

Editorials

# Sunshine Week celebrates public records out in the open, where they belong



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Boeing 777 fuselage sections in various stages of production, at Everett's final assembly line. The assembly line is being re-configured in preparation for 777X. Photo taken Dec. 9, 2016. (Mike Siegel/The Seattle Times)

## In celebration of Sunshine Week, here are seven things you wouldn't know if it weren't for the state Public Records Act.

By [Seattle Times editorial board](#)

*The Seattle Times*

WHEN a citizen asks the government for records, the government officials must comply, with some exceptions. They must comply because the records aren't the government's records; they belong to the people. Former Seattle Times investigative reporter Eric Nalder calls those requests for records the "people's subpoena," and they are powerful.

This week is Sunshine Week, a celebration of the public’s right to know. Here is a short list of facts the public learned in the past year, thanks to Washington’s Public Records Act:

- A whistleblower tipped off the state Department of Health about inappropriate surgeries, rising rates of complications and infections and staff complaints being ignored. The DOH spent just two days on-site before closing the investigation. [Seattle Times reporters Mike Baker and Justin Mayo](#) got those records and more, and after a thorough investigation, the Cherry Hill CEO and a head doctor quit. The DOH reopened its investigation, and the U.S. Attorney also opened an investigation.
- When a review of the state Department of Corrections sex offender program found systemic errors in how sentences were calculated, officials said they didn’t know if anyone had been released early from supervision. But [Seattle Times reporter Joe O’Sullivan](#) sifted through 1,500 pages of emails and found that a senior official did in fact know about early releases, and that there were at least five of them.

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- The state Department of Health issued an emergency license suspension of pain management specialist Dr. Frank Li, in part because 18 of his patients fatally overdosed. But former [Seattle Times reporter JoNel Aleccia](#) found through public records that the DOH hadn’t really treated Li’s case like an emergency. Regulators were warned a year earlier about overdose deaths and knew the state workers’ compensation program had blocked Li’s prescribing authority three years earlier.
- As the University of Washington’s KUOW secretly prepared to buy KPLU, UW officials maintained a “Fight Club” rule: the first rule of Fight Club is don’t talk about Fight Club.

[Seattle Times reporter Lewis Kamb](#) got emails showing that the UW followed the rule with intentionally vague meeting agendas about the potential purchase, evading state open-meetings laws. KPLU supporters — angry they hadn't been given a chance to put together a bid — stepped up and made the station independent.

- How much was that Boeing tax break for the 777X manufacturing line really worth? [Seattle Times reporter Jim Brunner](#) asked the state Department of Revenue for the tax records. They said no. He appealed. Brunner eventually won, and the public found out. The special loophole passed by the Legislature saved Boeing \$305 million in taxes in just one year.

- When two Western State Hospital patients escaped in April, the Department of Social and Health Services said such incidents were “extremely rare.” But [Associated Press reporter Martha Belisle](#) got police records showing there had been 185 incidents of patients escaping or walking away over a 3½ year period. The hospital's security was totally overhauled.

- Seattle Department of Transportation director Scott Kubly worked for the bike-share company Alta before joining City Hall, so he had to get special permission before negotiating a contract between Alta and the city for the Pronto bike program. [Seattle Times reporters Daniel Beekman and Evan Bush](#), using public records, showed that Kubly failed to get a waiver — and he was intimately involved in the negotiations. Kubly was fined up to \$10,000, and the Pronto program ultimately collapsed, at great expense to the city.

Happy Sunshine Week.

*Editorial board members are editorial page editor Kate Riley, Frank A. Blethen, Donna Gordon Blankinship, Brier Dudley, Mark Higgins, Jonathan Martin, William K. Blethen (emeritus) and Robert C. Blethen (emeritus).*

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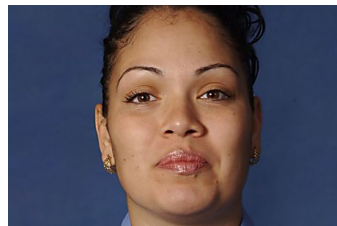
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