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REPORT TO THE CONGRESS

General Accounting Office
Assistance To The Congress In
Improving Access And Usefulness
To The Congress Of Fiscal,
Budgetary, And Program-Related
Information B-115398

BY THE COMPTROLLER GENERAL
OF THE UNITED STATES

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SEPT. 20, 1974



COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

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U To the Speaker of the House of Representatives
and the President pro tempore of the Senate

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This is our first report submitted to the Congress in accordance with section 202(e) of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970, as amended by Title VIII of the Congressional Budget Act of 1974, Public Law 93-344, approved July 1, 1974. This section requires us to report to the Congress annually on the progress and results of our continuing program to enhance the usefulness of fiscal, budgetary, and program-related information to congressional users.

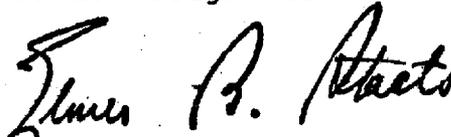
In section 201(e) of Public Law 93-344, the Congress provided specifically for coordination of the operations of the Congressional Budget Office and the General Accounting Office, with a view to most effectively using the information, services, and capabilities of each. Many provisions of Public Law 93-344 require coordination and cooperation with other legislative and executive agencies and with State and local governments. In recognition of the importance of our work with these many diverse organizations, Assistant Comptroller General Phillip S. Hughes has been assigned the responsibility for developing and coordinating the activities involved in meeting our responsibilities under this law. He will provide liaison between the General Accounting Office and the congressional committees, Congressional Budget Office, Department of the Treasury, and the Office of Management and Budget. An early task will be the development of joint working plans and agreements on tasks and staffing among these various organizations.

We strongly supported and participated in the development of the congressional budget legislation. As the legislation developed we began planning and preparing for the implementation of our new responsibilities. Now we have begun to substantially expand our staff capabilities. In addition to enlarging our staff involved in identifying and addressing the fiscal, budgetary and program-related information requirements, we are creating a new staff unit to prepare program

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budget analyses to support the Congress. Also, we will continue to increase the emphasis on the evaluation of program results, throughout the GAO. Our central staff with technical capability in the evaluation area will be strengthened to (1) develop methods for review and evaluation of program results, and (2) assist the Congress in developing legislative requirements for evaluation and assessing evaluation studies prepared by Federal agencies.

Copies of this report are being sent to the Director, Office of Management and Budget, and to the Secretary of the Treasury. Copies will be sent to the Director of the Congressional Budget Office when he is designated.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "James B. Stacks". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J".

Comptroller General
of the United States

GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
ASSISTANCE TO THE CONGRESS IN IMPROVING ACCESS AND
USEFULNESS TO THE CONGRESS OF FISCAL, BUDGETARY,
AND PROGRAM-RELATED INFORMATION

Section 202(e) of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970, as amended by the Congressional Budget Act of 1974, Public Law 93-344, approved July 12, 1974, requires the Comptroller General to:

- Identify and specify information needs of the committees and Members of Congress and to establish the relationship of the needs to the existing reporting requirements and the extent to which executive branch reporting presently meets the identified needs.
- Monitor the various recurring reporting requirements and make recommendations for changes and improvements in reporting.
- Develop and maintain the standard terminology, definitions, classifications, and codes for fiscal, budgetary, and program-related data to be used in reporting to the Congress.

Since less than 3 months have passed since we were assigned primary responsibility for activities to be covered by this report, our plans for implementing some of these requirements are still being formulated. Accordingly, we are reporting primarily on (1) the work we have done under the original provisions of section 202 of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 and at the specific request of committee chairmen and (2) the planning we have done in anticipation of enactment of the Congressional Budget Act. Also included are comments on other related work not specifically required in this report, including what we are doing to assist the Congress in securing and using fiscal, budgetary, and program-related information.

In the past year, we have been conducting several pilot and cooperative projects under the original requirements of the 1970 Act and at the request of committee chairmen. Through these efforts we have developed the cooperative relationships and working procedures with officials of the congressional committees, Office of Management and Budget (OMB), Department of the Treasury, and other executive agencies to carry out these joint and cooperative projects.

INFORMATION NEEDS

We conducted a survey of 258 persons, representing 44 committees and 69 Members of Congress in 1971 and 1972, to identify and specify the general scope and nature of congressional fiscal, budgetary, and program-related information needs. The summary results of our analysis and evaluation were reported to the Congress and the executive branch on November 10, 1972. Appendix I is a digest of the report.

