



February 12, 2014



## Transparency and Good-Government Groups Encourage Legislative Efforts to Bring Transparency and Accountability to Federal Grant-Making

Dear Members of Congress:

We are writing in support of efforts to bring new transparency to federal grants and cooperative agreements. Spread across 1,714 programs and 26 agencies, federal grant outlays reached \$538 billion in FY2012. Of that amount, nearly \$80 billion was allocated through discretionary grants. While grants and cooperative agreements fulfill a crucial role in our society, too little is known about where the money goes, how it is awarded, and how to apply.

Recent legislation, such as the GRANT Act (H.R. 3316) that was reported out of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform in October 2013, seeks to address these problems. We applaud these reform efforts. Prospective grant recipients should be able to access and understand decision-making criteria, agencies should apply criteria fairly and consistently, and the public should be able to provide oversight of the process. We must hold federal grant-making to the highest standards.

We particularly commend the provisions in the GRANT Act that:

- Require federal agencies to establish uniform standards for how they notice, award, and disclose discretionary competitive grants, creating a more merit-based spending system, and to publish this information to the public in downloadable, searchable formats;
- Require OMB to create an online portal that will serve as a central location for all grant information, criteria, weighting of different factors, ranking of applications, and a tool to help grantees manage their applications throughout the process.

We are encouraged that such approaches to grant transparency also take into consideration an ability to provide oversight of grant reviewers, but more should be done to protect the integrity of the peer-review process while maximizing disclosure. Publishing statistical information about volume of grant applications, denied applications, and processing time would also be a meaningful addition.

While there should be a presumption of disclosure, we also agree that regarding scientific and technical grants where an agency determines that the public posting of the grant proposal, application, or plan may harm the intellectual property of an applicant or is prohibited by law, agencies should still be required to publish that information in a timely manner but with the option of withholding information in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act.

However, we are concerned that an over-application of the “deliberative process” exemption would allow agencies to withhold important ranking and scoring information; we urge you to address this in your legislation. We urge you to strike the balance between discretion and disclosure in favor of public access, and that you include a study of this balance by the Government Accountability Office.

In addition, we urge you to advance similar legislation to increase transparency and accountability in government contracting. Taxpayers also need to be able to track the \$517.5 billion obligated to federal contractors (FY2012). This likewise will increase competition, accountability, and effectiveness in federal contracting.

We applaud the ongoing efforts to advance legislation that meets these stringent but essential requirements and welcome the opportunity to work with you. Please contact James Valvo at [james.valvo@causeofaction.org](mailto:james.valvo@causeofaction.org) or Daniel Schuman at [dschuman@citizensforethics.org](mailto:dschuman@citizensforethics.org) if we can be of assistance.

Sincerely,

Cause of Action  
Center for Effective Government  
Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington - CREW  
Defending Dissent Foundation  
iSolon.org  
Project on Government Oversight - POGO  
Taxpayers for Common Sense