Designing a Government for the People

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PARTNERSHIP
FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

Accenture Federal Services

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About the Partnership

The Partnership for Public Service is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that works to revitalize the federal government by inspiring a new generation to serve and by transforming the way government works. The Partnership teams up with federal agencies and other stakeholders to make our government more effective and efficient.

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Accenture Federal Services, a wholly owned subsidiary of Accenture LLP, is a U.S. company with offices in Arlington, Virginia. Accenture's federal business has served every cabinet-level department and 30 of the largest federal organizations. Accenture Federal Services transforms bold ideas into breakthrough outcomes for clients at defense, intelligence, public safety, civilian and military health organizations. Learn more at www.accenturefederal.com.

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Executive Summary

The Biden administration's customer experience policy strives for more equitable and efficient services for all and is a clear reflection of what a government designed for the people should be. Putting this vision into practice requires mitigating obstacles that prevent agencies from addressing the root causes of customer experience challenges. Customers would benefit from a collaborative approach that aligns all elements of government with those customers' perspectives and needs. The Biden administration should invest in a change management strategy that empowers not only customer experience but financial, legal, human resources, data, and technology teams to act in the customer's interest and targets the root causes of customer experience challenges.

The next phase of improving the federal customer experience should involve building a customer-centric mindset and accountability across every government function. We identified seven key ingredients for accelerating the administration's customer experience goals—all within agencies' purview today.

1. Empowered leadership: providing deputy secretaries with the insights, staff and performance management systems to be true champions of improving the customer experience.

2. An engaged and accountable agency enterprise: generating enterprise-wide customer experience performance expectations for chief financial, information, human capital, and other officers.

3. A knowledge mobilization strategy for customer solutions: making all customer data easily accessible for designing and delivering a better customer experience.

4. A comprehensive data-sharing policy infrastructure: building common, consistent resources to enable customer-data sharing.

5. A digital enterprise to support consistent customer experience: investing in enterprise-wide digital talent, solutions and infrastructure to support simple, seamless and secure customer experiences.

6. External partnerships for expert knowledge and trusted communication: thoughtfully building expert stakeholder partnerships to connect with vulnerable customer groups.

7. Co-design of services with customers: generating customer co-design strategies that take into consideration technical, physical, emotional, communication and resource barriers and get agencywide buy-in.

Customer experience leaders should be proud of their work putting this critical federal mission at the forefront of innovative policymaking. But addressing the primary root causes of customer experience challenges requires redesigning government so that it can deliver simple, seamless and secure experiences for all eligible customers. **Four bold actions are needed to build a government for the people:**

Fully authorize and hire for the talent needs of a customer-centric government, both within and across agencies, and professionalize the customer experience career field.

Fully and flexibly fund customer experience budgets from the customer's perspective, allowing for cross-agency investments, programs and resources.

Enable common customer data sharing in a secure environment—supported by emerging technologies and centralized data-sharing authorities and agreements—and pass legislation such as the Federal Agency Customer Experience Act.

Redesign regulatory and statutory customer experience frameworks to streamline recertification, access and eligibility; make COVID-19 driven flexibilities permanent; and build a culture of decision-making that consistently works to the customer's benefit.

Photo credit: U.S. Department of Agriculture

Introduction

The federal government has entered a new era of customer experience. Though today's efforts by federal agencies to renew public services build on a decade of reform, recent policy has presented a higher-level vision of simple, seamless and secure customer experiences. This administration's President's Management Agenda Vision and the accompanying "Executive Order on Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government" define clear goals for equitable delivery to the public and targeted actions to relieve the administrative burden on government's customers.

> Scholars Don Moynihan and Pamela Herd define administrative burden as the "costs that people encounter when they search for information about public services (learning costs), comply with rules and requirements (compliance costs), and experience the stresses, loss of autonomy or stigma that comes from such encounters (psychological costs).

But these mandates demand a seismic shift in how government does business: All parts of government must be designed around customers' lives and needs. Such an approach doesn't always align with today's federal organizational charts or processes. And requiring customers to use systems built for the convenience of government has led to frustration and lesser service quality for the very people government is meant to serve–all of us. "We now need to align our programs, technologies and systems to the customer journey, and not align the customer to our systems," said Andy Lewandowski, Digital Experience Advisor to the Federal CIO in the Office of Management and Budget.

