



**A Quick and Easy Guide:
The Appropriations and
Budget Process**

**Prepared by the
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Managing the Appropriations and Budget Outreach Process

ENVIRONMENT

The poor economy, a tight federal budget, and less foundation money make engagement in the federal budget and appropriations process more critical this year. The current recession is shaping the debate on the federal budget, which provides not just funding but direction for the nation's policy priorities. As Congress moves forward with the budget and appropriations process, specific funding amounts for the programs our Affiliates run will emerge. Your engagement can help determine the outcome of this year's spending on programs you operate. This document is intended to provide guidance on the budget and appropriations process.

UNDERSTANDING PROCEDURE

The Senate and House of Representatives Budget Committees decide how much overall funding the Appropriations Committees will be allowed to work with in setting individual program funding levels. The Appropriations Subcommittees determine the actual amounts for each federally funded program. To help you better understand the roles played by the different parties involved in the budget and appropriations debate, we have provided the following glossary.

Key Players

Office of Management and Budget (OMB)—The budget arm of the White House

House/Senate Budget Committees—Set the parameters for overall spending and revenues

House/Senate Appropriations Committees and Subcommittees—Write spending bills

Departmental Budget Service Offices—Write departmental budget and policy proposals

Key Terms

Budget Resolution—The budget resolution is created by the House and Senate Budget Committees and covers total spending (programs), total revenues (taxes), and the deficit. It is intended to guide spending and other policy decisions, so it is not signed into law by the President. However, it sends a political message about congressional priorities.

Reconciliation—The budget resolution often contains instructions (“reconciliation instructions”) to other committees with jurisdiction over spending (often “mandatory” spending, such as Medicaid payments), revenues, and other policies. If those other committees take action on these instructions, then Congress must include them in a “reconciliation bill.”

Appropriations—Appropriations bills provide spending for specific programs through “line items” and “report language.” Line item funding targets significant “authorized” programs, such as Adult Education. Report language can provide instructions for the use of funding. For example, report language in an appropriations bill can instruct the Department of Education to set aside a certain amount of adult English-as-a-second-language funds for community-based

organizations. Report language cannot supersede a law, i.e., it cannot make permanent changes to a federal program.

Authorization—For federal programs to receive funding, they must receive an “authorization,” i.e., they must be approved by Congress and enacted by the President. Authorization can take place through an authorizing committee (for example, the House Education and Labor Committee authorizes programs such as Head Start and the Workforce Investment Act).

Discretionary Spending—These funds are provided for by the Appropriations Committees and are included in each fiscal year’s appropriations bills. These are for domestic programs, such as Head Start, health clinics, housing counseling, and job training (Workforce Investment Act).

Mandatory Spending—These funds are provided mainly for entitlement programs that have been permanently authorized and whose amounts are based on the number of eligible participants, such as Medicaid or Social Security.

Pass Back—Government agencies (within each federal department) develop their annual budgets and then submit them to OMB. OMB reviews agency budgets and then passes them back to the agencies with questions and/or revised budget amounts. It is up to the agencies to advocate for specific funding for programs in their jurisdiction and for how programs are operated within their agencies.

Mark Up—To mark up refers to committee consideration and amending (i.e., “marking up”) of a bill.

ENGAGEMENT

Funding for programs operated by National Council of La Raza (NCLR) Affiliates comes mainly from discretionary spending programs, so we need to encourage the House and Senate Appropriations Committees to adequately fund these programs. The timeline below highlights appropriate actions during a typical year. This year, the process has been delayed due to the transition to a new administration. However, it remains essential that we focus on the Appropriations Committee and Subcommittees.

Our message cannot simply be that programs need a certain number of dollars. We need to:

- Describe how vital the programs are to your local community.
- Provide a real-life example of what your programs do for community members.
- Emphasize how much funding the programs need to continue to serve the community effectively.
- Point out that they have been losing funding for years (if that is the case) and, if possible, the number of people who will not be served if the programs do not receive sufficient funding.

Here's a link to a list of discretionary human needs programs, created by the Coalition for Human Needs, that shows what has happened to federal spending since fiscal year (FY) 2005, taking inflation into account: <http://chn.org/pdf/2009/BudgetFY0508vOmnibus09.pdf>.

GETTING INVOLVED

The budget process is less accessible than the appropriations process. For instance, the budget process does not allow outside public witnesses to testify at hearings. The Budget process deals with big-picture spending and revenues, rather than smaller amounts dedicated to specific programs. It is important to draw attention to the programs that are important to us by working in broad coalitions to build support, thereby creating a stronger voice so that these specific programs are not lost among the larger discussions. The earlier you get involved in the process, the easier it is to influence policy. Community groups, activists, and practitioners who want to influence the congressional budget process should adapt their actions as time moves forward.

WHEN TO TAKE ACTION

February 2009—White House releases its FY 2009 budget for the federal government. *Point of influence: Offer a press response to the White House budget, preferably with a local angle to make the connection between the federal budget and how it impacts your community (e.g., “Three hundred fifty potential homeowners will not receive housing counseling in [your city] under the President’s budget proposal”).*

February through March 2009—Appropriations Subcommittees hold hearings on FY 2010 funding for different departments and agencies. *Point of influence: Provide written testimony to subcommittees on funding priorities.*

February through April 2009—Budget Committee considers the budget resolution and sets spending parameters for appropriators. *Point of influence: Send letters to Budget Committee members **prior** to April.*

Action for February through April*

Build relationships with congressional members and staff:

- Identify members and staff of the budget committees. Individual citizens often do not target these committees.
- Identify supporters of your issues.
- Be an accessible, reliable, and accurate source of information.
- Understand their motivations: votes, money, programs, and projects in their district.
- Understand the congressional calendar. Based on the congressional calendar for the budget process, February and March are critical months. However, relationship-building takes time and requires a long-term commitment to really have an impact.

