

Plaskett Advocates for Legislative Reform to Ensure Equal Data Collection Across U.S. Territories

"New legislation seeks to align data collection standards between U.S. territories and states, addressing gaps identified by a recent GAO report

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Janeka Simon **May 11, 2024**

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In light of a recently published report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office on gaps in federal data for U.S. territories, Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett is calling on her colleagues to act on draft legislation that would require federal agencies to collect and publish statistics on the territories in the same way they do the 50 states.

The GAO report identifies several factors which contribute to the data gaps, some of which are immutable. The geographical distance between the seat of the federal government in Washington, D.C. to some of the country's more far-flung territories is one such challenge. Some of the barriers

to effective data collection and compilation, however, are legal ones. “Statutes governing and funding principal statistical agencies may differ or be ambiguous about the requirement to collect data from the territories,” the report notes. Higher costs and technical challenges with ensuring accurate data collections within the relatively small populations in the territories were also cited.

H.R. 1400 was meant to solve the data disparity. Introduced in March last year by Representative Raúl Grijalva of Arizona’s 7th District, ranking member of the House Natural Resources Committee, the bill was co-sponsored by Congresswoman Plaskett as well as the other territorial representatives in the House, from Puerto Rico, Guam, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands. The legislation requires “the implementation of a plan for federal agencies to collect and publish statistics regarding U.S. territories in the same manner as the 50 states,” said Congresswoman Plaskett, a move reinforced by the recommendation of the GAO report, that “the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) develop a coordinated, government-wide strategy to involve the territories in federal statistical outputs and address these data gaps effectively.”

Representative Grijalva declared that the issue was ensuring equity. “Residents of the U.S. territories deserve the same access to federal programs and resources as every other American,” said Mr. Grijalva. However, they are getting left behind because of historic disparities between how the federal government treats those who live in states compared with the Americans who reside in U.S. territories.

“Addressing the gaps and deficiencies in data collection is only one step, but a meaningful one, in bringing equity and justice to the territories,” said Rep. Grijalva. “I urge the agencies to heed GAO’s recommendations and work to put a government-wide strategy in place to improve data collection among the territories, and I encourage my colleagues to use this opportunity to advance the Territories Statistics Collection Equity Act now.”

The Act has been referred to the Subcommittee on Indian and Insular Affairs in the House Committee on Natural Resources, Oversight and Accountability.