

CENTRAL VALLEY FOUNDATION

Partner Stories – First Amendment Coalition

First Amendment Coalition

Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press.

The First Amendment Coalition (FAC) is an award-winning, nonprofit public interest organization dedicated to advancing free speech, more open and accountable government, and public participation in civic affairs. FAC achieves its mission through a range of activities that include educational programs, publications (including the handbook, *Right to Know: A Guide to Public Access and Media Law*), a legal hotline, public advocacy and "strategic litigation."

After 12 years of tireless, dedicated and visionary leadership, FAC's Executive Director Peter Scheer plans to step down by the end of 2016. Peter, who has received both the Eugene S. Pulliam Award and James Madison Award for First Amendment advocacy, comments on his tenure with characteristic humility, "I've had a good run as advocate for a righteous cause."

However, Susan McClatchy, CVF's vice chair and its co-founder, describes Peter's impact in this way, "Peter Scheer has been a fierce defender of the public's right to know and transparency in government. With the threat of ever-changing technology Peter has continued to protect the rights of the media to access information and protect their sources."

CVF thought this was a good opportunity to ask Peter his views on the most pressing issues for freedom of speech and the press. The items below reflect some of his current concerns.

- Electronic surveillance by governmental agencies poses a serious threat to investigative journalism because the agencies are now able to bypass journalists and target their confidential sources directly. In this climate, individuals with direct knowledge of official misconduct or corruption are reluctant to disclose such information to journalists - and the public is cut-off from a crucial channel of information.

CENTRAL VALLEY FOUNDATION

- Private individuals are bankrolling “revenge lawsuits” to both punish and censor media outlets and journalists by forcing them to pay massive legal fees to defend their reporting. Additional harm is the self-censorship that could result as journalists may be fearful – and rightly so – of provoking individuals with the means to put them out of business via costly, time-consuming litigation.
- California’s Public Records Act, once the envy of other states and open-government advocates across the country, has become riddled with loopholes that allow special interest groups, including law enforcement, to restrict public access to vital information, including investigations and allegations of misconduct.

At this juncture, Peter also reflected upon FAC’s relationship with the Central Valley Foundation (CVF) and how the foundation’s annual grants have helped to advance FAC’s work:

FAC has no greater friend than CVF. While other FAC funders come and go (and sometimes come back again), CVF’s steadfast support has allowed us to plan ahead and to expand key programs. Just one example: FAC’s Legal Hotline service, which provides free legal consultations to journalists and others on free speech / press issues.

CVF’s support allowed us to leverage this service by creating a searchable database, on FAC’s website, that has become a uniquely valuable resource for researching issues on free speech and access to government information.

CVF’s support has also opened doors to other funders, both foundations and individuals. Prospective new donors are impressed by the long-time support of a prestigious, California-based foundation. Having CVF as a funder has also enhanced FAC’s credibility in our dealings with news organizations across the state.

To learn more about FAC, First Amendment issues and how to get involved, please visit the website: www.firstamendmentcoalition.org.