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A: I am the author of "Establishing a Grants Office" (Federal Funds Information for States, 6/11/14), consultant to multiple states establishing grants offices, and recently retired (3/1/14) as founder and director of the Maryland Governor's Grants Office.

B: One of the primary goals of a state grants office is to assist constituents--individuals, local governments, and non-profits--in identifying potential sources of revenue that can support their mission. The majority of federal grant funds received by each state first go through a state government entity. Most of the federal grant funds received by state government agencies are then passed along through various mechanisms (including, but not limited to official sub-recipient relationships) to other entities. If a constituent only reviews information on federal grants where they are directly eligible to apply, they will be missing out on the majority of available federal funds. Only a few states currently provide information on federal grant funds that they receive directly and how the money is then used. Even those states would like to verify the information that they produce on their own, but most states would just like to have this information available to share in a single document or location.

C. If a state does not compile and publish its own information on federal spending, constituents can use USASpending.gov. Very few people seem to actually use USASpending.gov (at least not twice), and those that do often find it unable to provide even the most basic (accurate) data on which grant funds arrive in which states or localities. With the end of the CFFR Census Reports, which previously were heavily used by states and local governments to track federal funding using this information to compare performance with peer entities, and with the wrap-up of ARRA, which had a heavily used and extremely useful website that allowed for easy tracking (though only for the approximately 15% of federal grant funds that, during peak implementation, were ARRA-related), the ability to track federal funds is actually lower today than has been the case for some time. With the passage of the DATA Act there is considerable hope that whatever new system develops will provide federal spending information in a transparent and easy-to-use manner that will not only return things to a level of usability that existed in the past, but hopefully makes improvements that, among other things, can assist states that do not currently track their own federal grant funds in a manner that is accessible to the public. The ARRA website should serve as an example of what is possible, and what the public now expects to see.

D. Federal spending information is used by states, local governments, non-profits, and individuals to identify resources that might be available to help support their mission and meet their policy goals. Beyond just seeing what new federal grant opportunities are available (now easily identified through Grants.gov) being able to research federal funding that has been received and spent by other entities is perhaps the single most useful research tool that is missing today.

E. DATA Act information would be used by states to ensure that their agencies are aware of existing funding resources, identifying funds used by peers in other states that differ from practices in their state. Similarly, DATA Act information would be used by local governments to provide information to state agencies on how funds are being used in other states, particularly if those are different than how funding is flowing in their states. This would also become substantive fodder for local elections; why is County X receiving funding from a particular program while we are not? DATA Act information will also be used by foundations to encourage and assist state agencies to seek and use federal funds in ways that have been demonstrated in other jurisdictions, potentially increasing the amount of overall funding that is leveraged in a particular community around a policy goal. DATA Act information will be used by individuals seeking employment as they can see which entities in their region, or in their chosen profession, have recently received federal grants or contracts. DATA Act information will be used by non-profits as part of their fund-raising strategies to encourage participation by organizations that have been successful in securing federal contracts in their community; this information will also help local job training programs adapt their curricula to current/future needs.

F. Implementation of the DATA Act should be prioritized around doing the things that are easiest to achieve first, building on these successes in future years. While everyone will have a wish list of what they would like to see accomplished, starting with the easy things will show immediate value, which then increases support for some of the tougher actions in future years. From a state government perspective, being able to see which federal grant funds currently come into their state, and being able to sort this information by state government agency (also local governments) and grant recipient should be an easy place to start. Sorting funds received in local jurisdictions (counties, not Congressional districts, which are often shaped in ways that make this information unusable--plus the district lines change every ten years) also has tremendous research value. This same information at the sub-recipient level would have great value, but presumably will be more difficult to compile (accurately) during initial implementation. Being able to see how much money remains to be drawn down from grants already awarded would also be valuable to state governments, though also possibly (?) difficult to implement during the early phases of website development. Links between federal funding and policy goals would also be nice, but without achieving early/easy reporting transparency on the basics--who gets the money and where are they located--jumping to this phase will be difficult and probably not an appropriate early priority.