How COVID-19 is Advancing Digital Transformation in Government

In this Q&A, Chris Shriver, Health and Human Services Partner, IBM Services, discusses how COVID-19 has highlighted the need for — and value of — accelerating digital transformation in government.

How do you see state and local governments leveraging the ongoing crisis to advance their digital transformation agendas?

State and local governments have been rapidly innovating to transform their applications and citizen interfaces. Most of them are more focused than ever on how they can better serve constituents with much faster response and feedback mechanisms. For example, department of labor and department of health call centers are changing the way they interact with constituents. Not just in terms of answering calls but also sharing information and using new technology and processes to improve interactions. We've seen a dramatic shift in the use of AI — not only to reduce in-person call center volumes by handling question/answer types of calls, but also by interpreting the intent and sentiment of callers' questions so agencies can provide the most effective and immediate response.

What are some examples of application modernization where state and local governments are taking advantage of CARES Act funding?

Some are using the funding to implement or re-engineer platforms that provide them a 360-degree view of their constituents and their needs around emergency response. State and local governments can leverage these platforms for the current pandemic as well as future emergencies such as flooding, tornadoes, hurricanes and forest fires. They are also using this funding in support of public health, by transforming their infectious disease tracking system and processes. In addition, they have leveraged CARES Act funding to adapt their business processes and apply technology to resident-facing applications to be more responsive to citizens' requests.

Community engagement and data sharing are important to obtain a holistic view of an individual. How has contact tracing and care management of COVID-infected individuals advanced these approaches?

State and local governments see the pandemic as an opportunity to provide better services to constituents. A person who tests positive for COVID-19 will likely be asked to quarantine. How do you support them in terms of health care, food, housing, childcare and so on — the whole social care needs assessment? State and local leaders know we need to look at people holistically, and the pandemic has created an opportunity to advance their initiatives on data integration/sharing between agencies and the ability to integrate with community partners for resources referrals and engagement.

How has the pandemic shifted the CIO's role?

The pandemic provides state CIOs with an opportunity to broker services beyond a state agency. State CIOs are providing information and services to city and county governments, and they are working with education institutions to help students and instructors return to campus. In addition to expanding their reach and sphere of influence, they are brokering a broader set of services.

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For more information, visit https://www.ibm.com/watson/watson-works or contact Chris Shriver at cshriver@us.ibm.com.