

Show Us the Money: How Online Databases Can Help Taxpayers Sort Out State Spending

NTU Issue Brief # 161

By Christopher Biggs and Kristina Rasmussen

March 23, 2007

The ongoing struggle to bring greater clarity to government spending marked a huge victory when President George W. Bush signed the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act into law in September 2006. This bipartisan legislation requires that all federal grant and contract funding data appear in a searchable website to be completed in 2009. Given that Washington issues hundreds of billions of dollars to various entities every year, it's a great stride forward that taxpayers will now have an easy-to-use tool to help make sense of where and why their money is parceled out.

Of course, state and local governments also disburse large amounts of grants and contracts, along with other outlays such as bond funding and regular appropriations. Alas, problems of inaccessibility and unwieldiness often plague the typical taxpayer's efforts to better understand spending that takes place closer to home. To their credit, a few states have put up limited versions of spending databases on the Internet, but far more have piecemeal information scattered throughout the websites of various agencies. In Minnesota, the Legislative Auditor recently reported that while the state awarded almost \$1 billion in grants to approximately 1,900 nonprofit entities in 2005, "the state's approach to managing grants to nonprofit organizations is fragmented and inconsistent, and does not provide adequate accountability." Unfortunately, this is not an isolated case. More often than not, existing state web databases are geared toward advertising funding or contracting opportunities, not for oversight. While this decentralized arrangement might benefit researchers and contractors, most citizens are still waiting for a one-stop web page that will allow them to easily access state spending information.

No state has fully emulated the federal concept of a single searchable grant and contract database, but government leaders are gradually picking up on the need for more public transparency when it comes to tracking – and evaluating – the spending of taxpayer dollars. As Connecticut State Comptroller Nancy Wyman describes it, what started as an internal staff project to monitor state bond allocations turned into something of greater use:

As the design and implementation phases progressed, I decided the public should have access to this information as well. The result is this database, which ... is part of my ongoing initiative to open the state's books to citizens, public advocates, academics and the media in order to enhance their important oversight role in the government's system of checks and balances.

Thankfully for taxpayers, more state officials are getting into the act. Indiana's Governor signed an executive order to create a contract database, and lawmakers in at least eight states (Colorado, Hawaii, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, Minnesota, Oklahoma, and Tennessee) have introduced legislation

to create grant and contract websites similar to the federal version. By acting now, state leaders have the opportunity to help make “e-government” a powerful implement for taxpayers instead of a privilege often reserved for the political elite.

This Issue Brief provides a state-by-state overview of some of the existing Internet databases for grants, contracts[†], bond allocations, and regular budget appropriations. Taxpayers looking for more information on state spending should visit these websites; we’ve starred (*) exemplary sites for officials seeking to create or improve databases in their states.

Alaska

Grants: Community Funding Database

http://www.commerce.state.ak.us/dca/commdb/CF_Grants.htm

Alaska’s Community Funding Database allows users to search state grants and revenue sharing funds given to Alaskan cities and towns. The database provides information on the year, grant type, recipient, project description and status, award amount, disbursement information, and staff contact for each entry.

Capital Funding: Capital Projects Database

http://www.commerce.state.ak.us/dca/commdb/CF_RAPIDS.htm

Alaska’s Capital Funding Database contains descriptions, funding levels, and status for over 16,000 capital projects in Alaska communities.

Arizona

Contracts: SPIRIT Automated eProcurement System

<https://www.spirit.az.gov/>

Arizona’s SPIRIT system provides a database of statewide contracts for state agencies and over 400 colleges and universities, counties, cities, school districts, and qualified not-for-profit organizations. Users can view bids as well as closed contracts and pending solicitations.

Connecticut

Bonds: Connecticut Bond Allocation Database*

<http://www.osc.state.ct.us/finance/>

This database tracks bond fund allocations, which includes billions in state spending that is financed through borrowing. Each record contains the following information: the date of authorization for the project funding, the primary recipient or beneficiary of the funds, the primary use of the funds, the specific program category under which the project falls, the total amount of funding authorized, and a brief description of the project. The database includes project allocations approved by the State Bond Commission from January 1995 through the present.

[†] Contract sites that served mostly procurement and bidding purposes were excluded.

Illinois

Contracts: Illinois Contract Database

<http://www.wh1.ioc.state.il.us/QuickTake/Contracts/index.cfm>

Illinois' Comptroller's Office maintains a database of all contracts issued by the state. The contracts are organized by vendor, and inquiries can be made by name or by type of service provided. Along with the total amount expended to each vendor, more detailed searches reveal the yearly amount of money allotted since fiscal year 2003 and which agency contracted with the vendor.

