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## **USAFacts: This Goes Way Beyond Open Data.**

You might not peg former Microsoft CEO and current owner of the NBA's Los Angeles Clippers as a government data geek. But Steven Ballmer stepped into that role in a grand scale this week when he unveiled his privately funded, years-long project to help citizens easily track how government spends their money.

Called [USAFacts](#), the website contains federal, state and local aggregated data on revenue and spending, as well as on debt, population, employment and pensions. Want to know about pension debt? Two quick searches reveal that unfunded liabilities in state and local retirement systems have more than quadrupled since 2000. At the same time, the median age in the country has increased by 2.5 years.

As a businessman used to the corporate world, Ballmer wants to make government financial reports more readable. To that end, the site has introduced the first government "[10-K report](#)" — the private sector's version of an annual financial report. It aggregates data from all U.S. governments and gives progress reports on government programs, provides financial balance sheets and gives data on key economic indicators.

*The Takeaway:* Ballmer says USAFacts is not meant to insinuate that governments should be more like businesses. But the creation of this data trove does speak to a growing desire among the business community and citizens for better access to uniform financial data. No two governments are alike in how they present and deliver their financial data, to say nothing of the amount of time in which it takes them to do so. That makes any data compilation incredibly burdensome. Now, at least on a national basis, that headache has been eliminated.

What's more, shining a light on the real numbers behind government has the potential to change peoples' assumptions about it. By way of explanation, Ballmer looked up how many people work for government in the U.S. The answer: nearly 24 million. When people hear that, they tend to say, "Those damn bureaucrats!" he told The New York Times. But a look at the data may elicit a different response. Almost half are educators. Active-duty military and health workers represent huge blocks as well. Now, "your tax dollars are helping somehow to pay 24 million people — and most of these people you like," Ballmer said.

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BY LIZ FARMER | APRIL 21, 2017