

October 15, 2019

Committee on Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs
United States Senate
340 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC, 20510

RE: Support for the Congressional Budget Justification Transparency Act of 2019

Dear Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Peters, and members of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs committee:

We, the undersigned organizations, write in strong support of the Congressional Budget Justification Transparency Act of 2019, S. 2560, which would provide needed transparency and accountability to agency spending proposals, known as Congressional Justifications (“CJs”). CJs are plain language explanations of agencies’ plans to spend federal funds, written at a high level of detail and in language a layperson can understand.

The proposed legislation provides for a central, online repository for all federal agency Congressional Justifications, managed by OMB. It requires agencies publish their CJs online no later than two weeks after submission to Congress. It also provides for congressional and public access to the documents and encourages their publication as structured data.

Many benefits arise from a central website for all agency CJs. It makes it possible to view agency CJs submitted over multiple years, so that one can see how an agency’s proposals and plans have evolved. It allows for comparisons across multiple agencies. Additionally, it ensures that CJs will not disappear from public — and congressional — view. Finally, it encourages the publication of past CJs on the website, which would expand the baseline for comparisons.

A March 11, 2019 report by the Demand Progress Education Fund found that some executive branch agencies were not consistently complying with OMB’s requirement to publish their CJ on their own website¹. There is no way to say how many agencies failed to comply with the publication requirement because OMB does not publish a comprehensive list.

It is also not uncommon for oversight committees and even agency staff to struggle with finding previous submissions. While OMB, in response to several years of Congressional

¹ “Feds Lag in Publishing Funding Requests,” Demand Progress Education Fund (March 11, 2019), available at https://s3.amazonaws.com/demandprogress/reports/Congressional_Budget_Justification_Report.pdf.

pressure², has just launched a repository for CJs,³ it is incomplete,⁴ does not provide a list of agencies that must submit CJs, and does not host the documents itself. This legislation solves those problems. We urge the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee to take up the legislation at the next available opportunity and to report it favorably.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss our support for the Congressional Budget Justification Transparency Act. Please contact Daniel Schuman, policy director, Demand Progress, at 240-237-3930 or Daniel@DemandProgress.org.

Sincerely,

Beeck Center for Social Impact + Innovation
at Georgetown University
Campaign for Accountability
Campaign for Liberty
Center for Responsive Politics
Center for Science and Democracy at the
Union of Concerned Scientists
Coalition to Reduce Spending
Data Coalition
Demand Progress
Free Government Information
Government Accountability Project
Government Information Watch

GovTrack.us
Lincoln Network
National Freedom of Information Coalition
National LGBTQ Task Force Action Fund
National Security Archive
National Taxpayers Union
Open the Government
Project On Government Oversight
R Street Institute
Senior Executives Association
Society of Professional Journalists
TechFreedom

² See “Online Budget Repository”, Report, Financial Services and General Government Appropriations Bill, FY 2018 (H. Rept. 115-234), p. 31, available at <https://www.congress.gov/115/crpt/hrpt234/CRPT-115hrpt234.pdf>; “Online Budget Repository”, Report, Financial Services and General Government Appropriations Bill, FY 2019 (H. Rept. 115-792), p. 27, available at: <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-report/115th-congress/house-report/792/1>; “Congressional Budget Justifications,” Report, Financial Services and General Government Appropriations Bill, FY 2020 (H. Rept. 116-111), p. 38, available at: <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FY2020%20FSGG%20Appropriations%20Act.%20Report%20116-111.pdf>

³ USASpending.gov, available at <https://www.usaspending.gov/#/agency>.

⁴ “USASpending Publishes (Some) Budget Requests In A Central Location,” Demand Progress Education Fund (August 9, 2019), available at: <https://firstbranchforecast.com/2019/08/09/usaspending-publishes-some-budget-requests-in-a-central-location/>