Subsequent to our survey and report, OMB and the Department of the Treasury created a team to review congressional needs and to develop plans for meeting them. The team reviewed our survey data to identify specific needs they could begin addressing. They identified 60 specific needs and in March 1974 issued a plan for addressing these needs. We have been working cooperatively with the team to meet these needs. Appendix II is a statement summarizing executive branch progress. To aid GAO and the executive branch in matching congressional needs and executive reporting requirements and capabilities, GAO and the team have developed a congressional needs matrix. This matrix will be used to classify the congressional needs identified and specified by GAO and to classify executive information systems and reporting capabilities identified by the team. The needs and reporting capabilities will be described in terms of the following characteristics.

- Type of program, such as formula grant, direct benefits to individuals, loans and guarantees, etc.
- Type of information, including descriptive, management, or special analysis.
- Time period covered, including prior year, current year, budget year, and future years.

Each congressional information need will be matched with existing executive reports and reporting capabilities to assist us in identifying the most cost-effective way of meeting the congressional information need. In this work over the next year, we also intend to update our general statement of the scope and nature of congressional fiscal, budgetary, and program-related information to reflect additional understanding gained in working with congressional committees over the past 3 years, and the additional information needs of the budget committees and the Congressional Budget Office.

RECURRING REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

Under Public Law 93-344 the Comptroller General is now required to continuously monitor the various recurring reporting requirements, identify ways of enhancing their usefulness, eliminate duplication or unneeded reporting, and assess existing reporting in relationship to defined congressional needs.

CR + R At the specific request of the Chairman of the House Committee on Government Operations, we conducted an evaluation of the usefulness of reports submitted to the Congress by executive departments and agencies with the recipient congressional committees. By working with the recipient committees we identified 54 reports that could be eliminated, 30 of which were required by law. Appendix III is a digest of our report. The House Committee on Government Operations sponsored House bill 14718 to eliminate these statutory reporting requirements, and it passed the House on August 5, 1974.

In our work for this Committee we developed the basic inventory of about 750 required recurring report to the Congress and established working relationships with the recipient committees and reporting executive agencies. Therefore, we are able to continue this work without delay under our new responsibility and have already identified about 100 reports to begin reviewing with congressional users in the next few months.

STANDARD CLASSIFICATIONS

We have been working with the House Committee on Appropriations to develop ways of presenting budget and program data which will enable the Congress to effectively (1) track Federal programs from year to year, (2) identify similar or duplicative programs across account and agency lines, and (3) evaluate the results of such programs. We have completed initial documentation on all 49 appropriation accounts of the Department of Housing and Urban Development and on 8 housing accounts of the Department of Agriculture. Illustration I shows such a program-oriented classification structure developed in this work. Through this pilot effort we have developed the methodology for preparing detailed definitions of such congressional information requirements.

Our approach has been to analyze the information presented in the budget appendix, agency budget justification, budget hearings, and other material; talk with committee staff members; and then develop program definitions

and required information elements about the program. This participative approach has permitted us to develop classification structures at the lower levels, e.g., the agency budget justifications. We are also identifying the appropriate summary level classifications--functions, subfunctions, and accounts--for presentation in the President's budget and other reports, and we expect to be devoting more attention to these higher level classifications with the budget committees and the Congressional Budget Office. To meet this requirement, we are now using the experience gained in our pilot work, to address changes needed in the way budget data is structured and reported to the Congress.

Functions and subfunctions

GAO and representatives of OMB have reviewed and suggested changes in the functional and subfunctional classification, and certain changes have been agreed upon with the appropriate committees for use in the fiscal year 1976 budget. However, we all agreed that the new budget committees will be primary users of this level of data and that we will review these classifications with them before the preparation of the fiscal year 1977 budget.

Revenues and receipts

We are also reviewing the classifications used for various non-tax receipts such as offsetting receipts or miscellaneous receipts. We expect to make recommendations for improvement in the consistency and meaningfulness of the way these data are presented to the Congress.

Programs and accounts

As discussed above, we are completing a pilot project on program and account classifications for housing programs. This work is being extended to research and development programs and veterans programs and will be extended to other subjects as staff is recruited and trained to develop these program-oriented classifications and reporting requirements.

