

## Federal Grants & Government Accountability User Engagement Workshop

### *Key Takeaways*

#### BACKGROUND

In 2017, the U.S. Government spent [\\$3.98 trillion](#) in financial assistance. While [USAspending.gov](#) provides access to detailed federal spending data, there is an opportunity to enhance transparency and show the American public how programs are performing with taxpayer dollars. Linking federal spending and performance in high impact areas can increase transparency, promote economic growth and research, and improve citizen services. There are similar opportunities to streamline the federal grants lifecycle. Using open government data to address these challenges is well-aligned with the mandate of the [President's Management Agenda](#), which places a priority on [leveraging data as a strategic asset](#).

#### THE OPPORTUNITY PROJECT: 2018 SPRINT

[The Opportunity Project](#) (TOP) is a lightweight process for engaging the tech industry to create data-driven digital products that benefit the public and drive economic activity. TOP launched a 12-week tech development sprint in June 2018 designed to use open government data to address a series of problem statements, including two developed by the U.S. Department of the Treasury and the Executive Office of the President Office of Management and Budget (OMB):

- (1) **Increasing Government Accountability by Connecting Federal Spending and Performance Data.** Develop public facing tools that link federal spending and performance (or outcome) data to provide comprehensive insight into the use of federal taxpayer dollars across programs.
- (2) **Improving Access to and Management of Federal Grants.** Develop tools that expand on existing systems to help grant recipients manage the entire grants lifecycle, helping grant managers and recipients search for opportunities, streamline reporting, and assess risks.

As part of their involvement in the 2018 TOP Sprint, Treasury and OMB also identified open government datasets that tech teams could use to build digital products, including data that is publicly available on [USAspending.gov](#), [SAM.gov](#), [Benefits.gov](#), and [Grants.gov](#).

#### OVERVIEW OF USER ENGAGEMENT WORKSHOP

Treasury and OMB, along with the nonprofit [Center for Open Data Enterprise](#) (CODE), hosted a Federal Grants & Government Accountability User Engagement Workshop on November 16, 2018. The Workshop brought together over 50 people including user advocates from government, industry, academia, and civil society. It featured live demos from two participating tech teams in the 2018 TOP Sprint, eCivis and REI Systems.

The Workshop also included interactive breakout sessions designed to (1) gather substantive input from users and user advocates to improve digital tools and platforms before their public launch, and (2) identify opportunities to help make them scalable and sustainable in the long term.

## USER ENGAGEMENT FEEDBACK FOR ECIVIS

eCivis presented its tool, [Grants Intelligence](#), which provides information about federal grants, including their application and availability. eCivis focused specifically on its data on grants pertaining to issues of housing and homelessness, which allows for interstate comparisons. This tool is designed primarily for professionals, researchers, government finance professionals, and citizens with a keen interest in transparency and accountability of federal grants.

### *Target Audiences*

Participants identified many potential beneficiaries of eCivis' tool on federal grants tracking. Participants echoed eCivis' stated user base, focusing heavily on government and research, but also suggested that the tool on homelessness would have value and application for:

- **Grassroots and nonprofit organizations** with a focus on homelessness, who will benefit from the ease with which end-users can access a wide range of data using the tool.
- **State and local governments** that could use the tool to seek grants and to coordinate streams of federal funding.
- **Grants managers** seeking to distribute block funds effectively.

### *Features*

Participants identified several features present in the tool that were of particular interest, including:

- Easy in-depth exploration of information and data while remaining on a single page
- The presentation of data in an easy-to-understand ratio format, and the clean aesthetic of the site.

Participants suggested that the tech tool could be improved by providing downloadable and exportable data, developing a standardized data dictionary that would allow linkages with other datasets, and allowing end-users to include additional sources of data to address concerns about excluded variables.

