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UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

FEBRUARY 8, 1980

GENERAL GOVERNMENT
DIVISION

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The Honorable James T. McIntyre, Jr.
Director, Office of Management and
Budget

Subject: [Problems With the Dissemination
Of Information on Federal Assistance
Programs] (GGD-80-32)

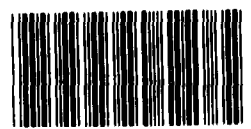
Dear Mr. McIntyre:

As part of our continuing interest in the program information needs of Federal aid recipients, we reviewed the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) Federal Assistance Information Data Base and the Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance.

Since 1968, information on Federal domestic assistance programs was gathered pursuant to OMB Circular A-89. The circular established policies for the development and issuance of a Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance and required that all specialized catalogs be approved by OMB. The circular was first issued in August 1968 and later revised in September 1969 and December 1970.

Because of complaints by Federal aid recipients about the lack of information on available Federal programs, the Federal Program Information Act (Public Law 95-220, December 28, 1977), was passed. It requires OMB to "identify all existing Federal domestic assistance programs and provide information on each such program to the general public through electronic media***and through a printed catalog."

To meet these objectives, OMB maintains a Federal Assistance Information Data Base. The data base is to be a complete listing of Federal domestic assistance programs and is to serve as the primary source of program information. From this data base, information is made available to the general public through the Federal Assistance Program Retrieval System and the Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance (Catalog). These two information sources represent the



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Federal Government's "face" to State and local governments and other prospective Federal aid recipients concerning available Federal programs.

We found certain shortcomings in the Federal Assistance Information Data Base. Specifically, we found that many programs are not included in the data base and information in the Catalog is not as easy to access as it could be. We also found that Federal agencies are publishing specialized catalogs which contain information different than that in the data base.

FEDERAL ASSISTANCE INFORMATION
DATA BASE IS NOT COMPLETE

While the data base contains numerous programs, many are not included. As a result, prospective Federal aid recipients are not being provided with information on all domestic assistance programs as required by the Federal Program Information Act. The data base is incomplete because (1) the information used to create the data base was incomplete to start with and little has been done to complete it, (2) programs are being excluded from the data base when they should not be, and (3) all new programs are not being added as soon as they should be. The situation that prompted the passage of the Program Information Act--lack of information on all Federal programs--still exists.

When the act was passed, the requirement for a Federal assistance data base was met by using the Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance's data base. However, the Catalog data base did not contain all domestic assistance programs. Part of the reason was that OMB Circular A-89 instructed agencies to report only those programs "****that could be requested or applied for****." Also, OMB's instructions to the agencies, although explaining that the act requires that all domestic assistance programs be reported, state that certain types of programs such as shared revenues and automatic payment programs should not be reported.

The data base is also incomplete because OMB, in relying on Federal agencies to submit data on domestic assistance programs, does not make any special attempt to assure that Federal agencies report all programs. In this regard, we found that Federal agencies have not reported all programs and some have had ongoing domestic assistance programs deleted from the data base.

The number of Federal domestic assistance programs not in the data base is unknown. While the data base contains

many programs, we found programs that are not included. These programs were identified using information in the U.S. Budget and in various Federal agency publications of federally supported programs. Following is a list of some of the programs we found:

- The Coast Guard's Alteration of Bridges Program. This program provides Federal funds to alter or remove railroad or publicly owned highway bridges which are considered navigation hazards.
- The Department of Interior's payments-in-lieu-of-taxes program. This program provides payments to local governments based on the property tax losses the unit of government experiences because federally owned lands are exempt from local taxes.
- The Department of Housing and Urban Development's Housing Counseling Assistance Program. Under this program, HUD counsels and advises eligible homeowners and tenants with respect to property maintenance, financial management, and other matters.
- The Department of Energy's Geothermal Loan Guarantee Program. The purposes of the program are to encourage and assist the private and public sectors to accelerate the development of geothermal resources and to develop normal borrower-lender relationships to encourage the flow of credit without Federal financial assistance.
- The Department of Energy's Coal Loan Guarantee Program. This program finances the development of new underground coal mines, or the reopening of underground coal mines.
- The Department of Energy's payments to States under the Federal Power Act. Under this program, the States are paid a percent of the receipts from licenses for occupancy and the use of national forests and public lands within their boundaries.
- The Department of Labor's Employment Opportunities Pilot Program, which is designed to pre-test various approaches to developing employment and training alternatives to welfare dependency among the employable poor.

