



# Using Open Data to Improve Financial Accountability in Public Sector

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# Introduction

For years, federal, state, and local governments, along with educational institutions, have heard the call to be more transparent and accountable by making data available for public consumption. Even before the “Digital Revolution,” taxpayers and the media wanted to know how public money was spent—and if citizens were getting a good return on investment. Those expectations rose with the proliferation of public-facing websites. The information is available, the reasoning goes, so why not share it for all to see?

The drumbeat for openness gets louder with every report of wasteful government spending or fraud against public programs, such as Medicare and Medicaid; Social Security; and Veterans Health Administration benefits. In 2019 alone, the Justice Department has twice announced major busts of Medicare fraud. In September, 35 people were charged with federal counts of defrauding Medicare of \$1.2 billion; and in April, 24 people were charged with bilking the program out of more than \$1 billion over five years.

Taxpayers, lawmakers, and others want to know not only how public money is spent, but if these programs are working. To that end, lawmakers and public sector executives have passed laws and enacted policies that mandate transparency. In the federal sector, agencies are guided by:

Policy or Law	Date Enacted	What it is
<b>OPEN Government Data Act</b>	<b>January 2019</b>	Building on the DATA Act of 2014, the Act requires agencies to publish all unclassified and non-sensitive information online as open data, using standardized, machine-readable data formats, with metadata included. Also requires agencies to appoint a chief data officer to create a culture of transparency.
<b>Federal Data Strategy</b>	<b>June 2019</b>	Released by the Office of Management and Budget, the Strategy includes a one-year action plan for agencies to meet requirements of the President’s Management Agenda to “leverage data as a strategic asset.”
<b>Taxpayers Right to Know Act</b>	<b>Proposed legislation</b>	Bipartisan bill moving through Congress that would require federal agencies to identify and describe each program they administer and the associated costs.

**Figure 1** Federal sector policies and laws

Most states also have passed open data laws in recent years and created online portals similar to the federal [data.gov](https://data.gov) site, where anyone can research spending and other facts in more than 200,000 data sets. For those concerned about spending in public education, there is [data.ed.gov](https://data.ed.gov), which shows data on everything from student loans and college accreditation to grant and scholarship information.

All these improvements in open data help citizens find the public information they’re looking for and better understand how public sector entities operate.

## Turning open data into actionable intelligence

The idea of posting thousands of data sets online is daunting, given the sheer volume of data that the public sector holds. Consider these examples from federal-specific programs:

- More than 60 million Americans were enrolled in Medicare in 2018 and there are thousands of providers, according to the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services.
- The Defense Department, with more than 3.3 million uniformed and civilian personnel, averaged \$6.1 billion annually in Defense Travel System payments from fiscal 2016 through 2018.
- More than 9 million veterans are enrolled in the VA healthcare program, which has providers at more than 1,255 healthcare facilities.

Additionally, traditional reporting provides for static data, which can't be sorted, queried, or integrated with other data sources. To make open data useful, data codes must be flexible for searches and sorting.

Without context or sorting, the data amounts to a long list of information that can leave the public with more questions than answers. Imagine if you're trying to learn how much Medicare or Medicaid funding has gone to specific opioid prescriptions in a select area of the country, but there are no filters to sort the information that way. Instead, you have to go to numerous sources and comb through dozens of pages of data to try to get to the information. The data becomes less useful to you and doesn't help the agency's image for transparency.

“To put it out there without context or explanation doesn't really help anybody,” says Anthony Young, a state and local government enterprise architect with Tableau Software. “Releasing complete data sets without supporting information may put agencies in compliance, but it doesn't help public understanding. Modern, self-service analytics, with proper visualization capabilities can help put this data into context for the user. It makes the data actionable,” Young added.



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—ANTHONY YOUNG

STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT ENTERPRISE ARCHITECT, TABLEAU SOFTWARE

The good news is that technology exists to make public sector transparency and accountability with open data easier than many realize. Modern data analytics platforms support open data and transparency by providing insights from vast and disparate datasets, with levels of detail not previously possible in traditional reporting.

# A closer look: Health Resources and Services Administration gets results with centralized data analytics

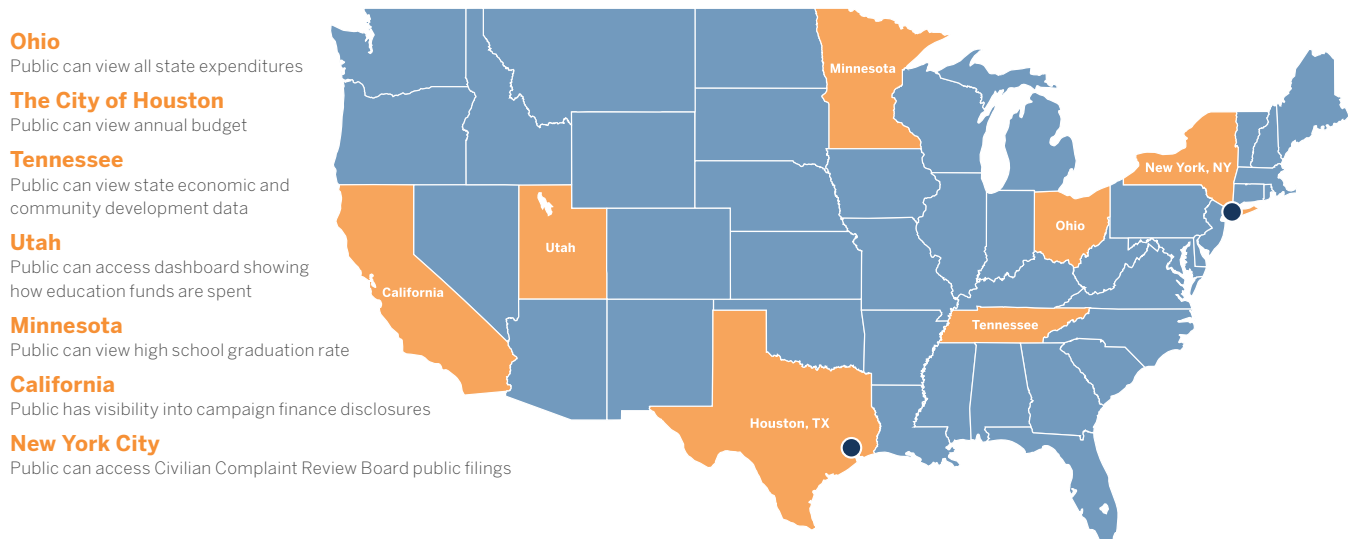
At the [Health Resources and Services Administration](#) (HRSA), the grants division of the federal Health and Human Services Department, the agency needed better visibility, internally and externally, for how billions of dollars in federal grants were being awarded and spent.

