

Open Government Community Challenges

As you well know, each open government plan is required to include a “flagship initiative,” a new transparency, participation, or collaboration initiative that the agency is implementing or will implement before the next update. This creates a great opportunity for multiple agencies to work together to address problems that are keeping all or multiple agencies from being more transparent. For example, in its last plan, the Environmental Protection Agency described its collaboration with the Department of Commerce, the National Archives and Records Administration, and others to create FOIAonline, a multi-agency FOIA portal that makes it easier for requesters to make and track requests.

Below are brief descriptions of other areas where members of the open government community think similar collaboration could help agencies become more open, and, hopefully, lead to new open systems and software that could be used more broadly. Members of the open government community are eager both to acknowledge agencies for taking on these challenges, and to work with them to address these complicated issues.

Making ethics information available in a meaningful way

Releasing ethics information helps the public understand who is attempting to influence its decisions and to improving public trust. Each agency collects a variety of information related to ethics, including lobbying information, financial disclosure forms, conflict of interest forms and waivers, contractor debarment information, and so on. Unfortunately, even when this information is available, it is frequently not in useful format or available in bulk. The information is also not as valuable because of a lack of unique identifiers.

Creating online forms that make disclosure easy

We recognize that many agencies still have paper-based systems to collect information. Even if the collection is in an electronic format, many of the systems that keep the information make it hard to disclose any of it to the public. Consistent with OMB’s new data policy, we need to move towards a situation where the default is both that data is collected electronically, and forms allow for the easy flow of information into databases. These systems should also be built so that it is easy to disclose any information that does not require protection.

Releasing an enterprise data inventory

In accordance with the Administration’s new open data policy, agencies have been required to create and maintain an enterprise data inventory and to post a list of any datasets that are publicly available or can easily be made publicly available. However, without seeing the entire enterprise data inventories, it is impossible for the public to know what data is being collected and stored by the government and to debate whether or not that data should be made public.

Increased disclosure of agency spending information

Agencies hold a great deal of information that would help the public better understand how the government uses taxpayer dollars. Issues for a possible pilot program to address include posting the text of contracts, grants, work orders, etc. For foreign assistance information, agencies are encouraged to develop their own implementation scheduled to define specific steps they will take to make sure the aid data they are publishing to the International Aid Transparency Initiative is timely, comprehensive, accessible and comparable and includes information on projects, performance (results and evaluations) and forward flows.