In our fourth annual Government for the People report, the Partnership for Public Service and Accenture Federal Services focus on agencies' readiness for these new policies centering the customer, specifically the requirement to "systematically [identify] and [resolve] the root causes of customer experience challenges." In other words, what are the key ingredients that enable agencies to design and deliver from a customer's perspective, and not their own?

A critical requirement for the administration's vision is to expand the collaborative customer-centric mindset to all agency functions. As agencies collect and analyze data, modernize

technology, perform legal reviews and conduct other essential activities, they need to align these systems with how customers live their lives. Teams performing all agency functions—not only customer experience teams—should be accountable for helping people become aware of the services they are eligible for and making it quick and easy for all possible customers to receive those services.

This collective effort can only happen when government offices and agencies coordinate in fundamentally new ways. To illustrate this approach, this report:

- Establishes a vision for collaborative customer experience.
- Explores the benefits to customers of agency collaborations to improve customer experience.
- Identifies critical ingredients for a customer-centric approach across all government functions.
- Proposes bold actions to design a government for the people and target root causes of customer experience challenges.

Root Cause Analysis
The process of discovering the root causes of problems—the underlying issues, not the symptoms—to identify appropriate solutions.

For this report, we interviewed dozens of customer experience leaders, as well as those who design and implement services at federal agencies. We also had conversations with customer experience experts from national research institutes and universities. Additionally, our work was informed by input from our quarterly customer experience roundtables and by leading commercial practices.

Photo credit: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Providing the Means to Achieve the Ends

"The means of government … must work to achieve the ends," according to the Biden administration's executive order on customer experience. This directive sets the expectation that "on-the-ground results for the people of the United States" are the responsibility of not only those charged specifically with designing and delivering federal services, but also the management and operational "means" …. its budget, policy, financial management, procurement and human resources practices."

This raised bar builds on a decade of targeted customer experience reform. Many agencies have already invested in their own customer experience capacity. The dividends from these investments became apparent during the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic as agencies demonstrated the ability to serve customers even as businesses and offices shut down. But a critical ingredient to their success was the coordinated effort of those outside the core customer experience community–lawyers, financial officers, HR managers, and more—to rapidly support customer experience innovations. As bureaucracies work to mitigate the effects of crises, they are pushed to experiment, take risks and become more customer-centric.

The customer experience community wondered how this crisis-driven, enterprise-wide approach would continue when the pandemic wound down. The President's Management Agenda Vision and executive order on customer experience sets broad expectations. It also offers specific initiatives for improving collaboration on design and delivery. Key among them is the formulation of the "life experience" organizing framework that cuts across multiple programs or agencies.

> The cross-agency "life experience" projects are aimed at addressing critical periods of life, such as experiencing a natural disaster, during which customers may require services from multiple agencies. Project teams spent their first months researching customer pain points across systems and developing holistic journey maps of the customer experience. The first projects include:
> - Having a child and early childhood for low-income families.

- Navigating transition to civilian life.
- Approaching retirement.
- Facing a financial shock.
- Recovering from a disaster

A government designed for the people is one that strives for more equitable and efficient services for all. To get there, agencies must take a collaborative, human-centered approach. But, given the baggage of decades of government-centric design, putting this vision into practice has been hindered by a range of people, process and technology gaps that prevent agencies from addressing the root causes of the customer experience challenges.

Photo credit: U.S. Department of Agriculture

Joining Together to Meet Customers' Needs

Collaborative efforts to build seamless customer experiences are important for individual programs as well as for the administration's cross-cutting life experience projects. They also contribute to the government's goal of reducing administrative burden and improving equity for underserved customers.

But the "whole of government" approach sought by advocates of collaboration is too often praised as an end in itself, without an articulation of its purpose. Collaboration demands time and resources and requires leadership-buy in. To be successful in customer experience, this approach requires a substantial change management strategy and serious investment across all functions of government–and will generate significant benefit to customers.

Collaborative and Customer-Centric from the Start

The Consumer Finance Protection Bureau and federal partners presented a clear example of a collaborative and customer-centric approach during the housing security crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. What made it work: an agile approach to responding to customer needs, with real-time shared design and delivery of resources and clear decision-making authority.

With millions of people out of work and behind on rental and mortgage payments, Congress and executive branch agencies acted quickly to provide billions in aid for rent, utilities, mortgage relief and other housing costs, as well as a range of consumer protections. The bureau spearheaded the development and launch of a multi-agency portal for customers that would serve as a one-stop shop for up-to-date information on and access to relief options, protections, and key deadlines. In such a crisis, this was no small feat. Customers were under significant stress. Relief programs were either new or changing rapidly, and responding agencies were coping with historic requirements for delivering assistance.

