



Digital equity

Building an inclusive
government that works for all

Introduction

As the imperative to provide better digital services to constituents accelerates, an important challenge has surfaced. How can state and local governments achieve equity in service delivery in an era of continuous change to ensure all residents can fully engage in every aspect of the economy and civic life?

This concept of digital equity has evolved beyond providing connectivity and devices. Now, it means making sure all individuals and communities have the technology capacity required to access essential services and fully participate in democracy, society, the economy, and lifelong learning.

To work toward this goal, governments need to embed digital equity in every technology, process, and service they enable. This requires public service leaders to attract, retain, upskill, and reskill the current government IT workforce. They need to increase the number of women and people from underrepresented populations in mission-critical IT roles. Without building inclusive IT teams that reflect their communities, governments will

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struggle to create programs and services that provide greater access to digital opportunities for all.

To better understand how governments can build diversity in IT workforces to deliver greater service to all constituents, the Center for Digital Government (CDG) and Amazon Web Services (AWS) have formed a Digital Equity Advisory Council to convene public sector technology leaders to discuss solutions and strategies.

This paper focuses on how governments can create more diverse talent pipelines that will fuel stronger opportunities for all constituents in the years to come.

“Digital equity starts with expanding access, understanding the needs of your population, focusing on human-centric design, and streamlining the user experience for all,” says Kimberley Williams, education and state and local government advisor for AWS. “The tools are available to open government services to everyone. We need to have goals and a roadmap to get there.”

The talent pipeline challenge

State and local governments face two critical talent challenges: skills and diversity. Agencies emerged from the pandemic with a renewed mission to make service delivery more equitable. Many are also taking meaningful steps to improve equity within and beyond their organizations, including launching initiatives to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion; engaging in collaborations with community organizations that serve underrepresented populations; and redoubling efforts to create a government workforce that reflects the communities it serves. That’s an essential first step toward digital equity for all constituents, says CDG Senior Vice President Teri Takai. “As we are growing our own organizations, if we reflect the citizens we serve, then our services almost automatically end up being much more equitable.”

However, in a January 2022 survey of more than 350 state and local government human resources managers, 85% reported difficulty in attracting and retaining a diverse staff. Three-quarters

About the Digital Equity Advisory Council

The Center for Digital Government Digital Equity Advisory Council helps state and local government organizations execute on digital equity programs and practices. The initiative aims to elevate digital equity education, take policies and practices to the next level, and engage executive leaders—including CIOs, CTOs, and chief diversity officers—in the digital equity imperative.

Comprising state and local government leaders and industry experts, the council is underwritten by AWS. Initial meetings held in 2022 focused on creating actionable steps to address diversity in the government workforce, women, and underrepresented minorities in STEM to support equity in service delivery.

(74%) of government HR managers said pandemic-related challenges and the so-called Great Resignation, which has led employees to reconsider their career and personal priorities, also pose barriers to hiring.¹

Governments must also compete with higher-paying private sector firms to attract scarce technology talent—a field in which women and minorities remain underrepresented in every sector. Women make up less than one-third (28%) of the workforce in STEM fields² and only 16% of IT professionals. This is a figure that has remained largely unchanged over the past decade.³ Together, Black, Hispanic/Latinx, and Indigenous employees make up 16% of the IT workforce—and only 5% in Silicon Valley firms.⁴

Governments have many built-in advantages to creating a diverse IT workforce, including a sense of mission and a head start on developing equity initiatives that are still lacking in the private sector. With a public sector workforce that is 60% female and employs one in five Black Americans,⁵ governments also have untapped talent to draw from to better serve communities,

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Teri Takai, Senior Vice President, Center for Digital Government

if they invest in identifying and upskilling promising staffers.

To leverage this opportunity, government leaders must focus on developing internal IT skillsets and think beyond traditional hiring requirements and discrete recruitment and outreach efforts. “Until we have a needle-moving effort, we’re not going to reach our goals,” Williams says. “Governments need to articulate where they are today and where the digital equity journey is going to take them.”

