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Why the DATA Act will be good for local transparency, too

by [Alisha Green](#)

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Sunlight has [long supported the goals of the DATA Act](#), which will create standards for improving the reporting and sharing of federal spending data. Successful implementation of the DATA Act will help ensure better accuracy and transparency of this crucial dataset -- one [that has been found to have flaws in the past](#).

This legislation won't just bring improvements to information about federal finances. Included in the [DATA Act](#) is language that will also make [federal grant reporting standardized](#), which means data about state and local grants from the federal government will be easier to access and analyze. It [could still be a long process to get to more accurate, standardized, and easily accessible data about these grants](#), but it is exciting to see progress in that direction.

As part of Sunlight's [local policy work exploring open data across the country](#), we continue to [examine the landscape of municipal financial data and advocate for improvements](#). We know that, as top-level collectors of information, [federal bodies sometimes have opportunities to encourage processes that help make local-level data more open](#).

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These kinds of top-level changes sometimes come with concerns from those directly impacted, though. From the time the original DATA Act was introduced in 2011, [state](#) and [local](#) groups have [expressed concerns](#) about the proposed changes to grant reporting. The main concern: how much money would be needed to adapt to the new reporting systems.


It's a concern worth addressing. [States and local governments are still recovering from the impacts of the recession](#). While standardizing and automating the reporting process ultimately reaps benefits for everyone in terms of data accuracy, sharing and usability, not to mention greater efficiencies in reporting, it requires initial investments to achieve all of that. Changing reporting processes can require staff time and new technology, which can add up to more costs up front before the cost-savings of greater efficiencies are realized.

To help with the transition in the meantime, budgeting for reporting costs should be considered as part of future federal grants where reporting is required. [Providing adequate funding](#) is a key element of ensuring proper implementation and sustainability of new processes.

It would be a shame to see promising initiatives like the DATA Act poorly implemented at the state and local level. [Opening data has a wide range of impacts](#) that benefit people inside and outside of government alike, and the DATA Act presents an opportunity for improving data release across the federal, state and local levels. We hope state and local governments will realize the long-term benefits of this transition, and we hope to see the DATA Act [signed into law soon and implemented successfully](#) at all levels of government.

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