



Center for Public Policy Priorities

Mr. Conor Kenny
Senate Committee on Government Organization
Texas Senate
P.O. Box 12068, Capitol Station
Austin, Texas 78711

Dear Mr. Kenny,

Thank you for inviting the Center for Public Policy Priorities to testify at the September 27th hearing of the committee on its interim charge to “review opportunities for increasing the transparency of government operations and make recommendations for enhancing public access to government.” CPPP comments will focus on ways to release more information out of the appropriations committee process and to make the appropriations conference committee process more transparent.

Specifically, we will discuss ways in which public testimony and public understanding could be improved if Senate Finance, House Appropriations, and budget conference committee documents such as issue dockets, agency budget handouts, and other information currently made available only to committee members was also posted online prior to the start of a hearing, and/or projected onto a screen during the committee’s deliberations, allowing everyone present to see what is being discussed. This would especially improve the budget conference committee process, when much of the decision-making takes place in meetings during which audio or video of the proceedings is not captured or archived.

Another area for improvement is the different ways in which the Senate and House hold public hearings. The Senate requires that a hearing with opportunity for the public to appear and testify be held on a bill (before a committee or subcommittee), with 24-hour posting notice, before the bill can be reported to the Senate. The House, in contrast, does not require a public hearing before a bill is reported out of committee or considered by the House--only a public **meeting**, which allows for the public to be present but not to testify. Bills that reduce tax revenue could therefore pass the House with no opportunity for public testimony.

Finally, existing technology could be used as a starting point to improve the availability of budget information, such as using the Legislative Budget Board’s “Texas Budget Source” and other ABEST-based interfaces to provide real-time information on the marked-up, House and Senate, and conference committee versions of the appropriations bill. More detailed information on the use of General Revenue and on changes in state employment should be provided at the strategy level of detail, and for a five-year timeframe. To make this more manageable for legislative budget staff, the availability of improved information could be limited to the half a dozen or so state agencies and universities receiving at least \$500 million per biennium in General Revenue, or about 70 percent of total state GR appropriations.

Please contact me immediately at (512) 320-0228, extension 103, if you have any questions about this.

Sincerely,

Eva DeLuna Castro
Senior Budget Analyst