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BREAKING NEWS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Chair Tighe Sees Need for Consistent Data Standards

WASHINGTON—In a blog posted today on Recovery.gov, Chair Kathleen S. Tighe of the Recovery Board describes how consistent data standards would lead to better data quality across the government and improved oversight of taxpayer dollars.

She recounts how the government has failed to develop a data standard system for nearly a half century, noting that President Lyndon B. Johnson issued a report to Congress on the government's management of automatic data processing in 1965.

"There's nothing mysterious about standards in our everyday lives," she writes. "Without them, consumers and sellers of products would have a tough time doing business." It's not surprising, then, she says, that "consistent standards for government data would be a big plus."

The text of Tighe's blog follows:

Benjamin Franklin once wrote that nothing can be said to be certain "except death and taxes."

If Ben were still around, he might now say: "except death, taxes, and inconsistent federal data standards."

For nearly a half century, the federal government has failed to develop a data standard system that would permit data sharing among agencies, save lots of money, and vastly improve the quality of information, including details on how the government spends your money. In nearly four years on the job, the Recovery Board and its staff have learned a lot—but nothing more important than the need for consistent data standards. Consistency would lead to better data quality, government-wide, a prospect that would ensure improved oversight of taxpayer dollars.

Indeed, the Board, the Government Accountability Office, and the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency will convene a data forum on Wednesday, January 16, at GAO headquarters in Washington. The focus will be on the use of data analytics for oversight and law enforcement purposes. The subjects include: Data Sources that can be used to prevent and detect fraud; Access to and Sharing of Data; and Technology Tools.

(more)

The Recovery Accountability and Transparency Board was created by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 to oversee the expenditure of Recovery funds and bring transparency and accountability to the process. The Board consists of a Chair, Kathleen S. Tighe, and 11 federal Inspectors General. The Board runs the Recovery.gov website that provides information on the Recovery initiatives and spearheads an accountability effort that involves both federal and state investigators and enforcement officials.

Data quality has always been an issue of paramount importance to the Board. In the early days of the Recovery program, the Office of Management and Budget issued guidelines defining the standard data elements that all recipients of stimulus funds had to report. Those guidelines allowed for data consistency and much better oversight. The Board, meanwhile, used only one electronic system—FederalReporting.gov—to collect the spending data from tens of thousands of recipients.

The results: Since October 2009, when the Board first began posting data from recipients, we have overseen 13 reporting periods without any major blunders. Our data quality, except for a glitch here or there, has been excellent.

There's nothing mysterious about standards in our everyday lives. Without them, consumers and sellers of products would have a tough time doing business. Look around, you see them everywhere:

- Every gas station has the same nozzles that fit every vehicle's tank.
- How about the four C's of diamonds—cut, clarity, color, and carat weight? Each category has a strict set of standards by which diamonds are measured and rated. That's how value is determined.
- You love baseball? Standards are essential—baseballs are manufactured to specific standards. The same is true for bats.

Thus, it's no surprise that consistent standards for government data would be a big plus. The Government Accountability and Transparency Board, a key ingredient in the President's campaign against wasteful spending, summarized the issue of inconsistent data standards nicely in a report in December 2011. The panel said:

"The countless award identification (award ID) systems...make the task of reviewing and tracking spending data challenging even for the most expert investigator, much less the everyday taxpayer. Introducing consistency into the award process will help better reconcile spending information from multiple sources and allow for more effective analysis and oversight."

The issue of data standards in the federal government has been around since at least 1965 when President Lyndon B. Johnson issued a report to Congress addressing the government's management of automatic data processing. Several years later—in May 1974, to be precise--the General Accounting Office (now known as the Government Accountability Office) wrote: "Standardization could help reduce high costs of federal computer operations by eliminating unnecessary duplication and incompatibilities in collecting, processing, and disseminating data." Nothing much has happened in the intervening years, however.

It's about time to do something. In our judgment, a good beginning would be to implement, government-wide, a universal award ID number for all contracts, grants, and loans. A universal ID would make it much easier to track and reconcile funds awarded to recipients of federal funds.

It would also make a lot of sense if the government developed a centralized system for collecting data for all government awards—something like FederalReporting.gov, the website we created for collecting Recovery data.

The ideas are out there. What is needed now is action.

--Kathleen S. Tighe, Chair, Recovery Board, and Inspector General, Department of Education

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