

July 29, 2020

RE: Rapid Action Needed to Advance Development of a National Secure Data Service

Delivered by Electronic Mail

Members of Congress –

The task ahead for our country in responding concurrently to the public health crisis and economic recovery is daunting. The Data Coalition appreciates the efforts Congress has already deployed to ensure insights from data analysis are prioritized in these activities. We look forward to your continued prioritization of evidence-based practices and policies in responding to the pandemic and mitigating negative impacts on the American people.

Even with the improvements incorporated to date, there is still a great need for rapid progress in addressing long-neglected data infrastructure needs across government. In fact, our data infrastructure is missing critical components necessary for using data to generate meaningful, timely insights.

As America's premier voice on data policy, **the Data Coalition calls on Congress to rapidly advance the development of a National Secure Data Service in the Executive Branch.** Three years ago, the experts on the U.S. Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking unanimously recommended to you that such a service be established. When Congress approved the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-435), you took initial steps towards this recommendation by establishing the Advisory Committee on Data for Evidence Building and establishing a strong privacy framework within which such a service would operate. But today, no such data service exists in government meaning our capabilities to meet researcher data needs – inside and outside government – remain limited. On March 23, 2020, the Data Coalition raised attention to this policy option as one reasonable, low-cost strategy for supporting the use of government-collected data to respond to the pandemic.¹

In July 2020, the Data Foundation—a non-profit, non-partisan think-tank that seeks to improve government and society by using data to inform public policymaking—published a new strategy for implementing a data service quickly.² Recognizing recent changes to federal law and the contemporaneous environment, **the recommendation to establish a new Federally Funded**

¹ Hart, N. An Open Letter to Congress on “Strategies to Support Responsible Use of Government-Collected Data for Understanding Long-Term Impacts from the Coronavirus Pandemic on Public Health, Welfare, and the Economy.” Washington, D.C.: Data Coalition, March 23, 2020. Available at:

<https://www.datacoalition.org/an-open-letter-to-congress-for-responding-to-the-covid-19-pandemic-with-data/>

² Hart, N. and N. Potok. *Modernizing U.S. Data Infrastructure: Design Considerations for Implementing a National Secure Data Service to Improve Statistics and Evidence Building.* Washington, D.C.: Data Foundation, 2020. Available at:

<https://www.datafoundation.org/modernizing-us-data-infrastructure-2020>

RE: Implementing a National Secure Data Service (7/29/2020)

Research and Development Center (FFRDC) at the National Science Foundation (NSF) could be achieved with an initial appropriation of \$25 million in the current fiscal year. An appendix to this letter offers suggested appropriations and authorization text.

In parallel with this strategy, the Advisory Committee on Data for Evidence Building's members can provide strategic advice and input about how to most effectively implement the new service in conjunction with NSF and the selected FFRDC-contractor. With the designation of the FFRDC as an agent under the Confidential Information Protection and Statistical Efficiency Act of 2018, the data service would operate within a strong privacy framework that embodies criminal and civil penalties necessary for protecting data and personally-identifiable information. With this privacy framework in place, the timely establishment of the service will provide the research and evidence-building community an infrastructure to rapidly analyze and understand data collected across federal agencies to better understand the impacts of policy interventions, and therefore, assist policymakers in making evidence-based decisions.

Thank you for your consideration of these critical data priorities as our country and partners around the world work to collectively address the coronavirus pandemic. We recognize the magnitude of the challenge before you and hope these suggestions will support your need for reliable information in the months and years ahead. For immediate assistance, please contact me or the Data Coalition's policy manager, Corinna Turbes (corinna.turbes@datacoalition.org).

Respectfully,

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CEO, Data Coalition