### *Federal Open Data*

Participants lauded eCivis for developing a tool that not only uses existing federal data, but identifies areas where federal data coverage could be improved. Gaps in the data occur at all levels, hindering the analytical leverage of the tool. To address this, participants suggested developing a tool to compare data at the community level and city level, which would greatly improve the granularity of the tool. This would allow state and local governments to better identify and address underserved areas in each state. One starting point should be collaboration with agencies that specifically focus on collecting and providing open data, which would allow a relatively easy expansion of the tool's influence and analytical leverage.

### *Scaling*

One major opportunity for the scaling of eCivis' tool is to include data about issues attendant to homelessness. This would include information about welfare programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the National School Lunches Program (NSLP). The tool could also be applied to other issues of public concern and safety, including tracking information about the opioid crisis. Additionally, participants suggested that the tool could be expanded to include state and local funding, as well as philanthropic streams of funding.

Participants suggested that eCivis might be able to improve its scalability by developing a universal template from the tool that can be applied to other topics of interest beyond homelessness; for example, the opioid crisis, the epidemic of HIV/AIDS, early childhood development, and others.

#### *Sustainability Planning*

To help make this tool sustainable, participants proposed allying with the private sector to secure either funding or access to high-end technology. Publicity from USA Spending and Grants.gov could also help maintain the tech tool. eCivis should also look for ways to incorporate unstructured data into the tech tool, perhaps by using machine learning techniques to derive the data and blockchain to verify the integrity of the data. This would allow the tool to automatically pull data from annual reports with minimal manpower or oversight. One potential first step would be to ally with [FedRamp](#), which is a Federal Government program designed to modernize the government agencies using cloud computing.

#### *Contributions & Collaborations*

In order to begin scaling laterally, participants suggested pursuing partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that focus on similar issues. For example, [Feeding America](#), an NGO focused on providing access to food for all Americans, would be well-placed to provide information about homeless access to food banks. Other potential collaborators might include those at the federal level, including the Interagency Council on Homelessness, the National Institute of Mental Health, and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

### **User Engagement Feedback for REI Systems**

REI Systems presented its [Grants Impact and Story Tool \(GIST\)](#), which visualizes the connection between federal spending and performance data. This tool is particularly helpful for charting the performance of federal grants on an award-level basis, as well as displaying the human story attached to each grant.

#### *Target Audiences*

GIST targets researchers, federal program managers, and engaged citizens, making it easy for them to call up detailed award-level data with minimal effort. Participants in the workshop agreed that these end-users will benefit from GIST, and suggested that others might benefit from the tool, including:

- Members of Congress, who could draw from GIST to improve their understanding of the grants that shape local-level politics in their state.
- The news media, who would benefit from GIST by holding lawmakers and federal agencies accountable for their use of taxpayer money.
- Grant applicants and nonprofit organizations seeking entry into government grants, who would better be able to understand patterns in how grants are disbursed and how they are applied.
- Taxpayers, who stand to benefit by learning precisely how their tax dollars are being used.

#### *Features*

Participants were particularly impressed by the easy navigation through GIST, and appreciated the simple and vibrant visual representation of its mission. Several suggestions arose concerning the features of the tool:

- User comments should be strictly monitored to ensure the quality of the website.
- The tech tool could go further in telling the human story associated with each award by linking federal awards with people-centric outcomes, such as number of individuals benefited.

- The tool should include a feature that would allow users to configure and download custom reports. For example, this would allow the tool to differentiate between programmatic outputs and larger program outcomes.
- The tool should develop and include a repository of data linkages that allow other users to link multiple datasets together.

#### *Federal Open Data*

Participants suggested that REI Systems should link the award-level with geospatial data that would allow end users to aggregate up to the region or state level, as well as to visualize the impact of awards across a map. A popular suggestion included the use of blockchain - a technology that allows for distributed verification and management of data that would not only improve the quality of data entered by the government, but would also help to verify machine-coded data.

