

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-104127](#), a report to congressional addressees

Why GAO Did This Study

In fiscal year 2020, the federal government spent \$7.4 trillion. USAspending.gov, the Data Lab website, and PandemicOversight.gov provide key information on this spending.

Congress included a provision for GAO to review implementation of the Digital Accountability and Transparency Act of 2014, which requires federal reporting of spending data. This report examines (1) user perspectives on useful activities for, and challenges with, these websites; (2) the extent to which information on use and usability of the USAspending.gov and Data Lab websites informs updates of their design and operation; and (3) the extent to which Treasury has addressed challenges regarding the awareness of, and data limitation disclosures on, USAspending.gov.

For this report, GAO collected user input from a nongeneralizable sample of 63 individuals and organizations using a snowball sampling technique. This allowed GAO to identify contacts through referrals, and additional information from a projectable sample of federal managers who were familiar with USAspending.gov. GAO also analyzed documents, compared Treasury actions with guidance and good practices, and interviewed agency officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations to Treasury, including that it should target USAspending.gov promotion and training to specific user personas, and make known data limitation disclosures more prominent and easily accessible to users. Treasury concurred with our recommendations.

View [GAO-22-104127](#). For more information, contact Michelle Sager at (202) 512-6806 or SagerM@gao.gov.

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FEDERAL SPENDING TRANSPARENCY

Opportunities Exist for Treasury to Further Improve USAspending.gov's Use and Usefulness

What GAO Found

Federal spending data websites let users search, download, and analyze how the U.S. government spends public funds. Users GAO interviewed—representing the public, recipients of federal funds, and federal agencies, among others—identified a variety of uses for, and challenges with, these websites (see figure).

Useful Activities and Challenges Identified by Selected Users of Federal Spending Data Websites



Useful activities

- ✓ Foster greater transparency
- ✓ Identify funding opportunities
- ✓ Identify potential fraud, waste, and abuse, and inform enforcement of recipient compliance
- ✓ Inform decision-making and program administration



Challenges

- ✗ Lack of awareness of websites and how to effectively use them
- ✗ Limitations with data availability and quality
- ✗ Difficulties locating known data limitations

Source: GAO analysis of interviews from actual and potential spending data users. | [GAO-22-104127](#)

The Department of the Treasury has collected website user feedback through various channels including usability testing sessions and an online community forum. In response to that input, Treasury officials have added information on unreported data to, created a data dictionary for, and provided additional file formats for downloads on their spending data websites.

Consistent with user-centered website design principles, Treasury identified specific types of expected users through the development of user “personas”—such as citizens and recipients—each with different interests and needs. However, GAO’s analysis found limited evidence that Treasury targeted USAspending.gov training toward these personas. GAO also found that Treasury generally did not target promotion efforts to these personas. Without taking these steps, Treasury may miss opportunities to encourage greater use of the website or properly address the needs of the different types of users.

Website users also reported difficulties locating disclosures of data limitations on USAspending.gov. This information is typically unavailable on or near the pages where users are searching for, or viewing, the data. In addition, GAO found that USAspending.gov does not include a site search function that could be used to more easily locate information on data limitations. If users cannot easily locate data limitation disclosures, they could inadvertently draw inaccurate conclusions from the data or lose confidence in them.