**Written Statement from Nicholas (Nick) Hart, Ph.D.,
President & CEO of the Data Foundation**

**For the House Appropriations Committee, Subcommittee on Legislative Branch
"Hearing on the FY 2026 Legislative Branch Appropriations"**

April 9, 2025

Chair Valadao, Ranking Member Espaillat, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to participate in today's hearing about the FY 2026 Legislative Branch Appropriations. I am Nick Hart, President & CEO of the Data Foundation, a national non-profit organization that works to improve government, business, and society through open data and evidence-informed public policy. The Data Foundation champions using accessible, high-quality data to make society better for everyone.

Creating a Chief Data Officer for Congress. For FY 2026, I urge Congress to establish a Chief Data Officer (CDO) function for the Legislative Branch. This senior role would coordinate data governance across Congress, establishing standards for data quality, accessibility, privacy protection, and interoperability, while respecting the independence of institutional units. The position would serve as a central point of coordination for data-related activities across House and Senate offices, committees, and support agencies.

A CDO at the enterprise-level in Congress, would build upon Congress's vision when it established CDO roles for federal executive branch agencies in the OPEN Government Data Act (Title II of P.L. 115-435), offering an opportunity for Congress to further strengthen its leadership through consistent application of these data governance principles within its own operations. While there have been ongoing systems dialogues, there is a need to ensure data governance across organizational units, committees, and member offices can be distinctly prioritized, just as IT systems and budgets receive guidance and support.

The CDO role would not replace existing data functions in Government Accountability Office (GAO), Congressional Budget Office (CBO), or committee offices,

but rather coordinate and enhance their effectiveness while reducing duplication of effort. As agencies across the Executive Branch have demonstrated, a CDO can drive significant improvements in efficiency, transparency, and effectiveness.

Building on Existing Legislative Branch Data Resources. Several legislative branch entities already perform critical data functions, including the GAO, CBO, and joint committees such as the Joint Committee on Taxation (JCT), which has long worked in a collaborative and coordinated fashion to use—and protect—sensitive tax data under Title 26. The Data Foundation strongly supports adequate resources for the GAO, CBO, and Joint Committees, such as JCT. These entities serve as trusted intermediaries that transform complex data into actionable insights for policymaking in Congress.

The Data Foundation is particularly proud of our partnership with GAO's Center for Evaluation Methods and Issues (CEMI) to support the evaluation community through joint initiatives that promote methodological rigor, quality standards, and a strong community of practice. As both an appointed member of the Comptroller General's Advisory Council on Government Auditing Standards (Yellow Book Advisory Council) and longtime supporter of institutional data governance practices, I deeply respect and appreciate GAO's leadership in establishing its own CDO role in recent years, as well as a unit that prioritizes statistical activities, and an emerging focus on evaluation methods.

Parallel Initiatives to Enhance Congressional Data Governance. With a Legislative Branch CDO in place, Congress could simultaneously pursue several parallel initiatives to enhance its data governance:

- *Developing a Legislative Branch Data Catalog:* A comprehensive inventory and catalog of Congress's institutional data assets would provide transparency about what information exists, where it resides, and how it can be appropriately accessed. This would specifically focus on shared resources such as committee hearing records, GAO reports, CBO analyses, legislative histories, and other data resources that belong to Congress as an institution—not individual offices' constituent casework or correspondence systems. This catalog would mirror requirements for Executive Branch agencies and would enable more efficient information sharing and use while maintaining appropriate privacy safeguards.
- *Establishing Data Governance Practices*: A legislative branch-wide data strategy would outline how Congress can better collect, manage, share, and use data to

support its constitutional functions. This would include shared practices for data quality, security, and accessibility.

- *Supporting Executive-Legislative Branch Data Sharing*: Effective systems for accessing and collaborating with the Executive Branch on data are essential. In some cases, re-collecting information is burdensome or costly. But under the separation of powers—and the privacy protections afforded to the American people—we should not assume it is an inherent right for individual members of Congress, their staff, or even designees in support agencies to have unfettered access without defined purposes to data about the American people and businesses. A Congressional CDO could help establish protocols and systems for appropriate data sharing between branches that respect constitutional principles and privacy protections while meeting Congress's legitimate information needs.

- *Implementing Privacy-Preserving Technologies*: Low-cost pilot programs could explore privacy-preserving technologies for constituent services. Modern approaches like privacy-preserving record linkage and secure multi-party computation would allow Congress to connect datasets across committees and offices without exposing sensitive details, potentially improving service delivery while maintaining confidentiality.