Illustration I

Program-Oriented Classification Structure

- A. Function
 - I. Subfunction
 - A. Category
 - 1. Area
 - a. Program

-
- A. Community Development and Housing
 - I. Research--Community Development and Housing
 - A. Housing research
 - 1. Increasing opportunities
 - a. Direct cash assistance
 - b. Equal opportunity/fair housing research
 - c. Special user requirements
 - 2. Improving safety and standards
 - a. Fire safety
 - b. Lead-based paint hazard reduction
 - c. Disaster housing research
 - d. Residential safety
 - 3. Improving construction, delivery and costs
 - a. Applying new technology
 - b. Conserving materials and energy
 - c. Acquisition costs
 - 4. Improving management and maintenance
 - a. Housing management improvement
 - b. National center for housing management
 - B. Community development research
 - 1. Neighborhood preservation and revitalization
 - a. Preservation analysis and demonstration
 - b. Revitalization of blighted neighborhoods
 - c. Disposition of acquired properties research
 - 2. Environmental improvement and resource conservation
 - a. Effects of development on the environment

- b. Utility and energy systems
 - c. Physical planning and design
 - 3. Community development and growth
 - a. National and community growth research
 - b. New communities research
- C. State and local government research
 - 1. Improving capabilities
 - a. Human resources
 - b. Management tools
 - c. Taxation mechanisms
 - d. Land use control techniques
 - e. Organizational structures
 - 2. Improving public services
 - a. Delivery methods
 - b. Operating and information systems

Terminology

Many Federal organizations have published glossaries or include terms and definitions in their published directories, including OMB, Treasury, and GAO. In addition, the Joint Financial Management Improvement Program has project underway for identifying and cataloging the financial management terms in use. Our initial task will be to identify and assess various existing glossaries and terminologies to be incorporated into the standard terminology we develop for use in reporting to the Congress.

ASSISTANCE TO THE CONGRESS IN SECURING AND USING INFORMATION

Meeting congressional needs for information is substantially a "people" problem rather than a computer or mechanical problem. We believe these needs can only be met with knowledgeable people who can help to interpret needs and assist in framing questions properly as well as interpreting responses for the congressional users.

We are building and improving our capabilities and operating procedures to provide more effective service to the Congress. For example:

- To improve our response time, we have provided for special handling of information requests not requiring audit, in 20 days or less. Many requests from individual Members are being handled in this manner. To provide information sooner than we can in formal reports, we are also using informal briefings of congressional Members and staffs. Another effort to speed up our response time is to more thoroughly define the requestor's problem and needs before we start work.

--In the future, we intend to focus more on the broader, longer range information needs of the Congress, furnishing more information on emerging issues of national concern and program effectiveness, both at congressional request and on our own initiative.

--We intend to make greater use of multidisciplined project teams to give us greater flexibility to draw together the staff members having the appropriate talents and interests, regardless of where they are based.

Also, to assist the Congress in securing and using information, the Comptroller General is required to develop inventories and directories of sources of information described earlier and to develop, with the Congressional Budget Office, the capability for maintaining central files of data needed to meet recurring congressional needs. We expect the inventories and directories of information sources and the central files to become basic supporting tools of the people who will be implementing the new congressional budget control procedures.

To begin development of the inventories and directories, we have collected, indexed and abstracted selected recurring agency reports to the Congress. We expect to complete a pilot directory of these reports and circulate it for comments and reactions during the latter part of 1974. In addition, we are reviewing selected nonrecurring Federal program evaluation reports for inclusion in a directory for congressional use.

To gain an understanding of the probable requirements for central files of fiscal, budgetary, and program-related data and to determine the availability of such data we have been working with several congressional committees and executive agencies. In the future, we will work with the Congressional Budget Office also.

--We have documented existing procedures for tracking congressional action on budget requests--the scorekeeping process--with the staffs of the House Committee on Appropriations and the Joint Committee on Reduction of Federal Expenditures, and we have identified ways of automating the production of the scorekeeping tables. Scorekeeping is now a responsibility of the Congressional Budget Office. We believe scorekeeping will have to be expanded to meet the new congressional budget procedures.

--The OMB-Treasury team has identified the central sources of fiscal, budgetary, and program-related data as major information sources for meeting congressional needs. We have made some experimental use over the past year of the Federal budget (documents and computer tapes), Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance, Regional Grant Information System, and the Federal Outlays Report to address congressional information needs.

