

Lessons on Service Delivery and Reaching the Public from Across Federal and State Government Benefit Delivery Efforts

*Testimony prepared for the Senate Finance Committee Hearing: Social Security During COVID: How the Pandemic Hampered Access to Benefits and Strategies for Improving Service Delivery - April 29, 2021 by Tara McGuinness co-author of Power to the Public the Promise of Public Interest Technology¹ and Senior Advisor, New America
740 15th St NW Suite #900, Washington, DC 20005*

Thank you Chairman Wyden, Ranking Member Crapo and members of the Committee. I am grateful to join you this morning to talk about making the federal government really work for the public.

- The effort to ensure that citizens and taxpayers are served by their government goes back over a hundred years.
- When President Lincoln presided over a country of 31 million residents he was perhaps the first President to focus on this question -- how are we delivering for those who elected us? He would open the doors to the White House after breakfast to hear from not only government officials, but citizens, welcoming their petitions and concerns.²
- But as the U.S. grew to ten times the size of the populace of Lincoln's time, the practicality of this exercise has changed. The challenge however remains today for agency leaders: how do they bring this spirit of citizen connection and government delivery into the digital age?
- If government is going to deliver for people, it needs to constantly ask them what they need, and understand how they live their lives. This requires:
 - *Using data and technology* to make the process as seamless as possible, and *understanding what data and technology can't do.*
 - *A focus on the people an agency serves* - really understanding their needs.
 - *A deep understanding of the approval process for services* and the role different state and federal agencies play.
 - *A culture of learning, re-tooling and adjusting* to make sure the services keep up with the times and respond to crises like a pandemic.
- I am grateful that you have called this hearing to understand how responsive the Social Security Administration was to the COVID crisis, what we can learn from it, and how we can take these lessons forward to improve services into the future.

Adapting Structures and Using New Tools to Serve the Public

- Just because government structures and systems were built for a different time doesn't mean they can't adapt.

¹ McGuinness and Schank, *Power to the Public: The Promise of Public Interest Technology*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, April 2021.

² Harold Holzer, "Abraham Lincoln's White House," *White House History* 25 (Spring 2009): <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/abraham-lincolns-white-house>.

- Massive digitization has come to the private sector and the truth is – many of the nation’s leading companies didn’t survive the digital revolution.
 - Very few of the *Fortune 500* companies at the turn of the century survived this disruption.³ Failure is not an option for the critical services like those administered by the Social Security Administration.
 - While companies can be replaced by startups better adapted for the time, the government is not going to be replaced by a startup - it needs to adapt to meet the moment.
 - Millions of Americans depend on it.

- Transforming an organization, whether to meet the changes of a digital age or a global pandemic, is difficult.
- There are new tools to do this -- the modern equivalent of Lincoln’s one man effort to understand what citizens need and serve them.
- While the new Millennium brought a ruthless focus on delivering for customers in the private sector— testing messages, imagery, and even tweaking the timing of emails to increase customer response—this modern toolkit is not yet accessible to all government leaders trying to bring critical benefits to citizens.
- This isn’t just about making paper applications digital. Digitizing a broken process gets you a digitized broken process.
- Many organizations make the mistake of just taking an existing process and digitizing it without understanding who they are serving or whether that process works.
- Making services work for people requires: building a culture of tracking the whole experience for consumers, de-siloing different lanes traditionally done by different departments and finding new ways to adapt processes to meet beneficiaries where they are.
- There has been progress. There are now multiple government units dedicated to the delivery of services from the US Digital Service which hires top technologists into term-limited tours to work alongside civil servants to build better tools for the people to 18F, an office within the General Services Administration, to help governments fulfill their mission, stay on budget and use leading technology practices.
- We have seen adaptations to COVID-19 that model new possibilities, and some of these models can be found in other federal agencies:
 - The Food and Nutrition Service out of the Department of Agriculture moved to remote validation for SNAP (food assistance) during the pandemic.⁴ More specifically, FNS allowed state agencies to adjust in several ways including:
 - By not requiring a household to complete an interview prior to approval, provided the applicant’s identity has been verified and all other mandatory verifications are complete.
 - By not requiring a face-to-face interview or granting a request for a face-to-face interview to any household at application or recertification.

³ Scott D. Anthony, S. Patrick Viguerie, Evan I. Schwartz, and John Van Landeghem, *2018 Corporate Longevity Forecast: Creative Destruction is Accelerating* (Lexington, MA: Innosight, 2018).

