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SENATOR ELDRIDGE HIGHLIGHTS PUBLIC RECORDS REFORM LEGISLATION TO BRING SUNSHINE BACK TO STATE GOVERNMENT

Legislation Calls for Greater Openness in State Government, Accessibility of Information

BOSTON—The Sunlight Foundation, a nonpartisan, non-profit group, has given Massachusetts a failing mark on their Open States: Transparency Report Card, making the Bay State one of the lowest scorers nationwide in legislative transparency. This grade underscores the mission of Sunshine Week (March 10-16) as national and local press organizations seek to shine a light into every corner and crevice of government.

“The report released by the Sunlight Foundation appropriately coincides with the goal of Sunshine Week to highlight the importance of open government and freedom of information – basic principles that make government better,” said Senator Jamie Eldridge (D-Acton). This grade serves a sobering reminder that we as a state legislature have a lot of work to do to improve public integrity, promote civic participation and update online public services. Citizens deserve accountability and the opportunity to have a fair place at the table when it comes to government participation – issues I have been steadfastly committed to since I was first elected to serve Worcester and Middlesex County.”

The Sunlight Foundation assigned grades based on completeness, timeliness, machine readability, use of commonly owned standards and permanence. The eight most transparent states include: Arkansas, Connecticut, Georgia, Kansas, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Texas and Washington. Massachusetts joined Alabama, Colorado, Kentucky, Nebraska and Rhode Island as the least transparent of all the fifty states.

The Massachusetts Public Records Law has not been substantially updated since 1973. Since then, it’s become more difficult for the public to obtain public records: the costs can be high, and responses to requests are often untimely.

Senator Eldridge has sponsored three bills this session that will bring about necessary 21st century public records reform:

- S1481 “An Act Improving Access to Public Records” would establish a records access officer at state agencies to facilitate responses to record requests.
- S1480 “An Act to Enhance Access to Electronic Public Records” would make it mandatory for public records to be provided to requestors in electronic form, and for information of significant interest to the public to be posted online.
- S727 “An Act Defining Court Administrative Records as Public Records” would define records within administrative offices of the courts – including Probation and the Office of the Chief Justice for Administration and Management – as public records subject to freedom of information requests; however, not apply the public records law to confidential criminal justice records or other court records.

Senator Eldridge is the first and only “Clean Elections” candidate elected to public office in Massachusetts history and has fought to limit the influence of money in politics as a strong opponent of the Citizens United Supreme Court decision.