To be successful, CFPB needed regular access to the right mix of multi-agency experts who could create a responsive and accessible resource for consumers in crisis and make decisions

rapidly. The modular team included everyone who would need to weigh in through internal clearance processes and gathered them together to discuss and respond in real time.

Find help for your situation

Help for homeowners

Learn about options to help your situation, like repaying any amount not paid during forbearance, avoiding foreclosure, and maintaining your reverse mortgage.

See your next steps

Help for renters

Federal, state, and local governments are offering relief. See options to avoid eviction, get rental assistance, and understand your rights.

Get the help you're entitled to

Apply for money to cover rent and utilities

Help for landlords

If you've lost rental income, you may be struggling to pay your mortgage and other costs. See alternatives to eviction and get help.

Learn what this means for you

Apply for money to cover expenses if your tenants cannot pay rent

From our interviews with customer experience experts across and outside government, we learned how successful collaborative efforts on the customer experience front benefit the public in six specific ways. When agencies are unable to provide these benefits, agency senior leaders should task cross-organizational teams to explore the root causes that prevent them from doing so, using "the five whys" or other comparable methodologies.

The Five Whys: A Root Cause Analysis Methodology
Building on a problem statement, ask a series of "why" questions that sequentially drill down to the root cause. The root cause is identified when you know that if you fixed that issue, the overarching problem would be prevented.

Customers benefit when agencies collect, access and act on the full range of available customer insights–whether from research teams, community engagement leaders, front-line staff who hear directly from customers or external experts who can offer a deeper picture of customer needs.

- Why don't we access customer feedback given to front-line employees?
- Why don't we use all sources of insight about our customers?
- Why don't front-line workers change their behavior based on our customer research?

Customers benefit when agencies proactively identify and communicate eligibility for services that are relevant to their needs–relying on holistic data management; data scientists with intelligent systems that can gather, analyze and respond to data; customer-centric legal structures; and customer-informed communications.

Five Whys Sample Questions

- Why isn't my program proactively engaging customers?
- Why can't my program analyze customer data for possible needs?
- Why doesn't my program share insights on customer needs with consumer educators?

Customers benefit when agencies streamline program eligibility processes so customers receive resources when they can make best use of them–seamless customer service is possible when agencies proactively "connect the dots" for their customers.

Five Whys Sample Questions

- Why can't eligible customers get access to my program when they need it?
- Why do customers miss their deadlines for my program?
- Why are sequential (or gated) application processes disconnected or not aligned?

Customers benefit when agencies ensure all audiences understand the services they are eligible for, relying on strong community engagement and diverse experience and perspective among communication specialists as well as relationships with trusted partners.

Five Whys Sample Questions

- Why is a specific customer community underrepresented among the customers we provide services to?
- Why do our resources for specific customer communities rarely get accessed?

Customers benefit when agencies create consistent, reliable experiences across all available customer channels—and such an "omnichannel" experience requires goal-driven collaboration across customer contact channels, data infrastructure and communication.

Five Whys Sample Questions

- Why are customer drop-off points higher for one specific channel?
- Why is customer satisfaction higher for specific channels?
- Why are satisfied customers in one program not accessing services they are eligible for in a related program?

Customers benefit when agencies design services inclusively to reflect the diverse experience of all eligible customers. Designing services this way requires a group effort: researchers who partner with underrepresented groups, program designers who come from the communities they serve, a wide array of translators, legal experts committed to accessibility, specialists in trauma-informed care and communication and other contributors.

Five Whys Sample Questions

- Why does this customer community not participate in research and data collection on our service websites?
- Why is this eligible customer group underrepresented in our programs?

Photo credit: U.S. Department of Agriculture

Joining Together to Meet Customers' Needs

The administration's vision of seamless and equitable customer experience is refreshingly ambitious. Its pursuit of the customer "life experience" projects and investment in popular service improvements—such as the State Department's online passport renewal [pilot](#)–shows its commitment to making progress for customers.

