

**Minnesota Coalition on Government Information (MNCOGI)
Written Testimony of Matt Ehling, MNCOGI board member
In support of Senate File 199**

The Minnesota Coalition on Government Information writes in support of SF 199, and thanks Chair Latz and Senator Frentz for bringing it forward. In the House, members of the press, the nonprofit community, and the legal community all offered testimony in support of a related bill — HF 305. We are certain that these same entities and individuals will also testify in support of SF 199. And to their voices, MNCOGI wishes to add the voices of members of the public, for whom access to court records is a critical part of interfacing with our system of government.

As we have described to this committee before, Minnesota has a robust open government tradition. Part of that tradition hinges on this body's determinations about what government information is made available to the public in terms of its legal classification — a matter that we speak to frequently. Another part of Minnesota's tradition, however, hinges upon questions about threshold access to information — procedural and practical questions about accessing government information, including questions of cost.

In the context of the Data Practices Act — through which the information of cities, counties, and state entities is made available to the public — the legislature wisely decided, decades ago, that there should be a statutory option to inspect government data for free, so that citizens could access important government data regardless of their economic circumstances. Within the court rules, there has also been a long-standing free inspection option, for similar reasons of policy.

Today, we are pleased to see this body move in a similar direction in regard to copies of court filings. SF 199 specifies that documents available on a court's on-line platform will be available to all citizens without cost — an important clarification given that there have been past discussions about potentially charging fees for downloads of such documents. This kind of free, on-line access to court filings is important, as these documents can have powerful effects on the lives of individual citizens. Liberty, property, and other weighty interests can be at stake in court proceedings. And this bill will permit everyone — no matter their economic circumstance — to have equal access to court filings in such consequential matters.

MNCOGI looks forward to this bill proceeding further through the legislature in the weeks to come.