Dealing with Disruption

Atlanta Housing Authority shifts to remote work and digital services to continue vital programs.

When the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in the U.S. in early 2020, affordable housing services for 23,000 Atlanta families depended on the Atlanta Housing Authority's ability to continue operations despite massive disruption.

To maintain vital services in an era of social distancing, the authority rapidly adopted new ways of working and interacting with clients. More than 300 staff members shifted to working from home, including call center agents who handle scores of citizen interactions daily. Vital processes such as intake meetings and home inspections were virtualized.

"We had to pivot," says CIO Brian Benn. "We were able to keep conducting business — that's the biggest thing. We continued our day-to-day operations."

To support remote work, the authority expanded its use of two cloud-based video collaboration platforms — one to support internal functions and the other dedicated to client-facing interactions. To secure its newly remote workforce, the authority added licenses for its existing multifactor authentication platform. The latter move was particularly important because some employees needed to use personal equipment until the authority could provide them with laptops.

When ready the new machines were shipped directly to employees' homes, eliminating the need to pick them up at the office. The IT department also extended its support hours to ensure employees were quickly up and running.

"We offered support almost 24 hours a day and on weekends," says Benn. "If someone got their device in the evening and had a meeting the next morning, we wanted them to be ready to go."

In addition, the authority rolled out new technology that enabled call center agents to work from home. Before COVID struck, agents working in the office fielded hundreds of calls daily. Working with multiple technology vendors, the authority rapidly took the operation virtual.

"We took more than 120 calls on day one with the new system," Benn says. "Now our agents don't need to be in the office to be productive."

Housing inspections are socially distanced too. Using smartphones and mobile video, the authority's inspection staff works with property owners and landlords to conduct virtual walk-throughs of affordable housing properties.

"This is a new age," says Benn. "As an IT group and more broadly as an organization, we need to accommodate change."

New Tools for Resiliency

With special districts relying heavily on remote work and digital services, network connectivity and flexible technology are fundamental to continuity of operations. The combination of hybrid networks and cloud-based services can help districts withstand disruptive events, says Donald Hartry, Client Solutions Executive, AT&T. These new solutions are more agile, scalable and resilient than older approaches.

For instance, software-defined wide area networks can quickly respond to changing requirements.

"They've evolved to where you can increase and decrease your bandwidth on demand through a portal," says Hartry. "Gone are the days where it took two to three months to make a change. Now you're making software changes instead of hardware changes, so they take place within minutes."

And thanks to high-performance 5G technology, wireless connectivity is becoming a vital component of enterprise network strategies — both for resilience and cost savings.

"You certainly should be looking at bringing wireless into your environment more than you probably

ever have — and not for just voice," says Hartry. "Today, wireless can be a more cost-effective solution for network redundancy and connecting things like video cameras."

Districts also can become more nimble and agile by taking advantage of vendor-provided services for specialties such as security and analytics.

"In this new environment where you're working and serving citizens remotely, you have to look at every device that's out in the field that connects to your enterprise," says Hartry. "Those devices need to be secured tightly and consistently updated and patched. So, you really need a trusted partner in that arena to work very closely with your security group."

Similarly, the right partner can help districts derive real-time insights from their data to improve operational efficiency and decision-making, he says. By tapping into cloud-based analytics infrastructure and on-demand expertise, districts can add sophisticated capabilities like executive data dashboards without deploying new computer hardware and software and hiring hard-to-find data talent.

Navigating the Future

Data is a priority for the housing authority, Benn says. The organization is creating an enterprise information management strategy designed to eliminate paper records, ensure accuracy and accessibility of information, and give decision-makers easy-to-use reports and visualization tools.

"We want to provide data dashboards for executives and everyone in between," he says. "We want to make data-driven decisions."

In addition, Benn is moving key applications to the cloud, including the repository that houses information about clients, landlords and partners participating in housing authority programs. The organization also is adopting cloud-based email, file-sharing and office applications.

Market Overview:
Housing Authorities

THERE ARE APPROXIMATELY 3,300 PUBLIC HOUSING AUTHORITIES in the United States, providing services to some 1.2 million households, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. These organizations provide an array of public housing options, ranging from single-family houses to high-rise apartments for a clientele of low-income families, the elderly and persons with disabilities.

In response to COVID-19, housing authorities implemented remote work for office staff and virtualized formerly in-person processes such as client intake and home inspections. To support these new activities, they rapidly increased their use of video collaboration platforms and other cloud-based tools that can be rapidly deployed and scaled. Some of these new processes — particularly remote work for some employees and digital services that improve client convenience — are likely to be permanent, driving the need for long-term strategies around endpoint security, identity management, cloud adoption, and network capacity and performance.

Housing authorities also are keenly interested in digital equity. Many have the ultimate goal of helping clients become self-sufficient. Internet access and technical literacy are viewed as key tools for supporting this goal; therefore, housing authorities are interested in technologies and partnerships that can provide low-cost connectivity and computing technology.

Furthermore, the authority is focused on ensuring digital equity for housing authority clients and works with the city of Atlanta and telecommunications providers to offer residents free or low-cost internet access, as well as personal computers and training.

"There is a digital transformation going on and we want to bridge the digital divide so our participants are part of that transformation," Benn says. "Our ultimate goal is to move our clients toward self-sufficiency, and these tools are an important part of that."

In the more immediate future, Benn continues to navigate uncertainty created by the coronavirus. The housing authority staff will not fully return to the office until early next year, but the situation remains fluid and Benn plans to have his staff ready to support the organization's workforce whatever the case may be. New tools like a virtual client intake process,

where housing representatives meet with program applicants via video instead of in person to fill out paperwork, equip staff to work from home indefinitely if needed.

"At this point, we're prepared to keep as many of these new processes as necessary, depending on how things go," Benn says, adding the ability to pivot based on changing conditions is now a key requirement for IT groups like his.

"Things are just going to be fundamentally different," he says. "And for us, we have to support and be part of those adjustments."

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