But many agencies face barriers to making this collaborative vision materialize. "We have found all kinds of approaches to navigating barriers that are legal, permissible, and tailored to use-cases as they arise, but for a variety of reasons those approaches are not scalable," one long-time customer experience expert said. And while customer experience teams have heavily invested in customer research, they need backing from across their agencies to move from this discovery phase to launching solutions. The next phase of federal customer experience must emphasize the change management necessary to shift from a culture of workarounds to a customer-centric mindset across every government function. This mindset should be accompanied by agencywide accountability for delivering solutions for customers. In our research, we identified seven key ingredients necessary for accelerating the administration's customer experience goals—all within agencies' purview today:

1. **Empowered leadership.**
2. **An engaged and accountable agency enterprise.**
3. **Knowledge Mobilization for Customer Solutions.**
4. **Comprehensive data-sharing policy infrastructure.**
5. **Digital enterprise backbone for a consistent customer experience.**
6. **External partnerships for expert knowledge and trusted communication.**
7. **Co-design of services with customers.**

1. EMPOWERED LEADERSHIP

The administration's customer experience approach has generated substantial senior leadership buy-in and, with it, top cover. Based on the responsibilities assigned in the President's Management Agenda and customer experience executive order, "to deliver a government that works for all Americans, it's essential for OMB and department and agency leadership teams to work together," said Noreen Hecmanczuk, Strategic Advisor to the Federal CIO at the Office of Management and Budget. "Through these partnerships, we can identify opportunities for agencies to connect their people, policies, processes, and data to deliver a customer experience that is simple, seamless, and secure." Critically, deputy secretaries are regularly reporting progress on their customer experience work within the President's Management Council.

However, seamless customer experience cannot be built on policies assigning customer experience leadership responsibilities on paper. For many leaders, approaching agency missions from the perspective of customer benefit is new, and in most agencies, customer experience functions are not well-integrated into the organization's priorities. Leaders may need support from staff to be true champions of customer success. Agencies customer experience teams making the most of their senior leadership's ability to drive change are:

- Supporting agency leadership efforts to both set agency-wide performance expectations for customer experience and also require inclusion of customer experience metrics in individual leader performance plans across the enterprise.
- Giving senior agency leaders the opportunity to directly connect with both front-line employees and customers.
- Staffing deputy secretary offices with advisors responsible for collaborative customer experience efforts, facilitating the deputy's line of sight across the agencies' customer experience activities.

> Barbara C. Morton says **complex, cross-agency coordinated efforts**—like synchronizing backend systems to create a seamless VA digital experience for Veterans on va.gov and the VA mobile app — are enabled and catalyzed when top leadership sets customer experience as a top priority: "We have Customer Experience as an agency measure of performance, as well as an individual measure of performance. This multi-pronged approach keeps us all focused on the same goal, which is keeping the Veteran at the center of everything we do."

2. AN ENGAGED AND ACCOUNTABLE AGENCY ENTERPRISE

"CX can't just be one of those siloed functions—and leadership is realizing that it's needed across all functions."

—Abena Apau, Customer Experience Officer, Farm Production and Conservation, USDA.

Customer experience teams are also empowered by offices that control key agency functions. "Back-end" elements, like technology, data, human capital, and legal counsel can make or break collaborative customer experience approaches. The significant responsibilities the president's executive order places on agencies to understand customers and reduce administrative burden should be embedded in agency operations, with accountability across the C-suite. Toward that end, agencies should prioritize:

- Agencywide guidance to streamline the approvals needed for repeat customer experience-related tasks–like data sharing or customer research–and find solutions in favor of the customer's benefit in bureaucratic stalemates. For example, decisions relevant to removing administrative burden on customer applications or renewals should be weighted in support of customer outcomes.
- Creating accountability for the customer experience across the agency, including expectations that:
  - Chief financial officers are empowered to realign agency resources with customer experience priorities.
  - Chief information officers prioritize customer-driven digital services, including user experience research for underserved populations.
  - General counsels consistently prioritize customer outcomes in legal reviews and advice to program managers.
  - Human capital teams prioritize timely hiring of skilled customer experience talent.
- Establishing agile teams with a blend of expertise to facilitate designing and implementing customer solutions.

Teams at the center of government—such the OMB office of the federal chief information security officer or the OMB Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs—can also play a critical role in establishing customer-centric policy and templates for agency teams to access and apply consistently.

"We want service providers to be purposeful with their qualitative data. When we do in-depth interviews with customer experience stakeholders, they mention hearing all these wonderful anecdotes, but it's often left with that one stakeholder trying to retell that story. Those stories must be transcribed, analyzed and shared—it can't be all on the shoulders of one individual to amplify."

