

Protecting whistleblowers

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Few U.S. senators walking the halls of the U.S. Capitol have been as consistently and passionately committed to government transparency and open records as Texan John Cornyn. It's an admirable characteristic that the Republican polished to a sparkling shine during his early years as an elected official in his home state.

Sen. Cornyn needs to use that passion and experience to help influence his Senate colleagues, including members of his own party, to pass a much-needed good-government bill in what's left of this session.

Last year the House and Senate passed, by impressive margins, bipartisan bills that would have created a better process to protect federal workers who expose government wrongdoing. Unfortunately, this needed initiative fell victim to an impasse when negotiations to resolve differences in the two bills failed. The good news is that those talks have resumed, albeit without much progress.

With so little time left in this Congress, lawmakers need a kick in the pants to get this important legislation moving.

Congress holds the keys that can open the door to protection for federal workers who report corruption, distortion, abuse and waste.

According to the Union of Concerned Scientists, about 1,100 of the nearly 3,400 federal scientists at nine agencies who responded to questionnaires about distortion and suppression of scientific data reported that they fear retaliation for openly expressing concerns about their agency's work.

Whether it is the safety of children's soccer nets or the effectiveness of a new prescription drug, Americans expect federal agencies to use independent and unbiased science to protect them and their families. When that doesn't happen, the scientists who blow the whistle must be protected from retaliation and harassment.

Cornyn has been able to reach across the aisle on previous good-government issues. He and Democrat Patrick Leahy of Vermont led the charge on passing the Freedom of Information Reform Act. It took three tries during the course of two years to make it happen, but they never flagged in their efforts and ultimately were successful.

"Open government is neither a Republican nor Democratic issue," Cornyn told members of the Texas Daily Newspaper Association back in March of 2006, on the eve of his long and tough trek to push, pull and cajole his colleagues into passing the act. "Any party in power is always reluctant to share information out of the understandable but ultimately unpersuasive fear of arming one's enemies and detractors."

Protection of federal workers isn't a partisan issue, either.

Abuse and waste enrage Republicans and Democrats alike. Without enhanced whistle-blower protections for the employees who risk their careers to report them, all Americans are ill-served by government.