

Delivering What Matters: Improving Government Service Delivery

By Matt Warshaw



Governments perform a number of important functions. However, almost all government functions can be boiled down to protecting people and helping people.

As the U.S. federal government has grown, much of its work has included analyzing, studying, and reporting on government policies—both creating new agency and governmentwide policy and looking back at the effects of these policies. Government agencies must also report out on their activities to Congress, the Government Accountability Office (GAO), the Office of Inspector General (IG), and several other state, local, tribal, and nonprofit partners. In effect, government agencies have built up large organizations to set policy, but many parts of the government lack the same ability to implement that policy in the form of citizen services.

After more than two years responding to the COVID-19 pandemic emergency, both through economic and public health outreach, it is clear that we need more focus on how

citizens receive services, as well as how the federal and state governments work together to deliver services quickly and effectively. Large stimulus programs, such as the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) and the CARES Act, demonstrated the government's ability to distribute large amounts of money to businesses and individuals. It also exposed the complexity in creating services that are easy to use and accessible by all who need them.

Citizen services in the United States rely on a mix of state and local government funding and program execution, creating mixed results across programs. Social Security is held up as the gold standard by experts Pamela Herd and Don Moynihan as an extremely effective government program because there is minimal burden placed on the recipient. The Social Security Administration keeps track of wages earned, benefits received, and eligibility. The beneficiary simply needs to sign up online or in one of 1200 field offices.¹

In their book, *Administrative Burden: Policy by Other Means*, Herd and Moynihan identify other governmental, civic, and health services that aren't as easily accessed as Social Security. For example, Medicare, Medicaid, and SNAP are not nearly as simple to navigate and universally accessed as Social Security. As a result, benefits go unclaimed and those benefits that are claimed often require significant time and effort to access. If government is to make good on the policies it sets out, these more burdensome programs deserve our attention, resources, and innovation.

In her article, "The Time Tax," reporter Annie Lowrey highlights one of Herd and Moynihan's most egregious cases. The benefits application for the State of Michigan's Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) was previously sixty four pages long and asked invasive questions such as "Tell me the date of conception of your child." With the help of Civilla, a nonprofit design firm, the Michigan agency was able to:



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1. Reduce application length by 80 percent, dropping the time it takes to fill out from fifty minutes to under twenty minutes.
2. Cut case processing time in half.
3. Reduce time spent correcting errors by 75 percent.²

Lowrey explains that poorly managed and unresponsive government programs harm those they are intended to serve. They also result in an erosion of trust and confidence in government. One way to alleviate these issues is to take a more human centered approach to designing government programs.

In redesigning their services, Michigan DHHS not only improved the experience for beneficiaries, but also improved internal efficiencies and reduced costs. So how did the form for Michigan DHHS's benefits end up clocking in at 18,000 words? According to Civilla, the form grew over the course of thirty years based on audits and lawsuits, new processes and policies, and potentially little user research to understand exactly what it felt like to fill out an 18,000-word application. Additionally, Michigan DHHS had tried to redesign the benefits application multiple times before, but no effort made it to completion.

Given the importance of government services to those who need them and the clear benefits of redesigning government services, why is it that every local, state, and federal government agency isn't redesigning services to improve services usage and delivery?

Governments around the world responded to the onset of COVID-19 with massive direct cash payments to individuals and businesses. In the U.S., the federal government greatly expanded the eligibility and added additional funds to unemployment insurance managed by the states. In European countries, governments were paying much of the salaries of employees who would otherwise be laid off.



Governments Should Take These Steps to Improve Citizen Services

Create Better Services

In early December 2021, the White House directed agencies to use technology to deliver services underscoring the vital importance of improving the customer experience when delivery services.³

Also in December, 2021, the acting director of OMB issued a memo underscoring the impartiality of inspectors general, but also the need for agency leadership to have a productive working relationship with IGs, specifically referencing the American Rescue Plan funding. Agency leaders should bring in IGs on their plans to reduce administrative burden, and where appropriate, work with Congress, GAO, and IGs to balance program risks with benefits.



Any agency that collects data on improper payments or misuse of government programs should also collect data on ease of use and eligible beneficiaries of those using the service.

Gain Leadership Buy-In

In their book *Power to the Public*, Tara Dawson McGuinness and Hana Schank explain that “a leader willing to worry about delivery is essential.” Service delivery must be a priority of senior government executives. Released in December 2021 and signed by agency deputy secretaries, President Biden’s Presidential Management Agenda Vision commits to delivering excellent, equitable and secure federal services and customer experiences. To continue to improve government service, leadership buy-in and incentives are essential.

Develop Skills

Starting with the U.K.’s Government Digital Service. (GDS), governments around the world have established digital services teams to help agencies more effectively leverage digital technologies to better serve their constituencies. To do this well, governments have recognized the need to diversify the skills it needs for this digital age. This includes hiring those with data science, customer experience, and services delivery skill to complement their public administration and public policy professionals.

However, an overfocus on policy does not create better government services. Francis Fukuyama notes that “being skilled in policy analysis is woefully inadequate to bring about policy change in the real world. Policy analysis will tell you what the optimal policy should be, but it does not tell you how to achieve that outcome.”⁴ How we achieve that outcome requires leadership and dedicated public servants with the right tools and skills.

Reduce the Risk of Negative Consequences

Fear of congressional investigation is a barrier to experimentation. This is the hardest to fix. There is incentive for those who don’t like a program to make it burdensome and gum up how it works.

In December 2021, the White House released a report on improper payments for COVID relief funds,⁵ explaining that improper payments had increased in the past year due to the increase in payments from new programs related to COVID relief. On one hand, government services should be easier to use and have a lower administrative burden. Yet improper payments from the government has also gone up when the government made programs easier to access.

Conclusion

Improving government services is not a new idea. Bill Clinton stood up the National Partnership for Reinventing Government, headed by then-Vice President Al Gore. George W. Bush created the President's Management Agenda—a document now central to how administrations manage government services. Barack Obama created the U.S. Digital Service and 18F, new government organizations dedicated to improving government service delivery.

President Joe Biden has released an ambitious plan to improve customer experience and reduce improper payments. Hopefully Biden will not only create a better customer experience, but also simplify the government benefits process wherever possible, removing the time tax that all Americans face and prevent those who need services the most from obtaining them.

Changing how multiple government agencies operate will not be easy. Agencies afraid to change how they do business will need to become much more comfortable experimenting with how they deliver services, pilot various approaches, and measure impact.

Footnotes

1. <https://www.russellsage.org/publications/administrative-burden>.
2. https://beeckcenter.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Civilla-x-Beeck-Center_Final-Report-1.pdf.
3. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/briefing-room/2021/12/13/using-technology-to-improve-customer-experience-and-service-delivery-for-the-american-people/>.
4. <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/08/01/whats-wrong-with-public-policy-education/>.
5. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/briefing-room/2021/12/30/updated-data-on-improper-payments/>.

