

## **Recovery Accountability & Transparency Board Independent Advisory Panel Meeting**

**August 5, 2010**

### **Statement by Sadaf Knight, Policy Analyst Massachusetts Budget & Policy Center**

Good afternoon. My name is Sadaf Knight, I work at the Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center, an independent non-profit research organization. We aim to produce policy research, analysis, and data-driven recommendations focused on improving the lives of low- and middle-income people, strengthening our state's economy, and enhancing the quality of life in Massachusetts.

At MassBudget, we have been working to track the ARRA dollars spent in our state and have been analyzing the impact that ARRA has had on our residents and communities. We have published reports that provide detailed analysis in each category of spending. Since ARRA was enacted in February of last year, hundreds of billions of ARRA dollars have come to our state. And along with this influx of state fiscal relief, ARRA called for comprehensive federal and state level data collection and tracking of exactly how these dollars are spent, providing a level of transparency that significantly exceeds 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. Allowing the public to understand how and where ARRA dollars are spent in their state and communities is key to providing clarity on exactly what ARRA is and how it impacts all of us.

However, the volume of data and the rapid distribution of funds also posed challenges in providing this level of transparency. Last December, MassBudget, along with Common Cause and MASSPIRG, released a report examining the Massachusetts recovery website – the primary portal for people to access information about ARRA. Our key concerns centered around the idea that it should be easy for an ordinary citizen to access information about ARRA spending: how much has been invested; the breakdown of ARRA spending in the major categories, such as infrastructure, education, or state fiscal relief; the geographical breakdown of spending in communities; the status of ARRA funded projects; and how residents can participate in projects or programs. At the time that our report was released, the state had done much by way of providing information in a clear and transparent manner. The website had many strengths, such as a map of showing transportation projects, information for job seekers, downloadable reports and data, and a summary of funds distributed and expended in the major spending categories.

However, there were still improvements that were needed in order for the website and data to be clear and user friendly. While there was a lot of data on the site, it was difficult to find and often buried within the sub-pages of the site. Aside from the transportation projects, there was also no geographical breakdown of ARRA spending. Many users would be interested in knowing how ARRA has affected their local communities. For those users, localized information was not available or difficult to find.

And finally, the website itself was not easy to navigate—it was text-heavy, detailed information was not clearly linked with more generalized information, and users often had to jump between sites to get the data they were looking for.

Since then, the Massachusetts Recovery & Reinvestment Office made significant improvements on the recovery website that address many of the concerns raised in our report. The site now has an interactive map, allowing users to drill down to their zip code to access information on ARRA spending and projects in their area. It also is much easier to navigate and more detailed data can be found with just a few clicks. The website also features stories of individuals who have benefited from the projects and programs funded through ARRA—an important tool for understanding the impact on everyday citizens.

We commend the Recovery & Reinvestment Office for these improvements and for their responsiveness to the input that we and others have provided on how the website could function more efficiently and be more accessible to a variety of users. Moving forward, we hope that comprehensive transparency remains a priority and that improvements are continually made to ensure the highest level of transparency possible.