

GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY BOARD, 1/22/2014



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WHO DO YOU REPRESENT?

National Priorities Project is a 30-year-old, non-partisan, non-profit federal budget organization. We help people understand how their tax dollars are being spent, and a large part of our work is researching the local impact of federal spending. Media, partners, and novices turn to us to understand the budget cycle and how federal dollars, as well as issues like sequestration and entitlement reform, affect the places around them.

WHAT QUESTIONS ARE YOU TRYING TO ANSWER?

Our research and questions usually fall into one of two categories:

1. PROGRAM/GEOGRAPHY SPECIFIC

We provide a lot of information about specific federal programs and how they're funded in states, counties, or congressional districts. For example, per-capita food stamp benefits by state or county.

2. THE BIG PICTURE

Recently, we've seen an uptick in requests from people asking bigger-picture questions about federal spending:

- “How much of California’s budget comes from the federal government? How has that changed over time? Can we see that funding by county?” – CA State Senator
- “Is there a good database that illustrates all federal dollars going to each state? I was wondering if there’s a way to compare ALL of the funding and compare it to other states and perhaps look at those figures over time.” – media request
- “I’m interested in per-capita spending data by county for total federal aid to individuals” – media request

WHAT FEDERAL SPENDING DATA DO YOU NEED TO ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS?

1. PROGRAM/GEOGRAPHY SPECIFIC

Answering the program/geography-specific questions requires:

- Program identifiers such as Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance codes or Treasury Accounts
- Geographic information (address of award recipient)
- Dates
- Total federal spending amount

In other words, USASpending was made for these types of questions. However, while we recognize that the website is constantly improving, it's often unusable because the data are incomplete. See the Sunlight Foundation's Clearspending project for more specifics:

<http://sunlightfoundation.com/clearspending/>

2. THE BIG PICTURE

To answer questions about total federal dollars going to states, we need the following data:

1. Federal grants awarded to state governments and other state entities
2. Federal contracts awarded and performed
3. Federal assistance directly paid to individuals
4. Federal employee salaries and benefits (aggregated)

Again, non-trivial data issues prevent us from using USASpending.gov to get 1-3.

The 4th item, aggregated federal salaries and benefits, is currently out-of-scope for USASpending. In FY 2010, the last year the Census Bureau published the Consolidated Federal Funds Report, federal salaries and benefits totaled \$343 billion — over 10% of all reported spending.

WHERE DO YOU FIND THAT FEDERAL SPENDING INFORMATION NOW?

There are a number of non-USASpending sources for local federal spending information, each with limitations:

- President's Budget Request, Aid to State and Local Governments — limited scope
 - Census Bureau's State and Local Government Finance report — survey data, not specific (reports amounts in large buckets like *public welfare* and *health and hospitals*)
- <http://www.census.gov/govs/local/>

- Some agency websites have good state-level information. For example, USDA has state-level benefits totals for food stamps, WIC, etc.
- Census Bureau’s Consolidated Federal Funds Report (CFFR) – old, but still necessary
- Office of Personnel Management FedScope – currently evaluating this as a source to estimate federal salaries per state, though it may not reflect benefits.
<http://www.fedscope.opm.gov/>

WHERE DOES FEDERAL SPENDING INFORMATION NEED CLEARER INSTRUCTIONS OR EXPLANATIONS?

Federal spending documentation should be written for smart, responsible, data-savvy people who aren’t federal spending experts or familiar with USASpending’s underlying systems. Some points that could use additional clarity:

- Overall picture of the federal spending universe, which is much larger than USASpending.
- What’s excluded from USASpending (*e.g.*, interest on debt, refundable tax credits).
- Specifics about any validation/checks done before data are published.
- Examples/tutorials for walking a programmer or data analyst through common tasks.
- Clear guidelines for reporting issues.

WHAT SUGGESTIONS DO YOU HAVE FOR PRIORITIZING FEDERAL SPENDING INFORMATION ENHANCEMENTS?

The work already underway to tackle USASpending’s data quality will be the most useful to the broadest set of users. At the same time, clearer documentation – including what types of spending aren’t included – could reduce the need to individually support the site’s users (*i.e.*, help us help ourselves).

There’s also a clear need for a liaison between USASpending, the agencies, and the public – someone who understands the agencies’ challenges, the users’ challenges, and the inevitable data issues that result from so many moving players and parts.

THANK YOU

Thank you for your time, and thank you for helping taxpayers understand how the government spends money. These data are critical, and I think you’ll find that the community stands ready to help move it forward in any way we can.