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Dear committee members:

My name is Rachel Alexander, and I'm a data journalist covering education and nonprofits for the newly-formed Salem Reporter. We're a locally owned, online-only news site run by former Oregonian editor Les Zaitz. Before moving to Salem, I worked in Spokane at the daily newspaper, the Spokesman-Review, covering health and criminal justice. I'm also a board member for the Society of Professional Journalists' Oregon chapter.

I'm writing to express my conviction that preserving public access to identifying information such as birth dates in public records is absolutely crucial for the type of public-minded accountability reporting that we strive to do at Salem Reporter.

In my five years as a professional journalist, I've been involved in numerous public interest stories that would not have been possible without birth date information provided in public databases.

Birth dates are crucial for reporting because they allow us to distinguish between people who share the same or similar names. This might sound basic, but it's at the core of much of what I do as a data journalist. Many stories start out by joining or comparing two databases against each other - for instance, are there any people on this list of city employees who are delinquent on their taxes? Relying on names alone to verify records leads to imprecise matches, which can make it nearly impossible to determine whether an issue is widespread or find people to contact about it.

When I worked in Spokane, I reported [a story about nurses and other health care workers who had died from opioid overdoses](#). That story exposed a serious health issue that's rarely discussed in the health care world, and would have been impossible without birth dates in public databases. Those dates allowed me to match state medical license data against death records

to confirm that the Beth Cleveland who died in September of 2013 was in fact a licensed nurse at the time of her death.

At that paper, we also used public employee birth dates to verify that a county public defender was indeed the same woman arrested on methamphetamine possession charges, which led to a story about how this woman represented clients and was paid a county salary while she was high on meth.

Other journalists have used these records to identify public employees who “retired” and quickly re-hired while subsequently drawing a state pension and track high school coaches who were fired for sexual misconduct and then re-hired by another school district. Shedding light on these issues saves taxpayers money and leads to better government.

Birth dates are not sensitive personal information - they’re routinely listed on public Facebook profiles and shared with Starbucks for a free birthday coffee. Journalists almost never publish information like birth dates in a bulk format online, but that data is absolutely crucial for the behind-the-scenes work of accountability reporting. The public interest in keeping this data accessible for disclosure vastly outweighs potential privacy concerns. I urge you to consider the public good of keeping information that can verify potential wrongdoing accessible to the public.

Sincerely,

Rachel Alexander