Our next steps to improve the accessibility of data to the Congress will involve exploring ways of making the various information systems more uniform so data can be acquired and used by the Congress more easily. We have begun discussions with the OMB-Treasury team on the development of a basic systems concept for standardizing the various central information system involved in monitoring and reporting data on the status of the budget from formulation through execution. We are concentrating on the need for sufficient standardization among the major central systems to allow direct data interchange and consolidation of data from these systems as needed. For example, we want to be able to more easily combine budget request data, congressional action data, and budget execution data on Federal programs and Federal functions.

At the same time, we are developing other potential requirements for the central files of data needed to meet recurring congressional needs. For example, we have had recurring requests for data on Federal grant programs and geographic distribution of budget and program data. We have been using data provided by OMB from the Catalog of Domestic Assistance and the Federal Outlays systems for the past year on a pilot basis to gain experience in their uses. In addition, we are participating in interagency task groups who are exploring ways of improving these systems to meet congressional and executive needs.

In summary, we have done considerable planning and work under the original requirements of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 and believe we are in a good position to carryout our new responsibilities.

COMPTROLLER GENERAL'S
REPORT TO THE CONGRESS

BUDGETARY AND FISCAL
INFORMATION NEEDS OF THE CONGRESS
B-115398

D I G E S T

WHY THE SURVEY WAS MADE

The Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 requires the Office of Management and Budget and the Department of the Treasury to develop standard classifications of programs, activities, receipts, and expenditures of Federal agencies and a standardized information and data processing system for budgetary and fiscal data.

The Comptroller General is required to insure that the interests and needs of the Congress are taken into consideration in the establishment and operation of the information system.

To ascertain the kinds of information the Congress needs, the General Accounting Office (GAO) conducted a survey of 258 persons representing 44 committees and 69 members of Congress.

The results of the survey were described in a report which was sent to all committees and members of Congress on February 17, 1972, for their review and comment.

This is a revised report incorporating the additional needs identified by committees and members of Congress.

RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

The Congress needs to easily obtain information on:

- Federal programs and projects: Basic financial information, such as on budget requests, authorizations, appropriations, obligations, expenditures, and information essential to the assessment of results and impacts.
- Federal fiscal policies: Socio-economic information and national estimates, such as gross national product, consumer income, and cost-of-living indices; Federal subsidy programs; tax expenditures; and foreign currency holdings; and other information indicating impact.
- Federal financial actions affecting States and political subdivisions: Information on revenues, outlays, domestic assistance programs, and other information essential to the assessment of results and impacts related to States and their political subdivisions.
- Classification structures for aggregating budgetary and fiscal information: The above categories

NOV. 10, 1972

APPENDIX I

of financial information must be aggregated, accumulated, or summarized by such congressional user patterns as authorizing and appropriating legislation, committee jurisdictions, responsible Federal organizations, program objectives or subject areas, political subdivisions, rural and urban areas, and target groups.

The Congress needs a wide range of reporting capabilities, ranging from annual reporting to immediate access through computer terminals. The Congress also needs to be able to identify and reach primary sources of information, as well as sources of additional pertinent information. The Congress needs further a readily accessible analytical capability.

GAO PLANS

GAO has initiated further interviews of congressional staffs regarding their specific data requirements within the broad areas of needs defined so far. These requirements will be systematically documented and communicated to the executive branch for their use in system development or modification. GAO will maintain close contact with the committees and the execu-

tive branch during the systems development or modification.

GAO recognizes that, because the scope of the information needs is very broad, the development of standard classifications and a standard information and data processing system to serve the executive and legislative branches is a major, long-term project and requires the cooperation and coordination of all elements of the Federal Government. Accordingly GAO has created a permanent, full-time staff that will continue until the system is functioning satisfactorily.

MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION BY THE CONGRESS

Copies of this report are being sent to all committees and members of Congress

- to inform them of GAO's description of information needs and
- to advise them of GAO plans for continuing work with the committees and members to document their detailed data requirements for each of the general information needs described in this report.

PROGRESS OF THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH

In addressing the information requirements of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970, the executive branch established a task team consisting of OMB, Treasury, and agency employees. This team built upon the needs identified in GAO's 1971 and 1972 interviews.

