

## Sunshine Week: A Win in Helmetta for the Wronkos

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It's Sunshine Week– a national initiative to promote a dialogue about the importance of open government and freedom of information. This week on the blog we will feature some of Pashman Stein's clients who are open government activists or journalists and highlight some proposed changes to the New Jersey Open Public Records Act (OPRA) that are currently pending in the Legislature.

Today we feature Collene Wronko, an open government and animal rights activist from Middlesex County. Ms. Wronko and her husband, Steve, have led a group of dedicated activists who have used OPRA to shine light on the abusive conditions at the Helmetta Regional Animal Shelter. Not all of the records were easily obtained, however, and the Wronkos hired CJ Griffin last fall to file a suit on their behalf. Last week, Superior Court Assignment Judge Travis L. Francis issued a decision finding Helmetta in violation of OPRA on numerous counts and compelled them to remove redactions from hundreds of animal intake records and release numerous other records that it had unlawfully withheld.

#### Interview with Collene Wronko:

##### **1. When and how did you initially become interested in the open government movement?**

I initially became interested in the Open Public Records Act, when I was trying to prove that there was abuse at the Helmetta Regional Animal Shelter. I was able to use the Open Public Records Act (OPRA) to get records that would show how incompetently the shelter was run, but the Borough itself made it very difficult to get the records. My requests were repeatedly denied or I was given negligent responses that did not contain all of the records I had requested. Ultimately, OPRA helped me get the word out so that the shelter situation was featured on Kane in Your Corner and the New Jersey Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (NJSPCA) raided the shelter, took it

into receivership, and filed animal cruelty charges against its directors.

**2. What types of government records or open government issues interest you most?**

I am most interested in records surrounding Municipal Shelters, NJSPCA, and misconduct of police officers in small towns, as well as how council are running small towns and if they are running them with a transparent government or a back door government.

**3. How many OPRA requests do you file a year? How many times would you estimate the public agency violates OPRA? Of those, how many do you actually litigate?**

In 2014, I filed approximately 125 requests. I would say at least 100 of those requests had some sort of violation within the response. Most we handled with a quick note from me or my attorney, but there approximately a dozen or so that we had to sue on. The case against the Borough of Helmetta was quite large and included numerous violations, but there were dozens and dozens more by them that we did not include in the lawsuit for various reasons.

**4. If you could persuade the Legislature to amend OPRA, what would be your top suggestions?**

The one thing I would like to see changed are Internal Affairs investigation reports for all types of police. I do not believe keeping these public records safeguarded from the general public is “transparency”. If anything, we should want to know what the police officers are doing that would cause citizens to file complaints and to see if those complaints are repetitive. Right now, it is very difficult to get those records.