsoring organizations include the Wisconsin Newspaper Association, Wisconsin Broadcasters Association, Wisconsin Associated Press, and the Madison Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists.

Awards are being given this year in six categories. The winners are:

### **Media Openness Award (“Mopee”): Milwaukee Journal Sentinel**

Even in tough times, the state’s largest paper blazed a trail for open government. It fought recalcitrant officials to do records-based reporting on COVID-19 in long-term care facilities (Daphne Chen and Rory Linnane) and meatpacking plants (Maria Jesus Perez Sanchez). It [intervened](#) in a lawsuit to oppose efforts to shield the names of businesses with COVID-19 cases. And it [joined](#) with other litigants in suing the state Legislature over its refusal to release records regarding misconduct investigations.

### **Political Openness Award (“Popee”): Milwaukee County**

While some public entities embraced secrecy over COVID-19, this municipality was among the first in the nation to release racial and ethnic data linked to the pandemic. The county created a public [dashboard](#) of demographic information about cases, hospitalizations and deaths, including age, gender, race and ethnicity, and underlying health conditions — data used by Milwaukee Journal Sentinel [reporters](#) and other members of the public.

**Citizen Openness Award (“Copee”): John Doe**

This unnamed person successfully [sued](#) the Madison Metropolitan School District to enforce the ability of citizens to get records anonymously, as the Open Records Law explicitly allows. Kudos also to attorney Tom Kamenick of the Wisconsin Transparency Project, which brought the suit.

**Open Records Scoop of the Year (“Scoop”): Tie: Molly Beck, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, and Emily Hamer, Wisconsin State Journal**

Beck and her paper were the first to [report](#) that Jim Troupis, President Donald Trump’s lead election lawyer in Wisconsin, filed a list of names of Wisconsin residents he claimed had cast illegal absentee votes which included himself and his wife. Beck checked the county’s list of absentee voters to confirm that Troupis was literally trying to disallow his own vote.

Meanwhile, the State Journal distinguished itself with Hamer’s [persistent reporting on](#) COVID-19 in the state’s prisons, including protracted efforts to procure relevant records and the development of courageous sources within the prison system. They revealed that some staff came to work with symptoms or after exposure to the virus, among other dangerous practices.

**Whistleblower of the Year (“Whoopee”): Peter Tharp**

This municipal judge sued his tiny village of Roberts in St. Croix County over its failure to respond to more than 80 record requests made over a three-year period. In October, the village [agreed to settle](#), providing more than 1,500 records and paying \$7,500 in fees, costs and damages. Tharp also had his attorney, Tom Kamenick, file a [complaint](#) identifying deficiencies in the village’s Open Meetings practices, and send a [letter](#) urging improvement, which Kamenick says it has pledged to do.

**No Friend of Openness (“Nopee”): The UW System**

The state university system conducted its search for a new president in a shroud of secrecy, until only [one finalist was left](#). Then that lone finalist backed out, in part due to the outcry over the process. The Board of Regents were forced to restart the process from scratch, urged by the Wisconsin State Journal to “learn from their mistakes.” We’ll see.