

October 1, 2013

Rep. Marsha Blackburn  
217 Cannon Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515  
202-225-2811

Rep. Peter Welch  
2303 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515  
202-225-4115

Dear Congressmen Blackburn and Welch,

We were surprised to learn that you have undertaken a series of hearings about consumer privacy with representatives of the data collection industry that are closed to the public and the press. According to news reports, the meetings will follow closely the traditional protocol for Congressional hearings with brief presentations by witnesses followed by a question and answer period for members. Except that the Committee room doors will be closed, and the public will be kept out.

While we are pleased that you have taken up Rep. Terry's recommendation to examine the enormously important issue of consumer privacy, there is simply no reason for your task force to hold closed-door session.

We recognize that there is value in private meetings among Members and staff and with constituents. But the Congressional hearing process anticipates a different approach when common matters of public concern arise. Meetings should be held in the open, a public record should be created, and various viewpoints should be heard.

The information that is made available to you and other members of the Task Force should also be made available to the public and members of the press. We believe the Task Force should follow the provision concerning "Open meeting and hearings" contained in the Rule of the House of Representatives for the 113rd Congress which states that:

Each meeting for the transaction of business, including the markup of legislation, by a standing committee or subcommittee thereof (other than the Committee on Ethics or its subcommittees) shall be open to the public. (g)(1) (p. 558)

Not only do the House Rules make clear that hearings must be open to the public, they also make clear that the hearing must be open to reporters and news organizations:

Each hearing conducted by a committee or subcommittee (other than the Committee on Ethics or its subcommittees) shall be open to the public, including to radio, television, and still photography coverage,

We ask that the Privacy Task Force commit to an open process to hear from witnesses and to gather information.

We look forward to working with you and others on this important issue.

Sincerely,

Electronic Privacy Information Center

Consumer Federation of America

Center for Digital Democracy

Consumer Watchdog

U.S. PIRG

Consumer Action

Cc: Chairman Fred Upton  
Ranking Member Henry Waxman  
Chairman Lee Terry  
Ranking Member Jan Schakowsky