May 17, 2024

Cherie Klein
Office of Performance and Personnel Management
Office of Management and Budget
1900 E Street, NW
Washington, DC 20415-1000

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Dear Ms. Klein,

On behalf of America Forward and the America Forward Coalition, we thank you for the opportunity to share our comments in response to the Request for Information (RFI) on "Methods and Leading Practices for Advancing Public Participation and Community Engagement With the Federal Government."

America Forward is the nonpartisan policy initiative of New Profit, a pioneering national venture philanthropy organization that invests in breakthrough social entrepreneurs and systems-change initiatives, catalyzes and builds their impact, and transforms how government and philanthropy pursue social change to ensure that all people can thrive. The America Forward Coalition is made up of more than 100 innovative, high-impact organizations that lead creative solutions to our country's most pressing social problems ranging from education to economic mobility to democracy. We work closely with these organizations and their stakeholders to elevate their voices in Federal policy conversations.

We are encouraged by the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB's) effort to improve the Federal Government's engagement with the public in its decision-making processes, and to pay special attention to underserved communities regarding public participation and community engagement (PPCE). Our recommendations emphasize the need to intentionally incorporate the perspective of practitioners, social entrepreneurs, intermediaries, program participants, and other community-based stakeholders with proximate expertise that is essential to drive strong policies at the Federal level.

Question #1: Experience Participating in Federal Government PPCE Activities
First, regarding good examples of Federal engagement, we note several drawing on instances in which the America Forward Coalition has participated in the past two years:

- **Offer multiple forums for engagement.** For example, in March 2023, the U.S. Treasury Department held an open forum for stakeholder input on the Social Impact Partnerships to Pay for Results Act (SIPPRA) program, responding to challenges in implementation of the program's first round of grants. That forum provided both candid insights on lessons learned in the first round while offering a clear purpose: receiving input to develop a stronger second round. In addition, this forum built on an earlier comment request for

written feedback, affording multiple venues for input from the community.[1] Ultimately, the second round application incorporated much of the feedback that community stakeholders had shared, and we believe this community engagement process was integral to Treasury's success in doing so.

- **Issue clear, specific questions tied to particular potential actions whenever possible.** Too often agencies issue broad RFIs with dozens of questions on broadly-defined issues. Stakeholders– such as our organization– typically feel compelled to respond and spend valuable hours of time working with community members, even though it is often not clear how the agency intends to actually use that information. In this context, we particularly appreciated the National Institute of Standards and Technology's 2022 RFI on Implementation of the CHIPs Incentives Program.[2] This RFI provided clear, specific questions and a direct tie to the agency's upcoming action in implementing CHIPS.
- **Provide longer time frames for input when possible**. It often takes time for opportunities for input– particularly written input– to filter down through stakeholders' networks, for stakeholders to convene, to perform research, and then to prepare and revise formal input. For example, this RFI provided about two months' notice – we would suggest affording three months for a process that does not appear to be time-sensitive. One good example is a Department of Labor RFI on open data issues: that RFI was issued in June 2022 and closed December 2022, affording six full months for responses.[3] America Forward and our Coalition members found that period tremendously helpful to develop the most effective and responsive feedback on workforce data ecosystem issues.

Second, we highlight ways that Federal agencies should improve. The America Forward Coalition recently held a session in which Coalition members – ranging in expertise from civic education to workforce development – shared their best practices with regard to elevating the voices of people proximate to policy issues under deliberation. Top takeaways from this session and our broader experience include:

- **Leverage and support the unique relationships and knowledge of non-governmental, community-based organizations.** There are many non-governmental organizations working in communities across the country who can provide their perspective as well as provide information and support to those they serve, enabling stakeholders to apply their proximate, lived expertise to create strong policies at the Federal level. We encourage

[1] U.S. Department of the Treasury (2022), "Agency Information Collection Activities; Proposed Collection; Comment Request; Application, Evaluation Design Plan, Reports, and Recordkeeping for the Social Impact Partnerships To Pay for Results Act (SIPPRA) Grant Program," 87 FR 24648, available at https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2022/04/26/2022-08858/agency-information-collection-activities-proposed-collection-comment-request-application-evaluation.

