

Access to government information study published

A new voice has been added to the debate in Canada on access to government information, with the publication this month of Robert T. Franson's study for the Law Reform Commission.

Franson, a professor of law at the University of British Columbia, examined the disclosure policies of several prominent administrative agencies such as the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission; the Unemployment Insurance Commission; and, the National Parole Board to see "how they should deal with information they receive, who they should share it with, and when they should keep it to themselves".

He identifies three basic considerations for access to information: the interest of the person requesting it; the context of agency functions (adjudicative or policy-making) within which requests for information are made; and the kind of information requested (personal, technical or commercial or agency-management information).

Hold "harmful" info.

While favouring as much disclosure as possible of documents such as staff manuals and directives, agency rules and decisions that delineate agency law or policy, Franson concedes that certain information cannot be disclosed. He recommends that "the public be given right to any information contained in the files of administrative agencies, as long as the information can be released without creating harm". Harmful information (such as the names of informants in parole matters or specific technical information on business procedures which could jeopardize fair competition) could be screened out, leaving the remainder of the document or file accessible, he suggests.

Preventing the release of material which might cause harm, Franson states, could be achieved by exempting from disclosure only information relating to particular interests which merit support or protection. Provisions exempting certain information from disclosure constitute one of the most important parts of any legislation regarding access to information.

Franson also recommends that any

legislation on disclosure of information carry protection for the rights of people or firms who supply, or are the subject of, information contained in agency files. He points to the U.S. Freedom of Information Act, which did not provide this protection and to the number of court actions brought by people seeking to block disclosure of personal or commercial information by an agency, as evidence of the need for this kind of protection.

Franson concludes with the suggestion that administrative agencies can and should develop policies for disclosing information and respecting confidentiality where necessary without waiting for legislation to do it for them.

Police get innovative system

The most advanced computer being used by a police force in North America went into operation recently at Ottawa police headquarters.

CADRE (computer aided dispatch and records entry) is a series of mini-computers designed to operate the communications centre and maintain records.

Simple, fast and accurate, CADRE facilitates the checking of stolen vehicles, missing persons, known criminals and other routine police queries by means of a visual read-out screen and digital terminal in the patrolman's cruiser.

Keyed to the Canadian Police Information Centre, the system can provide an-



A dispatcher demonstrates the computerized communication system to Ontario Attorney-General Roy McMurtry.

swers for the on-duty patrolman in a matter of seconds.

There are two main components to the system: the computer aided dispatch and the records entry. The CAD component automates the dispatcher's function. All calls for police service are logged into the data banks and cars are dispatched by flashing a message on the mobile terminal screen. The system can also handle numerous other duties of the patrolman, such as requesting ambulances and fire trucks. The computer will give the patrolman relevant information on the type of



Mobile digital terminal allows policemen to talk directly to computer.

call and possible information on suspects – in short, as much information as possible to give the investigating officer the best chance of performing the task safely. The computer maintains an up-to-the-minute status report on all field units.

CAD also provides a compilation of statistics on location and frequency of calls, the type of calls, and the time it takes to service them. This enables police management to observe the areas of the city which require service and to employ field forces effectively.

The records entry portion of the system, essential to the compilation of statistics, maintains operational files on crimes, accidents, summons and tickets and maintains duty rosters.

CADRE, which cost \$2 million and took two years to install, has become a model for North American forces and, say its proponents, may well signal a new era in police work and crime prevention.

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