



**Testimony of Stephen W.T. O’Keeffe
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before the:

**Senate, Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information,
Federal Services, and International Security**

**Hearing Titled: “Removing the Shroud of Secrecy: Making Government More Transparent
and Accountable”**

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Senator Carper and Subcommittee members, thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Steve O’Keeffe, founder of MeriTalk, the government IT network. MeriTalk is an online community that combines professional networking and thought leadership to drive the government IT community dialogue.

More than Lip Service?

What is open government and what are we trying to achieve? While Obama’s promise of making agencies more efficient, transparent, and responsive sounds nice, every agency has a different idea and definition of what open government success means. We need to agree on the concept and determine the road ahead rather than reporting on the individual behaviors of agencies – we’re dizzy with data without direction.

Open government is about more than publishing information and we cannot simply achieve it by releasing content onto the Web like putting out old clothes for the Salvation Army. It’s about making this data accessible and understandable by providing insight, delivering new functionalities, and empowering citizens to have an ongoing dialogue with their government.

How?

The vast amount of data available is overwhelming to human sorting and translating capabilities. In order to open up this platform to support cross analytics and true transparency of the data available, there needs to be a standardized language for the classification of such data. Without machine-readable metadata and tags, the task is far too complex for industry to engage – simply, the juice is not worth the squeeze.

Unlocking the Power of Public-Private Partnership

There is a real opportunity in engaging the private sector. Today, many businesses such as INPUT and LexisNexis make significant profits by republishing free government data. We can make a significant impact on the market by opening up this platform – where anybody has the opportunity to digest the vast amount of data available and develop applications for the general public. As this data is more readily available, naturally, costs for services will decrease and not just organizations

who can afford steep annual fees can uncover vital government data. Transparency would increase, empowering citizens to expose the issues that matter most to them.

Let's introduce entrepreneurial spirit into this dusty and proprietary environment. In doing so, we can slash the cost of these data services, invoke new business models, and provide greater access and flexibility.

What They Want – Ogov Survey Results (MeriTalk, <http://www.meritalk.com/opengovpoll>)

In the spirit of open government, on March 4, MeriTalk launched the Ogov Survey. As of March 23, 2010, 118 users had completed the eight-question survey covering various issues in open government. The survey supports our belief that while we have made progress in making government more open and transparent, there is still a lot of work to be done. While 53 percent of users feel that government is more open today, 58 percent still do not feel that current open government initiatives are providing them with a voice on how government works. Our analysis also suggests that users agree transparency is about more than publishing data. 58 percent of users graded OMB's IT Dashboard with a "C" or "D" and 83 percent agree that the government needs to execute research to identify the needs and wants of citizens.

Finally, those surveyed felt that open government goals need to be agreed upon and clearly defined across government. Our results show that among users, the leadership for Ogov initiatives is unclear and 68 percent of users gave OMB's clarity and guidance on how agencies can achieve Ogov goals a "C" or "D." Please refer to slides.

These are all powerful numbers – one user and retired Federal employee, Cliff Moore, added the following: *"I am concerned that "open" government is being proposed for its own sake and not for the reason originally intended. I have participated in doing dashboards and other such reporting, but it tends to be at such a high level, I question the veracity and meaningfulness of any data. Many times in my opinion agencies etc. are answering the mail and not providing realistic and/or meaningful information to these sites making them a political rather than an informative tool."*

What's Working

1. Open Government Contests: The guidelines issued by the OMB for how agencies can best utilize incentive-based practices to improve open government initiatives not only indicates government's interest in collaborating with private and innovative thinkers, but gives agencies a clear model on how to use citizen engagement to accomplish the goals of an open and transparent government.

2. New Data on the Dashboard: Open government and the transparency of government data is not a one-time fix. This requires ongoing upkeep and continued effort to improve accessibility and efficiency. The government needs to update data in real time to provide a true representation of government activities. The launch of the IT Dashboard lit a spark of excitement within the government IT community, but without ongoing updates, the fire will surely diminish.

Room for Improvement

1. Federal IT Dashboard: Scratch the surface, and evidence on this whiz-bang tool is, well, not so whiz bang. When we took a look last year, just 56 percent of the data on IT contracts linked to

usaspending.gov. That means almost half of the program data didn't map back to a government purchase/contract. The reason offered on the Web site states "Interagency Agreements not required in the Federal Procurement Data Systems (FPDS)," (IT Dashboard, http://it.usaspending.gov/?q=content/contracts&buscid=3522&has_js=1&offset=10&limit=10). That made us raise an eyebrow. As we looked at building applications on top of the dashboard – allowing people to pull data by prime contractor, by red program, by sole source, etc. – we soon realized this was a dead end.

I did have the opportunity to meet with Vivek Kundra last week – and we chatted extensively about the future of the IT Dashboard. Vivek was keenly interested in the results of the MeriTalk Ogov Study. He wants to see the IT Dashboard get an A grade – but importantly, he is interested in learning how customers feel today so that he can improve the grade. We also went back to the IT Dashboard last week – and found the available data, and access to that data, much improved from last year. Please take a look at these slides that graph data from the IT Dashboard – engaging new insight on how the Federal government is spending in IT. Vivek Kundra mentioned that OMB will update this important resource in the coming weeks – delivering new and more intuitive capabilities. MeriTalk will work with OMB to host a free Webcast program to get the word out about the new IT Dashboard functionality.

2. Recovery.gov: The Web site established by the Stimulus Act that, among other things, promised to publish the compensation of the top five executives from all companies that received ARRA contracts. MeriTalk tried to get to this data late last year. While it appears that the information is there, it would take more than 100 hours of programming to extract the data. Less government data at your fingertips – more government data under your fingernails.

I did have the opportunity to meet with Mike Wood at the Recovery Board last week. He noted new plans afoot to improve the capabilities and intuitive functionality on recovery.gov. We are encouraged by the open and engaged response from OMB and the Recovery Board on these critical open government resources. The administration is interested in feedback and dialogue – they are not pretending that they have all the answers and we are excited to work with them to improve the outcomes of open government.

3. Citizen Engagement: Transparency and openness will only achieve so much in reaching a more efficient and responsive government. The next step to making data accessible and understandable is in providing a forum where feedback is accepted and considered. Beyond elections, citizens need a platform for reacting to government data.

Conclusion

The net on these programs is the data, or organization of the data, simply is not there to support the open government promise. Success means taking an overhaul of current legacy systems and a new management approach. It's not about pushing out data, nor about the government developing Ogov applications of its own. To win, Uncle Sam needs to consider customer requirements, establish common data formats, push data to the public, and empower industry to build applications and turn government into the platform. That said, we are very encouraged by the OMB and Recovery Board response to feedback from the Ogov study. President Obama's open government initiative is analogous to President Kennedy's commitment to go to the moon. It is a journey, and

key stakeholders in government seem very receptive to building a better open government rocket ship. The effort will doubtless yield many useful innovations along the way.

Mr. Chairman, it is our sincere hope that open government continues to build momentum in the Federal government. Much room exists for improvement. Our recommendations and observations are but a start toward establishing open government as a mainstream standard operating procedure in the Federal government. We are ready and willing to discuss our initiatives and recommendations and look forward to working with you and the Subcommittee to bring about additional improvements to open government in the Federal government.

I welcome any questions that you have on the subject.