—Simcah Suveyke-Bogin, Chief Customer Experience Officer, USDA

Crisis-driven enterprise solutions—such as in the Uniting for Ukraine program at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services—can provide lessons for customer experience. USCIS offices across agency functions formed an agile team to create a pathway for Ukrainians seeking to resettle in the United States. "Everybody is on the same page," said one senior customer experience official. "We are laser-focused on this initiative … the case managers, the attorneys, policy staff, everyone understands the priority. By having that alignment and agreement, we can get things done." In a week's time, the team created a form that displaced Ukrainians in the United States could use to apply for a temporary stay. More than 100,000 people from Ukraine have since used it to file for a stay.

3. MOBILIZING INSIGHTS FOR CUSTOMER SOLUTIONS

"Stories are vital to get the attention of changemakers…. Stories are critical to helping agencies think beyond just their part of the elephant…to the whole customer journey."

—Kimberlyn Leary, Senior Vice President, Urban Institute

Agencies are increasingly listening to their customers and learning about their needs. Customer insights, whether from surveys, congressional caseworkers, complaints or ethnographic research, are vital tools to inform agency investments, regulatory policy and communications strategy. But not all agencies can act on what they learn. Many lack the capacity for compiling and sharing customer insights with the people who need them most–whether front-line staff, lawyers or web designers—in a way that resonates with them. A frequent challenge for customer experience offices is data going to waste. Interviews are not transcribed or shared; complaints reside in silos; or surveys get shared in charts instead of stories. To make sure their customer data is useable and acted on, agencies should prioritize investments in three areas:

- Knowledge mobilization:
    - Require teams to record the widest range of customer feedback from across channels; for example, consolidating data from qualitative interviews and surveys or around common customer groups across different programs.
    - Help front line staff and leaders across the agency understand customer pain points —sharing not only what is important to customers, but why.
    - Provide access to modern digital platforms that enable rapid, timely analysis and decision-making.
- Customer insights accountability:
    - Connect customers' pain points encounter with the root causes of customer experience challenges across the whole agency.
    - Track action on customer insights and responding directly to their feedback through closed loop feedback systems.
- Rapid prototyping: Speed the pace at which discovery research on the customer experience is used to design, test and implement improvements.

> The Veterans Health Administration uses **human-centered design research** to identify the **top pain points** for its customers. Analysts use the data to map customer insights against these pain points, identifying opportunities for change and collaborating with veterans to validate those findings from that analysis. This work generates direction for performance improvement teams to address the root causes of customer complaints. A key ingredient to their success is helping agency staff to personally connect to customer experiences. "You're

4. COMPREHENSIVE DATA-SHARING POLICY INFRASTRUCTURE

"Stories are vital to get the attention of changemakers…. Stories are critical to helping agencies think beyond just their part of the elephant…to the whole customer journey."

—*Kimberlyn Leary, Senior Vice President, Urban Institute*

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services' data team identified (by geographic region) different groups of people across the country who are potentially eligible for citizenship, but not yet pursuing this status. The team shared this information with their counterparts in the education and outreach office, who then created and launched a citizenship application awareness campaign tailored to different local communities.

Programs that deliver federal services rely on an accurate understanding of customers, and most federal programs share customers—but not their data. The burden of providing even the most basic data typically lands on customers. Customer experience teams operate in a data-sharing environment that is not highly developed, either within or across departments. Data sharing is hindered by many factors, such as general confusion or misperception about what data programs are allowed to share or inconsistent interpretations of the Privacy Act that protects that data. "Eight different agencies can have eight different interpretations of the Privacy Act regarding what can be shared and how it can be shared," one federal customer experience expert said.

Federal agencies—and their state-level counterparts—often lack clear, authoritative data sharing policy and occasionally seek out one-off waivers from Congress that result in inconsistent, temporary solutions. "Any small steps that are made [around data sharing] are these agency-to-agency or program-to-program relationships, or decisions that are made, so a specific individual from a specific office is pushing for a particular agreement," said Emily Tavoulareas, managing chair of Georgetown University's Tech & Society Initiative.

