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NEW MEDIA

Stimulus Applications Could Overwhelm Grants.gov

By Sarah Cohen

The first federal casualty of the stimulus bill was identified by the Office of Management and Budget this week when OMB director Peter Orszag told agency heads to plan for a possible meltdown of the government's main grantmaking portal.

A review of its capacity revealed a "significant risk of failure," Orszag warned. A memo sent to agencies said that Grants.gov, a site where nonprofits and local governments can search federal programs and apply for more than 1,000 competitive grants from 22 agencies, is already straining under the weight of recent growth. With an expected 60 percent increase in volume because of last month's \$787 billion stimulus bill, the system could just break, Orszag said.

Programs getting large boosts in grant spending under the bill include broadband Internet access, medical research and education construction. The risk was identified as part of OMB's review of major systems needed to get the stimulus money out quickly.

The expected major surge in applications will likely take a while to emerge, as agencies begin writing their instructions to applicants and settle on conditions and priorities for the grants. So far, only grant monies sent to state and local governments using formulas have been allocated.

But already the system is slowing down, frustrating would-be grantees trying to meet application deadlines and instead getting error messages. "Grants.gov continues to experience system slowness due to the high volume of users," the site's program management office [told readers of the Grants.gov blog Tuesday](#).

"Think we all need to go to our congressmen and senators and do more than 'shake some trees,'" wrote one anonymous commenter in response. "The system can not support the activity. It's as basic as that.... Not until we all scream and shout will we get action. If I am told one more time to 'call the help desk,' I think I'll go crazy!"

In preparation for the surge, the Department of Health and Human Services, which runs the portal, recently added more storage space for the system and is working on other modernization efforts, Orszag said in a written statement. But Orszag nonetheless ordered all of the agencies to make alternative plans in case Grants.gov can't handle the load by next week.

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