

# Pressure, potential for federal shield law

By Cora Currier, *Columbia Journalism Review*

Though earlier this month the Supreme Court refused *New York Times* journalist James Risen's appeal that he should not be made to testify in a government leak prosecution, efforts to pass a federal media shield law are gathering steam.

On Wednesday, more than 70 media organizations sent a letter to Senate leadership demanding a vote on a law that's been sitting around since it passed the Judiciary Committee since last September. And late last month, the House approved an amendment proposed by Rep. Alan Grayson of Florida that forbids the Justice Department from spending money to force a journalist to testify about a source.

"I think we're really close, and the Risen situation really highlights the need for the law," said David Cuillier, president of the Society of Professional Journalists, one of the signatories on the letter to the Senate. "There might be some senators who are still undecided and still on the fence, but I hope that they'll now realize this is long overdue."

There is still contention over the definition of the word journalist, and concerns that any attempt to enshrine reporters' privilege could make those that don't fit precisely even more vulnerable. Republican Sen. John Cornyn and many conservative pundits have opposed the bill on the basis it could disadvantage bloggers and other non-traditional journalists. It also has an exception for situations involving future threats to national security.

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