While many of these challenges require government-wide or congressional action, agencies can drive change by:

- Prioritizing internal data-sharing agreements that enable secure data validation or verification without requiring agencies to share their customers' personal information.
- Developing expedited data-sharing agreement templates for customer experience, building on the Chief Data Officer Council's Data Sharing Working Group's [Findings and Recommendations.](#)
- Developing authoritative, up-to-date legal interpretations of Privacy Act requirements and other relevant regulations related to customer experience for intra-agency use.

In early 2022, through a concerted, coordinated effort by the IRS and the Bureau of the Fiscal Service, tax filers were sent statements detailing the Economic Impact Payments they received during the pandemic. By getting these statements into the hands of the public early in the year, the IRS and the Fiscal Service, the agency responsible for disbursing payments, gave tax filers paperwork at just the right time—during the pre-tax filing season—help customers access any additional payments to households. The carefully timed distribution came about because the two entities ironed out a data-sharing agreement in advance, with the specific goal of getting guidance to the public when they needed to act on it. The IRS has other creative data sharing arrangements as well, such as its collaboration with Federal Student Aid to create a process whereby IRS staff can validate income thresholds information without explicitly sharing customer's personal information.

5. ENTERPRISE-WIDE DIGITAL BACKBONE FOR CONSISTENT CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

"We'd like to be at a point where a representative in the VA education benefits contact center not only knows the customer's education benefits history, but also has information available regarding that customer's interaction with other VA benefits and services... to work towards one VA through the eyes of our Veteran community. The omnichannel experience is something we must enable behind the scenes through data sharing, through robotic process automation, and other ways to connect our people and systems."

Nathan SanFilippo, executive director of multi-channel technology, Department of Veterans Affairs

Seamless customer experience means customers receive consistent access and service quality whether they contact an agency via a contact center, field office, app or other channel— "omnichannel" experience. This outcome depends on a digital backbone that centers around the

customer's needs. Recent research from Accenture shows that less than 10% of public sector customers believe they can start an interaction in one channel and continue in another without starting over. As agencies modernize their technology, it is critical that "no matter where they are on that journey, the number one thing they need to do is align their work to the way customers actually experience their services in real life," Lewandowski said. If back-end digital systems cannot synchronize with one another, that can frustrate efforts to deliver connected and consistent services. An approach that delivers services in this way requires:

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services dedicated years to building a central data repository that brings together relevant data sources. By creating a platform that can house data streams from different Medicare sources, CMS is establishing the potential to parse data for cross-cutting patterns and trends. "Over time, we believe this will become a central nervous system behind all the outreach that we do and a more integrated omnichannel environment," said one CMS official.

- Leadership commitment to enterprise-wide solutions instead of custom solutions for individual lines of business, along with opportunities for digital teams to spread successful solutions to agencies.
- Digital teams with relevant customer-centric experience, or blended teams with experience in a range of fields including technology and digital platforms, software development, data, design, and customer experience.
- Customer usability assessments that are incorporated into digital procurement decisions, such as digital services apps.
- Long-term funding commitment for modernizing technology to support and enhance the customer experience—for example, consolidating websites; leveraging digital tools and platforms; migrating data and applications to the cloud; and transforming contact centers.
- A consolidated data strategy that addresses all agency data, with a security that serves customers' needs.

The office of Federal Student Aid (FSA) at the U.S. Department of Education took the opportunity of the COVID-19 driven student loan payment pause to thoroughly invest in **all the channels customers might use** to understand this benefit and communicate all they might need to know. **Wendy Bhagat, the director of product marketing and delivery group at FSA**, said "We worked together to make sure that if we're making updates on our website, Aidan [*FSA's virtual assistant*] can then answer questions people may ask based on the updates we made; that we have social media content pointing people to those updates on our website; and we have regular email communication with our borrower so that they know what they may want to be thinking of during the payment pause, like looking at what the best repayment plan for them is. It was very much a collaborative effort to help our customers stay informed and engaged."

6. EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIPS FOR EXPERT KNOWLEDGE AND TRUSTED COMMUNICATION

"People across the customer experience space (and beyond) need much more rigorous understanding of the ways that their work can reinforce trauma—bring it up, create, recreate trauma, be unnecessarily invasive and more."

—Senior Research and Design Official, Office of Personnel Management

Partnering with trusted community organizations makes it easier for agencies to understand the diverse needs and situations of people eligible for government services. It also broadens the agencies' reach and makes it easier to tailor messaging to specific demographic groups.