⁴ USDA Food and Nutrition Service, SNAP – Adjusting Interview Requirements Due to Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) (Washington, DC: GPO, 2021), <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/adjusting-interview-requirements-covid-19>.

- This process takes work, but it isn't impossible. Here are a few examples of bureaucracies seeing a delivery challenge and making a change:
 - **In the state of Michigan - the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services and Civilla worked on project re:form** - the transformation of America's longest benefits application.⁵
 - DHS-1171, the application was the longest of its kind in America at over 40 pages.
 - The form was an inhumane barrier between people desperately in need and the emergency services the state of Michigan provides to over 2.5 million residents each year.
 - One resident described the system as "a cosmic force" "it feels like it is left up to fate whether you will make it through."⁶
 - After reviewing the stories of beneficiaries who could not get through the system and data on how the application was a maze for beneficiaries and state employees alike to navigate, a team of state agency leaders and external organizations tackled the design of the country's longest benefits application.
 - After a massive redesign the experience is different, one resident said, "I feel like I can breathe again, after completing the process."⁷ So is the efficiency of processing, the form can be completed in under 20 minutes and processed by the state in half the time it used to take.
 - Why does it matter? Paying attention to form design, and ensuring it is accessible, could be the difference between a needy family receiving the help they need, and going hungry.
 - Similar transformations have happened in **California's SNAP application, Vermont's process for accepting benefits applications supporting documentation**, and multiple states' application process for accepting foster parents into the child welfare system. In Vermont, a document uploader (allowing people to upload documents without coming into the office), cut 9 days processing to 1 day.⁸
 - In the state of California, a collaboration of state, county, and external partners transformed the process of applying for SNAP (food assistance). The reach of Calfresh, California's food and nutrition services for low income families was very low -- only 67% of those eligible used the program compared to many states where enrollment was 80% or 90%. A series of engagements, starting with fellows to the nonprofit Code for America, has become a multi-year public-private partnership for a statewide

⁵ "Project Re:Form," Design Awards, Core 77, accessed April 26, 2021, <https://designawards.core77.com/Service-Design/86102/Project-Re-Form>.

⁶ Interviews with Lena Selzer about original Re:form research and Zack Quaintance, Government Technology (e.Republic, June 2018), <https://www.govtech.com/civic/A-Blueprint-for-Human-Centered-Change.html>.

⁷ McGuinness and Schank, *Power to the Public: The Promise of Public Interest Technology*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, April 2021.

⁸ Domenic Fichera, "Integrating Eligibility and Enrollment for Health and Human Services," Nava, accessed April 26, 2021, <https://www.navapbc.com/case-studies/integrating-eligibility-and-enrollment-for-health-and-human-services.html>.

transformation to bring the SNAP enrollment process into the digital age. The results: while once an online application for CalFresh required *access to a desktop computer* and took the better part of an hour to complete, after the GetCalFresh transformation the application could be submitted from a smartphone and completed in 10 minutes. Applicants can get multilingual live chat support while applying, send necessary documents from their mobile phone, receive text and email reminders to guide them through the enrollment and reporting process, which saves countless hours of anxiety and stress for applicants, and reduces operational inefficiencies for the counties and state.

- This didn't happen overnight. The team did research with users, adjudicators, created a short minimum viable product, and over five years, transformed the experience of digital SNAP outreach and enrollment.⁹ Harvard has written a case study about this work.¹⁰

Here are four key lessons for making this transformation to service delivery in the digital age:

First, increasing outreach doesn't help if the front door is locked (forms):

- It is very important to make sure that the public knows and understands the benefits they are eligible to receive. Communication and outreach from trusted messengers is critically important, *but it is rarely enough to make the difference.*¹¹
- Often forms or applications, online or on paper, and the approval process beneath them are the equivalent of either a locked gate or a welcome mat that says "NEED NOT APPLY."
- Agencies should think hard about their forms for benefits:
 - Try them out on a few people before you subject them to millions of people.
 - Talk to the beneficiaries who use the form in order to better understand the pain points and the experience.
 - Understand who uses your form (paper and online) - and how they differ. There may be some clients that will need in person application processes.
 - Talk to the front-line workers who adjudicate and process these forms, understanding their work and perspective on the process. Often great innovations come from those on the frontlines of a broken process.
 - Collect data on where people get stuck. Many times backlogs are the result of confusing questions that require requests for more information that must be processed through the mail, slowing down applications.
 - User research with beneficiaries shouldn't just ask people what their experience was. Where possible, researchers should watch the process of filling out forms -- ask people to think aloud, and see which questions are difficult and cause confusion.

