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MASSACHUSETTS STIMULUS WEBSITE: What It Tells Us & How It Could Tell Us More

(A report by Common Cause Massachusetts, the Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center, and MASSPIRG).

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The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) was both a response to an economic emergency and an effort to launch a new set of policies to build a stronger foundation for long-term economic growth. It was signed into law 28 days after the new President took office. In the following months, the federal and state governments have been required to develop systems to distribute – and to track – hundreds of billions of dollars targeted at rebuilding our infrastructure, maintaining and improving the quality of education in our public schools, helping states to avoid budget cuts that would harm residents and the economy, supporting conservation and weatherization, investing in health care technology, and funding a variety of strategies to put people to work.

To better ensure the ARRA investments meet these critical goals, the law called for a comprehensive level of data collection and transparency, significantly exceeding the current level of budget and contracting disclosure for most states, including Massachusetts. Comprehensive transparency allows us all—the public, government officials, administrators, businesses contractors, and residents—to ensure ARRA projects and investments are distributed and used fairly and efficiently. Because the law also sought to distribute funds quickly, building these tracking systems while implementing the law and distributing the funds poses daunting challenges.

This brief examines how Massachusetts has used its recovery website to provide information about ARRA spending – and describes additional strategies that could improve transparency.

In assessing the state's progress on designing a website, we begin with clear and simple principles. It should be easy for an ordinary citizen to access the following information:

- What is the total amount that has been invested in Massachusetts as the result of ARRA?
- How much of this spending has been in each of the major categories, such as infrastructure, state fiscal relief, tax reductions, direct aid to the unemployed and other areas of investment?
- How much funding, in which categories, has gone to each area of the state?
- Which specific projects and initiatives are being funded and how close are they to completion?

- How can residents participate in ARRA projects or programs?

While this information should be easily accessible on the state web site with one or two clicks, there is additional information that should also be available for those who want to dig deeper.

- Comprehensive information on each program/project funded through ARRA.
- Data on who the particular contractors are on each project and how many jobs have been created and saved.
- The status of each project and whether completed on time and on budget.
- Detailed information on the purposes and criteria that guide the selection of projects for each element of ARRA spending.

How does the state ARRA website measure up to these principles? In some areas the state is providing information in a clear and transparent manner, and has responded to citizen feedback on a variety of issues. Over the past few months, the state has made many improvements to the website in order to provide clear and detailed information. But in other ways, the state website does not yet provide information in as easily accessible a manner as it should. In keeping with the spirit of providing information in a clear and understandable format, this report highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the state website.

Strengths:

- **“Where is the Money Going?”** This section of the website, prominently linked on the home page, provides a range of information on how ARRA funding has been allocated and spent in Massachusetts: an overview of federal funds available nationally and allocated for the state; a summary of funds distributed through State agencies; a Citizens Update showing how much money has been spent and jobs created and retained, using easy-to-read pie charts and tables; a Comprehensive Summary of Awards that outlines all funding awarded to agencies and programs, which includes information down to the sub-recipients and vendors, as well as descriptions of each program and activities that the state or agency has undertaken so far; a link to transportation projects; and a spreadsheet detailing awards of ARRA funds to various programs.
- **Downloadable Reports:** The recovery website includes a number of downloadable excel spreadsheets that provide details on state and federal awards of ARRA funding. These spreadsheets include information on the agencies receiving funding, the purpose of the funding, amount of the awards, jobs created or retained, and information on the sub-recipients and vendors.
- **State Map of ARRA Spending:** This interactive map includes an overview of the amount of ARRA funding spent by category either at the county level or by city and town. While the map itself does not drill down to provide locations of ARRA

funded projects, there are reports linked below the map that detail all ARRA projects within each county, including job creation estimates.

- **Connecting Unemployed Workers with Jobs.** The website provides a link to the state Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development website that allows users to search for available jobs. To compile this database the state is requiring all ARRA contractors to post available jobs on this site. Users can search the site by keyword and select only to show those jobs funded by ARRA.
- **Information on Contractors and Contracts for Particular Projects.** The website posts a wealth of information about stimulus-funded contracts, bids, and contractors as part of its Procurement Access and Solicitation System, or “COMPASS.” The site maintains a searchable database of all state contracts and bid solicitations, and includes a section devoted to those funded by stimulus money. Although the system somewhat difficult to use, businesses searching for stimulus contracts, or residents interested reviewing contract terms and conditions, cost, progress, and bid solicitation are able to review all the applicable information in detail. Massachusetts is one of the few states to provide this level of information on its website.
- **Timeline.** The website has a timeline that includes extensive information and is easy to use with effective graphics offering numerous ways to view the information or be alerted to updates.
- **Map of Transportation Projects.** The website has a map of transportation projects funded by ARRA. The map shows where each project is and allows a viewer to click on the project to receive additional information.

Areas That Need Improvement:

- **Information is too hard to find and understand.** Many of the useful tools explained above are difficult to find on the website. While much improvement has been done to clearly link important information on the home page, such as spending reports and the state map, more could be done to improve coordination between the various sub-pages of the website. For example, the ‘spending and reports’ tab on the home page goes to a different page than if the user clicked the ‘where the money is going’ button on the home page. Almost the same information is presented, but on two separate pages, in two different formats. Also, the ‘comprehensive summary of awards’ provides information on ARRA spending by category, as should the ‘funding and contracts’ tab on the home page as well as the information presented on each agency recovery site (which are buried several pages deep). However, the information in all three of these areas is not entirely consistent, and the differences between them are not intuitive, nor are they explained.

- **Information is too text-heavy.** Much of the information can be made clearer and easier to understand with less text and more charts, graphs and graphics. The Overview of Spending is a good example where presenting the general information in a pie chart with the ability to drill down for more detail would be an improvement.
- **Detailed Information Should be Linked to General Information.** Where there is general information in an overview or a map, those looking for additional information generally have to leave that tool and look somewhere else rather than being able to click through to get more information. For example, on the Transportation site, you can click on various symbols to find a transportation project, you then get some basic information about that project; including project name, description, date advertised, ARRA amount or estimated cost. Then, to get to more information about the contract or contractor for example, you need to know to go to another link, Comm-PASS to search for that information. It is there; it just requires a deep familiarity with the web site and links. Information and data should be organized in the easy to use “drill down format.”
- **Too much inconsistency between agencies and sites.** Information should be presented more consistently and uniformly on the ARRA website. Ideally all the ARRA information would be on the one single website. If the information is provided by separate agencies it should be presented in a consistent format and better notification to users about leaving the website should be provided. For example, the information and format between the transportation spending and education spending is immense. While on the transportation page one can find where the ARRA money is being spent by geography or by type of project. To find similar information on ARRA spending by district for education, one would have to search through excel spreadsheets from the Department of Education website. The format and information for other spending categories vary widely.
- **There should be more information on where funding is occurring.** The state map of ARRA spending and the interactive transportation spending map provide some information geographically, but only for a small share of ARRA spending. The site should include an interactive map that provides information on other spending occurring in each community, such as education, housing, and possibly estimates of Unemployment Insurance, tax benefits and others. While this can not be done for all ARRA money—some of it is for grant programs where the money has not been awarded and other elements are really statewide—it would be helpful, where possible, for the state to provide as much information as possible about what is happening in each community.
- **More Information on Jobs Created and Saved.** To the extent it is possible the state should provide information about jobs created by each category and subcategory of spending and each project. The Massachusetts Recovery website has done much to include job creation and retention estimates in the various reports on ARRA spending. However, these estimates only take into account