PRESS RELEASE

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BREAKING NEWS
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'Thought Leadership': Transforming Government

WASHINGTON—Recovery Board Executive Director Michael Wood, in a blog posted today on Recovery.gov, outlines the creative ideas developed by the Board to promote transparency and accountability in government spending.

Wood explains how the Board raced against the clock to develop the infrastructure for collecting and displaying recipient data on Recovery.gov. He also reports on how the Board uses the state-of-the-art Recovery Operations Center to assist the federal Inspector General community in overseeing the economic stimulus program.

The text of Wood's blog follows:

There's a lot of talk these days about "thought leaders," individuals or organizations that produce and act on innovative ideas. Indeed, one could argue quite convincingly that the Recovery Board has more than its share of thought leaders. Since its inception, the Board has been results-driven.

Congress passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 in February of that year. The new Recovery Board, consisting of Inspectors General from various federal agencies, was directed to establish and maintain a public website that would provide "detailed information'' on contracts, grants, and loans issued under the Recovery Act. The law also directed the Board to maintain a vigilant oversight program that would "prevent fraud, waste, and abuse.''

The job was daunting, and senior Board officials were literally racing against the clock. The Office of Management and Budget, which writes the guidelines for the Recovery program, required that recipients begin reporting spending data on October 1, 2009. That didn't allow for a lot of time to build the infrastructure necessary to collect and display data from more than 100,000 recipients of Recovery funds and to develop a tough oversight program.

What to do? The Board and senior officials—including then Chairman Earl E. Devaney, myself, and a handful of staff members—decided we needed an innovative plan or we would face the unpleasant consequences of failure: Condemnation from official Washington, the public, and the news media.

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For starters, we cut through government red tape. We assembled an agile IT team from other agencies, we expedited contracting, and we established firm deadlines for the task ahead. This was the task: (1) assemble a website to collect quarterly spending data from recipients of Recovery contracts, grants, and loans; (2) manage the public website, Recovery.gov, created by the General Services Administration before the Board was up and running, while developing a second version that could handle massive amounts of recipient data; and (3) create a robust oversight program that would prevent criminals from stealing Recovery funds.

Not everything went smoothly but in the end we accomplished the task in what for government amounted to light speed. A summary:

•   FederalReporting.gov, activated in August 2009, was unique in government. As a rule, federal agencies that issue awards collect data from their respective recipients. FederalReporting.gov became the first government website to collect data on all agency awards in a single system. This was no small accomplishment: 28 federal agencies distribute funds under the Recovery program. The Board has overseen 12 recipient reporting periods without any major blunders.

•   FederalReporting.gov transfers its data to Recovery.gov. The new version of Recovery.gov was launched on September 28, 2009, and provides real transparency to users. There's easy access to quarterly spending data. Information is displayed through interactive, searchable maps; data downloads and tables, charts and graphs; videos; feature stories; and Social Media. Users can find information about Recovery programs in their own states and communities. There's also information on federal Recovery programs and oversight activities, including audits and reviews conducted by agency Inspectors General and the Government Accountability Office.

•   The state-of-the-art Recovery Operations Center, launched in November 2009, is the centerpiece of the Board's oversight program. As it evolved, the ROC became a focused, intelligence-sharing center for the oversight community, particularly those Inspectors General who monitor the Recovery program. In tracking fraud, waste, and abuse, ROC analysts have turned up significant investigative leads for the IG community. Meanwhile, several IG offices have been given access to ROC tools so they can conduct research from their own workstations.

Looking back, it's apparent our work transformed the way the government tracks spending on contracts, grants, and loans. We focused the discussion on what it truly means to provide transparency and accountability in a government program. A lot of public officials talk about how they favor transparency and accountability and how they are going to change this and that. But results matter, not talk, as the Board has demonstrated.

Chairman Devaney, his work done, retired last December but we didn't miss a beat. His successor, Kathleen Tighe, seamlessly picked up the baton and began directing us on our remaining challenges. Under her leadership, the Board is promoting the idea of a universal award ID for all government contracts, grants, and loans. A uniform ID would enhance transparency, making it much easier to track and reconcile funds awarded to recipients of federal funds.

We are also preparing to launch a pilot project later this year to determine the viability of a single electronic data collection system for government grants. A select group of recipients will participate. The Grants Reporting Informational Project will require recipients to report only one time on their grants, eliminating the burdensome requirement of filing separate reports with each agency involved in the grants.

The Board is continuing to improve Recovery.gov, which serves as the principal Recovery contact for taxpayers. Most recently, we added a new feature that allows access to summary data on each federal agency that distributes Recovery funds. The feature highlights how much money an agency has distributed to recipients along with information on the top recipients in states and cities.

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Under the Recovery Act, the Board is scheduled to expire on September 30, 2013. But there's plenty of work to do, and we will continue to advance ideas that promote transparency and accountability in government.

--Michael Wood, Executive Director, Recovery Board

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