[2] National Institute of Standards and Technology (2022), "Implementation of the CHIPS Incentives Program," 87 FR 61570, available at https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2022/10/12/2022-22158/implementation-of-the-chips-incentives-program.

[3] U.S. Department of Labor (2022), "Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy; Request for Information on Design and Implementation Features for Open Data Services Provided by the Department of Labor," 87 FR 36151, available at https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2022/06/15/2022-12510/office-of-the-assistant-secretary-for-policy-request-for-information-on-design-and-implementation.

agencies to prioritize outreach to these non-governmental organizations who can act as trusted intermediaries to support broader, more effective community engagement.

- **Offer times for participation outside of the "regular" working day of 9 a.m. - 5 p.m., as well as venues outside of purely written feedback** (e.g., in-person or virtual hearings). To expand engagement among community members, we urge stakeholders to consider options that are accessible beyond the typical policy and membership organizations that often respond to these kinds of requests.
- **Ask program participants and community members not only for their perspective on problems to be solved, but also potential solutions**. Too often people are only asked to talk about their challenges but not given the opportunity to offer their perspective on potential solutions.This solution addresses policymakers' (and advocates') common misconception that some policies are too "technical" for such individuals to consider, though in practice such individuals have often considered complex policies deeply and have invaluable perspectives to share. Often the most useful and creative insights on potential solutions come from the people who are the most proximate to the issue.
- **Offer fair compensation for program participants and community members who are sharing their perspectives.** This is particularly essential when engagement requires significant investment of time or occurs during their work hours - such as through an ongoing advisory committee.
- **Follow-up on RFIs and other venues to communicate what the agency learned and how they are responding – and consider less-formal venues.** Engaging in these forums is not costless, and it is frustrating to stakeholders when agencies do not follow-up with takeaways. In particular, written RFIs often require extensive time to craft responses, and it is dispiriting when it is not clear that anyone at the agency fully read or responded to the feedback. Our team includes numerous former federal agencies staffers, and we recognize how it can often be easier to ask a question than to follow up. We discuss potential solutions in response to OMB's question on this topic below.

Question #2: Content in a Federal Framework for PPCE

Building on our recommendations above, we provide the following suggestions as OMB develops a Federal framework for PPCE:

- **A clear plan for responsiveness to input.** When agencies request significant time and effort from the community regarding questions, they should have a clear plan to report back. To be clear, we are not suggesting expanding the intensive notice-and-comment process agencies must undertake as part of rulemaking. But simply asking questions, taking input, and providing no follow-up is dispiriting and antithetical to the motivations undergirding the present RFI. This response could be informal, such as a blog post summarizing input from the community–one good example is this blog post from the former Director of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) earlier this year, reflecting on input for IES's APRA-ED strategy.[4] We also strongly encourage agencies to follow-up directly with commenters to share these responses or the follow-on action (e.g., a rule or guidance) – one easy way is to simply email back all of the respondents to the Federal Register notice.

[4] Schneider (2024), "Help Us Grow Seedlings," Institute of Education Sciences, available at https://ies.ed.gov/director/remarks/01-23-2024.asp.

- **Encourage input from participants and proximate community members.** OMB should encourage agencies to emphasize their desire to hear from program participants and proximate community members whenever possible. For example, agencies proposing a rule relating to benefits programs could emphasize their desire to hear direct input from affected participants, past participants, and other proximate stakeholders – and could complement written notices with virtual and in-person forums.
- **Engage non-governmental, community-based organizations in the process.** Per our recommendation above, OMB should encourage agencies to ensure that non-governmental organizations are aware of opportunities for public participation and community engagement and are provided the necessary support and time to participate directly and to support those they serve in participating.
- **Emphasize meaningful, mission-aligned engagement, not simply more metrics.** While we applaud the goal that agencies critically consider the success of their PPCE activities and engage in continual improvement, we also urge OMB to consider the effectiveness of past metrics in this regard. For example, one of our team members supported the development of the Annual Performance Plan and Annual Performance Report at multiple federal agencies. We celebrate the many agency efforts to leverage performance data for intentional improvement, but we also recognize that too often these measures are mere "vanity metrics" and can even provide perverse incentives for agencies if not well-designed. We think these issues can be particularly concerning in the context of PPCE as agencies make a show of PPCE figures without conducting a truly meaningful process. In this context, one metric we suggest agencies consider is the extent of responses reflecting direct input from proximate participants and stakeholders directly affected by issues to be addressed (e.g., former or current benefits programs recipients).
- **Build on Evidence Act and Uniform Grants Guidance efforts.** We applaud OMB's recent action to support effective implementation of the Evidence Act, including agency learning agendas. We also celebrate the terrific advances in the Uniform Grants Guidance, including spurring agencies to conduct community engagement as part of their grants activities. Any new PPCE framework should intentionally support and complement these efforts. For example, as America Forward recommended in a report on federal evidence funds such as the Education Innovation and Research program last fall, agencies should engage proximate individuals as staff and advisors to support the selection of federal grants – reflecting true community engagement in one of agencies' most critical choices.[5]