The first steps

✔ **Benchmark and assess key skills.** Begin by assessing how current roles in the organization match up with skills needed for next-generation digital services. Then examine the criteria for each IT position to ensure the specified skills match current needs, particularly with

the ongoing transition to cloud and other as-a-service technologies. This will help identify the skill gaps for the roles required in the future, which in turn lays the path for upskilling and recruiting strategies.

✔ **Identify high-potential employees to immediately address gaps.** Identify women and minorities already in government who can be upskilled into IT roles. Current employees bring with them a deep understanding of programs and services and the challenges and barriers that constituents face. With training, their firsthand experiences can inform work with in-house IT staff and technology partners to deliver improved—and inclusive—digital services.

“I’ve hired people who wouldn’t consider themselves technologists but found themselves in more



technical roles that can bridge technology with the business and operational side of things,” says Devyn Paros, chief digital officer for the commonwealth of Massachusetts. “These roles are critical to working in a different way and thinking more holistically about the skillsets.”

✔ **Consider how technology partners can play a key role in improving capacity.** The right partners can supplement IT staff and strengthen in-house and expertise. Agencies should include knowledge transfer as a component of statements of work for all IT projects.

Recruitment and retention

To sustain momentum over time, government leaders must rethink their broader recruitment and retention practices. Among the strategies:

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Devyn Paros, Chief Digital Officer, Massachusetts

✔ **Evaluate job descriptions to expand the applicant pool.** IT leaders should rethink whether a position requires a four-year degree, a shift that private sector technology giants have already made in recognizing skills can be learned on the job or in two-year certificate programs offered by community colleges. Currently, job postings for a given occupation in the public sector are often more likely to have a bachelor’s degree requirement than the same job in other sectors. Unwillingness to

relax degree requirements can hinder governments from achieving greater workforce diversity.

States such as Texas are “hiring employees who have what we see as the critical skills to do the job, but may not have the certifications and backgrounds,” says Amanda Crawford, executive director of the Texas Department of Information Resources (DIR) and CIO for the state of Texas. “We can provide training and opportunities to earn certifications.”





The same holds true in senior level positions, and governments should cast a much wider net for technology leaders. Across all industries, significant numbers of CIOs don't have traditional technology backgrounds, often coming from the finance and budget sectors, according to Lea Eriksen, who followed a similar path to her role as CIO and director of technology and innovation for the city of Long Beach, California (see page 7).

✔ **Provide workplace flexibility for both new and existing employees.** Remote and hybrid work arrangements support retention and allow organizations to recruit in rural areas or across an entire region. Target people willing to work in part-time roles, such as current employees who are contemplating retirement but may stay in key roles if offered greater flexibility.

✔ **Recruit non-STEM skillsets.** Digital Equity Advisory Council members stressed the value of nontechnical skillsets within IT departments to help them work more effectively with business units. Targeting people with skills in procurement, contracts, and service delivery can add a new dimension to IT departments.

✔ **Focus on mission.** Government leaders have long argued that public service is a differentiator in attracting a mission-driven workforce, but they must make sure to communicate this during the recruitment and hiring process.

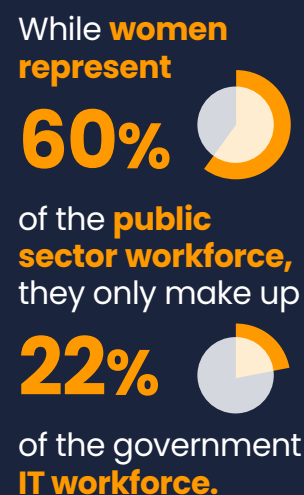
"Every position we're offering needs to have a story behind it," Eriksen says. It's critical to connect technology roles to real-world outcomes.

