

Testimony on SB 949 Section 4

My name is Stephen Ross, and I am a Professor of Economics at the University of Connecticut. I have extensive experience working with confidential government data both as a Sworn Researcher of the U.S. Census Bureau and on projects using state administrative on K-12 education in North Carolina and Florida. In all of these cases, researchers are able to follow a well-established process in order to apply for and obtain access to these data, and the process for application, approval and access is documented on publically available websites with points of contacts whose primary job is to manage these requests and make the data available to researchers. The research that has been conducted using confidential, administrative government records of the last two decades is massive, and has addressed too many important policy questions to list here, but include work on the determinants of youth crime, high school graduation rates and college attendance, and labor market success to name a few.

For the most part, the State of Connecticut has not been a major participant in this revolution. Access to administrative data in Connecticut is obtained only with extreme patience and persistence. Every request has to find an advocate within the department, be approved by the department's commissioner, requires the development of a unique contract for the particular project, and finally requires that an understaffed data management bureau find time for data processing tasks that are not part of their primary mission. I have been very impressed with the work in the state agencies (especially in the Department of Education where I have the most experience) that has been done to develop and maintain these individual level data sets. However, in spite of very good intentions, starting any project using state administrative data is an incredibly slow process. Even getting a contract signed between the State and the University of Connecticut can take months and many iterations of the contract language. It seems crazy that there is not a standard off-the-shelf contract available for work between UConn and the state that could be signed within days and require minimal time on the part of university and state agency staff.

Given these concerns, I endorse the general proposal embodied in SB 949 Section 4. At the same time, I want to caution the committee to be careful to review the language in the proposal in order to make sure that this proposal does not have the opposite effect than what is intended, i.e. that the proposal increases research using state administrative data rather than constrains it. I have two specific concerns. First, the proposal to develop systems for access to data will take years to realize, and any legislation must make sure that the state departments are free to move forward on research project that make sense and can start in the meantime. Second, while laudable and extremely useful, the proposal to link data across all agencies with a general portal for querying data by definition must severely restrain what type of data is available, in comparison to obtaining a data extract directly from the state agency that keeps the administrative records. I am extremely worried that such a system may become viewed within the state as the only legitimate way to access state administrative data. If so, then the results of this bill would be disastrous for the future of research using administrative data in Connecticut. The goal of this bill must be to make it simpler and more efficient to conduct important policy research using State of Connecticut administrative data in any form, not just through a specific, potentially rigid, statewide portal.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Stephen L. Ross