

Data Coalition Recommendations for the 2021 Transition: Making Government Data Higher-Quality, Accessible, and Usable

When the next Administration is sworn in to lead the Federal Government's Executive Branch in January 2021, there will be a large number of pressing priorities for fulfilling campaign promises and addressing the many challenges facing the country. During this unprecedented time in our country, the need for valid, reliable data is clear. As America's premier voice on data policy, the Data Coalition and its members strongly encourage the administration in 2021 to prioritize using data to determine how to most effectively and efficiently address the country's emerging challenges. To do so, the President, political appointees, and career civil servants can all help ensure agencies are collecting the data and developing the evidence necessary to understand critical priorities challenges, while also planning for the country's future policy needs. The 10 following recommendations are common-sense steps that will improve our nation's data infrastructure and support evidence-based policymaking. The Data Coalition encourages prioritization of these recommendations during the transition planning for 2021.

#1: Reissue, revitalize, and refocus the Federal Data Strategy to support evidence-based decision-making. The Federal Data Strategy is a 10-year plan developed with widespread civil servant and civil society input, outlining principles and practices every agency should implement over the next decade. Refocusing a national data strategy on core priorities -- such as pandemic response, economic recovery, social equity, and financial oversight -- will provide agencies much-needed direction about how to most efficiently implement data governance and open data strategies that meet policymaker expectations. An action plan and strategy in 2021 should explicitly complement rapid implementation of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act, the OPEN Government Data Act, the re-authorized Confidential Information Protection and Statistical Efficiency Act, and the Grant Reporting Efficiency and Agreements Transparency Act. Specific actions include issuing implementation guidance to agencies on the OPEN Government Data Act's data inventory and open data expectations, as well as ensuring the legal framework for new data sharing authorities can be accessed by agencies with final regulations expected under the Evidence Act.

#2: Provide adequate resources for Chief Data Officers and other agency data leaders to implement core data priorities. Federal agencies need capacity to pursue open data, data transparency, data governance, and data analysis activities; every agency needs adequate resources to truly recognize data as a strategic asset. Providing at least \$50 million in new, immediate implementation funding for Chief Data Officers will directly support efforts to improve accountability and transparency of government policies and programs by better managing and using data.

#3: Launch new capabilities for secure, responsible data sharing, including establishing a National Secure Data Service. Development of a National Secure Data Service within the Executive Branch is long overdue, and the administration should prioritize using existing legal authorities as appropriate to provide new data analytic capabilities. This service was unanimously suggested by the U.S. Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking to fill a substantial gap in existing capabilities to securely, confidentially combine datasets for research purposes. In addition, the administration must explore other areas where increased data sharing and linkage may be necessary, such as addressing improper payments and enforcement actions across government.

#4: Apply reasonable, open, and consensus data standards for financial services reporting. As the country plans for economic recovery, improved data quality is critically needed for financial regulatory agencies, financial markets, and investors. Basic improvements in data quality and consistency can be achieved by pursuing implementation of common business identifiers and other aspects of proposed legislation, such as the *Financial Transparency Act*.

#5: Expand access to certain income and earnings data for research and evidence-building activities. Core indicators for measuring economic mobility and stability in the country require access to certain income and earnings data, often already collected by the government. The administration should pursue improvements in data quality to systems like the National Directory of New Hires, and propose any adjustments to federal law to expand access for research activities and to support the production of relevant open data. Similar proposals for restricted access to certain tax data for improving critical national economic indicators, such as the Gross Domestic Product, and economic statistics should be prioritized.

#6: Improve the system for compiling national COVID-19 data and relevant health information by prioritizing public health data standards. The country lacks basic public health data standards as part of the effort to respond to the pandemic, the next administration should prioritize the adoption of basic standards to support aggregation of local and state level data for national analyses.

#7: Ensure the American public has access to reliable federal spending data. While vast improvements to government spending data were made over the past decade, far too much information is still low-quality or difficult to access. The next administration should make agency congressional budget requests available as structured data, and publicly available in a centralized database for the American public to have insights about the budget formulation process. In addition, current spending data could benefit from improved capabilities and application of existing government-wide financial data standards to make information about federal expenditures more readily available and transparent to taxpayers.

#8: Ethically and responsibly implement emerging data analytics capabilities like artificial intelligence and machine learning in government, beyond exploratory research. The next administration should take proactive steps to address the potential for bias in AI applications by improving the underlying data, thoughtfully designing algorithms, and addressing human bias. Applications should include clear evaluation metrics for any AI pilot programs and experiments, including a focus on how these projects can be scaled.

#9: Strengthen and diversify the federal data workforce, including by establishing a data science occupational series. The administration should direct the Office of Personnel Management to rapidly establish a new occupational series for data science, encourage agencies to use the series for new hires, and subsequently promote strategies for improving diversity in the field for women and persons of color.

#10: Modernize implementation of the Paperwork Reduction Act to ensure timely, valid, and reliable data collection. The next administration should take steps to consider strategies for administratively improving implementation of one of the country's most important data laws, and propose any necessary modifications to Congress. Modernization should aim to improve alignment with recent legal authorities and current analytical capabilities, to ensure the quality and value of government information is maximized, and minimize the burden on the American public in providing information to the government.

Recognizing that good decision-making needs good data, the Data Coalition calls on the next administration to prioritize efforts to improve the quality, accessibility, and usability of our country's data. In doing so, the administration will support ongoing efforts to transform society's capabilities to generate insights that can be used to promote transparency and accountability of our government in parallel with efforts to devise strategies for improving the effectiveness and efficiency of government operations.