

# Tracking Stimulus Spending May Not Be as Easy as Promised

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Shortly after the economic stimulus bill was signed, Vice President Biden was talking up the administration's Web site to track the spending, Recovery.gov, when he accidentally directed people to Recovery.org.

As slip-ups go, this one had an upside: Unlike the government site, the privately run Recovery.org is actually providing detailed information about how the \$787 billion in stimulus money is being spent.

To build support for the stimulus package, President Obama vowed unprecedented transparency, a big part of which, he said, would be allowing taxpayers to track money to the street level on Recovery.gov. Together with a spruced-up WhiteHouse.gov, the site would inject the stodgy federal bureaucracy with the same Webby accessibility and Facebook-generation flair that defined the Obama campaign.

But three months after the bill was signed, Recovery.gov offers little beyond news releases, general breakdowns of spending, and acronym-laden spreadsheets and timelines. And congressional Democrats, state officials and advocates of open government worry that the White House cannot come close to clearing the high bar it set.

[Rep. Brad Miller](#) (D-N.C.), who chaired a House hearing about stimulus transparency this month, hailed Obama for seeking more openness than the Bush administration. But he added that the Obama team, tech-savvy as it is, has promised more than it can deliver. "It's proven to be much more difficult than anyone imagined going in," he said. "They may not achieve the transparency they set out to."

Rep. Paul Broun (Ga.), the top Republican on the House science panel's investigations subcommittee, was harsher. "This is another broken promise by the Obama administration," he said. "We don't have the transparency and the accountability we were promised."

The problem the administration faces goes to a central challenge of the stimulus: It was designed to spend money quickly enough to jolt the economy, but with enough care to achieve longer-term policy goals and to ensure that billions aren't wasted. The situation also points up the enormity of the package -- more than 100 spending streams flowing to tens of thousands of recipients through federal, state and local departments unaccustomed to providing the user-friendly reports the White House is demanding.

Earl E. Devaney, the Interior Department inspector general who has been placed in charge of stimulus oversight, said there is only so much spending underway that can be

tracked on Recovery.gov. States have received billions in education and Medicaid funds to balance their budgets, and tax cuts and expanded safety-net payments have begun, but federal agencies are still drawing up guidelines and accepting applications for many of the spending programs.

Devaney says the site will not post much spending data until October, when recipients must file their first full reports. "I'm not being particularly apologetic about where this site is today," he said. "I would be if someone could show me anything that has happened that isn't on this site."

Even once the first mass of information goes up, it will not be as granular as the White House has led people to expect. Devaney said the reporting requirements are simply not stringent enough to provide dollar-by-dollar tracking.

The Office of Management and Budget requires stimulus spending to be reported by primary and secondary recipients, but in many cases, this means the reporting will stop short of the contractors and subcontractors that are hired to do the work. For instance, if a state allocates transportation money to a local authority, such as Metro, that authority would not necessarily have to disclose what contractors were hired. "The law doesn't require [recipients] to go to the depth that people imagine it does," Devaney said.

Pushing back against critics, the budget office has told congressional committees that it is aware of the limits of its reporting rules but is worried about overburdening small businesses, though it is considering ways to require more reporting from some contractors.

Standing as a counterpoint is Recovery.org, which was started by Onvia, a Seattle-based company that for a dozen years has been compiling bid solicitations from all levels of government to sell to vendors and contractors that pay a subscription fee.

To draw attention to its product, the company is pulling all the stimulus-related contracts it finds and posting them on Recovery.org, where they can be searched free on a map, state by state and county by county. A visitor looking for what's going on in, say, Virginia can find nearly 150 specific stimulus projects that have been posted for bids in that state, whereas a visitor to Recovery.gov's Virginia page sees only the general program-by-program allocations.

Virtually the only spending reported on the Virginia government's stimulus page is for education money that has already gone out. Meanwhile, two other federal sites, FedBizOpps.gov and USAspending.gov, which Obama helped launch as a senator, offer some stimulus data, but they are limited to federal contracts. USAspending.gov tends to operate on a time lag.

Executives at Onvia say they do not envy Devaney. It has taken the company more than a decade to develop the deep-dive search technology it uses to scour the Internet for

contract notices, and it directs 60 of its 200 employees to do research, many flipping through dozens of newspapers a day looking for notices.

The executives, who have given advice to Recovery.gov's designers, say it will be difficult for the site to duplicate with top-down reporting requirements what the company does in a bottom-up way with its search engines. With so little harmonization between federal, state and local financial methods, developing a standard reporting system is unrealistic, they say.

Instead, they urge Devaney's office to dig up information that it can post without waiting for the October reports, because as gradual as the spending has been, there will still be billions of dollars going out the door in the coming months.

"They need to get data up. People get so worried about getting the product right, instead of just getting it out there," said Onvia Vice President Eric Gillespie. "Just put it out there and let people react to it, and it will get better and better over time."

But Devaney is being more methodical, saying he wants to settle on the right approach to the site before spending a lot of money on it. His office, which is funded by \$84 million in stimulus funds and has about 30 people devoted to the site, helped organize an online dialogue late last month to solicit ideas that drew 1,600 participants, and is now sifting through the many pitches it has received from tech companies offering their services to help develop the site.

He is confident that the site will live up to its billing. "We have four and a half years to turn this thing into its final product," Devaney said. "My intent is not to have people come once and never come back. I want it to be good enough that the citizens who look at this site become the eyes and ears for the [inspector generals] and see things that normally an IG would have to stumble across."