Mission should also play a role in selecting candidates. In Maine, for

Women in public sector IT: Relaunching and retention

Women represent an untapped resource for government IT. While they make up 60% of the public sector workforce, they only make up 22% of the government IT workforce, and an even smaller proportion of IT leadership. They also tend to find IT roles rewarding—92% of women in IT reported being either satisfied or somewhat satisfied in their roles.⁶ Among the strategies for recruiting and retaining women:

- **Rethink hiring criteria.** Although this applies to attracting a broader pool of all applicants, women are far less likely than men to apply for jobs if they don't meet the specific criteria outlined in job listings. An often-cited example from Hewlett Packard suggests that men apply for jobs even when they lack nearly half of the posted skills and requirements.⁷
- **Focus on relaunching and returnships.** These programs target and support women returning to work after taking breaks in their careers to raise children or meet other family needs. Nearly half of Fortune 100 companies have formal returnship programs, which are programs designed to help individuals relaunch their careers after a break. Additionally, recruiting sites such as Indeed allow candidates to label themselves as relaunchers. Strategies like these shift the narrative from scrutinizing resume gaps to valuing skills developed during time away from the workforce.
- **Stress flexibility for all.** Flexible work arrangements benefit women and men, and they are increasingly available in private and public sector jobs. "A silver lining of the pandemic was realizing remote work could happen in government," says Crawford, the CIO of Texas. Providing these and other benefits such as parental leave to all employees, not solely women, can help ensure initiatives are seen as what she calls a "better together situation."



example, interviews for IT positions now begin with questions focused on core values “to get a sense of affinity and empathy toward constituents and their colleagues,” says Fred Brittain, CIO for the state of Maine.

✔ **Ensure hiring panels reflect equity goals.** Interviewers, not only interviewees, should represent the workforce governments aspire to have. “Your workforce will be whoever is on your hiring panels,” says Rob Lloyd, deputy city manager for the city of San José, California.

✔ **Know your data and be transparent.** Many governments have created dashboards showing representation of women and minorities in different departments and leadership roles. “Knowing that data and having people see the trends is important to measure progress,” Eriksen says.

✔ **Build support structures for diverse hires.** Formal mentoring leadership development programs are essential. But governments often face challenges pairing women and diverse hires with peers in similar roles because of how few women and minorities are

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Rob Lloyd, Deputy City Manager, San José, California

currently in technology leadership positions. One solution involves forming public-private partnerships to connect mentees with mentors in the same disciplines.

Ongoing communication is critical. Consider conducting regular “stay” interviews to “address issues proactively instead of waiting until it’s too late and having an exit interview,” Crawford says.

