



Data Act sponsors look to implementation

By Adam Mazmanian

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President Barack Obama will sign the Digital Accountability and Transparency Act into law. The bill cleared the House on April 28 after passing the Senate earlier this month.

"The administration supports the objectives of the Data Act and looks forward to working with Congress on implementing the new data standards and reporting requirements within the realities of the current constrained budget environment and agency financial systems," Office of Management and Budget spokesman Steve Posner said in a statement.

There are going to be a lot of warm toes at OMB if the three leading sponsors of the legislation get their way. Rep. Darrell Issa (R-Calif.) and Sens. Mark Warner (D-Va.) and Rob Portman (R-Ohio) each said they would "hold feet to the fire" over implementation.

Issa wants to make sure the process has a champion inside OMB who knows "the inherent latency in implementation" so that planned pilot programs aren't extended, delaying the finalization of standards for federal contracts and grants data and the release of that data to the public.

Issa made his comments April 29 at a fortuitously timed event hosted by the Data Transparency Coalition, which gave backers the opportunity to take a victory lap and plan for the long slog of transforming the legislation into workable federal policy.

Among other things, policy-makers will have to come up with definitions of obligations, programs and awards.



"We have not yet broken the code for how we get to expenditure data on grants and contracts," said Richard Ginman, director of defense procurement and acquisition policy at the Defense Department and chairman of the Government Accountability and Transparency Board.

Treasury is going to play a big role on the implementation side through its oversight of USASpending.gov.

Christina Ho, executive director for data transparency at the Treasury's Bureau of the Fiscal Service, has a vision for a 360-degree system with visibility into each federal dollar from appropriation to expenditure. She said the open system tracking the spending lifecycle "is probably not going to get to exactly the way that [the Data Act] is written," and that implementation would probably mean some additional costs for agencies in terms of personnel and IT systems. Still, she called the law a "huge step in improving transparency," and said it could eliminate the need for individual agency data warehouses.

But there's no easy solution to the problem of converting federal spending information into open, extensible data. For instance, the community of federal grants recipients has so far identified 1,100 data elements that could potentially be included in standard reporting. Ginman noted that there was likely a large amount of duplication, but once that is sorted out, there could still be 600 data elements that apply across the range of government grants.

"If this was easy to do, it would have already been done," said Dan Mintz, president of the Advanced Mobility Academic Research Center and former CIO at the Transportation Department.

The federal government has already taken a look at standardizing grants data across agencies, said Amy Haseltine, who leads data transparency efforts at the Department of Health and Human Services. A "data element bank" would give agencies a way to identify redundant data collections, eliminate duplication and adhere to agreed-upon standards for data elements so they aren't asking for the same information in different ways.

"One benefit is to our federal colleagues to make sure we're using information as a way to formulate policies going forward," Haseltine said.

That inward-looking benefit for federal users of data and for oversight bodies could help encourage agencies to implement the Data Act.

Among supporters in Congress, even from across the partisan divide, there is a sense that implementation will give evidentiary support for particular views of government.

Issa, for example, said he thought that better data on federal spending could identify enough waste, duplication and fraud to narrow the budget deficit. Warner said better information on the outcomes of government spending could support "those of us who want to make the case for more investment" in research and development, education, and infrastructure.

About the Author

Adam Mazmanian is a staff writer covering Congress, the FCC and other key agencies. Connect with him on Twitter: [@thisismaz](https://twitter.com/thisismaz).



8609 Westwood Center Drive, Suite 500
Vienna, VA 22182-2215
703-876-5100

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