The agency was pulling information from more than a half dozen systems to show transactional data from 90 grant programs. The agency tried to conduct enterprise risk management on spreadsheets, but with so many systems and data sources, they were missing too much, according to Joe Roach, HRSA director of financial policy and analysis.

Roach helped bring in a centralized data analytics platform to analyze data in near-real time and display it visually via an interactive dashboard. Now, everyone in the agency can see the same data using the [dashboard](#), which has led to better visibility and decision-making, Roach said.

Like HRSA, managers at the [Federal Emergency Management Agency](#) turned to a centralized data analytics platform after struggling for years to account for money in its disaster recovery grants. Now, the agency—and the public—has visibility into how the money is being spent. Using the platform’s interactive dashboards, the agency and the public can follow trends in disaster recovery funding and filter data in many ways to find specific information.

State and local agencies are also reporting faster access and better visibility to their data using a [centralized analytics platform](#). Some examples of states and cities using advanced analytics and public-facing dashboards include:



The best open data sites highlight data commonly sought and display it with interactive visuals that viewers can quickly understand, to know the stories behind the data.

## How Tableau helps public sector organizations

Today, the best way for public sector organizations to meet internal and external stakeholder expectations for open data and transparency is to adopt a modern data analytics solution. With a centralized data analytics platform, agencies can unlock the potential of their data, and share insights across departments (and with the public) in interactive dashboards that give concise data in near-real time. Empowered by data, leadership can improve the quality of decision-making, and ensure that they have the right information to meet their mission objectives.

**Linda Miller**, director of public sector fraud risk assessment for the Grant Thornton accounting network, works with federal agencies to deploy Tableau's data analytics platform.

According to Miller, despite increased laws and policies, some agencies have been slow to achieve transparency, often because they aren't aware of how visual analytics can make it easy.

"A common response I get is that it's 'like magic,'" she says.

Using Tableau, agencies can get full visibility into their data and at the same time, provide the public with transparency into program spending at a glance. As a self-service platform, Tableau allows data workers within agencies to easily prepare data for end users, using drag-and-drop features. And the data is accessible by design: a user can tap into Tableau's robust features whether accessing via desktop, laptop, tablet, or smartphone.

## Getting started with visual analytics

**To obtain the benefits of a platform like Tableau, public sector organizations need to prepare by doing three essential steps:**

**PRIORITIZE** data by determining what is most relevant to the public. This usually starts with financial data.

**KNOW** what data is releasable with minimal ease and work toward releasing everything that is not private or confidential.

**CONSIDER** the story the agency needs to tell. And, think through how people will learn the story from the dashboard. An example may be a Food and Drug Administration (FDA) webpage that lets viewers search for any new drug approvals over a certain amount of years, their intended uses, and possible side effects. In that case, the FDA is telling the story of how it regulates pharmaceuticals for public use.

## Conclusion

For public sector organizations, the move towards open data and transparency is a critical first step towards engendering public trust in government. By seeing and understanding data in new and powerful ways through visual analytics, organizations are also better able to comply with laws and policies that mandate a more rigorous, data-driven approach to financial accountability.

The Tableau platform supports open data and transparency by helping public sector organizations:

- Reduce time spent managing data, allowing teams to focus on other tasks
- Detect and flag anomalies, exceptions, and outliers related to potential fraud, waste, and abuse
- Develop data governance standards and modeling

We invite you to learn more by exploring the information in the Resources section below.

## About Tableau

Tableau helps extract meaning from information. It's an analytics platform that supports the cycle of analytics, offers visual feedback, and helps you answer questions, regardless of their evolving complexity. If you want to innovate with data, you want an application that encourages you to keep exploring—to ask new questions and change your perspective. If you're ready to make your data make an impact, [download a free trial](#) of Tableau Desktop today.

## Additional Resources

### Online

[Federal Civilian Analytics solutions page](#)

[Meet Tableau Blueprint](#)

[Federal Data Strategy](#)

### White papers

[How Government Agencies Can Achieve More with Modern Analytics](#)

[5 Best Practices for Open Data in Government](#)

[4 Ways Government Agencies Can Deliver Better Results](#)

[How to Build a Culture of Self-Service Analytics in Government](#)

[7 Essential Finance Dashboard Strategies](#)

