



1616 P Street NW, Suite 210
Washington, DC 20036
202-232-1616 fax: 202-232-6680
www.goodjobsfirst.org

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Contact: Michelle Lee 202-232-1616 x 210

Report: States Are Making More Effective Use of Web to Inform Taxpayers About Economic Stimulus Spending

Washington, January 26, 2010—Some states are making dramatic improvements in websites designed to disseminate information about their share of the \$787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), but others are still failing to make effective use of online technology to educate taxpayers about the impact of economic stimulus spending.

This is the finding of *Show Us the Stimulus (Again)*, a report released today by Good Jobs First, a non-profit research center based in Washington, DC. It updates a similar study published by Good Jobs First last July.

The full text of the report as well as state-specific appendices can be found on the Good Jobs First website at www.goodjobsfirst.org/stimulusweb.cfm.

“Some states are making great strides in fulfilling President Obama’s promise that the Recovery Act would be carried out with an unprecedented level of transparency and accountability,” said Good Jobs First executive director Greg LeRoy. “Led by Maryland, which again receives the highest score, these states’ ARRA websites do a good job in helping taxpayers understand and evaluate the role of the Recovery Act in job creation and state fiscal relief.”

The Good Jobs First study examines the quality and quantity of disclosure by official state websites on the many different ways more than \$200 billion in ARRA funding is flowing through state governments to communities, organizations and individuals. It looks at the availability of information on spending programs as well as specific grants and contracts, with emphasis on data relating to jobs and the geographic distribution of spending within states. Using seven main criteria, each state is graded on a scale of 0 to 100.

“We are impressed by ‘Cinderella’ states such as Kentucky and Illinois, which were ranked at the bottom in our previous assessment but broke into the top tier in the new ranking,” said Philip Mattera, research director of Good Jobs First and principal author of both reports. “Numerous others have also improved their sites and are effectively incorporating the data states are helping to collect for the federal government’s Recovery.gov website. The state sites and Recovery.gov both have vital roles to play in helping the public evaluate the Recovery Act’s performance.”

Accountable Development & Smart Growth for Working Families

The states with the highest scores in the new report are: Maryland (87), Kentucky (85), Connecticut (80), Colorado (72), Minnesota (72), Wisconsin (72), California (69), Illinois (69), Oregon (67), Massachusetts (65), Georgia (64), West Virginia (64), New Mexico (62), New York (62), Pennsylvania (62), Montana (61) and Arkansas (60).

At the other end, there are 11 states with scores below 20, reflecting the absence of adequate data on ARRA programs or specific projects. Starting from the bottom, they are: North Dakota (5), District of Columbia (6), Missouri (10), Alaska (13), Vermont (13), Louisiana (16), Mississippi (17), Idaho (18), Oklahoma (18), Texas (18) and South Carolina (19).

Although changes in methodology make exact comparisons impossible, the following states experienced major changes in ranking from GJF's previous survey: Kentucky, which soared from 47th place to 2nd (an increase of 45 places); Illinois, which jumped from 50th to 7th (43 places); Minnesota, which climbed from 34th to 4th (30 places); and Utah, which rose from 50th to 24th (26 places).

Here are highlights of specific findings:

- Most states do a good job of providing information on the composition of their ARRA spending, both in broad program categories (energy, housing, transportation, etc.) and in narrower ones. Only the District of Columbia provides no program allocation information at all.
- Geographic breakdowns (by county or other division) are less common than summaries of spending by program category. Twenty-seven states provide geographic information, often with interactive maps.
- Only three states—Kentucky, Maryland and Wisconsin—juxtapose the geographic distribution of spending with patterns of economic distress or need within the state.
- Besides overall spending amounts, state residents may be interested to know where individual ARRA projects such as the repaving of a road or repair of a school building are taking place. More than half the states (28) now have some kind of project mapping feature on their ARRA site.
- Via maps or otherwise, 41 states provide one or more of the following types of detail on projects funded through ARRA grants and contracts: description, dollar amount, recipient name, status, and the text of the contract or grant award. Four states—Connecticut, Kentucky, Massachusetts and New Hampshire—have all five elements.
- Despite the ready availability of jobs data at Recovery.gov, 10 states still have none on their websites: Hawaii, Kansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, South Carolina and the District of Columbia. By contrast, 16 states have jobs data on individual projects as well as totals by program area and for the state as a whole.
- No state provides comprehensive data on wage or benefit levels in ARRA jobs or on the demographics of the workers in those jobs.
- Only five states—Connecticut, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Mississippi and New Hampshire—provide the full texts of at least some ARRA contract awards.

- No state reports the share of ARRA contracts going to minority, women-owned or other disadvantaged business enterprises, though Pennsylvania is expected to begin doing so soon.

Based on our findings, Good Jobs First offers the following recommendations:

- Put a summary of key information about ARRA spending at the top of the home page of the site. A graphic showing the main spending flows goes a long way in helping the average user begin to see what the Recovery Act is all about. There should be clear links to pages with details about the various specific programs.
- Provide a map or table showing how overall ARRA spending and the amounts in key categories are being distributed among counties (or other geographic division) around the state.
- Also show how the spending is distributed across the state in comparison to patterns of economic distress such as local unemployment and foreclosure rates.
- Along with information on spending streams, provide details on individual projects— such as a particular transit improvement or weatherization effort— funded by an ARRA grant or contract. These details should include a description of the project, the dollar amount, the name of the recipient entity, the status of the project, and the number of jobs generated by the project, along with the text of the contract or grant award.
- Where possible, display the location of the projects on maps. Interactive displays that allow one to drill down for details are better than static maps.

“At a time of intense public concern about the effectiveness of government spending designed to mitigate the economic crisis, states should be maximizing their use of online tools,” Mattera said.

Good Jobs First co-chairs the [Coalition for An Accountable Recovery](http://www.coalitionforanaccountablerecovery.org) (www.coalitionforanaccountablerecovery.org), which works at the federal level. It also coordinates States for a Transparent and Accountable Recovery, or [STAR Coalition](http://www.accountablerecovery.org) (www.accountablerecovery.org), which works with state-level organizations.