#### *Scaling*

One suggestion by participants was that REI Systems focus on adding more programs and variety, which would increase the user base for the website. One potential path would be to work with additional government bureaus and offices, including incorporating a tool that would allow certified and registered agencies to input and authenticate their own data. This could alleviate the challenges posed by the varying formats of data, both digital and analog.

#### *Sustainability Planning*

Participants suggested adopting the [Federal Integrated Business Framework \(FIBF\)](#), which is an ongoing initiative led by a coalition of government agencies to create a scalable, sustainable data ecosystem including standardized data elements. REI could also seek to partner with advocacy groups - particularly those that serve as government spending watchdogs - that may be willing to contribute to the upkeep and further development of the tech tool. Alternatively, there might be interest from the Federal Government in hosting and providing funding for the tool, particularly given its theoretical linkages to recent efforts by the government to improve performance.

#### *Contributions & Collaborations*

REI should consider partnering with the Chief Data Officers at each of the federal agencies from which it sources its data. Additionally, REI should consider collaborating with the [Association of Government Accountants](#), an organization made up of members of the government's financial management sector, or the [Financial Assistance Committee on e-Government \(FACE\)](#) at the U.S. General Services Administration.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Federal Grants & Government Accountability User Engagement Workshop provided important and substantial feedback to the two participating tech teams in the 2018 Opportunity Project Sprints. By speaking with potential end users and user advocates, as well as experts in data and grants management, tech teams were able to solicit direct feedback based on their most recent iteration of their respective tech teams. This feedback will help them improve their products in preparation for the Demo Day that The Opportunity Project will host in February 2019, where all participating tech teams will publicly launch their final products.

In addition to the detailed feedback for eCivis and REI described above, the workshop produced several key takeaways that may apply to The Opportunity Project as a whole.

1. Tech tools should seek to address the **holistic narrative** that surrounds government grants and awards. Rather than focusing exclusively on technical details or numbers, the two tech teams successfully marshalled data to present clear, coherent stories about how federal grants shape human lives. eCivis focused on the impact of grants on homelessness across America, whereas REI Systems focused on linking federal government awards to local-level performance on the ground.
2. In order to be most effective, tech tools should seek to combine data from **multiple levels** - federal, state, and local - to allow the tools to provide more nuanced and detailed applications and reports. Furthermore, including more levels of data allows end-users to make meaningful comparisons within states, tracking the Federal Government's impact on issues of homeless and grant performance at the community level, which is where most organizations operate.
3. Tech teams should develop their tools with **transparency and portability** in mind. Workshop participants noted that tech tools should seek to make data customizable and downloadable for the end user. In addition, whenever efforts are expended to link datasets together, the resulting data linkage scripts should be housed in a repository that is available to the public.

The Opportunity Project seeks to partner with technology companies designing tools that address some of the most pressing issues facing the Federal Government and American people today. The workshop provided an opportunity for tech teams to solicit and receive direct feedback from a wide range of potential users, including members of the Federal Government, state and local governments, nonprofit organizations, and academic institutions. It provided tech teams with valuable insight from external sources that will help improve the tools.

The workshop not only provided vital feedback to two tech teams, but allowed participants to provide suggestions for the broader work of The Opportunity Project itself. For example, participants suggested that the Project should develop a unified certification and promotion program that would help market the tools and also ensure that the tools are actually being used by the government. The Opportunity Project may also consider integrating workshops like these as part of the iterative process that characterizes its agile approach to development.

## **ABOUT THE CENTER FOR OPEN DATA ENTERPRISE**

The Center for Open Data Enterprise (CODE) is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization based in Washington, DC. Our mission is to maximize the value of open government data as a public resource for economic growth, social good, and scientific research. Since it was founded in 2015, CODE has worked with the White House and numerous U.S. federal agencies to help them improve how they collect, publish, and apply data to better meet the needs of data users. More information is available at [www.odenterprise.org](http://www.odenterprise.org).