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Tracking Federal Awards in States and Congressional Districts Using USAspending.gov

Overview

USAspending.gov, available to the public at <http://www.USAspending.gov>, is a government source for data on federal awards by state, congressional district (CD), zip code, city, and county. The awards data in USAspending.gov is provided by federal agencies and represents grants, contracts, loans, and other financial assistance. Grant awards include money the federal government commits for projects in states, local jurisdictions, regions, territories, and tribal reservations, as well as payments for eligible needs to help individuals and families. Contract awards refer to bids and agreements the federal government makes for specific goods and services. USAspending.gov does not include data on actual spending by recipients.

USAspending.gov also provides tools for examining the broader picture of federal spending obligations within the categories of budget function, agency, and object class. *Budget function* refers to the major purpose that the spending serves, such as Social Security, Medicare, and national defense. *Object class* refers to the type of item or service purchased by the federal government, such as grants, contracts, and personnel compensation and benefits.

Using USAspending.gov to locate and compile accurate data on federal awards presents challenges, in part, because of continued data quality issues that have been identified by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO). Researchers need to be aware that search results may be incomplete or contain inaccuracies.

USAspending.gov includes the following features:

- **Advanced Award Search** of prime and subaward data back to FY2008 allows filtering by award type, awarding agency, recipient, country, state, zip, city, county, CD, and other criteria. To identify where money is being spent, search on *Place of Performance* versus *Recipient Location*. Search results include awards that are *active* during the selected fiscal year, regardless of when the award initially started. Details on an individual award, including transaction history and subawards, may be viewed by clicking on the *Award ID*. The results list displayed can be downloaded at either the award or transaction level, along with additional details about each award, into a spreadsheet. The advanced search is continually being developed and improved, so new features may have become available since the publication of this report.
- **Spending Explorer** enables “big picture” browsing of federal spending obligations and offers interactive data visualization by budget function, agency, and object

class. With this tool, users can see the budget function breakdown by categories such as Social Security, Medicare, and national defense; obligated amounts by agency; and obligations by object class categories such as grants, contracts, and personnel compensation and benefits.

- **Profiles of Agencies and Federal Accounts** features data on each agency’s budgetary resources, a dollar amount that has been obligated (or committed to be spent) against those budgetary resources, a breakdown of these obligations by object class, and the federal accounts through which the obligations are administered. Users can also browse a list of the nearly 2,000 federal accounts and track spending obligations within each. The data in this section is presented visually through interactive charts.
- **Profiles of States** provides tables, interactive maps, and graphs showing a breakdown of a total awarded amount to each state back to FY2008. Breakdowns include totals by award type, county, and CD. Profiles also include top five rankings in various categories, such as awarding agencies and recipients.
- **Profiles of Recipients** contains information on entities that have received federal awards in the form of contracts, grants, loans, or other financial assistance back to FY2008. Recipient profiles include data on award trends over time and top five rankings in various categories.
- **Download Center** allows bulk exporting of large, pregenerated award data sets by agency, award type, and fiscal year through the *Award Data Archive*. The custom download pages—*Custom Award Data* and *Custom Account Data* (which covers all spending data, including nonaward spending)—also allow downloading of large data sets but provide additional filtering options.

Key Challenges in Tracking Awards

Key challenges may be usefully considered in two general categories: (1) reporting issues and (2) pass-through issues. In addition, tracking awards in CDs presents several specific issues that are addressed separately below.

Reporting Issues

Federal agencies are required to submit reports on awards transactions within 30 days after they are implemented. There may be a longer lag-time with data from the Department of Defense, generally 90 days. Although this reporting requirement is in place, issues still remain involving of the data’s completeness, consistency, and accuracy (see “Background on USAspending.gov”).

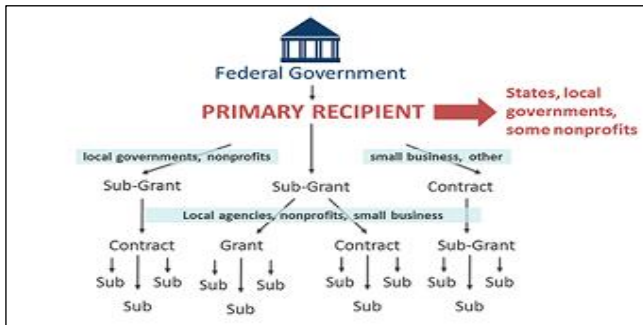
Pass-Through Issues

Most federal grants funding is awarded to states, which then pass through funds to eligible recipients elsewhere in the state. Funds may then be further subawarded or subcontracted (see **Figure 1**). This sublevel location may be a project's place of performance as opposed to the initial recipient location. Consider the following pass-through scenarios:

- A grant award may pass through different jurisdictions in a state (located in different CDs) before reaching the final place of performance.
- Federal grant monies may first go to the state (an agency or agencies in the state capital in one or more CDs), then be distributed to a city or county government (in one or more additional CDs), which then may subaward funds to an organization that spends the money in other CDs.
- Procurement awards may be given to a corporation headquartered in one state (and one CD). The company may spend the money manufacturing the purchased product at one or more of its manufacturing facilities in one or more additional states (and CDs).

Figure 1. Examples of Federal Spending Streams

Recipients at Multiple Levels



Source: Jerry Brito, George Washington Univ., 2009; and CRS 2016.

Specific Challenges in Tracking Awards by Congressional District

When searching for CD data, note the following:

- Special care should be taken when comparing CD data over time. Because of the redistricting process, the geographic area within the boundaries of a CD in the 113th and later Congresses may be partially or wholly different from the geographic area of a CD with the same number in the 112th and earlier Congresses. Other geographic search options, such as by zip code or county, could be used to track awards within a CD, although borders may not exactly align.
- CDs that include state capitals may sometimes appear to receive more federal awards because state administering agencies (SAAs) pass through funds for projects throughout the state.
- Federal grant or procurement funds may pass through various administrative levels (e.g., to states via block

grants, then to local jurisdictions, including different CDs) before they are actually spent. Therefore, searching on *Place of Performance* rather than *Recipient Location* will yield results that more accurately reflect ultimate award destinations.

Background on USAspending.gov

The Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act of 2006 (FFATA; P.L. 109-282) required the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to create a public database to enable tracking of federal funds awarded to the final recipient level. This can be challenging because federal funding that is awarded to states or contractors may then be passed through or subawarded to local entities or subcontractors (see **Figure 1**).

In addition, because of continued data quality issues in USAspending.gov, information in the database may still be incomplete and inaccurate (for example, see Government Accountability Office report GAO-20-75 on data quality, available at <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-20-75>).

Under requirements of P.L. 113-101, the Digital Accountability and Transparency Act of 2014 (DATA Act), responsibility for the database passed to the Department of the Treasury. The act required Treasury and OMB to set uniform data standards to be used across all federal agencies and provide additional guidance to agencies for posting data on USAspending.gov.

Treasury launched the current version of the website in March 2018.

For more information on USAspending.gov, see the website's *About* page at <https://www.usaspending.gov/#/about> and *Frequently Asked Questions* at <https://usaspending-help.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/sections/115000739433-Frequently-Ask-Questions->.

Congressional staffers who need help searching USAspending.gov may place a request via [CRS.gov](https://crs.gov).

Related CRS Products

CRS Report R44027, *Tracking Federal Awards: USAspending.gov and Other Data Sources*, by Jennifer Teefy.

CRS Report R44374, *Federal Grant Financial Reporting Requirements and Databases: Frequently Asked Questions*, by Natalie Keegan.

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