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Representation: Myself and clients.

What questions am I trying to answer with spending data?
I am usually trying to find out how much money a particular program has given out and to whom. If I am looking for a specific award, I want to know how much they have received to date and how much is left on the award. I also like to know what has been accomplished to date and where the work is being performed. I am often asked to find out how much funding a particular program has made to a specific area by county, zip code or Congressional district, as well as state and city. County information is important because so many states divide the funding up by county and population.

I use USASpending.gov, with reservation. I also use agency websites where they have posted information. In addition, I use state and local information when it is available. I use to use Census data that was produced through FAADS and from the Consolidated Federal Financial Report, which helped in knowing how much was being spent in the states by program and agencies. This information is greatly missed.

Enhancements: I would suggest that USASpending.gov and management seriously look at more direct recipient reporting or recipient verification of the reported data by the agency in USASpending.gov in order to begin to establish a better reporting base of federal spending. I would also suggest (see comments below, too) that a close examination of the central reporting pilot conducted by the Recovery Board be examined because it might help improve Federal spending reporting.

I would create agency/program profiles and recipient profiles of their spending. The profiles can be cut many ways, but they all come down to a verification of the data and a good cross-check but all are driven by recipient data and from what funding source, which only has limited timeframe with the data. The recipient is the one who deals with the reporting data on a regular basis—agencies only at award. Therefore, more emphasis should be put on receiving the data from recipient. Agencies do not have the need to correct data after it has been awarded—it is a one time deal for them, but not the recipient. Use of centralized reporting would ease the burden on the recipient (see GRIP Pilot). Agency staff should be used for oversight of the awards, not focused on data collection and correction.

See Specific Comments below:

Context of USASpending.gov Usefulness for Funding Searches

1. Home page: Search section: no information on what to put into the box. Usually there is some information, e.g., agency name, recipient name, state, etc. Nothing.

2. Advance Search for what purpose? The only information is for prime award. It does not say entire a prime award name, award number, etc.
3. Same for sub-award advance search—no instructions or examples.
This is a poor user interface.

4. Popular requests: is interesting concept. At least get an idea of what people are searching for.
5. The Trends chart is totally useless. Usually when you have a chart you put a title on it. The chart should have a title e.g., Trends of grants and contracts by State, since that it is what is depicting.
6. Use of the Advance search is more helpful but the results are not helpful. At least you have an idea of what you can search on and maybe the results will be helpful.

The result from entering a prime recipient name provides some basic information. However, when results are produced its does not appear to be any rhyme or reason to how data is presented. You do not know if the transaction is an award or an amendment or modification.

What USASpending.gov does provide is the amendment to an award. The amendment should be listed under the source award and in logical order. It would help subrecipients find their awards in the subaward data base.

I am not able to easily find total dollar amounts for a particular recipient without going through data. There should be a recipient profile, as there is on Recovery.gov where the sub-awards are linked to the prime award. Based on a profile concept, it would be very easy to add amendments or modifications to awards. Here again, sub-recipients would be able to report better, if USASpending.gov followed the FederalReporting.gov model, where it gave prime recipients the ability to have subs report directly. In the current USASpending.gov model for FFATA reporting, recipients have to scroll through many awards before finding the right award to report subaward information.

In order to change this, USASpending should look at a reporting model, where once an award is received by recipient, they go into the database and verify the award. If at that time, the prime recipients knows of any subawards, the can be entered on the prime award document. If they are not known at the time of verification, then the prime can always add the subaward information. Subrecipients could either be given the authority to report directly or the prime could do the reporting.

With establishing a verification of award, the Federal government will know the recipient has received the award. With the beginning of setting up a verification environment, it allows for recipients to verify data and make corrections if necessary. At the same time the funding program/agency can view the data. The government is in more of real time environment for managing its funding.

USASpending should include expenditure data by the recipient. Actually, expenditure data for grants is captured in the SF-425 and could be easily posted on

USASpending.gov. There is a lag time between when an agency obligates the data and a recipient receives its funding. Knowing when the recipient has received or the amount received, the government can better see how fast the money is being spent by the recipient. It really becomes more of checkbook environment.

In order to accomplish a more robust spending environment of Federal funds, it would require some changes in how the Federal government processes the collected information. It should consider a more centralized environment, similar to FederalReporting.gov which was used for ARRA. Plus this environment allowed correction periods which enabled the agencies and recipients to view the data at the same time.

Ability to use USASpending.gov

I find using the site very frustrating. First, I am not sure of what information I am receiving. I get lists of data, but do know if they are linked in anyway.

Second, there are data fields missing in the USASpending data. In order to reduce blank fields, there needs to be some quality controls on the data in form of business rule edits. For example, we know DUNS numbers are a specific length. Any less or more should not be used and it is an error and should be corrected. Zip codes are specific links and USASpending should be using the USPS database to ensure all zip codes are accurate to a specific place of performance.

If you are going to use maps for information gathering, I should be able to enter a zip code and receive a listing of total dollars awarded to that specific zip code and how much money has been expended in the area. It should offer of listing of the funding agencies and total dollars awarded to that specific area. Further, for each agency, I should be able to the listing of awards making up the total for that agency in a specific zip code. I should also be able to do this same search by state. If USASpending began such a breakdown of its awards, it would soon be able to begin producing a document similar to the Consolidated Federal Funds Report, which is not produced anymore.

In order to provide better information USASpending.gov should go the route similar to the data the Recovery Board produced by ARRA reporting. There should be an agency/program profile and a recipient profile. Basically, these two profiles should be used help verify the data found in USASpending.gov. If recipients verified the receipt of an award and were able to add subrecipients or subawards/subcontracts to the prime award, it would also help ensure the data was more accurate that what is being displayed today. Plus, it begins to be easier to use by agencies, recipients and the public.

Also, in order to get best idea of how a website of data is used, it is often a good idea to convene user panels to see how they like the display of the data and learn how they would use the data. It needs to be tested before focus groups from the public, interested stakeholders that use government data on a regular basis and government management users. In some respects, their needs will be similar. They want to know how much

money has been spent by a particular agency or program; how much has a particular recipient received or specific location received, and how many subrecipents or subcontractors were used and received funds. Other uses of the data are to learn how much has been spent to date and how much is left to spend and for what purpose of the funds being used.

Therefore, the data in USASpending.gov needs to have better quality control, better linkages between the transactions and better displays of the data. Also, the user interface needs to be enhanced to a level where it is easy to use and the user can understand where they are at any one time. Tables and graphs are great, but they need to have an explanation or be titled so one knows what they are looking, at or can get an idea of what is trying to be conveyed in a chart. Visuals do tell a story, but unless there is some context around the display it does not help the user under the stand the data.