
STRAY THOUGHTS

Government should not hide volunteers' names

By Randy Evans

Volunteers occupy an important place in the hearts of Iowans for all they do for their friends, for their neighbors and for their communities.



Evans

There's no way we could ever adequately compensate them for their service.

They do this not for fame or fortune. In fact, a sincere "thank you" and the knowledge that their work helps others is the only reward most of these

people seek.

But a bill awaiting debate in the Iowa House of Representatives would lead you to believe that the tens of thousands of Iowans who volunteer to help government bodies are in danger of being scared off if someone finds out they are volunteers.

House File 403 would make the names and other personal information about government volunteers confidential. Supporters say such a law is needed to keep volunteers from being hounded by solicitors.

The proposal seems innocuous enough until you stop to think about its ramifications.

The people of Iowa would have no way of confirming who is helping in the local public schools. People would not know who is lending a hand in the county hospital, picking up trash in the city park or donating their time to pitch in at the public library.

The rationale behind the legislation is bogus, and Iowans should convey those sentiments to members of the Iowa House and Senate.

House File 403 grew out of a decision last year by the Iowa Public Information Board involving the Crawford County Memorial Hospital in Denison. The board ruled that the hospital could not keep secret the names of volunteers who work for the hospital, including those who drive shuttle vans that pick up patients and

at the hospital's clinics.

The Iowa Hospital Association and Iowa Commission on Volunteer Service both claim that possible public disclosure of the names of volunteers is having a chilling effect on the willingness of people to volunteer to help government bodies.

That's nonsense.

People volunteer because they want to help their local schools, or the local hospital, or their favorite park. They volunteer because they are proud to do their part to improve the community.

It's unlikely anyone would decide not to volunteer because they are worried their names might be made available to the public and that they might get a thank-you note from someone picked up by the hospital shuttle van or whose child enjoyed the kind volunteer who listened to the child read at school.

Iowa's public records law now allows the public to obtain the names and compensation details for all employees who work for state and local governments in this state. The law does not apply to independent, nonprofit organizations.

The Iowa Public Information Board ruled that nothing in the public records law allows governments to keep secret the names of volunteers.

Iowa law does not require government to hand over the home addresses and telephone numbers for its employees. Obviously, that should be the case for volunteers, too.

As volunteers are relied upon to handle duties that once were carried out by employees, it's important that the public be able to know who is doing work on their behalf, regardless of whether the person is receiving a salary or doing the work out of the goodness of his or her heart.

The Crawford County hospital case and a few other cases in the headlines illustrate why public accountability and public safety need to take precedence over convenience for volunteers.

A Denison resident filed the

complaint last year with the Iowa Public Information Board after hospital officials refused to release the names of its volunteers. Among the volunteers the hospital would not identify was a Denison man who was found guilty in 1994 of committing lascivious acts with two 13-year-old boys he apparently met while working as a Boy Scout leader.

In 1999, an Iowa City man was charged, and later found guilty, of inappropriately touching children and photographing them while working as a volunteer in his wife's elementary school classroom in that city.

More recently, police in Marion charged a 15-year-old Marion High School student with three counts of sexual abuse of 5-year-old kindergarteners last fall at an elementary school where he worked as a classroom volunteer.

No one is advocating that government volunteers should be subjected to more scrutiny than employees are. But volunteers should not be shielded from public scrutiny by House File 403.

In my role as executive director of the Iowa Freedom of Information Council, a reporter asked me recently about the legislation. My response is worth repeating:

"This is about accountability and public safety. The citizens of Iowa have a right to know who is performing government services on their behalf."

I was at the Iowa Capitol last week talking about this legislation. One official who shares my view summed up the issue so nicely:

"The only volunteers who care about their name being confidential are those that have something to hide."

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