

# What Experience Means Now

Governments confront intertwined issues of access, usability and equity

State and local governments faced a perfect storm of challenges at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Public offices closed to slow the spread of the virus and public employees went to work from home, often making it impossible to deliver services or hold meetings in person.

Agencies responded to the crisis the only way they could: They shifted services and public events to digital channels at a break-neck pace. But as governments scrambled to put important transactions and eligibility forms online, they surfaced other issues.

In too many parts of the nation, broadband internet coverage was spotty or even non-existent. Constituents who needed help the most often lacked desktop or laptop computers, as well as the technology skills needed to access digital services. Many people had smartphones, but clunky processes and bloated government forms didn't translate well to five-inch screens.

All of this is now driving a more serious commitment to usability, accessibility and equity of government digital services. City and county officials ranked improving constituent experience and engagement as a top priority, trailing only cybersecurity, in the Center for Digital Government's (CDG) 2021

Digital Cities and Counties surveys. And states ranked expanding and improving access to services as their top priority in CDG's most recent Digital States Survey conducted in late 2020.

"In response to the pandemic, everyone hit the gas on digital services because they had to," says Phil Bertolini, CDG vice president and former deputy county executive and CIO for Oakland County, Mich. "Now we're seeing governments confront the question of which services should remain digital and what should this new constituent experience look like. They're asking themselves, 'How do we package this the right way and do it methodically so that we know we're getting the right services to the right people at the right time?'"

## Expansion of Experience

One impact of the pandemic has been to broaden the definition of experience. Before COVID, the term commonly equated to convenience. But now it encompasses more fundamental concepts such as digital access and equity.

Multiple jurisdictions — often backed by big new federal government funding streams for broadband improvements — are addressing connectivity gaps that became magnified

when government offices, schools and other public facilities were shuttered.

Delaware's New Castle County, for example, expanded public WiFi connectivity in parking lots of libraries and other public buildings during the pandemic, giving residents a vital link to online services.

"With support from Verizon and others, we rolled out 22 sites in eight business days. And we stood up a website so people would know where to go for access," county CTO Michael Hojnicky told *Government Technology* in September. "Anyone who needed to get online for school, for work, they could come and sit outside of any of our public buildings."

The county won a 2021 Government Experience Award from CDG for its efforts to connect residents to the internet and rapidly deploy a new digital platform to support community-wide COVID testing.

Another award winner, the city of Mesa, Ariz., used federal COVID relief funds to create a private cellular network to improve internet access in underserved areas. The city worked with Mesa Public Schools, Arizona's largest public school system, to analyze census tract data and identify locations to deploy new equipment.

"We were going up on poles and putting up cellular antenna arrays," Mesa CIO Travis Cutright told *Government Technology*. "The folks in these communities can



apply for internet connectivity, and we give them a hot spot to access internet off of our private cellular network.”

### **An Omnichannel Future**

Connectivity is just part of the equation, however. Jurisdictions are also moving toward omnichannel strategies that provide equal access to services — and an equally good experience — to constituents regardless of whether they’re contacting agencies using a traditional voice call, accessing services from a desktop computer or mobile device, or visiting a government office in person. These efforts include more options for unbanked residents, too, such as kiosks located in government buildings and retail locations that enable users to complete digital transactions using cash payments. In addition, agencies are expanding their use of artificial intelligence (AI) to power user-friendly web and app-based self-service capabilities and augment human call center agents.

This shift is pushing governments to address technical debt. A growing number of jurisdictions are looking to replace old systems that often struggle to deliver services in these new ways.

In Michigan state government, for example, these pressures helped drive a series of initiatives meant to simplify

and streamline government interactions for constituents. Those efforts included moving to a new SaaS-based identity and access management platform that standardized log-in processes for constituent services across state agencies. The state is also migrating its Michigan.gov web portal off 20-year-old legacy infrastructure to a modern web content management system and implementing a digital design framework to ensure usability and uniformity across state government applications, websites and social media platforms.

“It should feel very seamless to people as they traverse our digital environment,” eMichigan Director Suzanne Pauley told *Government Technology*, adding the framework embraces a range of design elements including color palette, typography, iconography — and especially accessibility. “We have put a huge focus on making sure that our services can be used by everyone.”

### **An Opportunity for IT Leaders**

This new environment offers a huge opportunity for government IT and business leaders to remake the way agencies serve constituents.

Current federal COVID relief programs provide significant funding for broadband expansion, IT system modernization and other necessary upgrades — and more is

on the way through the recently signed Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. At the same time, there’s never been more executive attention on these issues and support for addressing them.

Tackling the intertwined issues of connectivity, access, equity and usability will be complex. It’s a long-term effort that demands perseverance from IT teams and sustained support from elected officials and business leaders. What’s more, the solutions implemented by states and localities to meet new experience goals must be sustainable long after temporary federal funding streams run dry.

But the results — giving more people easier and more meaningful access to government services and information they need — could be monumental.

## **Customer Experience Moves Up the Priority List**

### **State Priorities**

- 1. Expand, simplify and/or improve access to services available to residents and businesses**
2. Expand economic development opportunities for residents and businesses
3. Address or increase responsiveness to crises affecting residents and businesses

### **City Priorities**

1. Cybersecurity
- 2. Customer engagement/experience**
3. Disaster recovery/continuity of operations

### **County Priorities**

1. Cybersecurity
- 2. Customer engagement/experience**
3. Business process automation

*Source: CDG 2021 Digital Cities and Counties Surveys; 2020 Digital States Survey*