



**ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS
FOR THE RECORD**

Following a Hearing on

**CBO's Efforts to Enhance Its
Transparency, Effectiveness,
and Efficiency**

Conducted by the
Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress
U.S. House of Representatives

DECEMBER 7 | 2021

On October 21, 2021, the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress convened a hearing at which Phillip L. Swagel, the Congressional Budget Office's Director, testified about the agency's efforts to enhance its transparency, effectiveness, and efficiency.¹ After the hearing, Congresswoman Nikema Williams submitted a question for the record. This document provided CBO's answer and was published on October 28, 2021. Chair Kilmer and Vice Chair Timmons then submitted another question for the record, and the document was published again to answer it. It is available at www.cbo.gov/publication/57556.

Chair Kilmer and Vice Chair Timmons's Question About Ways to Improve the Timeliness and Accuracy of CBO's Work

Question. What additional authorities and resources would help CBO improve the timeliness and accuracy of its scores?

Answer. A modest increase in CBO's budget would enable the agency to be even more responsive to the Congress's needs. Beginning in fiscal year 2019, the Congress increased CBO's budget to bolster that effort, allowing the agency to expand staffing in high-demand areas; to organize staff to work on broader, shared portfolios; to publish more data and documentation; and to publish reports that evaluated previous forecasts and cost estimates. CBO's budget request for the current fiscal year would allow it to maintain its current staffing level and to hire four new staff members to provide more analysis of infrastructure, energy, and climate change issues—areas in which CBO expects heightened legislative activity.²

With an increase in the agency's expertise and modeling capability in those areas, analysts could more readily provide preliminary estimates as committees developed

legislative proposals, as well as detailed formal cost estimates ahead of floor consideration. With the larger staff, CBO would also have a number of people with overlapping skills to handle surges in demand for analysis of a particular topic or to lend additional assistance for a complicated estimate. In some cases, those skills would be technical, improving CBO's ability to design simulation models and thereby enhancing the accuracy of its work. Moreover, as the agency's budget request describes, CBO would continue its series of publications evaluating the accuracy of its outlay and revenue projections for the previous year. The agency would also seek opportunities to review the precision of its previous forecasts and cost estimates.

Another way to enhance CBO's responsiveness and accuracy is increasing its access to data. The use of data is critical to CBO's work in producing baseline budget projections, economic projections, cost estimates, and reports. CBO pulls together information from many different federal agencies.³ The Congressional Budget Act of 1974 already provides CBO with the authority to obtain data generally from a variety of sources. CBO also has the authority to obtain certain specific data, and at times it collaborates with agencies that permit CBO to use their data under their authorities. CBO currently has in place more than three dozen data use agreements for protected information.

However, obtaining data from agencies can present challenges. One such challenge is that in some cases, the data remain in the possession of the other agency. Before the coronavirus pandemic began, CBO analysts usually traveled to that agency's offices to work with those data; more recently, CBO has obtained remote access on a temporary basis. Retaining that remote access would help improve CBO's speed and efficiency.

Also, to attract and retain a staff that can meet the demands of the Congress, CBO needs to provide salaries and benefits that are competitive with those in the executive branch and, to a lesser extent, the private sector. In particular, providing better access to affordable child care remains a challenge for CBO, and giving the agency the authority to offer subsidies for child care to its employees would help it compete better with other employers.

1. See testimony of Phillip L. Swagel, Director, Congressional Budget Office, before the House Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, *CBO's Efforts to Enhance Its Transparency, Effectiveness, and Efficiency* (October 21, 2021), www.cbo.gov/publication/57329.

2. See Congressional Budget Office, *The Congressional Budget Office's Request for Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2022* (February 2021), www.cbo.gov/publication/57265.

3. See Congressional Budget Office, *The Congressional Budget Office's Access to Data From Federal Agencies* (June 2021), www.cbo.gov/publication/57150.

Congresswoman Williams’s Question About How CBO Makes Its Work Accessible and Visible

Question. Dr. Swagel, I want constituents to be able to find and understand the information CBO releases so they have the tools to form their own opinions on a bill. Your testimony mentioned that CBO is making its work more accessible.

What steps could CBO take to not only make its analysis more digestible for our constituents, but also to make our constituents more aware that your work exists for their informative benefit?

Answer. Making its work accessible is a top priority for CBO. For example, the agency recently began publishing most of its reports in a mobile-friendly HTML format. CBO creates interactive tools to help readers better understand its analyses, as well as slide decks and visual summaries that present reports’ main points briefly and clearly. Another recent development is a new format for reports that emphasizes data visualization.

CBO has also improved readers’ access to cost estimates and will continue to do so. New, predictable URLs help readers locate the estimates more quickly on CBO’s website; new filters allow readers to search for estimates by the 10-year total effects of legislation on direct spending, revenues, and deficits; each estimate’s web page now includes a link to the associated bill’s text and legislative information at [Congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov); and the estimates themselves are presented in a way that makes it easier to

find pertinent information. In the coming months, CBO plans to update the main web page for cost estimates, making them even easier to find and making related materials, such as frequently asked questions about cost estimates, more prominent. And CBO will provide additional information to help people understand its cost estimates—for example, characterizing the uncertainty that surrounds them.

CBO aims to build on its current efforts to increase the visibility of its work. The agency releases publicly all of its formal cost estimates and analytic reports. It delivers its work to interested Members of Congress and their staffs. Soon after delivery to those key parties, CBO posts the work on its website. In addition, an email service, Twitter announcements, and RSS feeds notify subscribers when the agency publishes work. Also, CBO has enhanced its profile on LinkedIn by regularly highlighting its recent work.

Further enhancing CBO’s visibility, staff members will continue to communicate daily with people outside the agency to explain findings and methods, respond to questions, and obtain feedback. CBO’s Director will meet regularly with Members of Congress to do the same. Staff members will continue to give presentations on Capitol Hill—some in collaboration with the Congressional Research Service—on the agency’s budget and economic projections and on other topics. Those presentations allow CBO to explain its work and answer questions. Staff members will also give presentations about CBO’s findings and about work in progress in other venues to offer explanations and gather feedback.