

Media Credentialing

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Issues

1. Should the Legislature continue to rely on the Department of Administration to determine which media representatives should receive credentials that can give them access to the floors of the House and Senate?
2. Should documentary filmmakers, bloggers and other representatives of social media be credentialed in the same way as “traditional” media and allowed access to the floors?

Background

House and Senate rules limit who is permitted on the chamber floors during legislative proceedings. But both chambers specifically extend floor privileges to “accredited” members of the news media (Senate Rule 20-60, House Rule 20-40).

The accreditation process in Montana is simple. Reporters may get a photo identification card for \$5 from the General Services Division (GSD) of the state Department of Administration by providing a letter from their employer verifying their employment with a legitimate news-gathering agency. Generally, sergeants at arms have allowed media with these credentials onto the House and Senate floors.

During the 2009 session, GSD accredited a blogger for the first time. His credentials were later revoked by the House sergeant at arms, who determined that he was abusing the privilege.

Options

The National Conference of State Legislatures has attempted over the past two years to gather information from all states regarding their process of media accreditation. That data is available online at <http://ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=15522>. A printed version is also attached to this report.

Some states, like Congress, have created Capitol Press Corps Associations to develop credentialing guidelines and/or issue credentials. In several states, legislative staff credential media, and in at least one other state, the Department of Administration does so.

State Legislatures Magazine, published by NCSL, plans to include an article on this topic in an upcoming issue. The article specifically explore how states are credentialing “new” journalists.

Recommendations

- Wait until the State Legislatures article comes out to see what other options have been identified by other states and how successful they are.

- Involve media representatives in any discussion of changing the way reporters are accredited. Although access to the chamber floors is a privilege and not a right, it is a privilege that the media have become accustomed to and are likely to strenuously resist changing.