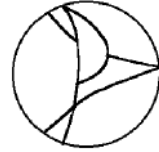


Community Matters

Government Web Portal Offers the World

By: Patricia A. O'Malley

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At the end of each column, I list Web sites where you can find more information. Most of my columns deal with government in one way or another, and every government office and agency has its own site. So how do I know all of this stuff and how do I find my way around?

In the late 1990s, President Bill Clinton instructed every government office to develop a Web site for public use. Can you imagine how many sites that would be? People had no idea how or where to look for the information they needed. In June 2000 Eric Brewer, one of the founders of the Internet, donated a massive search engine to the United States through his nonprofit Federal Search Foundation. His gift included the condition that the U.S. launch its official web portal within 90 days. Firstgov.gov opened for business on September 22, 2000. The name was changed to usa.gov in January 2007. Congress issues the funds and the US General Services Administration's Office of Citizen Services and Communications administers the site.

In its eight years, the site has earned 171 awards from dozens of organizations, publications, and other Web sites. The most recent was the "Site of the Day" award from *Entertainment Weekly* magazine just last month.

USA.gov is your access to a mind-boggling supply of information. It links all of the individual government sites into a single place. It can connect you with every bit of public information in every government office and agency at every level – federal, state, local, and even American Indian tribal governments. That's right. All of it. Of course, no one wants all of that information, but every piece is important to someone. Now there's a way to find it.

Since the site is so massive, it includes a search function, a Help page, a Frequently Asked Questions page, a site index, and online tutorials. You can even email questions to the managers. However, I've found that the best way to use it is to spend just a few minutes poking around and getting used to it. There are sections for individuals, businesses, government employees, and visitors to the US. In only seconds, you can contact elected officials, read the text of legislation pending before Congress, register to vote, read the nutritional requirements of the National School Lunch Program, and apply for student financial aid. You can visit every US embassy in the world, and the embassies of foreign governments in the US.

But it's not just for the federal government. You can email the governor, find hotels in every city, find your state legislator, and renew your driver's license. There are maps of every Allegheny County park and the county real estate Web site. You can reach larger cities easily, but finding the smaller municipalities is a bit tricky. You can link to Allegheny County towns and boroughs through the county Web site. School districts are listed under the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

Usa.gov is a vital tool for every citizen. I found the US Constitution in four clicks, President Obama's economic stimulus bill in six clicks, and the Pleasant Hills Borough Council meeting minutes in six clicks. I found Allegheny County poverty statistics in seven clicks. I reached the government's site for

military families in two clicks and the Pennsylvania state budget in three. You can reach the White House, Congress, the governor, and your own mayor.

It's great for students, too. I found the official sites of the Navaho Nation in Arizona, the Smithsonian Institution, and the West Coast/Alaska Tsunami Warning Center. Essentially, if the government has it, you can find it.

You can get all of the same information over the telephone or through the mail, but it will take longer. That contact information is listed below. The site is published in English and Spanish. General information is available in 89 other languages, too.

When you need information or help on anything related to government, start with usa.gov. If you don't have a computer to get to the Internet, you can use one free at any public library in Allegheny County. Each library offers a class to show you the ropes. It's all paid for through the Allegheny County RAD (Regional Assets District) Tax. That's the extra one percent sales tax. You can get to the RAD Web site through usa.gov in seven clicks. Try it.

For more information, go to www.usa.gov, call 1 (800) FED INFO (1-800-333-4636), or write to Office of Citizen Services and Communications, U.S. General Services Administration, 1800 F Street, NW, Washington, DC 20405

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