

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-72](#), a report to congressional addressees

Why GAO Did This Study

Open data can foster accountability and public trust by providing citizens with information on government activities and their outcomes. It can also promote private sector innovation. The DATA Act requires that the federal government collect and present open data on roughly \$4 trillion in annual federal spending. The DATA Act also includes a provision requiring GAO to review its implementation.

This report (1) identifies key practices for transparently reporting government data; and (2) evaluates the extent to which USAspending.gov is consistent with those key practices and other requirements. GAO developed the key practices by systematically evaluating and synthesizing information from literature on open data, as well as interviews with open data experts and good governance groups. GAO used these key practices as well as existing federal website standards and applicable laws to evaluate USAspending.gov.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations including that Treasury (1) establish a process to ensure that additions to USAspending.gov meet security requirements, (2) provide structured metadata and licensing information on the website, and (3) ensure that users can search for awards by city and program source as required by law. Treasury agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-19-72](#). For more information, contact Triana McNeil (202) 512-6806 or McNeilT@gao.gov

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OPEN DATA

Treasury Could Better Align USAspending.gov with Key Practices and Search Requirements

What GAO Found

GAO identified five key practices for transparently reporting government data, as well as actions to implement each practice. These key practices and actions can assist managers of open government data programs in the transparent presentation of their data. Open data are information that can be freely used, modified, or shared by anyone for any purpose.

USAspending.gov aligns with several key practices. However, the Department of the Treasury (Treasury) has not fully aligned the website with all of the key practices, the requirements of the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act of 2006 (FFATA), and Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidance (see table.) FFATA, as amended by the Digital Accountability and Transparency Act of 2014 (DATA Act), directed Treasury to develop and manage USAspending.gov to provide detailed information on federal spending.

USAspending.gov Alignment with Key Practices and Other Requirements

Key practices	USAspending.gov characteristics
 <p>Provide free and unrestricted data</p>	<p>Consistent with this key practice, USAspending.gov, as a general matter, provides unrestricted data to the public and Treasury has made all the data available for free. In the course of its work, GAO found that users could only download the complete database after registering for an account with a third-party database host and incurring a charge. In July 2018, in response to GAO's inquiries, Treasury provided an option for users to download the entire database for free without creating an account.</p>
 <p>Engage with users</p>	<p>Consistent with this key practice, Treasury conducts user research and engages with users of USAspending.gov online and in person. For example, Treasury officials said they have conducted more than 150 interviews with users. Treasury officials also told GAO that they have directly engaged with various audiences about the website through a hackathon and a partnership.</p>
 <p>Provide data in useful formats</p>	<p>Consistent with this key practice, USAspending.gov provides detailed, machine-readable data in standardized formats and includes several options for downloading the data. However, Treasury lacks a process to ensure that any new pages added to the website are hosted on a .gov domain and encrypted with the secure HTTPS protocol required by OMB. Without such a process Treasury does not have assurance that new pages added to the website meet federal security requirements.</p>
 <p>Fully describe the data</p>	<p>USAspending.gov does not fully reflect this key practice because while it discloses data sources and timeliness, the website does not provide structured metadata. Providing metadata—structured descriptive information about the data—is also an OMB requirement. In addition, while OMB guidance provides that agencies must apply open licenses, the website does not provide comprehensive licensing information for the data. As a result, users may not have the information they need on how the data can be used.</p>
 <p>Facilitate data discovery for all users</p>	<p>Consistent with this key practice, Treasury facilitates data discovery by providing tools such as interactive maps and visualizations to help users interpret the data. However, users cannot search for city and program source (the unique accounting code used to track federal spending) as required by FFATA. As a result, users may be unable to find certain financial or geographic information related to recipients or federal programs.</p>

Source: GAO analysis of USAspending.gov. | GAO-19-72