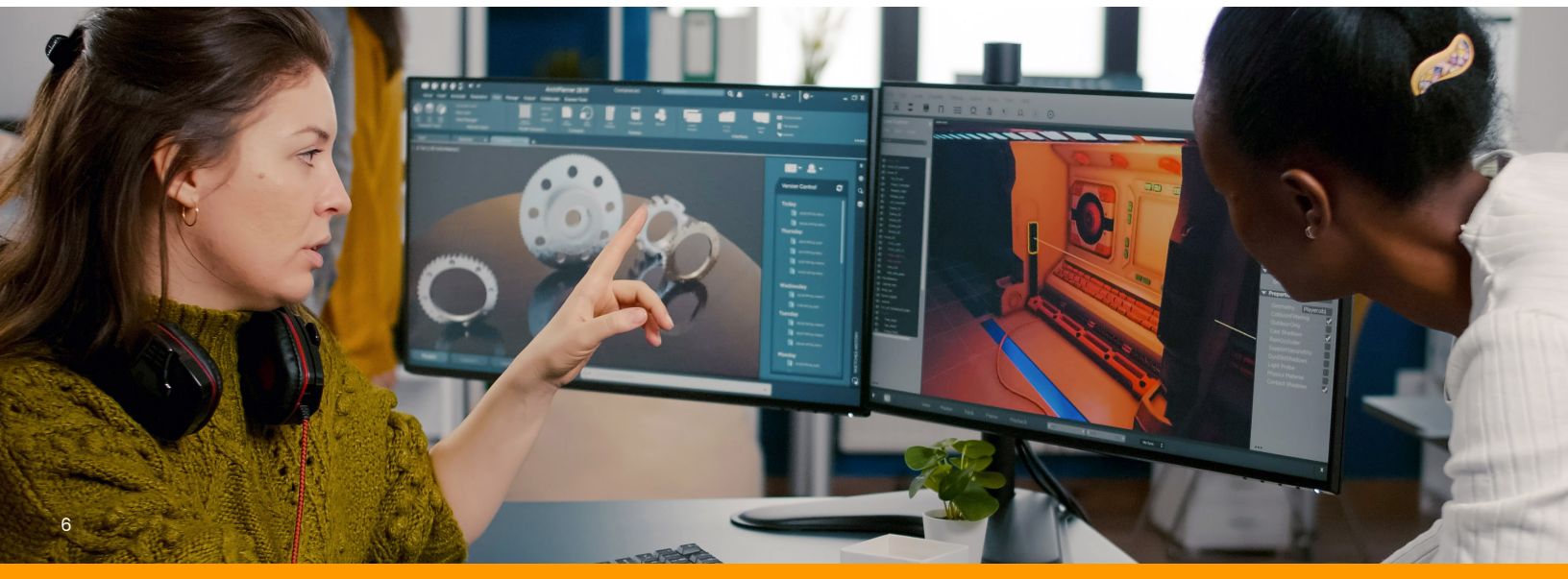
Leaders also play a critical role in setting an example. “Our best people recount the individuals who provided the support and candid feedback that helped them achieve and build valuable relationships,” Lloyd says. “It’s vital to mentor at least one person at all times and have your top team members commit to the same.”

Building talent pipelines

Changing recruitment and retention practices will only go so far. To fully address digital equity within and outside of government, public sector leaders must think beyond the boundaries of their own workforce. They should work with the private sector to strengthen local economic opportunities and build pipelines for women and minorities to pursue STEM careers, which are among the fastest-growing and highest-paying jobs in every sector.

“Equity and diversity will not happen by accident, and including women and underrepresented groups will not happen naturally,” Williams says. “We must be intentional to bridge the digital divide. We can improve outcomes, increase earning potential, and close the wage gap.”

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Spotlight: Women leaders in government IT



Karrah Herring,
Chief Equity,
Inclusion, and
Opportunity Officer,
Indiana

A native Hoosier, Karrah Herring has a simple goal for her role as Indiana's first cabinet-level equity leader: "to serve as many people as possible in a short amount of time."

Created by Governor Eric Holcomb, the Office of Equity, Inclusion, and Opportunity is charged with leading statewide initiatives to support socially and economically disadvantaged citizens.

"A big part of that is making sure everyone has access to services, education, and the things they need to live a good quality of life," Herring says. "You can't talk about that in 2023 unless you're talking about the digital divide."

Addressing the digital divide involves improving the accessibility of government services, including translations into multiple languages, as part of broader workforce, economic, and community development initiatives. Herring is also focused on making sure equity initiatives are sustainable through data-driven efforts to establish goals and track outcomes.

Her mission also includes making sure Indiana sets an example with its own workforce. "We can't go out and challenge our peers and other folks to come alongside us if we aren't doing the work internally," she told the *Indianapolis Star*.



Amanda Crawford,
CIO, Texas

Amanda Crawford's commitment to public service draws from her parents. Her father served in the Marine Corps and her mother volunteered for various civic causes. As Texas CIO, she meets that commitment by empowering others to serve constituents, she says.

"Now more than ever, technology powers the business of government, and I feel privileged to lead a team that supports government agencies across our state in serving Texans," she says.

