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For Immediate Release

EQUALITY STATE POLICY CENTER CELEBRATES YEARS OF SUCCESS

*Unique coalition marks 16 years of holding government
accountable and promoting civic participation*

The Equality State Policy Center will celebrate 16 years as Wyoming's "Good Government Watchdog," Friday, Oct. 2, 2009, from 6-10 p.m, at its Sweet Sixteen Celebration and Awards Banquet at the Casper Shrine Club. Dr. Peter Simpson, noted Wyoming historian and former legislator, will keynote the evening, and individuals and organizations contributing to the ESPC's work will be honored.

The Equality State Policy Center was founded as a nonpartisan organization in 1993 around a common need to re-involve citizens in policy making in Wyoming. Since then, the ESPC has grown from a handful of individuals around a kitchen table to a 32-member coalition that includes all of Wyoming's major conservation groups, labor unions and the state's most active civil and social justice groups.

"Although most of our work is not flashy, it's right at the root of what makes democracy work," said Sarah Gorin, one of the founding members of the organization. "Our successes mean more people know how policy decisions affect their families, more people speak to their representatives, and more people vote."

The ESPC was formed at a time when there was little accountability in state government. Major legislative decisions were made in committee meetings that occurred with little or no public

notice. Most legislative votes went un-recorded, and it was difficult for the public to access records of the votes that were recorded.

An early ESPC project, The *Wyoming LAP* Book* (Legislative Accountability Project), recorded campaign contributions and key votes, enabling citizens to analyze this information for the first time. The ESPC began posting this data online in 1998, along with background papers and other information. .

The ESPC's "sunshine" on government spurred the Legislature to reform its processes and make all its work more transparent. The Legislature's own website now publishes much of this information. Committee meeting notices are posted in advance and include time, location, and agenda, enabling broader public participation. The Legislature is even beginning to look at ways for citizens to see legislative work and participate in committee meetings online. Next year, the Secretary of State's Office will implement a new electronic system that political candidates can use to report their campaign contributions. The system becomes mandatory in the 2012 election cycle, meaning people anywhere in the state (or the world) will be able to see and consider the information via computer.

"We still have a long way to go," said Dan Neal, ESPC's executive director. "While we have seen good progress on accountability and specific working family issues, like Worker's Compensation, too many citizens have lost faith in the political process."

"Lobbyists for special interest groups are well paid and well practiced," he said. "We often are the only voice for the public interest when policy is being developed and voted on. That's not OK. We know policy is better when decision-makers hear from real people that it will affect."

Although coalition members initially united as advocates for civic engagement and government accountability, the ESPC has evolved over the past 16 years to address a broader range of issues where there is a need to speak out for the public interest, such as tax policy, workers' compensation, health care, gender wage gap, voting laws, and redistricting.

"We are mostly small organizations who can't afford to hire hot-shot lobbyists," said Robert Spencer, ESPC board chairman. "But working together we can accomplish far more than the sum of our parts. We want Wyoming to be a place where people's needs are addressed and we think about the best way to do things, not just the way it's always been. We're the watchdog."

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For interviews: Sarah Gorin 307-745-8594, Robert Spencer (Chairman, Wyoming Equality) 307-631-1714, Marcia Shanor, (Vice-Chair, Wyoming Trial Lawyers Association), Linda Burt (Treasurer, American Civil Liberties Union).

For reservations for the Sweet Sixteen Celebration, please call 307-258-4527 or visit our website, equalitystate.org.