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Filling Indiana's "Information Gap" By David Goodrich, Pres. & CEO of the Central Indiana Corporate Partnership

"Knowledge is power."

Now more than ever, this old adage rings true. In the corporate world, solid information is absolutely essential: while good executives often rely on instinct, they also know the importance of market research, product testing, competitive analysis, and the many other data-gathering tools that can guide a business decision.

Knowledge is like air – it's an indispensable resource.

It's the same in the public realm. Making good public policy depends on having timely and accurate information about the options available. Unfortunately, government officials and the public-at-large in Indiana often lack access to the important economic, demographic and social data they need to make informed policy choices, according to a study released last week by the Central Indiana Corporate Partnership (CICP).

This study, "Data for Effective Policy and Decision-Making in Indiana," is available on the Central Indiana Corporate Partnership's website (www.cincorp.com). Its author, Dr. Timothy Hogan of Arizona State University, interviewed more than 100 Indiana government, business and non-profit leaders to assess their level of satisfaction with the availability of solid information on key policy issues. Dr. Hogan discovered a high level of frustration with the accessibility of statistics and analysis related to all aspects of the state's policy environment.

For example, seven out of every ten new jobs in today's economy are being created by entrepreneurial companies. But in Indiana, there's little empirical data available on entrepreneurial trends – our public officials are forced to make economic development decisions based on hunches and anecdotal information about the challenges faced and incentives needed by Hoosier entrepreneurs and small business owners.

Or take workforce development. Our universities are working harder than ever before to meet the needs of Indiana employers – just look at the new biotechnology degrees at IUPUI and Ivy Tech, tailored to the employment demands of companies like Eli Lilly & Company, Roche Diagnostics, Dow AgroSciences and Baxter Pharmaceutical. But there is no comprehensive study of the anticipated workforce needs of businesses in the life sciences, advanced manufacturing, logistics and technology, and we also lack in-depth information on the state of adult education in Indiana. Again, when it comes to preparing our young people and incumbent workers for the careers of tomorrow, Indiana policymakers are often forced to make do with an incomplete picture.

Other critical information gaps uncovered by Dr. Hogan's interviews included data related to local government operations and efficiency – a hot topic with Mayor Peterson's Indy Works plans and similar initiatives before the legislature. Better social data (i.e. environmental and children's issues) outside the Indianapolis metro area was also identified as a pressing need, among others.

While one would think that state government would be home to much of this information, this isn't the case. Under the previous administration, the Governor's Office had no dedicated research or policy analysis unit, and state agencies varied widely in their ability to produce timely data interpretation. The Legislative Services Agency concentrates narrowly on legal and fiscal analysis for the Indiana General Assembly; the policy staffs assigned to each legislative caucus are too small to focus on more than leadership issues and Ways & Means and Tax & Fiscal Policy Committee needs.

This is an unacceptable state of affairs. As we work to rebuild Indiana's economy with limited state budget resources, we need to set priorities based on factual data and expert analysis. We can't afford an ad hoc approach to gathering the information we need to craft sound policies.

As such, the report calls for a State Data Initiative that will support the standardized collection, formatting and analysis of information related to economic activity, demographic trends, and social issues affecting Hoosiers. After discussing the study with Dr. Hogan and CICP's leadership, Governor Mitch Daniels expressed his support for the concept of a data collection and analysis effort.

This issue hasn't garnered many headlines, but is of vital importance nonetheless. When you're in unfamiliar territory, it's hard to find your destination without a roadmap. Indiana's policymakers are trying to trudge towards solutions to difficult challenges without the benefit of a map, or often even a lamp to guide the way. A data initiative supported by the public and private sectors in collaboration would help fill in the uncharted territory and lead us towards a more informed future.

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