Coming out of the pandemic, Crawford is committed to serving constituent needs "in a world where preferences and attitudes about remote work, government offices, and public health will likely be completely different," she says. Technology can serve as a "force multiplier" to provide better service in these changing times, she adds.

The same sense of mission that brought Crawford to public service can inspire others, she says. "It's time for the public sector to talk about the critical importance of our missions as a way to promote the value of working in government IT," she says. "We won't be able to beat private sector salaries, but we can certainly compete on mission and impact."



Lea Eriksen,
Director of Technology
and Innovation and
CIO, Long Beach,

Lea Eriksen didn't have a technology background when she entered public service, interning in Cincinnati's budget office before serving in budget roles there and in Long Beach. But she was drawn to smart city initiatives and saw technology as a tool to "be more responsible and accessible by using data to inform decisions."

Despite jumping into two major projects—a new data center and enterprise resource planning system (ERP)—after being named CIO and director of technology and innovation for the city of Long Beach, Eriksen found the new role a good fit for her skills. "Being involved in different projects and initiatives and being a problem-solving partner translated well into the CIO role," she says. "It's about leadership, recruiting, retaining great teams, asking good questions, and knowing the direction we're going."

As CIO, she has focused on digital inclusion and aligning the city's equity efforts with its smart city initiative, which led to Long Beach's recognition by CDG as one of the nation's top digital cities for 2022.⁸ "One of the things I'm proud of is carving out positions to do work like smart cities and looking for people from nontraditional backgrounds," she says.

Eriksen has also built a leadership team in which women and minorities are the majority. "Having people in those key leadership positions helps people see there's a career path," she says. "People can't be what they don't see."

Among the strategies:

✔ **Develop partnerships.**

Governments should work closely with community organizations, technology companies, and IT-focused recruiting agencies to create public-private partnerships that offer certification, apprenticeship, and internship programs that address community needs. The goal is to create a “community curriculum” tailored to the local economy that involves business, schools and colleges, and government. One such program is the AWS Education to Workforce initiative, which brings together employers, industry, and educational institutions at all levels to find solutions to close the skills gap.

“AWS Education to Workforce is building partnerships that work for the people that we are trying to help,” says Val Singer, who leads

the initiative. “Our mission is to give all people the skills necessary to be employed in highly sustainable jobs and thrive in the digital economy.”

✔ **Work closely with community colleges.**

Community colleges are particularly valuable partners for internship and recruitment efforts, given their outreach to underrepresented populations, including low-income and minority students and formerly incarcerated individuals. The growth of promise programs and other opportunities that allow students to receive a free two-year degree or certification represents another important avenue for equity.

“Community colleges can help build the programs that meet the needs we’re looking for and reach the non-traditional student,” says Alana Troutt, former agency deputy secretary for external affairs for the California Government Operations Agency.

✔ **Start early.** Government outreach often focuses on college (career days and internships) or high school (partnerships with STEM-focused nonprofits). But sparking an interest in technology careers—and dispelling persistent bias about who is best suited for them—must begin much earlier. “It starts in early learning,” says Karrah Herring, chief equity, inclusion, and opportunity officer for the state of Indiana. “How are we exposing them to women and people of color to say there is a space for them in IT and math and science?”

It’s essential to convey urgency as these efforts continue, Williams says. “We’ve seen good intentions around diversity for a while. But now we have a digital equity imperative that can finally turn those intentions into action. It’s crucial that we maintain momentum on this issue.”

Sparking an interest in technology careers—and dispelling persistent bias about who is best suited for them—must begin in early learning.



✔ **Focus on storytelling.** For all ages, discussions about technology should go beyond the usual tropes about visionary leaders in the field—almost universally white and male—and focus on how governments are using technology to change lives. “Tell stories in a way that talks about impact,” says Anushree Bag, CIO of the Indiana Department of Child Services.

