

July 10, 2019

Dr. Phillip Swagel
Congressional Budget Office
Ford House Office Building, Fourth Floor
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Dr. Swagel:

Congratulations on your appointment as the new director of the Congressional Budget Office.

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 long-standing 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 CBO's efforts to make this information available to the public on its 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.

In 2017, we met with Dr. Keith Hall regarding improving information publication practices at CBO. Since then, CBO has begun standardizing the way scores are presented. We welcome these steps and would appreciate the opportunity to continue that conversation with you, with the following topics serving 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.

Longitudinal Spending Information

CBO makes certain top-line spending information, such as category 050 defense spending and

302(b) committee suballocations, publicly available in annual reports¹. Tracking that spending over time can be a challenge. In the executive branch, the Office of Management and Budget publishes historical spending tables that provide a high level of detail² and we recommend that CBO adopt a similar practice. Specifically, CBO can aggregate annual reports into a series, consolidating spending information over time in one place. CBO could also publish current and historical spending information as CSV datasets.

Total and net spending estimates

CBO often provides only net spending estimates in cases when executive agencies have the authority to increase fees or when offsetting receipts are scored as changes to direct spending (see, for instance, CBO's score of FCC spending in S. 1294³.) Additionally, in those instances when total numbers are provided, they are rarely presented in a year-by-year breakdown. More detailed information would provide valuable transparency in these cases.

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.

Participation in the Bulk Data Task Force

The Legislative Branch Bulk Data Task Force, convened by the Clerk of the House of Representatives, works to improve how legislative branch data is shared and published to meet internal congressional needs and the needs of the public. The task force meets regularly with stakeholders, and we encourage the CBO to participate.

Panel of Advisers

CBO discloses online three of its panels of advisers (concerning economic matters, health matters, and its health insurance simulation model) and the agendas for its meetings with those panels. In addition, it collects an initial and annual disclosure report of substantial political activity and significant financial interests from its advisers and states on those forms and on its website that the forms will be available to the public and can be requested from CBO. However, there is no clear mechanism to request those reports from CBO, which were first required in 2015. Automatic disclosure of the reports online is a best practice; CBO should consider automatically publishing all the reports online. At a minimum CBO should make clear how the public might request the reports (individually and in bulk), including who they should contact and the expected turn-around time. In addition, if it does not already, CBO should ensure that every panel of advisers and the members thereof are disclosed online and consider whether to publish the minutes of their meetings. Furthermore, to the extent an adviser provides substantial assistance with a CBO report, she or he should be identified on that report as a contributor.

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.

¹ <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files?file=2018-10/FY%202018%20House%202018.9.30.pdf>

² <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/historical-tables/>

³ <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2019-06/s1294.pdf>

Sincerely,

American Society of News Editors
Americans for Prosperity
Associated Press Media Editors
Association of Alternative Newsmedia
Campaign for Liberty
Cause of Action Institute
Center for Responsive Politics
Coalition to Reduce Spending
Data Coalition
Demand Progress
Free Government Information
FreedomWorks
Government Accountability Project
Government Information Watch
GovTrack.us
Issue One
Liberty Coalition
Lincoln Network
National Taxpayers Union Foundation
Open the Government
Project On Government Oversight
Quorum
R Street Institute
Sunlight Foundation
Taxpayers for Common Sense
Taxpayers Protection Alliance
TechFreedom
Transparency International