Question #3: Collaborative process to co-develop a Federal framework for PPCE

In general, we encourage OMB to employ the recommendations we made above in pursuing a Federal framework for PPCE. We also make two specific recommendations:

- **Address issues with the Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA).** In several of our team members' past experience as Federal officials, we have found the PRA to pose an absurdly burdensome obstacle to the goals of this RFI. Any new Federal framework for

[5] See page 19 of Sackett, Covell, and Lopez (2023), *Unlocking Innovation: Advancing the Continuous Improvement of Federal Evidence Funds*, America Forward, available at https://www.americaforward.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/America-Forward-Unlocking-Innovation-in-Evidence-Funds-October-2023.pdf.

PPCE must deal head-on with the PRA and its stultifying effect on federal agency community engagement (and we suspect that the PRA has led agencies to over-use the rigid, formal input processes we decry above). As a 2012 Administrative Conference of United States (ACUS) report noted, "It is a common refrain at federal agencies that the PRA increases paperwork."[6] We strongly encourage OMB to review the 2012 ACUS report as well as a recent piece by Dr. Stuart Buck at the Good Science Project that discusses many of the issues with PRA that are likely to stunt implementation of new PPCE efforts as well as potential solutions, such as exempting collections under a certain burden-hour threshold.[7]

- **Develop ongoing infrastructure to support this effort.** In 2021, America Forward provided extensive recommendations to OMB's RFI "Methods and Leading Practices for Advancing Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through Government."[8] One of our central recommendations wat the creation of a new White House Office of Inclusive Impact & Innovation, led by a Chief Innovation & Inclusive Impact Officer reporting directly to the President, with the authority both to help set budgetary priorities through the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and to convene and direct policy through the White House Domestic Policy Council (DPC).[9] Building on the breakthrough work of the Obama-Biden Administration's White House Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation, we encourage you to consider ways to institutionalize support for PPCE efforts over the long-term through the creation of a similar Office.

Conclusion

In sum, America Forward supports the Department's overarching goal to strengthen its engagement with communities. As you develop a final rule, we urge your consideration of America Forward's recommendations to bolster PPCE across the Federal government and respond to past barriers to effective PPCE.

Thank you for your attention to and consideration of America Forward's recommendations, and we welcome the opportunity for further dialogue and collaboration. Please contact us if we can be of any assistance at chase_sackett@newprofit.org.

Sincerely,

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Policy Director	Advocacy Director	Advocacy Manager
America Forward	America Forward	America Forward

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[6] Shapiro (2012), *The Paperwork Reduction Act: Research on Current Practices and Recommendations for Reform*, prepared for the Administrative Conference of the United States (ACUS), available at https://www.acus.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Draft-PRA-Report-2-15-12.pdf.

[7] Buck (2023), "The Paperwork Reduction Act Is Terrible, And We Should Eliminate Or Reform It," Good Science Project, https://goodscienceproject.org/articles/the-paperwork-reduction-act-is-terrible-and-we-should-eliminate-or-reform-it/.

[8] New Profit and America Forward (2021), "RE: America Forward & New Profit Advancing Racial Equity Policy Recommendations," available at https://www.regulations.gov/comment/OMB-2021-0005-0155.

[9] New Profit and America Forward (2021), "A New White House Office of Inclusive Impact & Innovation," available at https://downloads.regulations.gov/OMB-2021-0005-0155/attachment_2.pdf.