Build coalitions with other groups and organizations:

- Work with traditional and nontraditional allies.
- Find common ground.
- Demonstrate a wide base of support for your cause. This strengthens your ability to influence policy, especially if you encompass a diverse range of interests.
- Coordinate efforts targeting the budget committees.

* Michelle Weinberg, *Understanding the Federal Budget Process* (Baltimore, MD: Communities Committee, 2009), http://www.communitiescommittee.org/pdfs/fed_budget.pdf (accessed March 20, 2009).

May through July 2009—House and Senate committees mark up appropriations bills and ready them for floor votes. *Point of influence: Send letters and written testimony to committees and the entire House of Representatives and Senate.*

Summer 2009—Agencies complete their budget requests for 2011. *Point of influence: Send letters to Department Secretaries.*

August Recess—Representatives and Senators spend August in districts and states. *Point of influence: Invite members of Congress to visit programs, host breakfast/lunch/dinner meetings with congressional members, and host town hall meetings.*

Action for May through December*

Write letters:

- Write to representatives (in Washington and in your home district), chairs of the relevant congressional committees and subcommittees, and heads of relevant agencies, targeting individuals likely to be called to testify before a committee.
- An effective letter addresses why federal funding is critical for the program, discusses the program's past successes, explains why the congressional member or agency representative should be interested, states how much money the program needs, and suggests any changes needed in the program.
- Follow up with a phone call to briefly summarize your letter and express your desire to hear back from your representative or a member of their staff regarding your concerns.

Meet with your representatives in person:

- Arrange a meeting at their district offices when they are in town or in Washington.

Provide written testimony to an appropriations subcommittee:

- Write a letter to the relevant subcommittee chair requesting to submit testimony for the record at a specific appropriations hearing. Be sure to tell your story.
- Send copies of your letters to your representatives, both in Washington and in your home district.

* Michelle Weinberg, *Understanding the Federal Budget Process* (Baltimore, MD: Communities Committee, 2009), http://www.communitiescommittee.org/pdfs/fed_budget.pdf (accessed March 20, 2009).

September 2009—FY 2010 appropriations bills to be completed. *Point of influence: Write letters to Appropriations Conference Committee members and the full House of Representatives and Senate.*

Fall 2009—FY 2011 budget pass-back to departments from OMB. *Point of influence: Write letters to OMB prior to fall.*

February 2010—President releases FY 2011 budget. *Point of influence: Send a budget letter to the President prior to release of budget. Opportunity for press.*

BECOMING FAMILIAR WITH THE BUDGET AND APPROPRIATIONS PROCESS

Budget 101—This PowerPoint presentation by Debbie Weinstein from the Coalition on Human Needs explains common vocabulary used in the budget process and outlines the traditional timeline for the federal budget. The presentation provides greater clarification on the definitions provided earlier in this document.

<http://chn.org/pdf/2009/CHNBudget101.pdf>

Budget Functions—The federal budget is divided into approximately 20 categories known as budget functions. These functions include all spending for a given area, regardless of the federal agency that oversees the individual federal program. Being familiar with these functions can help in researching specific programs.

<http://budget.house.gov/functions.shtml>

The President's Budget—The links on this page provide helpful ways to pick through the current budget and begin drawing comparisons.

http://budget.house.gov/pres_budg.shtml

Summary of the President's Budget (also found on the previous web page)—This general overview is an informal Democratic document issued by the Budget Committee to help clarify the President's plan. Comparisons are drawn between the Obama administration's plan and the Bush administration's previous budget.

http://budget.house.gov/pres_budgets/fy2010/02.27.2009_FY2010_Pres_Budget_Summary.pdf

Appropriations Subcommittees—The programs NCLR and its Affiliates care about are divided into subcommittees within the Appropriations Committee. Links are provided for each of these below:

Agriculture:

http://appropriations.house.gov/Subcommittees/sub_arfd.shtml

Commerce, Justice, and Science Defense:

http://appropriations.house.gov/Subcommittees/sub_cjs.shtml

Defense:

http://appropriations.house.gov/Subcommittees/sub_def.shtml

Energy and Water:

http://appropriations.house.gov/Subcommittees/sub_ew.shtml

Financial Services:

http://appropriations.house.gov/Subcommittees/sub_fsdc.shtml

Homeland Security:

http://appropriations.house.gov/Subcommittees/sub_dhs.shtml

Interior and Environment:

http://appropriations.house.gov/Subcommittees/sub_ienv.shtml

Labor, Health and Human Services, Education:

http://appropriations.house.gov/Subcommittees/sub_lhse.shtml

Legislative Branch:

http://appropriations.house.gov/Subcommittees/sub_leg.shtml

Military Construction, Veterans

Affairs:

http://appropriations.house.gov/Subcommittees/sub_mivet.shtml

State, Foreign Operations:

http://appropriations.house.gov/Subcommittees/sub_sfo.shtml

Transportation, Housing and Urban Development:

http://appropriations.house.gov/Subcommittees/sub_tranurb.shtml

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