Other examples of programs not in the data base include the General Revenue Sharing program and some Federal programs intended to assist State and local government productivity improvement efforts. These programs were funded at the time the Program Information Act was passed and are currently funded.

Federal agencies have had four opportunities under OMB's formal Catalog updating procedures since the passage of the act to report these and other existing domestic assistance programs, but had not done so.

Since May 1978, 141 Federal domestic assistance programs have been deleted from the Catalog. Of these, 40 were deleted because the programs were considered as "normal daily duties" of the agency and 13 were deleted because the criteria for inclusion in the Catalog were "no longer valid." These 53 programs were still being funded at the time they were deleted.

Almost all of the programs deleted because the assistance was considered part of the agency's normal daily duties were in the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Two years ago, BIA listed 38 programs in the Catalog, now it lists 11. BLM listed 9 programs in the Catalog; now it lists none.

A BLM official said the type of assistance they offered did not meet the Catalog's definition of a domestic assistance program because it is not separately identifiable nor separately funded as a program by the bureau, and therefore, not appropriate for inclusion in the Catalog. However, according to OMB's instructions to the agencies, assistance does not have to be separately identifiable by statute or regulation to be included in the Catalog.

OMB defines assistance to include "provision or donation of Federal facilities, goods, services, property, technical assistance, and counseling, statistical and other expert information, and service activities of regulatory agencies." The assistance may be financial or non-financial. Non-financial assistance programs include:

- sale, exchange, or donation of property and goods,
- use of property, facilities, and equipment,
- provision of specialized services,
- advisory services and counseling,
- dissemination of technical information,

- training, and
- investigation of complaints.

All of the programs deleted by the Department of the Interior either fell within one or more of these categories or were financial assistance programs.

Two Library of Congress programs were also deleted because they were considered normal daily duties of the agency. An agency official told us the reason for deletion was that the program offices were receiving too many requests for assistance from people not eligible for the assistance. Yet, the applicant eligibility information in the Catalog for one program stated that "Anyone may apply" and for the other program stated that, "Federal, State, academic, and public libraries and archives; individuals and government agencies" could apply.

Thirteen programs were deleted because agencies felt that the criteria for inclusion in the Catalog were "no longer valid." We discussed the deletions of some of these programs with agency representatives and were told that:

- Two programs were dropped because the funds are not given to grantees, but are used to fund operations which provide technical information to grantees.
- One program was dropped because an application from the beneficiary is not required. An application, however, is required from the sponsoring institutions which disburse funds to beneficiaries.
- One program was deleted because it offered assistance to a limited, pre-determined group of recipients.

None of these reasons are valid based on OMB's program exclusion criteria for the Catalog. According to Circular A-89, technical assistance programs are to be included in the Catalog, as are programs for which either the applicant or beneficiary submits an application, and programs regardless of the "relative dollar size" or "relative number of governmental units, organizations, or individuals eligible for the program."

Federal agencies have been slow in reporting new programs, taking in some cases nearly a year or more to report them. In the 2-year period since the passage of the act, 149 programs were added to the data base. One third of

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these were "new" programs that were previously authorized but were being reported for the first time.

OMB's instructions are that new programs should be reported as soon as they are funded. Our analysis showed that of the 32 programs added in the first update of the 1979 Catalog (issued September 1979), 10 programs were authorized and funded in fiscal year 1978 (ending in September 1978) or before. The May 1979 Catalog reported 19 new programs (42 percent of the added programs) that were authorized and funded in fiscal year 1978--8 months earlier.

IMPROVEMENT NEEDED IN CATALOG INDEXES

Even with a complete inventory of Federal domestic assistance programs, the usefulness of the inventory to potential Federal aid recipients depends on the ability of the potential recipients to find the programs which meet their needs. To access the information in the data base, OMB uses 5 indexes: agency program index, functional index, popular name index, subject index and applicant eligibility index. These indexes, however, are not set up to make a search for assistance as easy as possible, or detailed enough to cover all of the activities within a program.

As the indexes are currently set up, anyone searching for a federally assisted activity would have to know which agency sponsors the activity, or which broad subject or functional heading the desired assistance falls under. For example, the Catalog's subject index consists of 32 topics. To find a federally assisted activity using the subject index, a user has to determine which topic it will be listed under and then scan the listings of program titles for the activity being sought. If an activity coincides with a program title, the activity and program can generally be identified. If the activity does not coincide with the program title, a user must find a synonym and search that topic, or page through the entire index.

