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On behalf of the Congressional Data Coalition
Testimony Before the House of Representatives
Legislative Branch Appropriations Subcommittee
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Chairman Yoder, Ranking Member Ryan, and members of the Legislative Branch Appropriations subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

At Civic Impulse LLC, our mission is to help the general public learn about and participate in their government. In the last year, 9 million Americans visited our free website www.GovTrack.us to research and track legislation in the U.S. Congress — including journalists, legislative affairs professionals, legislative staff on the Hill, advocates, students, educators, and of course members of the general public. Civic Impulse LLC is a proud member of the Congressional Data Coalition, which is a coalition of citizens, public interest groups, trade associations, and businesses that champion greater governmental transparency through improved public access to and long-term preservation of congressional information, and I am authorized to speak on their behalf.

Americans care about what is happening in the legislative branch, and Congress's efforts to publish its proceedings accurately, comprehensively, and comprehensibly is an indispensable function of our government in this era when information travels fast.

In recent years, this subcommittee has favorably reported appropriations legislation that, once enacted, has dramatically improved access to information about the work of the House of Representatives. Some examples include the establishment of and support for House Bulk Data Taskforce's legislative bulk data program at the Government Publishing Office and the Library of Congress, the creation of the central committee repository docs.house.gov, the House Clerk's upcoming new website, the annual Legislative Data and Transparency Conference, digitization of the Congressional Record, and most recently public access to Congressional Research Service reports. Thank you for these efforts. We now rely on many of these resources — and your support for these efforts have had a tangible impact on improving civics education and general understanding of Congress. It also has improved public engagement with Congress.

Three incremental steps would continue the forward momentum of releasing important Congressional information in ways that serve the needs of the institution and the public. They include publishing a committee calendar on

Congress.gov, publishing the “bioguide” website as data, and improving disclosure around committee witnesses.

Committee Calendar on Congress.gov

Congress.gov, a website jointly administered by the Library of Congress and the Government Publishing Office and visited by nearly 1 million people each month, provides a valuable resource to the public about legislation considered by each chamber of Congress. However, the website does not provide an integrated calendar about hearings and markups taking place each week in both chambers, even though that information is available as structured data from the House and the Senate. We know it is possible to combine this information into a unified user-friendly calendar, as we have built a successful prototype of such a service on our website, govtrack.us.¹

Providing a central listing on Congress.gov of upcoming committee hearings and markups from both chambers for the upcoming weeks would be a valuable resource to the general public as well as congressional offices that currently pay third parties for a service to provide that information. It should include basic information about the meeting, including the topic; the witnesses; the date, time, and location of the meeting; the committee or subcommittee holding the hearing; a link to the committee’s website; links to any documents released by the committee relevant to the meeting; and a link to where video from the proceedings are (or will become) available.

Biographical Directory of the United States (Bioguide)

The Biographical Directory of the United States Congress (or Bioguide) is an excellent source of information about current and former members of Congress. Since 1998, the online version of the Bioguide has been maintained by staff in the Office of the Clerk’s Office of History and Preservation and the Office of the Historian of the United States Senate at <http://bioguide.congress.gov>. And, since at least 2007, the underlying data structures for Bioguide data have been provided by the House at its XML website.

At this time, however, the format in which the information is published is inferior for reuse of that data. For those who wish to programmatically make use of its information, the website’s data is published only in HTML. Instead, bioguide information should be published in a structured data format like XML. This will make it easier for everyone to use the information. In addition, to keep the public apprised of updates or changes in the bioguide information, a change log, which indicates when information has been changed, should be maintained as well.

¹ <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/committees/calendar>

Committee Witness Disclosures

House rules² require non-governmental witnesses appearing before a committee to disclose recent grants or contracts from the federal or foreign governments, which the committee then discloses to the public. In implementing this requirement, congressional committees are using PDF forms to gather the information and posting it on their individual committee webpages. Witnesses often hand write (and occasionally scribble) their information on these formats, which in turn are scattered across multiple websites. This makes it difficult to fulfill the purpose of the rule, which is the useful disclosure of information about witnesses that informs Congress and the public about grants and contracts they have received.

We recommend instead that the information should be gathered by a House-wide webform that would ensure the information is typed in and centrally available. Ideally, it would be published to the public in an online searchable, sortable, downloadable database that can be sorted by witness, the organization they represent, and the contract or grant they've received.

Concluding Remarks

We urge the legislative branch to continue striving to cultivate its in-house technology talent. The fundamentals are already in place — the Clerk's website docs.house.gov, the Library of Congress's Congress.gov, and GPO's GovInfo.gov websites are evidence that in-house talent can produce effective and cost-effective solutions for Congress's public information needs. They can do so much more to enhance public engagement and civics education through the dissemination of Congress's trusted, primary source materials. They need your continued support and encouragement.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you and welcome the opportunity to discuss how the work of the House on public access to legislative information translates into a stronger democracy.

² Rule XI, clause 2, subsection (g)(5)(B)