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Operation Modernization:

4 Steps Agencies Can Take to
Build Back Better



In the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act, over \$4 billion is set aside for public sector modernization efforts. As ARP funding is distributed, what steps can federal agencies take to ensure they're becoming more resilient?

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Introduction

When the coronavirus first made headlines, many assumed it would be over within months. Nearly two years later, many Americans are still struggling to cope with the follow-on effects of COVID-19. Congress stepped in earlier this year and passed the American Rescue Plan Act (ARP). This rescue package sought to address the hardship experienced by many and bring much-needed relief to the economy. Now that agencies are receiving ARP funds, what actions should they take to ensure versatile service delivery?

That was the topic of discussion of [*Building Back Better with the American Rescue Plan*](#), an episode of GovExec TV presented by ServiceNow and hosted by GovExec Director of Events George Jackson. Over the course of an hour, government leaders and industry experts discussed the American Rescue Plan and how federal agencies can start building flexibility and responsiveness into government services.

Here are four key takeaways from their discussion.

Step 1: Design with the Citizen in Mind

Government services are so complicated that a new word was coined in 2013 for the phenomenon – [kludgeocracy](#).

Building a more resilient government means addressing this kludgeocracy. And although federal agencies have made strides since 2013, the [recent fall-out](#) from the pandemic shows they still grapple with effectively addressing citizen concerns. One way agencies can slay this kludgeocracy is by making a shift toward citizen-focused design.

“If we’re not thinking about designing our programs, our systems and our

interactions with citizens in mind, it becomes really difficult for a person that needs a benefit or assistance to be able to get it,” said Jonathan Alboum, federal chief technology officer for ServiceNow.

Fortunately, public sector agencies can look to their counterparts within the European Union for examples. In Estonia, government leaders noticed a growing complexity within their system and sought to rectify it by creating the [E-Estonia app](#). The app allows citizens to do everything from filing their taxes to applying for benefits, and it has revolutionized life in Estonia, [with many singing the app’s praises](#).

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Step 2: Understand Your Data to Better Detect Fraud and Improve Equity

However, building resilient systems also means building systems impervious to fraud, waste and abuse. In 2021, the Government Accountability Office [pinpointed 36 areas across the public sector](#) deemed a “high risk” for abuse. For agencies seriously looking at building systems that better serve their constituents, addressing misconduct should be a top priority.

“One must never forget that fighting fraud, waste and abuse, and improving equity are actually two sides of the same coin,” said Gundeep Ahluwalia, chief information officer for the Labor Department. “If you are able to combat fraud, waste and abuse effectively, by definition, you will improve equity on the other side as well.”

And Organizations can combat this systemic abuse by looking at and understanding their data. Once public sector organizations do this, they can then empower agents to chase down and flag any errors spotted within data sets.

“The sooner that we can detect that fraud is happening in the system, the more likely we are able to recover those payments and reduce the number of improper payments that can’t be recovered,” Alboum said. “So much of that requires you to understand the data, how it flows to the organization and how it flows through the different processes.”



Step 3: Focus On Interoperability – Systems and Data Sets Need to Communicate

Indeed, protecting against abuse is critical when building efficient and effective systems. To make sure misuse doesn't happen, there needs to be interoperability between agency systems and data.

But the current landscape within the federal government is not built with interoperability in mind.

"One of the issues we have not just across the Food and Drug Administration, but I think this is true across the federal landscape, is that we tend to work in a very siloed manner," said Vid Desai, FDA CIO.

Instead of reinventing the wheel and designing systems from scratch –

which requires copious amounts of time and money – agencies should adopt tools designed with interoperability in mind, Alboum said.

"One thing CIOs are having a lot of success with is overlaying a platform across their legacy systems, and being able to use the data to do big things," he said. "You can leverage that data via workflow to drive to an outcome without having to replace that underlying system. But, you have to do the work to deploy a platform and then integrate the data sets with that platform."

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Vid Desai

Chief Information Officer for the FDA



Step 4: Start Building Workforce Data Skills to Prepare for AI/ML

Thanks to the magic of Hollywood, artificial intelligence often conjures up images of the Terminator or Hal 9000 – reality, however, is much less apocalyptic. Instead, AI and machine learning can help federal agencies more effectively deliver services to constituents.

“In the past few years, we had started using algorithm-based, detection support systems,” said Sanjay Gupta, chief technology officer for the Small Business Administration. “When the pandemic hit, because of the volume and velocity of the work, we

accelerated the use of AI/ML solutions, and they were immensely beneficial in our ability to deliver programs.”

However, anxieties surrounding AI/ML still persist within the workforce. [Nearly a quarter of all Americans](#) say they believe AI will replace them in some form. To counteract this, agencies need to focus on building data skills, upskilling employees, and shifting preconceived notions.

“It’s about shifting people’s focus from the mundane tasks to higher value work,” Alboum said.

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