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On behalf of the Congressional Data Coalition and Civic Impulse LLC
Prepared for the Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch
regarding the Library of Congress and the Office of the Historian

Chairman Daines, Ranking Member Murphy, and members of the Senate Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony.

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. Civil 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 Senate, most recently public access to Congressional Research Service reports. Thank you for these efforts. We rely on many of these resources the subcommittee has supported — and your support for these efforts have had a tangible impact on improving civics education and understanding of and 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 are publishing a committee calendar on Congress.gov, publishing the "bioguide" website as data, and creating a public information advisory committee to the Library of Congress.

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 Historian of the United States Senate and the House Clerk's Office of History and Preservation 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.

Library of Congress Public Information Advisory Committee
The Library of Congress is proud of its reputation and role as the largest library in the world. Part of its mission is to share knowledge through its online resources. Indeed, the Library plays an important role in providing information about Congress to the public, but the Library -- at least in our experience -- is not in regular contact with civil society, especially with those with expertise in facilitating public access to Congressional information. This is a missed opportunity.

Other legislative and executive branch agencies and entities regularly meet with civil society stakeholders to share information and provide a foundation for collaboration. For example, the Legislative Branch Bulk Data Task Force meets quarterly concerning bulk access to congressional data; the Advisory Committee on the Records of Congress semi-annually convenes congressional historians; and the Federal Depository Library Council is an ongoing point of contact for depository libraries. In the executive branch,

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[1]   https://www.govtrack.us/congress/committees/calendar

the FOIA Advisory Committee meets monthly as a point of focus for FOIA practitioners and agency officials, the Archivist regularly meets regularly with civil society, and so on.

To our knowledge, however, the Library of Congress does not have a regular mechanism by which it convenes public and internal stakeholders, at least not with respect to sites like Congress.gov. We recommend that such an advisory body be established with broad internal and external stakeholder representation that would hold regular public meetings where a productive interchange can take place.

Concluding Remarks
We urge the legislative branch to continue striving to cultivate its in-house technology talent. The fundamentals are already in place — 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. Congress has been supporting its in-house talent through the Legislative Branch Bulk Data Task Force, for instance. The legislative branch's technology staff 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 testify and welcome the opportunity to discuss how the work of the Senate on public access to legislative information translates into a stronger democracy.

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