⁹ Francesca Costa, "Code for America Improves Access to Social Services during COVID-19," Hunger and Health - Feeding America, June 3, 2020, <https://hungerandhealth.feedingamerica.org/2020/06/code-america-improves-access-social-services-covid-19/>.

¹⁰ Laura Winig and David Eaves, *Hacking Bureaucracy: Reimagining California's Food Stamp Program in the Digital Age* (Cambridge, MA: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2016).

¹¹ Elizabeth Linos, Aparna Ramesh, Jesse Rothstein, and Matt Unrath, *Increasing Take-Up of the Earned Income Tax Credit* (California Policy Lab, 2020).

- Testing forms takes iteration. Try new forms, and then test them again.¹²

Second, map the user experience (client journey) - end to end:

- Often there is no single person in charge of an application process end-to-end. Without tracing the journey (and what it feels like to someone on it) end-to-end, it is hard to know where the bottlenecks are.
- By moving step-by-step, you can come to understand the true experience on the customer side -- often, people get lost in the transition from one part of the process to the next.
- Time and again, in the California and the Michigan examples above, and in countless others, this mapping of the user experience helps us understand how a person gets approved.

Third, measure what matters, in real-time:

- Understanding the universe of eligible populations and the recipients a program currently serves is the first step in assessing service delivery and identifying important gaps.
- Correspondence with this Committee revealed that the Social Security Administration conducted a comparative analysis of pre- and post-COVID Supplemental Security Income (SSI) applications to identify any subgroups which showed a larger than average impact from the pandemic by analyzing demographic factors, disabilities, and local economic characteristics. This analysis identified two specific subpopulations which showed larger than average declines: individuals aged 65 and older and those with limited English proficiency. These groups were under-enrolled during the pandemic compared to prior years.
- This is an important insight. But a critical question is what data instrumentation does SSA have to see beneficiaries and where they are in the process in real-time?
- The ideal for service delivery is to establish monitoring real-time data for priority services. This will ensure that the policy is achieving the help it intended, and that people aren't being left out.
- The installation of real-time data monitoring was game-changing for the adhoc team of engineers, designers, data scientists and contractors working to turnaround Healthcare.gov in its early days.
- The team didn't know what was broken until they could see where clients were stuck: the log-in, the identity verification, the part of the site where you pick a plan. It was impossible to prioritize fixes until you could see all parts of the system in one place and where people were getting through and where they met barriers.
- Often different services (log-in, identity verification, application validation) are run by different offices, agencies or contractors - many times agencies have a hard time creating a complete picture of the data because it requires seeing across these lanes of work.
- The ability to see in real-time who you are serving and how applications are being processed is a key part of modern benefit delivery operation.

¹² Brigid Schulte, "Want to design policies that really work? Test them on the users who need them first," *New America*, March 31, 2021, <https://www.newamerica.org/better-life-lab/blog/want-to-design-policies-that-really-work-test-them-on-the-users-who-need-them-first/>.

Finally, fourth a word of caution: digitizing a broken process gets you... a digitized broken process.

- In more than one instance, governments have tried to turn an existing process digital only to make things worse and experience few gains. In 2005, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS), the successor to the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the federal agency responsible for green cards and citizenship applications, began a project to digitize the nation's immigration system.¹³ USCIS undertook this digitization process over the course of ten years. Early work didn't account for how field offices actually functioned, and digitizing the process at first made it a lot worse. Leaders at the agency have since course corrected, and set USCIS on a strong course but the example is a warning. To modernize or digitize a process requires really understanding both the beneficiaries and the barriers they face, and the work an agency does on the other side¹⁴.

In closing, I am grateful for the attention this committee has paid to *how these benefits really reach people*. There are models across the federal government and across the country to build on.

While policy matters a great deal, it matters very little if it doesn't reach those who need it most when they need it most: in a crisis.

¹³ Office of Inspector General, USCIS Automation of Immigration Benefits Processing Remains Ineffective (Washington, DC: GPO, 2016), <https://www.oig.dhs.gov/reports/2016-03/uscis-automation-immigration-benefits-processing-remains-ineffective/oig-16-48>.

¹⁴ Hana Schank and Tara McGuinness, "What Happened When the U.S. Government Tried to Make the Immigration System Digital," *Slate*, April 16, 2021, <https://slate.com/technology/2021/04/elis-uscis-digital-immigration-system.html>.