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TESTIMONY: Subcommittee on Modernization hearing: "The Path Toward a
More Modern and Effective Congressional Research Service."
3:00 p.m. on Wednesday, April 26, 2023
Longworth House Office Building

Good afternoon Chairwoman Bice, Ranking Member Kilmer, and members of the Subcommittee on Modernization. My name is Richard Coffin, and I am the Chief of Research and Advocacy at USAFacts, a non-partisan, non-profit organization that seeks to empower Americans with the facts by making government data accessible, understandable, and usable. I am honored to be able to participate in today's hearing, and we at USAFacts are thrilled that this subcommittee is continuing its crucial modernization work as a permanent fixture in this Congress. We appreciate the committee's dedication to ensuring there is an ongoing focus on improving access to data and information as well as a commitment to leveraging insights and evidence to strengthen the lawmaking process, improve policy, and, we believe, provide a better quality of life for all Americans. I am truly grateful for the opportunity to be here alongside Director Mazanec, Joseph Dunn, and Kevin Kosar, to discuss modernizing the Congressional Research Service to better inform Congress.

Now more than ever, it is essential that all Americans have a trusted source of facts; this is especially true for our elected leaders as they craft legislation and make informed policy decisions. Of course, no one understands more acutely than this esteemed body how, in the face of increasingly complex challenges in our country, a thriving democracy must be supported by undisputed, trusted data. USAFacts was created to help fulfill this societal need.

USAFacts is a nonpartisan, not-for-profit organization dedicated to providing the American public with comprehensive and understandable government data. We seek to empower American citizens—and you and your fellow elected leaders—with facts to more easily make data-driven decisions about issues facing the country. USAFacts does this by aggregating and standardizing data from federal, state, and local government sources. We then present that data in a clear and simple manner on our website, USAFacts.org.

To support serious, reasoned, and informed debate, USAFacts consolidates data from more than 78 federal agencies along with sources from across the more than 90,000 state and local governments. We maintain a regularly updated website and publish an annual report on combined federal, state, and local spending, revenues, demographics, and outcomes. We publish an annual 10-K for the government modeled after the SEC Form 10-K that public companies must file. And we produce and share contextual content through weekly articles and our social media channels. USAFacts creates these products to help everyone from policymakers to voters access reliable data and make informed, fact-based decisions.

Many of you are familiar with former Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer. In 2015, he was focused on using his personal charitable giving efforts to help lift children out of poverty. He tasked our team with finding impartial data around the government's own efforts to determine where current programs are targeted and where additional needs exist. We thought the research would take a matter of weeks to compile and present. In reality, these two efforts—collecting and organizing data from the government and then presenting it in a clear and understandable way—took much longer. In fact, two years passed from the moment we started to the day we were able to launch our website publicly. This is because the information we poured through and were ultimately

able to assemble from the government was disparate, difficult to access, and at times, confusing.

Steve asked an important question: Why isn't the same standard for metrics and data that businesses are required to report to shareholders applied to government programs and initiatives? As CEO of Microsoft, he had relied on and valued real-time data to make the best possible decisions. Shouldn't our lawmakers have the same access to information when they are making decisions on policies that endeavor to shape the direction of the country with real results for 330 million Americans? From his background working in technology and as a successful businessperson, Steve understood that unavailable, outdated, or incomplete data can lead to poor, uninformed decisions. In light of this, Steve set out to invest his personal assets and efforts to create USAFacts—to be a service and free resource for all Americans and policymakers to have easy access to trusted facts.

Successfully modernizing how Congress is able to understand, prepare for, and respond to current and future challenges depends upon Members having unencumbered access to reliable data and information on government programs and outcomes. As James Madison once said, "a popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps, both." Congress needs strong research and a foundation of facts and data to make informed policy decisions on behalf of the American people.

The mission of the Congressional Research Service—"to serve Congress with the highest quality of research, analysis, information and confidential consultation, to support the exercise of its legislative, representational and oversight duties in its role as a co-equal branch of government"—is one of the most fundamentally important elements of a modern Congress. Across all industries and sectors, including the government, the strongest decisions are those made by leaders who have access to all relevant and unbiased data and information. Congress knows this as demonstrated by several significant recent legislative efforts focused on evidence from the last decade including the Data Act and the Foundations for Evidence-based Policymaking Act. In short, Congress needs data and research to do its job.

We at USAFacts have nothing but respect and admiration for the work of the Congressional Research Service. It is an admirable institution that has provided unbiased and vital research to Congress for the last 109 years. The agency's reports are an unrivaled fount of information for policymakers, and more recently, for the American public as well. However, it has been more than 50 years since the role of the agency was last scrutinized, and in that time the world, and Congress, have dramatically changed. This is why we are here today—to dream about the future that could be if the agency reimagined itself for the 21st century.

