

CAPABILITY BASED BUDGETING

Sample Questions for Appropriators

This document provides model questions that committees can use to elicit clearer, more decision-useful budget information from agencies, **even** without changing appropriations accounts, statutory authorities, or scoring conventions.

The questions are designed to be used selectively, not as an additional reporting burden. Committees may choose a small subset to:

- Supplement existing Questions for the Record (QFRs)
- Replace duplicative or low-value compliance questions
- Focus oversight on priority mission areas or portfolios

The intent is to shift responses from descriptions of inputs and activities toward explanations of:

- What mission capabilities are being funded
- What outcomes improved as a result
- What trade-offs, risks, and constraints exist

Staff can deploy these questions in multiple ways:

- As standalone QFRs following hearings
- As targeted follow-ups on budget increases, delays, or rebaselines
- As pilot questions for a single bureau, portfolio, or capability

Even if agencies do not reorganize their budgets to respond, over time, repeated use of these questions will improve comparability across fiscal years and give the Committee a clearer line of sight from appropriations to outcomes.

Used consistently, these questions help committees:

- Surface real prioritization decisions
- Identify cross-cutting risks earlier
- Strengthen oversight while reducing performative reporting

Topline Question

A single reframing question that encapsulates the logic of capability-based budgeting and can be used repeatedly:

“What capability does this funding build or sustain—and what will be measurably different if we fund it versus if we don’t?”

Initial Framing Questions

INSTEAD OF:	ASK:
“How much did you spend on contracts, FTE, and IT this year?”	Which mission-critical capabilities (such as claims processing, identity and access management, or eligibility and enrollment) does this account primarily fund? Which capabilities are being sustained versus actively improved with this funding request? What capabilities would degrade first if funding were reduced by 5-10 percent?

WHY THIS MATTERS:

These questions force agencies to explain what the money actually buys in terms that improve Congress’s ability to debate and evaluate tradeoffs.

Questions About Outcomes & Value

INSTEAD OF:	ASK:
“Was this project delivered on time and on budget?”	What measurable change in the capabilities’ performance or capacity occurred as a result of last year’s funding? Which citizen-facing or mission outcomes improved because this capability matured? Where did increased funding fail to produce proportional capability improvement, and why?

WHY THIS MATTERS:

These questions provide a clearer line of sight from dollars → capability → outcome, enabling Congress to assess value and outcomes rather than process.

Questions about Trade-Offs & Prioritization

INSTEAD OF:	ASK:
"Why does this program need an increase in funding this year?"	What additional performance or capacity is expected as a result of this increase in funding? How does this request reflect changes in mission demand or risk since last year? If we increase funding for this program, how does that impact the agency's capabilities overall? How does that shift in capabilities impact the agencies work on other programs? What capabilities are being deprioritized to fund this request? What important work is no longer being done because of these trade-offs?

WHY THIS MATTERS:

These questions normalize prioritization and surface implicit decisions that are otherwise hidden inside diffuse budget lines.

Questions on Risk & Resilience

INSTEAD OF:	ASK:
"Are there any major risks for program execution we should be aware of?"	Which capabilities are currently at risk of leading to mission failure in the next 2-5 years? And why? Where is technical or operational debt accumulating, and what capability does it threaten? What single-point failures exist across capabilities funded by multiple appropriations?

WHY THIS MATTERS:

These questions shift oversight from reactive crisis management to proactive risk detection across integrated agency systems and capabilities.

Questions on Cross-Cutting Capabilities

INSTEAD OF:	ASK:
"How is your agency coordinating across offices and programs?"	Which capabilities are funded by multiple appropriations or operate across multiple programs, and how are they jointly governed? Where does fragmented funding [at the program/project level?] prevent a capability from improving end-to-end? What outcomes are we failing to achieve because a capability is funded in pieces rather than being invested in as a whole?

WHY THIS MATTERS:

These questions provide Congress with visibility into how fragmented funding of capabilities can drive inefficiency, duplication, and poor service delivery.

Questions on Modernization

INSTEAD OF:	ASK:
"Why is this program still requesting development or modernization funds for a product that is 4 years old?"	How has this capability evolved over the last three budget cycles? What are the next 2-3 discrete improvements to this capability that would result from continued financial investment? How long should Congress expect these improvements to take? Which legacy practices or systems are still constraining this capability, and why?

WHY THIS MATTERS:

These questions support iterative improvements to capabilities, which is more representative of modernization efforts.

Questions on Oversight & Accountability

INSTEAD OF:	ASK:
"What governance board and/or process overseeing this program?"	What performance indicators should Congress track to judge success next year? What process or reporting requirements are you required to follow that hinder your ability to improve or properly leverage this capability?

WHY THIS MATTERS:

These questions enable Congress to focus on outcomes rather than box-checking exercises that don't uncover the real barriers to mission delivery.