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GANNETT WISCONSIN MEDIA INVESTIGATIVE REPORT

WISCONSIN STATUTE 19.31

"In recognition of the fact that a representative government is dependent upon an informed electorate, it is declared to be the public policy of this state that all persons are entitled to the greatest possible information regarding the affairs of government and the official acts of those officers and employees who represent them."

NAMES DISAPPEAR FROM POLICE REPORTS

Liability concerns prompt state changes

By Eric Litke | Gannett Wisconsin Media Investigative Team

Police work that has traditionally been conducted in public view is increasingly being shielded, as insurance companies and municipal attorneys throughout Wisconsin push departments to withhold names from reports due to liability concerns. A long-ignored federal privacy law is driving the redactions, interpreted by some municipal leaders to overrule a state public records law that says the full reports should be released. With a growing number of departments redacting crash reports — and, in some cases, all incident reports — drivers injured in crashes may have no right to the identity of the other motorist, and communities can be kept in the dark about who police are arresting. In Sheboygan Falls, Brenda O'Malley spent 13 days tracking down a crash re-

port identifying the man who crashed into her daughter's car after police wouldn't release an unredacted report under the new policy. After the March 14 crash, she called everyone from the mayor and city attorney to the federal Department of Transportation before being pointed to the full reports available through the state Department of Transportation. "It's completely ridiculous," said O'Malley, 45. "I understand they're trying to protect the party, but, I'm sorry, where was the protection for my daughter?" Dan Thompson, executive director of the League of Wisconsin Municipalities, said a recent Illinois court ruling on the matter "caught a lot of officials by surprise." While the case out of Palatine, Ill., is still pending, many municipalities are taking a better-safe-than-sorry approach

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County agencies also enact policies

By Josh Lintereur | jlintereur@sheboyganpress.com

Most law enforcement agencies in Sheboygan County have begun blacking out names and other personal information from accident reports, mirroring policies being enacted throughout the state in response to an ongoing federal court case in Illinois. Public record advocates argue that law enforcement agencies are overreacting to the federal case, a move they say unnecessarily cuts off the flow of information to the public on traffic crashes and some arrests. But law enforcement officials here say that while they don't necessarily favor the changes, until further guidance is provided by the state or courts, they're being advised by their attorneys and insurers to withhold information in order to avoid potential lawsuits. "It's one of those things that the court is going to have to straighten out eventually," said Sheboygan Police Chief Christopher Domagalski. "We're trying to abide

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Aging farm community puts new focus on inheritances

Farmers must decide how to divvy up the business, or whether to sell it

By Christopher Doering  
Gannett Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — When Varel Bailey and his fellow shareholders meet this month, the seven-member family board that includes his three children will focus its attention on one issue:

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The "graying tsunami" in rural America means that more farmers are being forced to decide what happens to their farm once they retire or die. The process is further complicated because most farmers reinvest any profits back into the operation. AP FILE

Gov. Walker heads to Iowa later this week

Trip seen as sign of presidential run to some observers

By Mary Spicuzza  
Wisconsin State Journal

In just a few days, Gov. Scott Walker will head to the heart of Iowa — where the 2016 presidential race will likely begin — and take center stage before that key state's Republican party faithful. But Walker, who developed a national conservative cult following after effectively ending

collective bargaining for public workers and surviving an ensuing attempt to oust him from office, is downplaying the political significance of Thursday's trip to the Des Moines area, where he will deliver the keynote speech at a fundraiser hosted by Iowa's largest GOP committee, the Republican Party of Polk County. "Yeah, I'm going to Iowa, but I get invited to other states that have nothing to do with presidential politics," Walker recently told reporters. "(Iowa Gov.) Terry Brandstad is a good

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Patchy fog before 9 a.m., otherwise mostly sunny skies during the day, then mostly cloudy and a 50 percent chance of showers and thunderstorms after 8 p.m.

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