Budgets: Appropriation Inquiries Database

<http://www.wh1.ioc.state.il.us/Expert/Appr/AIControl.cfm?Params=None>

Illinois operates a detailed appropriations database going back to fiscal year 2005 that allows searches for budget expenditures by fund source, agency, and fiscal year. Summary results are provided by category, which then link to detailed appropriation and expenditure amounts.

Indiana

Contracts: Indiana Contract Listing*

<http://www.in.gov/idoa/proc/active.html>

This online database lists all active professional services contracts and leases (including grants) issued by the state. Typical information displayed includes the agency providing the contract, a contract description, and the contract amount. Active contracts can be explored by keyword through a search function. Those active contracts issued before July 1, 2006, can be viewed collectively through Microsoft Excel or HTML.

Kansas

Contracts: Procurement Contracts List

<http://www.da.ks.gov/purch/Contracts/Contract.asp>

This list provides information on current contracts and offers information on the agency that offered the contract, the length of time the contract is in effect, the entity awarded the contract, and the price the state will pay for goods or services provided.

Louisiana

Grants: Louisiana Infrastructure Information Center

<http://wwwprodapp.doa.louisiana.gov/infra/>

The Louisiana Infrastructure Information Center is a database of specific funding projects (such as transportation and safety grants) under review or approved by the state. The database provides information regarding the status and cost of grants requested by local governments.

Maryland

Contracts: Department of Budget and Management Contract Library

<http://www.dbm.maryland.gov/>

Maryland's Contract Library features a repository of information for contracts awarded by the Department of Budget and Management. Contracts are sorted into categories named Employee Benefits, Information Technology, and Services. Entries provide a summary of what the contract is for, who manages the contract, and starting/ending dates. In some cases users can access PDF copies of the original contract agreements.

Nebraska

Budgets: Public Accounts State and Local Budget Databases*

http://www.auditors.state.ne.us/index_html?page=content/political_subdivisions.html

The Auditor of Public Accounts provides audit and budget databases for every municipality, county, and school district within the state dating back to fiscal year 2000. The financial data revealed in an audit search includes the type of subdivision (municipality, county, or school district), name of subdivision, fiscal year, revenue received, expenditures, and fund balance. The budget search data provides even more detail.

North Carolina

Grants: State Auditor Grant Reporting*

<http://www.ncauditor.net/WebProject/>

North Carolina's Office of the State Auditor provides residents with some of the most in-depth grant information in the nation. Thanks to an increase in reporting requirements that became effective in 2005, all nongovernmental entities receiving state or federal "pass-through" grants must complete reports on how the funds were used (previously, organizations receiving less than \$15,000 did not have reporting requirements).

Upon receipt of this information, the State Auditor issues a yearly report with grant summaries by fund source, agency, county, and service type. In fiscal year 2006, North Carolina gave private organizations \$606 million in grants, yet over a quarter of all grants had none of the reports required of beneficiaries on how the grant money was used. In order to spur compliance, the Auditor's office publishes a monthly reporting noncompliance list.

While the information currently focuses on private-sector grants, the Auditor's office is working with the Local Government Commission to establish a similar report for grant funds going from the state to local governments.

North Dakota

Contracts: State Procurement Online Agency Center

<http://www.nd.gov/spo/agency/contracts/>

The State Procurement Office manages a list of current state contracts, along with their expiration dates, contractor information, and supplemental pricing schedules.

Ohio

Contracts: State of Ohio Procurement Website

<http://www.procure.ohio.gov/proc/index.asp>

The State Procurement Website displays supplies and services contract information. The site allows searches for different types of current contracts using a number of different criteria, including keyword, vendor name, and contract type.

Utah

Contracts: State Cooperative Contract Search

<http://www.purchasing.state.ut.us/main/>

Viewers can access information on every current contract, including a brief description, the purchasing agent, the expiration date, the vendor, and a price schedule for all possible products that may be purchased. Users can search by keyword, vendor, contract number, and purchasing agent.

Virginia

Contracts: eVA

<http://dps.dgs.virginia.gov/DPS/contracts/contracts.asp>

The Department of General Services provides information on state contracts through its electronic commerce initiative, eVa. Users can download an entire list or search according to description and/or buyer.

Washington

Contracts: Advanced Contract Search

<http://www.ga.wa.gov/index.html>

The Department of General Administration furnishes details on contracts awarded by the state. Users can look up current and recently expired (within the last 90 days) contracts by keyword and contract number. Results provide current contract information along with detailed contract history (which can include performance reviews, pricing information, and renewal discussions).

About the Authors

Christopher Biggs is Associate Policy Analyst and Kristina Rasmussen is Senior Government Affairs Manager for the National Taxpayers Union, a non-profit, non-partisan organization founded in 1969 to work for lower taxes, smaller government, and economic freedom at all levels. For further information, visit www.ntu.org.