

“Underfunding” for Congressional Printing Continues to Plague GPO

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Over the past ten years, GPO has reported on a number of occasions that the printing it produces in-house for Congress was “underfunded” during the previous year. This month GPO presented its FY2002 budget request to Congress, and announced that the Congressional printing work had been underfunded by \$9.9 million.

Many GPO watchers in both the private sector and in government translate this “underfunding” to a loss due to inefficiency and/or to a failure by GPO to live within the budget Congress sets for it. These conclusions are inaccurate. Underfunding for a government service organization such as GPO does not necessarily mean that the organization operated at a loss, or that it spent money inefficiently or ineffectively.

The way in which GPO operates is unique. Each year Congress provides it with budgeted funds that are intended to cover the cost of printing Congress orders. Some years, the budget figure is driven by a belief that Congressional printing will be reduced in the subsequent year, while some years the GPO’s budget simply relates to a desire by Congress to lower expenditures. If GPO were another agency, whatever the reason for a reduction in its budget, it would simply have to make do, and provide fewer services. However, GPO is not another agency – it is the Congressional printer. Congress is not willing to waive printing of Congressional Record issues, or any of its bills or other materials, simply because GPO had already expended the budgeted amount for Congressional printing. When Congress says, “print it” the GPO presses run. As a result, when the charges for the printing (at the rate agreed to by GPO and Congress) exceed the amount of the budgeted funds Congress provides, the “underfunding” results.

When such an underfunding occurs, GPO suppliers and production staff do not go unpaid. Instead, GPO makes up the shortfall from its Revolving Fund. That fund contains the surplus GPO has built up over the years. If Congressional underfunding is a method to draw down the amount of the Revolving Fund (a budget reduction measure of sorts) then someone should simply say so, so that it does not appear that GPO is running “in the red.”

GPO’s underfunding problems have lead some to believe that GPO should cut its costs in order to produce the printing Congress wants at the price Congress wants to pay. While that belief seems logical, it ignores the fact that GPO is basically an in-house printer for Congress, and must maintain facilities, equipment, and highly trained staff on call to perform Congressional printing whenever it is needed. The daily Congressional Record is a good example. Some days it is two hundred pages; some days it is five hundred pages. As all printers know, you maintain the same press, building, and staff to print either job—especially when there is no way to predict the page count. Add this production problem to the scheduling problem: no one knows when the Congressional sessions are going to end on any given day, so that the run may start at 6 o’clock, or it may start at 11 o’clock. In either case, the printed Congressional Record has to be delivered in the halls of Congress early the following morning.

In addition to maintaining the press and bindery staff necessary to support this complex product, GPO also has to maintain a skilled prepress and desktop publishing staff in order to produce the record and bills with the exact look that is required.

Several years ago, Congress began to reduce the run length for the Congressional Record. Like most customers, they felt that if they ordered fewer copies, the bill would go down substantially. While this may be the case for single jobs purchased from outside suppliers, reducing the run length for a publication produced by an in-house plant generally does not generate a substantial saving. The same typesetting, layout, design and prepress work is required for 10,000 copies or 20,000 copies. The existing facility, equipment, and pressroom staff is also required. While there may be some saving in the bindery and handling area, it is really not significant. In short, while there is a savings realized, it is no way proportional to the reduction in the copy count.

Because of the cost inherent in maintaining an in-house printing facility, some in Congress have suggested that it may be time to contract out Congressional printing to the private sector. However, as far as I am aware, there have been no actual quotes or cost studies done to determine whether or not a private sector facility, which is required to be on call to print the Congressional Record and other Congressional materials, would be more cost effective than GPO. For a normal government customer, with a reasonable schedule, GPO has found it to be far less expensive to contract work out to the private sector. As a result, GPO contracts out 75 percent of other government printing to the private sector, but none of those printing jobs have a daily printing run that ties up both the second and third shift. On the contrary, many of them simply fit neatly into a printer's commercial market workload.

The question of whether or not the private sector should supplant GPO as the printer of the Congressional Record may fast become moot. For several years the Congressional Record has been on-line (http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/aces/aces150.html) in an expertly laid out, fully searchable web version maintained by GPO on its servers, before the printed copies are available. This on-line Record is available to the public without charge. Today, Capitol Hill, Agency personnel, and those of us in the business and university communities that have a need or reason to look something up in the Congressional Record have high-speed internet access. Those primary user groups prefer to use the searchable internet version (as opposed to paging through volume after volume of daily Congressional Records to find the needed quote or information). Judging from the hits on the GPO website, the public likes the on-line record too. Trips to a number of libraries disclosed that the printed copies of the Record remain almost untouched, apparently evidencing the fact that the libraries' internet connections have become the preferred way for those without internet access to access or search the Congressional Record.

The question that some in Congress may consider in 2003 and beyond is not who should print the Congressional Record, but whether the excellent job GPO has done with the on-line version could eliminate the need for the web run of the printed version.

Although doing away with the printed Record would save money, it would not eliminate the high cost of producing the digital files that are required to provide *both* the web and printed products.

In the meantime, as long as Congress is going to require GPO to maintain the facility, equipment, and staff to meet the stringent demands inherent in printing the Congressional Record, it seems only fair that it should be willing to pay GPO's cost of producing the Record and eliminate the "underfunding" problem.

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July 11, 2001