For example, a person looking in the subject index for Federal programs providing assistance to combat drug abuse would find that drug abuse is not a listed topic. The person may then recognize it is a health problem and look under the health and medical services topic. However, drug abuse is not a listed subtopic. If the person continues looking, perhaps with a different but

related term in mind, the person will find a "Narcotics, drug abuse and alcoholism" topic. But none of the 44 program titles listed thereunder use the word "drug" or "drug abuse" as the key word.

If the person searches for drug abuse programs using the Catalog's functional index, the ease of finding programs is not significantly improved. The functional index has only 20 functions listed. Drug abuse is not one of these, but Health is. Under the Health function, a subfunctional title of drug abuse is not used but "Alcoholism, Drug Abuse and Mental Health" is used. Under this title, the programs are arranged numerically by catalog number rather than alphabetically. Because of this, each entry must be read to eventually find all the drug abuse programs.

In contrast to the 1979 Catalog's subject index, the prior year's catalog index was arranged alphabetically and used cross references. In that index, the term "Drug Abuse" was listed under "D" and the potential aid recipient was directed to related drug abuse terms and the programs listed thereunder. The 1978 alphabetically arranged subject index was dropped from the 1979 Catalog in the interest of conforming the catalog's subject index format with that of the functional index.

Federal programs provide assistance for a plethora of assistance needs of State and local governments, other organizations, and individuals. Yet, the indexing of the program benefits is not as complete as possible. Primary program benefits are too often the only benefits indexed, even though many programs are multipurpose. Detailed indexes are often lacking for secondary or tertiary services offered under the programs.

For example, a Department of Agriculture official told us that a Farmers Home Administration program for industrial development provides funds for the construction of access streets and roads, but these program benefits are not indexed under "streets", or "roads", or even "transportation." Federal assistance for the planning, development, or maintenance of bridges is provided under at least two Federal programs, but the term "bridges" is not indexed in the catalog's subject index. To locate funds or services for these purposes, a potential aid recipient would need an extensive knowledge of the Federal aid programs or would have to search through other catalog indexes in the hope of finding out what the Federal Government supports and which agency provides the support.

SPECIALIZED CATALOGS PUBLISHED BY EXECUTIVE
BRANCH AGENCIES WITHOUT OMB APPROVAL

During our review, we found several specialized catalogs on Federal assistance programs being published by Federal agencies without OMB approval. In some cases, the information in these catalogs differed from the information contained in OMB's Catalog. According to Circular A-89, the Catalog "will be the single, authoritative, Government-wide compendium of Federal domestic assistance program information produced by the executive branch of the Federal Government." Unless required by law, other program information catalogs may be published "only when specifically authorized" and developed within the following OMB guidelines:

- (1) The proposed development and publication of any specialized catalog of Federal domestic assistance programs will be cleared with OMB in the conceptual planning stages.
- (2) Whenever feasible, justifiable ad hoc needs of an agency will be satisfied by the development of specialized user guides or supplements to material contained in the currently available Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance in lieu of developing completely separate catalogs.

According to an OMB official, OMB has approved the publication of three specialized catalogs:

- Catalog of Federal Education Assistance Programs (required by P.L. 91-230, Section 413),
- Guide to Federal programs for Rural Development (no longer published), and
- Programs of the National Foundation of the Arts.

During our review, we found other executive branch publications which fit the A-89 definition of a specialized catalog but which had not been cleared for publication through OMB (See enclosure). Some of the specialized catalogs contained information which differed from or conflicted with information in OMB's data base. Differences were noted in application procedures, eligibility criteria, and other requirements. Also, some of the specialized catalogs contained programs which were not in OMB's Catalog. In our view, these inconsistencies

undermine the intent of Circular A-89 that the Catalog be the single, authoritative compilation of assistance programs.

We contacted some of the agencies which prepared the specialized catalogs to determine why they felt it necessary to publish a program information document in addition to OMB's Catalog. Most indicated that their specialized catalogs were prepared to provide their clientele with information in one functional area. The OMB Catalog, because it lists Federal domestic assistance programs for all functions, was believed to be too bulky to fulfill their clientele's needs.

For example, a Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) representative stated that the HUD Digest of Federal Disaster Assistance Programs serves as a quick reference to Federal disaster aid programs. The official said that the OMB Catalog's subject index does not arrange the programs to permit ready compilation and distribution to persons needing information quickly. Similarly, an official of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare said the Department's publication on Federal programs serving the handicapped was published because the OMB Catalog's subject index does not list all Federal assistance available to handicapped individuals.