USAFacts is in a unique position to provide ideas to CRS. We are not only a consumer of its reports, but also have similarities in our mission of providing unbiased facts and information to the American public and to Congress for use in decision-making. We know how hard it is to meet the research needs of lawmakers, and we also recognize the value of what the agency already produces. Based on our work in the area over the past eight years, we believe CRS could best serve Congress and the American public if it made the following improvements:

1. **Publish reports as web documents with scrapable and machine-readable data tables and text in addition to PDFs**. This will allow for CRS reports to be more easily found through search engines and make the data more available. When data is included, it should also be made available in an appendix or supplementary materials as a CSV file for ease of use.
   o From our experience, search engines are the primary way reports are surfaced and accessed. Making it easy for search engines to find and index these reports will expand their reach. In addition, people will want to use the data to make charts or perform light analysis. Making this as easy as possible will empower readers to put these reports into action.

2. **Provide more "executive summary" style products**. CRS has experimented with shorter format reports and infographics, but this effort should be expanded so that the agency consistently provides summarized findings alongside its reports and includes simple, high-impact charts demonstrating trends. One potentially useful summary product would be the creation of "onboarding" materials for members of Congress and Congressional staff.
   o Anecdotally, we have found instances where our annual report for government has been used as introductory material for congressional interns and early-career staff to help understand the function of government broadly and the role of the federal government. A CRS-created resource that provides a broad overview of government and its actions could help reduce the time it takes new Members or staffers to ramp up in their work. Primers on various policy areas and key reports could also be extremely useful in helping people with limited time to quickly learn about key issues.

3. **Create more online interactive tools that constantly update such as Congressional dashboards**. In addition to reports which are tied to a point in time and can quickly become outdated, CRS should consider publishing online tools that continuously provide relevant metrics about key issues to members of Congress. This would be similar to executive dashboards that heads of companies use to assess progress towards goals and outcomes of company actions and decisions. Members of Congress should have the same tools to aid in decision-making. At minimum, make sure that outdated materials are clearly marked or archived to prevent inaccurate, incomplete, or outdated information from being used in decision-making.
   o We have been asked by several members of Congress for this kind of dashboard to aid in tracking major issues, and we have produced one example: our [COVID recovery hub](#), which tracked the COVID pandemic and the effect on government, the economy, and Americans' standards of living.

4. **Provide insight into what questions Congress is asking.** CRS has the most insight of any organization into the questions Congress is asking. Publishing these broad questions (limited to what is not embargoed and preserving privacy) would be of value to members of Congress and staff who are looking for where to start in understanding an issue and could build from the thoughts and knowledge of their peers.
   o We produce an annual report for the United States each year and have brought it to Congress on multiple occasions to help provide grounding data on key debates facing the country. One of the responses we often hear is that while the data is great, what would really be helpful is knowing which questions to ask in the first place. CRS is uniquely positioned to help members of Congress understand what their peers are asking.

5. **Create resources for how to find, interpret, and use data.** As we have embarked on making data easier to use for the general public, we have encountered significant challenges with the data itself. Where can data on specific topics be found? Which competing datasets should be used for a given purpose? How should one put numbers in context by looking at the big picture or comparing to population and inflation? Congress faces the same challenges, and creating resources to assist Congress in using data would be a significant step towards empowering evidence-based policymaking.

6. **Support lawmakers in defining intended outcomes of legislation and ensuring the data for measuring these outcomes is available.** Numeric outcomes are rarely defined for individual pieces of legislation, and as a result, data to track these outcomes is sometimes unavailable or difficult to find. CRS should work with Members to understand outcomes of legislation (while staying non-partisan) and identify data that could help measure these outcomes. Where data does not exist, CRS could define what data would need to be collected and how it should be reported so that Congress can effectively track the implementation of legislation in data.

7. **Adopt a product focus with Congress and staff as the customer.** One key element in modernizing CRS would be to adopt an internal structure that, in addition to producing the myriad one-off reports, would look across all requests to understand problems faced by Congress, proactively conduct outreach and audience research of Members and staff to understand what would help them do their jobs, and create tools that could be used across many offices to make research-based decisions. This would mimic and build on the learnings of product teams at USAFacts and other non-profit and private sector customer-facing organizations. CRS could then focus on producing single products that help a broad swath of Members and staff in addition to answering one-off requests.

8. **Make as much as possible publicly available.** While there is an understandable need to protect confidentiality in many requests made to CRS, where possible, releasing tools and information publicly could help all Americans understand what information was used in decision-making, allow them to follow legislation more closely, and ultimately could create more trust in Congress.
   - According to a poll USAFacts conducted in 2020 with the AP and NORC at the University of Chicago, 43% of Americans (and a higher percentage than years prior) believe that relying on different facts about major issues causes more political division than does differing political beliefs. Making more of CRS's research publicly available while maintaining their rigid non-partisanship could help Members and the public alike access the same information to form the basis for debate.

In closing, it goes without saying that Congress needs trustworthy, nonpartisan, and usable information to effectively govern. While the Congressional Research Services has been a stellar partner to Congress, taking on a holistic modernization effort would make it even more effective.

Trustworthy information is at a premium in today's world, and policymakers need the best tools possible at their disposal as they decide on policies that affect the lives of millions and the direction of the country. The opportunities are significant, but improvements are within our reach, and USAFacts remains a strong advocate and partner in this effort.

Thank you for your time.