The team completed a preliminary analysis on October 19, 1973, and released a final Plan for Addressing Congressional Information Needs on March 7, 1974, which listed 18 categories of congressional needs, specified actions planned to further define them, and provided detailed schedules for meeting them. The 18 categories of needs are

- Budget document content
- Budget and fiscal status information
- Program-oriented information
- Tax information
- Fiscal policy information
- Foreign currency information
- Federal employment information
- Catalog of Federal domestic assistance
- Program eligibility and beneficiary information
- Federal grant information
- Federal subsidy program information
- Geographic distribution of budget and program data
- Foreign affairs information
- Social and economic information
- Analysis of Federal programs
- Agency and program information contacts
- Definition of terms
- Federal loan guarantee information.

As the executive branch has gained a clear understanding of congressional information needs, it has become increasingly apparent that many of OMB and Treasury systems will be the source of much of the needed information.

Pilot test of OMB information systems

Special computer programs have been developed to provide interested committees with reports they have requested. Contractual arrangements between OMB and the House Committee on Administration are being developed to aid the staff of the House Information System in pilot-testing the OMB systems to support particular reporting requirements of the House Committee on Appropriations.

APPENDIX II

Data and systems access

OMB has provided the staffs of several legislative units, including the House Committee on Appropriations, House Information System, GAO, Government Printing Office, and other legislative branch representatives, with basic data files, operating programs, and system and user documentation as well as special reports on the OMB budget preparation and status systems, Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance system, legislative tracking system, and OMB's computer tape library system.

To assist the legislative branch in using these systems and files, OMB and Treasury personnel have conducted training sessions, briefings, and many meetings and are continuing to provide such technical assistance and consultation.

Budget tape

This year OMB expedited the availability of the fiscal year 1975 computer version of the budget to facilitate the analysis being made by various units of the Congress, including the House Committee on Appropriations.

Functional classification

OMB and GAO have been cooperating closely in making changes to the budget functional classification structure, insuring that the structure being developed is responsive to legislative needs.

Budget status systems

OMB and Treasury are developing a basic systems concept to present to GAO for review with potential congressional users. The envisioned systems would provide the Congress with periodic reports on the status of the budget from formulation through execution.

Other information areas

Other major areas of congressional interest on which the executive branch is focusing and working with GAO include

- Federal subsidy information
- Geographic distribution of budget and program data

Foreign currency information
Federal grant information
Foreign affairs information
Social and economic data.

Full time executive coordination team

In June 1973 the executive branch established and has since maintained a full-time task team composed of personnel from OMB, Treasury, and the agencies. The team's sole responsibility is to address the problems of congressional information needs. This coordinative unit has aided executive branch work significantly by resolving issues and identifying sources for meeting congressional needs.

The executive branch will report its plans and accomplishments to the Congress on or before March 1, 1975.

APPENDIX III

COMPTROLLER GENERAL'S REPORT
TO THE COMMITTEE ON
GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

USEFULNESS TO THE CONGRESS OF
REPORTS SUBMITTED BY THE EXECUTIVE
BRANCH B-115398

D I G E S T

WHY THE REVIEW WAS MADE

The Chairman of the House Committee on Government Operations requested GAO to study and recommend improvements in or elimination of the recurring reports submitted to the Congress by executive departments and agencies.

GAO discussed reports identified by departments and agencies with 36 congressional committees and recorded their suggestions for modifying or eliminating reports.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The committees identified 54 reports they considered could be eliminated; 30 of these are required by law; 24 are nonstatutory. Unverified yearly preparation costs provided by the agencies for 39 reports totaled about \$222,000; cost information was not provided for 15 reports.

The committees suggested improvements for 25 reports, including changes in frequency of submission of 8, eliminating portions of 5, consolidating 11 reports into 5, and changing the format of 1.

GAO recorded different evaluations by committees for 102 reports; 79 concerned elimination and 23 involved improvements. GAO plans to contact the committees to reconcile the differences.

Legislation has been introduced to assign to GAO the responsibility for monitoring congressional reporting requirements (H.R. 9002, H.R. 9091, and S. 2049).

MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION BY THE COMMITTEE

Action should be taken to carry out report improvements and eliminations to which all recipients agreed. GAO recommends that the Committee introduce legislation to make the necessary changes to laws identified in appendix IV. Committee chairmen have been asked to notify preparing agencies to eliminate nonstatutory report requirements.

If House bills 9002, 9091, or Senate bill 2049 requiring GAO to monitor reporting requirements of the Congress are not enacted into law, GAO believes the Committee may wish to propose that a reports management function be established within the Congress itself.

OCT. 26, 1973

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