CONCLUSIONS

The Federal Program Information Act was passed to provide information on all Federal domestic assistance programs and charged OMB with the responsibility to carry out the act's provisions. Prior to the passage of the act, OMB issued Circular A-89 which established policies and procedures for gathering domestic assistance information and publishing the Catalog. To date, OMB Circular A-89 has not been updated to reflect the act's increased reporting requirements.

Since the act was passed a number of ongoing programs have been deleted from the data base and agencies have been slow in reporting new programs to OMB.

An increase in OMB oversight efforts should help assure that all domestic assistance programs are in the data base. Adopting procedures such as reviewing the Federal Register and coordinating with OMB budget examiners, would provide increased assurance that Federal agencies are reporting new programs.

As presently structured, the Catalog indexes are not easily used by someone unfamiliar with the way the Federal Government is organized. To better serve the Catalog's primary clientele, potential aid recipients, the Catalog's subject, functional, and proper name indexes could be folded into one alphabetical, keyword index. Such an index would focus on the purposes of the assistance and guide readers to the appropriate assistance through the use of terms familiar to the readers. Also, the index could use cross-references to make the search for Federal assistance as easy as possible.

Specialized catalogs which have not been approved by OMB and which do not use OMB's information data base as the source of information tend to undermine the Catalog as the single authoritative compilation of Federal domestic assistance. The specialized catalogs also run counter to the intent of the Program Information Act to make the data base, and from it the Catalog and the Federal Assistance Program Retrieval System, the single focal point for gathering and disseminating information on Federal programs and their requirements. Catalogs published from different information sources increase the chances that conflicting program information may be published.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To further the purposes of the act, we recommend that you

address

- Revise OMB Circular A-89 and update your Catalog instructions to reflect the new reporting requirements of the Federal Program Information Act, and reemphasize the need for the timely reporting of new programs.
- Increase oversight to insure that Federal agencies report all Federal domestic assistance programs.
- Reinstate those ongoing domestic assistance programs previously deleted.
- Establish, with the assistance of an indexing specialist, an alphabetical key word index for the data base in lieu of the subject, functional, and popular name indexes.
- Reemphasize to Federal agencies that all specialized catalogs must be approved by OMB before the catalogs can be published.

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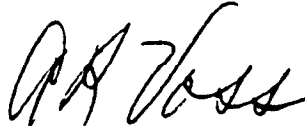
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Copies of this report are being sent to the Chairman, Senate Subcommittee on Intergovernmental Relations, Governmental Affairs Committee; the Chairman, House Subcommittee on Intergovernmental Relations and Human Resources, Government Operations Committee; and the Chairman, House Policy Group on Information and Computers, House Administration Committee.

This report contains recommendations to you. As you know, section 236 of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 requires the head of a Federal agency to submit a written statement on the actions taken on our recommendations to the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs and the House Committee on Government Operations not later than 60 days after the date of the report and to the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations with the agency's first request for appropriations made more than 60 days after the date of the report.

We will be pleased to discuss these matters further with you or your staff.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "A. R. Voss".

Allen R. Voss
Director

Enclosure

SPECIALIZED CATALOGS PUBLISHED BY
FEDERAL AGENCIES

Department of Commerce

"Commerce Department Resources and Services for
Economic Development"

Department of Health, Education and Welfare

"Catalog of Federal Education Assistance Programs"-
Office of Education
"Federal Assistance for Programs Serving the
Handicapped" -Office for Handicapped Individuals
"Profiles of Financial Assistance Programs" -Public
Health Services

Department of Housing and Urban Development

"Digest of Federal Disaster Assistance Programs"-
Federal Disaster Assistance Administration
"Programs of HUD"

Department of Transportation

"Grant and Assistance Programs"

Environmental Protection Agency

"Federal Assistance Programs of the Environmental
Protection Agency"
"ORD Program Guide"

Interagency Steering Group/National Science Foundation

"The Development of Joint Federal Research and
Development Processes Responding to State and
Local Needs"

National Endowment for the Arts

"Guide to Programs"

National Endowment for the Humanities

"Program Announcement"

ENCLOSURE

ENCLOSURE

United States Fire Administration/Federal
Emergency Management Agency

"Sources of Federal Funds For Fire Programs"

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