

STUDY: MINNESOTA NEEDS TO IMPROVE ITS REPORTING ON ECONOMIC STIMULUS SPENDING

Washington, DC, July 29, 2009—A new study of official state websites focusing on the federal stimulus program finds that Minnesota is among the states that need to improve the quality of their online reporting.

“The State of Minnesota needs to be more open and transparent about how federal stimulus dollars are being used in the state,” said Mike Dean, executive director of Common Cause Minnesota. “A high level of openness and transparency is critical to holding the decisions of state and local governments accountable as they spend an unprecedented amount of money through the federal stimulus.”

The Minnesota finding 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 (68), Washington (63), 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.

- 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.

**SHOW US THE STIMULUS:
AN EVALUATION OF STATE GOVERNMENT
RECOVERY ACT WEBSITES**

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July 2009

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This report, along with the state scoring sheets used to compile the results, can be found on the web at www.goodjobsfirst.org/stimulusweb.cfm

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Every state government now has a website reporting on its role in implementing the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), the \$787 billion federal stimulus bill that is shoring up state finances, reinforcing the social safety net and funding job-creating infrastructure and energy-efficiency projects. Yet there are wide differences in the quality and quantity of the information the websites offer. Some state ARRA sites reinforce President Obama's promise that the stimulus plan would be carried out with "an unprecedented level of transparency and accountability." Others are half-hearted efforts that provide residents little useful data on the largest federal stimulus since the New Deal, making it harder to measure ARRA's success.

These are the conclusions of Good Jobs First after a review and evaluation of the states' ARRA websites. We considered how effective the sites are in conveying information about:

- the categories of stimulus spending;
- the distribution of that spending in different parts of the state; and
- specific projects being carried out by private contractors, including their employment impact.

The study rates each state twice on a scale of 0 to 100: once for its main ARRA website and again for a high-profile aspect of stimulus spending—highway projects (whether that reporting is done through the main ARRA site or a separate transportation department web page). In each case we evaluate the sites according to about ten factors relating to the quality and quantity of the information presented on the many forms of ARRA spending taking place in every state.

Most states do not score very high. The average of all the state scores for ARRA sites is only 28.2, and the median is 25. Scores for ARRA highway reporting are somewhat better—an average of 37.8 and a median of 38—but still not very impressive.

Only six states score 50 or better for their ARRA website: Maryland (80), Colorado (68), Washington (63), West Virginia (60), New York (53) and Pennsylvania (50). Thirteen do so for their highway reporting, led by Maryland (75), Washington (73), Colorado (65), Nebraska (60) and California and New York (each at 58). Only four states (Colorado, Maryland, New York and Washington) score 50 or better on both measures.

In contrast to these, two states score zero for their websites (Illinois and Utah), and two get a goose egg for their highway reporting (Illinois and Kentucky), so that Illinois is the only state to strike out completely in both ratings. Most states that score poorly for their main

ARRA website do better with their highway reporting, but apart from Illinois, there are four states that score very low for both: Alabama, District of Columbia, Kentucky and Vermont. Low-scoring states are ones that provide few specifics on how ARRA money is being used in the state. Illinois, for instance, has figures only at a national level and nothing on how much will be spent in the state.

On pages 7 and 8 are summary tables displayed alphabetically by state name and by ranking.

Although this study focuses on state ARRA websites, we also include an evaluation of New York City's impressive NYCStat Stimulus Tracker, which is comparable in quality to the top state ARRA sites.

Here are highlights of the state scores 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. States such as Iowa, West Virginia and Wisconsin use animated bar graphs to highlight the information. On the other hand, some states such as Colorado and Idaho bury the information in secondary web pages or linked PDF documents.
- 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. States such as Oregon, Tennessee and Washington use interactive maps to display county breakdowns.
- Few states juxtapose the geographic distribution of stimulus spending with patterns of economic distress, such as county unemployment rates or foreclosure levels. Only Maryland provides this information on its main ARRA website. Five states—California, Florida, Missouri, South Dakota and Washington—do so in their highway project reporting.
- 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 (California, Colorado, Hawaii, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and South Carolina) provide project maps on their main ARRA website, while 30 provide maps as part of their ARRA highway project reporting. Some of these are

