Legislative Branch Subcommittee
United States Senate Committee on Appropriations
Congressional Research Service

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**Subject:** Recommendation for Congress to Leverage USAspending.gov by Supporting a
Congressional Research Service DATA Act Information System

Chairwoman Cindy Hyde-Smith, Ranking Member Chris Murphy, and Members of the
Legislative Branch Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to provide written testimony
on behalf of the Data Coalition. As we submitted in 2018, this written testimony describes how
Congress can strengthen its operational capacity and effectiveness by utilizing the new
government-wide federal spending data openly published under the U.S. Treasury maintained
USAspending.gov. Additionally, this testimony argues that Congress should invest in a *DATA Act
Information System* to incorporate this new national federal spending resource into the
Legislative Branch's Budget, Appropriations, oversight, and policymaking workflows.

The Data Coalition was founded in 2012 to advocate on behalf of the private sector and public
interest for the transformation of government information into standardized, open, and
machine-readable data. Based in Washington D.C., the Data Coalition represent technology and
data analytic companies as well as public sector focused consulting and accounting firms. We
empower these data companies to help make our government more transparent and efficient.

As the Committee is aware, in 2014 Congress unanimously passed the *Digital Accountability
and Transparency Act* (DATA Act) (P.L. 113-101) which charged the White House Office of
Management and Budget (OMB) and the Department of the U.S. Treasury (Treasury) with the
task of transforming government-wide spending information into standardized, searchable
open data on a central website.

Currently the USAspending.gov website reflects the entirety of the FY2018 fiscal year's agency
spending data for the public and Congressional scrutiny.

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**The DATA Act: Value, Function, and Vision**

The DATA Act's unified open data set provides a comprehensive map of the executive branch's expenditure accounts, their balances, and funds available to be spent. Such information had never before been publicly-available in an electronic form. The data set also connects every account with the contract and grant awards which it funds. Before the DATA Act's mandate, this connection between accounting and award data did not systematically exist.[1]

In May of 2017, nearly every CFO Act agency began reporting its spending to Treasury using this data format (beginning with FY 2017-Q2). Now, as required by law, agencies are reporting, and Treasury is publishing, a unified open data set of executive-branch spending on a quarterly basis. By December 2018, the data set reflected the entirety of Fiscal Year 2018, its first complete fiscal year using a consistent data structure.[2] Over eighty-five federal agencies are actively reporting across over 1,600 federal accounts.

This spending information is centrally defined by Treasury's *DATA Act Information Model Schema* (DAIMS).[3] The DAIMS is a government-wide standardized collection of 400 interconnected data elements together representing the relational data structure by which all federal agencies must now map their financial account systems and award reporting.

And this is merely the beginning.[4] For instance Treasury has built a number of visualization tools in their *Data Lab* to demonstrate how the DAIMS enables a browsable government account structure or can visually represent how the purpose of spending (*Budget Function*) relates to the actual spending mechanism (*Object Class*).[5] Furthermore, Treasury's Strategic Plan sets a goal to expand the DAIMS to cover other "administrative data and link more domains…to support decision-making and provide metrics for evaluating program performance and outcomes".[6] And agencies are also seeing financial management benefits of agency-wide financial viewpoints enabled by a unified data set.[7]

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[1] Landefeld, Frank, Jamie Yachera, and Hudson Hollister. The DATA Act: Vision & Value. MorganFranklin Consulting. Data Foundation. July 2016. http://www.datafoundation.org/data-act-vision-and-value-report/. See Section III "How Does the DATA Act Work?".

[2] By May 2018, USAspending.gov will reflect a full consecutive years' worth of federal spending: the latter three quarters of FY 2017 and the first one of FY 2018.

[3] "DATA Act Information Model Schema (DAIMS) v1.3.1" Bureau of the Fiscal Service, Data Transaprency. Accessed May 03, 2018. https://fiscal.treasury.gov/data-transparency/DAIMS-current.html.

[4] Mader, Dave, Tasha Austin, Christina Canavan, Dean Ritz, and Matt Rumsey. DATA Act 2022: Changing Technology, Changing Culture. Deloitte. Data Foundation. May 2017. http://www.datafoundation.org/data-act-2022/. See "Realizing the Vision" for seven Cultural and Technical DATA Act recommendations.

[5] Data Coalition. "Treasury Launches Data Lab on Revamped USASpending.gov." News release, April 5, 2018. DataCoalition.org. https://www.datacoalition.org/press-releases/treasury-launches-data-lab-on-revamped-usaspending-gov/.

[6] Department of the Treasury. Strategic Plan 2018-2022. https://www.treasury.gov/about/budget-performance/strategic-plan/Documents/2018-2022_Treasury_Strategic_Plan_web.pdf.