✔ **Take a government-wide approach.** Fully transforming talent pipelines requires a coordinated approach—and leading by example. In Indiana, the governor’s workforce cabinet brought together labor, education, and economic development officials to develop a “comprehensive approach to talent pipelines,” Herring says. That includes apprenticeships, adult education, internships and capstone courses, high school career and technical education programs,

and job shadowing opportunities in technology and other high-demand fields. Indiana’s cabinet-level Office of Equity, Inclusion, and Opportunity has been involved in numerous efforts to look at state programs through an equity lens. It is also helping coordinate internships across the state’s cabinet-level offices through the “Pathways to Purpose” work-based learning internship program. The first cohort began in January 2023.

Ensuring equity in service delivery

Of course equity isn’t only about expanding the talent pipeline. It also requires a deliberate and systematic approach to planning, developing, and executing on new digital services that ensure every member of the population has access to the resources they need to participate fully in society, the workforce, and the world.

Many states have passed legislation or executive orders to promote equity in policy and service delivery. However, these efforts are still struggling to reach populations that Troutt calls the “invisible”—those who are underserved by government or don’t know how to engage with it.

“That is why you don’t see the needle move,” she says. “What we hear over and over is that we’re only at the top layer—the people who are perhaps willing to be served but don’t necessarily know how to be served. But I don’t think we’ve gotten to the invisible piece, and those may, in fact, be the most vulnerable.”

For government leaders, strategies for reaching all residents with equitable programs, services, and solutions include:

More than access: A continuum of digital equity

Digital equity begins with access to the internet but ultimately includes the ability to use technology in ways that improve livelihoods and lives. With federal broadband funding increasingly emphasizing access beyond mere connectivity, it’s essential to understand the full spectrum of digital equity.

Digital void

is a complete lack of internet access. Addressing the digital divide has been a long-standing focus of policymakers, but it represents only the first step.

Digital enablement

means providing access to the internet and devices. Once considered synonymous with digital equity, it’s now recognized as the bare essential needed to begin building a more inclusive approach.

Digital proficiency

is the knowledge and ability to use the internet to seek out resources and programs and successfully take advantage of them, and use digital platforms to participate more broadly in society.

Work-ready skills

refers to the development of technology skills that allow constituents to contribute to the modern digital economy and enter jobs that can support them and their families, helping build sustainable communities.

Digital equity

is achieved only when all constituents, including women and minorities, have developed the digital proficiency and work-ready skills to enter high-value careers that lead to full participation in the economy, society, democracy, and lifelong learning.

✔ **Engage with community groups.** Leaders must ask questions about who they are serving. For many governments, this alone is a challenge. “We need to determine the needs of the populations we serve to ensure we are delivering in the right languages, the right ease of use, and have the right technologies so that all members of the public can avail themselves of government services,” says Brittain.

They must also understand the needs of each group within the community. In San José, for example, residents collectively speak more than 300 languages. City officials quickly recognized that simply translating government content to describe services and news failed to reflect cultural context and produced only average results. Communicating purposefully to diverse audiences has been exceptionally more effective, even enabling the city to achieve best-in-nation results for the U.S. Census response, according to Lloyd.

Fully understanding the broad scope of populations within a community and their unique needs involves assessing where different groups exist on the digital equity spectrum (see box, page 9).

✔ **Determine programming.** Along with understanding whether current programs are reaching all residents, it’s important to determine how new and revamped programs fit into the full spectrum of services across agencies and departments. This requires rethinking how government services have historically been developed.

“Experts too often rush to solutions and say, ‘I know what will fix this,’” Lloyd says. “Stop. Listen hard before getting into solutioning. Human-centered design starts with empathy.

The process unites people with a shared understanding of each other’s key processes and challenges, then lets the team map out multi-department, silo-busting solutions.” Developing effective programming may also require going beyond government. In Long Beach, for example, the city’s digital inclusion initiative invites community members to co-create targeted strategies and programs “that work for them,” Eriksen says. In San José, the city’s COVID recovery task force comprises 55 community partners that guide how federal relief dollars are spent.

