

ISSUES TO WATCH

Harash (Sonny) Segal served as chief information officer of Montgomery County, Md., from 2012 until 2020. In 2014, Segal oversaw an effort by the county's Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to improve service delivery after department caseworkers and the county's large and diverse clientele — including many individuals seeking multiple benefits — expressed frustration over a service model that required repeated visits and redundant data entry. In response, county officials developed a cloud-based integrated case management system to simplify access to services for county residents.

We recently spoke with Segal about the importance of digital services in HHS, what he's learned about delivering cost-effective, future-friendly modernization strategies to replace aging legacy systems, and the benefits of data sharing and analysis to drive outcomes and performance.

How has data combined with modern technologies like cloud helped Montgomery County improve outcomes in HHS and other areas?

It allowed us to see where commonalities existed among clients. For example, we could see that a citizen using several health and human services might also be in the corrections and housing systems. That allowed us to be more proactive. We could see who was at risk and better prepare to meet their needs. We could also see where certain parts of the system were not as effective as they could be and perhaps led to a poor outcome. We could then adjust to get a better outcome for that citizen.

Cloud also enabled us to aggregate data in ways we couldn't before. These systems — whether they are in law enforcement, corrections, housing, etc. — are still disparate, but using cloud means the data in each of those systems no longer has to be siloed. For example, a cloud-based data lake can aggregate data from multiple departments. We can then work with a cloud provider to easily apply powerful analytics tools to that data. That's removed



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Sonny Segal: The Pandemic Teaches Us Modernization is Possible

many barriers and provided us all kinds of insights we didn't have access to before.

Have the impacts of COVID-19 made the use of cloud more critical to local government HHS departments?

Like many others, our HHS departments used cloud to quickly expand call center capacity in the wake of the pandemic. The use of cloud also enabled county employees to work remotely to keep the business of government open.

In addition, cloud enabled other technologies like artificial intelligence and bots that are helping us work more efficiently and effectively. For example, bots can be used to rapidly review an HHS client's history and make practical recommendations. That's a much-improved approach over the old knowledge-based articles which contained static information and often didn't even answer the questions citizens were asking. We are starting to see huge

potential from the use of bots that live in the cloud and are driven by analytics.

Will the types of virtual services governments are now offering continue post-pandemic?

The way we live and the way we do business is changing. That applies to government and its constituency. The expectation we have for how our clients engage us and how we respond and deliver solutions and services is the new way. The changes we see now were driven by a crisis, but they have taught government a lot about what's possible. There are many government modernization efforts that have languished or lingered for long periods of time. That's all going to change. Automation and digitization of government services is taking the front seat, and it's got to happen fast. We've learned a lot from industry in that regard, and now we know rapid modernization is possible in government, too.