[7] Landefeld. Vision & Value. See Section IV "Who Benefits From the DATA Act?" for a full discussion.

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In short, the DATA Act is the start to realizing a full life-cycle picture of the U.S. Government's financial information.[8]

**USAspending.gov and Congress: Real-time Insights, Better-Informed Decisions**

The real value of the DATA Act as a resource for government-wide spending information is in how it can be both publicly accessed via USAspending.gov through intuitive visualizations or complete bulk data downloads[9] and automated APIs[10] for technically advanced users.

For example, the USAspending.gov data provides sufficient information, in a readily-available electronic form, for software applications to more efficiently conduct the following tasks:

- Identify the particular agency accounts funded by a Congressional appropriation, select the contract and grant awards paid out of those accounts, and map the geographic impact of those awards by state, zip-code, and potentially Congressional district;
- Identify all of the agency expenditure accounts funding a federal grantmaking program, and assess the impact of future appropriations decisions on that program;
- Identify and track all of the unobligated balances across government, within a particular agency, or within a particular appropriations subcommittee jurisdiction, and reconcile this with approved spending allocations and supplemental budget requests;
- Make more informed appropriations decisions by comparing the annual budget request to current Fiscal Year government-wide agency account balances and spending activity;
- Tag spending to particular programmatic missions, track these resources over time, and pair with additional data sets to assess programmatic performance;
- Autonomously monitor the impact of federal spending activity on a geographic region;
- Access consistent and accurate data to inform Congressionally commissioned government reform and deficit reduction decision-making bodies.

However, to derive such conclusions requires in-depth analysis and parsing of the bulk data and the raw agency data submissions[11], where the real value and insights exist. This is often beyond the technical capabilities and time resources of Congressional staff who more often possess

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[8] Using the DATA Act to Restore the Power of the Purse, 114th Cong. (2016) (testimony of Hudson Hollister, Executive Director, Data Coalition). https://oversight.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/2016-12-01-DATA-Hollister-Testimony.pdf.

[9] "How to Access the USAspending.gov Amazon RDS Snapshot." USAspending.gov Database on AWS. Accessed April 16, 2018. https://aws.amazon.com/public-datasets/usaspending/.

[10] "The USAspending Application Programming Interface (API)." USAspending.gov. https://api.usaspending.gov/.

[11] "FilesDirectory Listing for Raw Financial Assistance Files / Raw Quarterly DATA Act Files." USAspending.gov Agency Submission Files. Accessed April 16, 2018. http://usaspending-submissions.s3-website-us-gov-west-1.amazonaws.com/.

deep expertise in specific policy issue areas and disciplines like public administration, law, business, or policy analysis.

**Recommendation: Provision a CRS Congressional Facing DATA Act Information System**

Congress should fund a project at the Congressional Research Service to build a Congressional facing *DATA Act Information System*. Such a platform would pull USAspending.gov's bulk data and make it readily accessible for the unique budget, appropriations, and oversight workflows of Congressional staff, Member Offices, and Committees.

Specifically, this software-based platform could provide Congressional staff with a financial performance and accountability dashboard that organizes spending by budget function, maps the impact of spending to Congressional districts and Committee jurisdictions, includes information on known data quality issues and limitations, and links other federal open data sets for performance analysis. Congressional staff could also track specific agency accounts and programs through a tailored dashboard equipped with custom alerts, report building functionality, and interactive data visualizations.

The implementation of the DATA Act's USAspending.gov represents a significant Congressional investment. The Congressional Budget Office originally estimated $300 million in associated implementation costs from FY 2014-2018 (though we estimate actual implementation costs were ultimately much lower).[12] For instance, more than $30.7 million in dedicated funds were appropriated in FY 2016.[13]

It is imperative that Congress now also invest in its own capacity through system upgrades that leverage newly provisioned national information resources such as USAspending.gov.

**Conclusion: Data-Driven Decision Making for Congress**

Congress needs to utilize this information resource to enhance the way it conducts the day-to-day work of executive branch oversight, budget formation, appropriation funding, programmatic authorizations, and constituent relations work. Otherwise the government risks this legal mandate becoming yet another federal compliance exercise.

By fully leveraging USAspending.gov's consistent and reliable spending data with a CRS built system, Congress will enhance its ability to fully understand how federal taxpayer funds are ultimately used. And in turn, make better, data-driven decisions on behalf of the public.

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[12] S. Rep. No. 113–139 (2014). https://www.congress.gov/113/crpt/srpt139/CRPT-113srpt139.pdf. See page 12.
[13] DATA Act Implementation Check-In, 114th Cong. (2016) (testimony of David Mader Controller, Office of Management and Budget). https://oversight.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/2016-04-19-Mader-OMB-Testimony.pdf. See Appendix B for a summary chart of Congressional appropriations for DATA Act implementation.