✔ **Emphasize human-centered design.** At the most basic level, this means designing programs and services to work for constituents, not existing agency silos or business processes. Many governments are creating a universal identity across programs and departments or developing digital assistants that can help residents find the services they need. However, reaching all populations will require forging authentic connections with communities. “My direct reports driving our equity work are planners and public health professionals, not technology people,” Eriksen says.

It’s also important to make sure design elements are accessible for all constituents. In King County, Washington, developers work with individuals with visual and hearing impairments to confirm they can use the county website and other services, according to Tanya Hannah, former CIO for the county.

✔ **Develop a multichannel approach to service delivery.** Understanding where different populations are on the digital equity spectrum can help governments deploy the best channels to reach all residents. “It’s not only the web. It’s mobile. It’s social media. It’s any way that we’re reaching out to constituents,” says CDG’s Takai.

It’s essential to consider appropriate channels through an equity lens. “Outreach in your community makes all the difference, because culturally, and by language, communities aren’t uniform. To engage, we have to use a mix of communications approaches,” Lloyd says.

✔ **Drive and measure outcomes.** New programs and services must include clearly defined outcomes and measures to judge progress. In King County, technology leaders conduct

How do we deliver equitable solutions?

- ✔ Engage with community groups
- ✔ Determine programs
- ✔ Emphasize human-centered design
- ✔ Develop a multi-channel approach to services
- ✔ Drive and measure outcomes
- ✔ Expand data-driven decision-making

an equity impact review of every new program or service to understand how they are impacting different populations, according to Hannah. Although metrics are essential to drive continuous improvement, they must also be examined carefully. For example, when New York City added a rat reporting system to its 311 service, data showed that some of the city's poorest ZIP codes had no reports of infestations. It took connecting with people who knew those communities to learn that residents weren't familiar with the 311 system—an object lesson in the importance of including feedback from the communities served when measuring outcomes and program efficacy.

"Getting that early adopter feedback has been critical for us to figure out what's working, what's not, and where the confusion and pain points are for the user," says Jennifer Buas, director of strategic digital services for the Texas Department of Information Resources (DIR).

"To move the needle, you've got to get back out to the people and ask them what they need, then go back into the workshop and build it."

Karen Loquet, Assistant Auditor–Controller/CIO, Los Angeles County

✔ **Expand data-driven decision-**

making. A priority for many governments, data-driven decision-making can be improved with analytics solutions and dashboards that help leaders make better use of the information they have. However, collecting that information across multiple agencies and departments remains a hurdle. "The sharing of information across our organizations is complex," says Karen Loquet, assistant auditor-controller/CIO for Los Angeles County.

Conclusion

Creating a diverse government technology workforce and delivering on the digital equity imperative will require intentionality, specific goals, and an effective system

of management to track activities and outcomes. These efforts must include the combined efforts of IT and line of business leaders within government, as well as education and other community institutions and IT partners focused on recruitment and system integration. They also require government leaders to shift their historical approach to program design and service delivery.

Leaders must think beyond individual initiatives and reach out to community partners in new ways to build comprehensive approaches to addressing digital equity and workforce needs. "To move the needle, you've got to get back out to the people and ask them what they need, then go back into the workshop and build it," Loquet says.

Building these wide-ranging partnerships will require political savvy, or "politics with a big and small 'p,'" as Crawford puts it. "So much of what we're trying to do is build networks, and that involves building trust," she says. "We have to get out from behind the screen and build those relationships."

But the benefits are clear: Lloyd notes that when a workforce gets to more than 30% of a traditionally underrepresented group, "you see folks go from tolerance to celebration." "You're not just checking a box," he says. "You get to watch as your culture grows stronger and your people take pride in the team they contribute to."

This piece was written and produced by the Center for Digital Government Content Studio, with information and input from AWS.



Endnotes

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