The Need for Enhanced Data Governance in Congress. In 2018, Congress passed the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act, including Title II, the OPEN Government Data Act, which required agencies across the Executive Branch to designate Chief Data Officers (CDOs) and implement data governance practices. This law recognized data as a strategic asset for the government. Congress has already seen the benefits of this approach, with Executive Branch agencies better managing data assets, improving data quality, and enhancing the use of data for decision-making.

However, despite Congress establishing these functions for the Executive Branch, the Legislative Branch has an opportunity to apply similar data governance principles to improve its own operations. The practical impacts of the current approach to data management are felt daily across congressional functions:

1. *Legislative Development Inefficiency:* When developing legislation, Congressional offices frequently request similar datasets and analyses from support agencies. A CDO could establish a searchable repository of previously requested analyses,

allowing staff to build upon existing work rather than starting from scratch, reducing duplication of effort and wait times.

2. *Budget Transparency Challenges:* The appropriations process generates immense volumes of data that individual offices struggle to analyze effectively. A Congressional CDO could develop standardized tools and machine-readable formats that would empower offices to make more informed budget decisions and better communicate funding impacts to constituents.

3. *Agency Accountability Challenges:* Individual offices fulfilling their accountability responsibilities often lack the tools to validate the accuracy and completeness of agency-provided data. A Congressional CDO could establish data quality assessment frameworks and cross-agency data concordances that would transform accountability from reliance on agency self-reporting to evidence-based assessment.

4. *Constituent Service Coordination:* During crises like natural disasters, individual congressional offices lack standardized ways to access and analyze critical assistance data. A Congressional CDO could create standardized data dashboards and secure information-sharing protocols between affected offices, enabling more responsive and effective constituent services, while protecting privacy and confidentiality of constituents.

As highlighted in the Data Foundation's "Data and Evidence Policy Trends: 10 Government Transformations for 2025," developed in partnership with our Data Coalition members, establishing robust data verification and trust frameworks has become increasingly vital. Congress has the opportunity to lead by example by implementing community-driven approaches to verifying and assessing data quality across its operations.

Immediate Opportunities for Congressional Data Improvement. With a Congressional CDO in place, several immediate, low-cost opportunities could be pursued to enhance data transparency and use:

- *Effectively Implementing the CBO Data Sharing Act*: The Congressional Budget Office Data Sharing Act (P.L. 118-89) authorized CBO to access necessary data from executive agencies more efficiently. Implementing this law effectively, with strong and transparent privacy safeguards, is essential. The Data Foundation

appreciates Congress's support for this initiative and encourages continued oversight of its implementation.

- *Publishing Congressional Budget Justifications*: Congress should implement for itself the standards established in the Congressional Budget Justification Transparency Act of 2021 (P.L. 117-40), which required Executive Branch agencies to publish their budget justifications in structured data formats. Legislative Branch agencies and offices should make their budget justifications machine-readable, centrally accessible, and transparently available to the public, and provide reports to GPO for at least the previous ten years.

- *Machine-Readable Appropriations Information*: Legislative Branch appropriations data should be published in structured, machine-readable formats through CBO and other appropriate channels. This would enhance transparency, improve analysis, and support more efficient management of congressional resources.

- *Developing Data Readiness for AI*: As our Data Foundation's AI Policy Framework emphasizes, high-quality, well-governed data is essential for responsible AI use. By establishing strong data governance practices now, Congress would position itself to responsibly leverage AI technologies as they continue to evolve, while ensuring appropriate safeguards are in place.

Conclusion. As technologies rapidly evolve, perceptions about data access and use rapidly shift, and the decision-making needs in Congress continue to advance, Congress must decide whether it is willing to invest in a data infrastructure that can meet the needs of both the present and the future. Establishing a Chief Data Officer for Congress is the first step in this process.

Congress must lead in data governance and transparency efforts, just as it requires of the Executive Branch. Data Foundation research indicates quality data systems effectively pay for themselves through improved services, reduced waste, and other benefits. The returns on investment for data governance are clear and substantial.

Small but strategic investments in data governance now—beginning with creating a Chief Data Officer for Congress—will yield long-term benefits in the form of more effective and efficient operations, better-informed decision-making, transparency to the American public, and contribute to enhancements in public trust in the institution. The Data Foundation stands ready to support Congress in this important endeavor.