



EMBARGOED UNTIL WEDNESDAY, JULY 29 AT 1:00 EDT

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Study: Ohio Has Better Reporting on Economic Stimulus Spending Than Most States But Still Needs Improvement

Washington, DC, July 29, 2009—A new study of official state websites focusing on the federal stimulus program finds that Ohio ranks better than most states but still needs to improve the quality of its online reporting.

“The Recovery Act extends or expands unemployment compensation for millions of Americans, provides essential support so that states can meet basic needs, and funds essential infrastructure investments,” said Amy Hanauer, Executive Director of Policy Matters Ohio. “But we can only measure the Act’s success if there is easy access to clear information about how much has been spent and on what, and about which portions of the spending have done most to create jobs, increase equity, improve energy efficiency, and stimulate the economy. ”

The Ohio findings comes from *Show Us the Stimulus*, a report released today by Good Jobs First, a non-profit research center based in Washington, DC. The full text of the report as well as online state-specific appendices can be found on the Good Jobs First website at www.goodjobsfirst.org/stimulusweb.cfm.

“Many states are failing to support President Obama’s vow that the Recovery Act would be carried out with an unprecedented level of transparency and accountability, said Good Jobs First executive director Greg LeRoy, “and they are making it more difficult to measure the success of ARRA in mitigating the effects of the recession.”

The Good Jobs First study examines the quality and quantity of disclosure by state websites on the many ways ARRA funding is flowing through state governments to communities, organizations and individuals. Looking at both spending programs and individual projects, it evaluates the general ARRA websites that all states have created as well as the reporting specifically on highway projects. Based on ten different criteria, each state (and the District of Columbia) is graded on a scale of 0 to 100.

“We tried to be as generous as possible, but most state ARRA sites simply do not measure up,” said Philip Mattera, research director of Good Jobs First and principal author of the report. “The challenge is not insurmountable,” he added. “States such as Maryland, Colorado and Washington are



doing a very good job in conveying vital information about stimulus spending and are leading the way in establishing best practices for state ARRA disclosure.”

Six states score 50 or better for their main ARRA site: Maryland (80), Colorado (65), Washington (73), West Virginia (60), New York (53) and Pennsylvania (50). Thirteen states score 50 or better for their highway reporting, led by Maryland (75), Washington (73) and Nebraska (60). The average score for the ARRA websites is 28, and for highway reporting 38.

Ohio receives a score of 40 for its ARRA website, putting it in a tie for 10th place among the states. It scores roughly the same in ARRA highway reporting, getting a score of 38 (a tie for 26th place).

Most states that score poorly for their main ARRA website do better in highway reporting, but there are five states that score very low for both: Alabama, District of Columbia, Illinois, Kentucky and Vermont. Low-scoring states are ones that provide few specifics on how ARRA money is being used in the state. Illinois, which gets a zero in both categories, has figures only at a national level and nothing on how much is being spent in the state.

Here are highlights of the state scoring for specific criteria:

- Most states do a good job of providing information on the categories of ARRA spending. Forty-two states display the data for broad categories (energy, housing, transportation, etc.), and 37 of these also provide details on specific programs.
- Geographic breakdowns are less common than data on program areas. Eighteen states provide the information, and in only three cases (Maine, New Mexico and Virginia) does the website show the information both for each county individually and for all counties side-by-side for comparison purposes.
- Few states juxtapose the geographic distribution of stimulus spending with patterns of economic distress, such as county unemployment rates or foreclosure levels.
- Apart from county dollar totals, state residents may be interested to know where individual ARRA projects such as the repaving of a road or repair of a school building are taking place. Eleven states provide project maps on their main ARRA website, while 30 provide maps as part of their ARRA highway project reporting.
- Only 10 states provide contractor names and dollar amounts on their ARRA website. The results are better in highway reporting, where 29 states have both names and amounts.
- The paramount objective of the Recovery Act is to address mounting unemployment through job creation and retention. Yet only four states - CO, MD, WA and WV - currently provide employment data for individual projects on the main ARRA site. Eighteen states do so in their highway reporting.

Based on the findings, Good Jobs First offers the following recommendations:



- Put a summary of key information about ARRA spending at the top of the home page of the site. A clear bar graph, pie chart or table showing the main spending flows goes a long way in helping the user begin to see what the Recovery Act is all about. There should be clear links to pages with more details about the various programs.
- Provide a map or a table showing how overall ARRA spending and the amounts in key categories are being distributed around the state.
- Along with information on spending streams, provide information on individual projects being funded by those programs. Where possible, display the location of the projects on maps. Interactive displays that allow one to drill down for more details are better than static PDF maps.
- For projects carried out by private contractors, be open about the contract award process and the identity of the companies that win bidding competitions. Post the bids and the details, including the full text, of the contract awarded to the winner.
- While the federal government’s Council of Economic Advisers is responsible for estimating the overall employment impacts of ARRA and the Recovery.gov website will report jobs data on some (but not all) individual projects, state ARRA sites should also make an effort to include employment data in their project reporting.
- ARRA sites should provide readily accessible information about the ways that individuals, organizations and businesses can apply for stimulus grants and contracts.

“The use of ARRA websites to inform the public is more than a matter of providing a service to state residents,” Mattera said. “The way in which the information is presented helps shape public attitudes toward the stimulus and could play a significant role in debates over future government interventions in the economy.”

The production of this report is part of the ongoing work of Good Jobs First on transparency and accountability issues relating to the Recovery Act. Good Jobs First co-chairs the Coalition for An Accountable Recovery (www.coalitionforanaccountablerecovery.org), which works on these issues at the federal level, and we coordinate States for a Transparent and Accountable Recovery, or STAR Coalition (www.accountablerecovery.org), which works with state-level organizations.