

June 19, 2017

Dr. Keith Hall
Congressional Budget Office
Ford House Office Building, Fourth Floor
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Dr. Hall:

We, the undersigned organizations, write to express our appreciation of the Congressional Budget Office's efforts to provide Congress with the information it needs to make economic and budgetary decisions. We acknowledge the CBO's longstanding role of providing written estimates of the financial impact of legislation and providing Americans of all political persuasions the ability to see how Congress plans to spend their money.

We note in particular your efforts to make this information available to the public on your website. As you know, the legislative branch has made a significant effort to release government information online as data, with the House going so far as to adopt that as part of its rules package. As organizations interested in government transparency and accountability--many of whom rely on that information--we would welcome the opportunity to discuss with you how digital best practices could help you further your agency's mission and make those hard-won insights even more broadly available to the general public.

The following topics could serve as a starting point for a conversation.

Website URLs

We are regular consumers of CBO reports and often seek to link a CBO report to the bill it concerns. At the present, there are some barriers to programmatically gathering CBO scores based on the bill number. The webpages for scores do not appear to follow a specific format based on the bill in question. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss whether publication at predictable URLs would be possible in such a way as to reflect publication date and bill number.

Bulk data for scores

One data point of particular importance to us is the final CBO score for a bill. While that information is contained in the reports, it does not appear to be available as a structured data format that can be systematically gathered. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss whether there's a way to centrally publish that data or make it easier to extract.

Score formatting

It is our understanding that every CBO score reports similar information, but that information may be presented in different written report styles. In recent years, CBO has standardized report formats, but perhaps there is more that could be done to ensure that consistent tables appear in all reports.

Archive of full score histories

Some CBO scores that previously appeared on CBO's website appear to have been removed.¹ This information continues to be useful for us, as it provides important historical context, helps illuminate trends, and provides crucial information to members. We would be grateful to learn more on why that information apparently was removed, and work with the Government Publishing Office to publish and archive all CBO documents and data in govinfo.gov, their digital repository.

Improved search functionality

The current CBO website allows several options for search filtering, providing users with multiple views into the data. For some fiscal-oriented organizations, additional functionality like the ability to search based on spending or deficit impacts would be particularly useful.

Thank you again for all that you and your staff do to ensure budgetary transparency. We would welcome the opportunity to speak with you or representatives from your office.

Sincerely,

American Association of Law Libraries
American Library Association
American Society of News Editors
Association of Alternative Newsmedia
Campaign for Liberty
Center for Data Innovation
Center for Responsive Politics
Coalition to Reduce Spending
Defense Priorities
Demand Progress
Free Government Information
FreedomWorks
Government Accountability Project
Government Information Watch
GovTrack.us
Issue One
Lincoln Network
National Taxpayers Union Foundation
Niskanen Center
Project on Government Oversight
Quorum
R Street Institute
Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press
Sunlight Foundation
Taxpayers for Common Sense
Taxpayers Protection Alliance
TechFreedom

¹ For instance, this link used to provide the score for H.R. 698 in the 113th Congress, but is no longer available: <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/44447>.