However, developing and sustaining long-term partnerships with groups outside government can be challenging. Limited government resources and a lack of dedicated staff to work on partnerships are among the most obvious ones. But sensitive historical relationships with government, and staff turnover, whether in government or the outside groups, can disrupt existing relationships and prevent new ones from being formed.

Despite these difficulties, many agencies have long engaged community partners to improve how they manage government services in local communities or, in the case of the Transportation Security Administration, in airports. Many people need extra help or information to get through the screening process. "We are trying to do everything that we can to reach these groups," said Niki French, TSA's customer service branch manager. The agency holds quarterly community engagement calls and regularly sends out newsletters to help strengthen relationships between the agency and its partners—tools that other agencies could replicate. The agency also seeks to bolster relationships among the partners themselves, to build a stronger network of organizations serving people with diverse needs.

Successful external partnerships require:

- Being proactive about starting, developing and maintaining a strong network of organizations with related missions.
- Having staff members whose work is dedicated to managing such partnerships.
- Deploying the partners' unique capabilities for tailored purposes, including outreach to communities in their language and with their culture in mind; messaging to populations whose members might not have taken full advantage of benefits available to them; and creating education programs for the staff at federal agencies.

The Transportation Security Administration **partners with more than a hundred advocacy groups** that represent people who need support during the airport screening process, such as Wheels for the World and Guide Dogs of America. Through these partnerships, TSA shares guidance for the public about TSA Cares—a program that assists people during the screening process—whether helping people with arthritis to ready their luggage or helping people who use wheelchairs to comfortably make their way through the tight quarters of a screening section. "We understand people with disabilities may have additional stress going through an airport, so it's really just giving them a little extra time and breathing room when going through screening, to make for a smooth process," said Niki French, customer service branch manager, TSA.

7. CO-DESIGN OF SERVICES WITH CUSTOMERS

"A benefit application ought to meet the people using it where they are. In Code for America's work on the social safety net, one of our teams encountered a benefit application that took over an hour to fill out, without the ability to save, and observed an unsheltered person unsuccessfully attempting to apply from a public library where the internet sessions timed out after 30 minutes. That benefit application did not meet its intended user, and thus failed to serve them."

—Ryan Ko, Chief of Staff, Code for America

Partnering with community organizations makes it easier for agencies to understand the diverse needs and situations of people eligible for government services. It also broadens the agencies' reach and enables agencies to more effectively tailor messaging to specific demographic groups.

An integral part of building equitable services is to design them not for, but with the communities being served. Many agencies' customer experience professionals are familiar with these approaches and are incorporating them into their practices. However, they will not work without resources and agencywide buy-in. Effective, inclusive co-design requires that all stakeholders involved have the mindset that they will work together, both across the design process and with all design partners—which can include digital, communications and policy teams and others.

Designing with the people who use a service, rather than for them, is especially important when it comes to serving historically disadvantaged communities in an equitable way. In these cases,

co-design is critical, as is getting internal buy-in for both the practice and follow-through of co-design. Good practices include hearing from customers and taking into consideration:

- Technical and physical barriers: Do underserved customers have good internet connectivity enabling them to attend design meetings virtually? Do they have the time to contribute to this task? Can they commute to an in-person gathering?
- Emotional barriers: Do agency representatives feel comfortable giving up the privilege of being the expert in the room? Do community representatives feel comfortable enough to actively participate? Is there a relationship of trust between the two groups?
- Communication barriers: Do all parties have a common language? Are they using terminology with the same assumptions?
- Resource barriers: Can the community participants be compensated for their time?

Photo credit: U.S. Food and Drug Administration

Bold Actions that Pave the Way for a Seamless Customer Experience

Customer experience leaders should be proud of their progress: Despite statutory and resource constraints, this critical federal mission is at the forefront of administration priorities and innovative policymaking. Ultimately, however, much of government structure and regulation was not designed with customers in mind—the primary root cause of most customer experience challenges. Designing and implementing customer solutions within this government-centric framework will always be a challenge. Administration, agency and congressional leaders must work together to redesign a government that is capable of not just understanding all its customers' needs but also of building solutions for them and being accountable for how well those customers' needs are met. Building a government for the people requires that our government takes bold action in four areas.

TALENT FOR THE PEOPLE

To meet the moment on customer experience, agencies—with the support of OMB and Congress—must fully fund and hire the talent needed to make our government customer-centric. The customer experience executive order and life experience framework need funding to support them over the long term. Personnel needs are frequently being filled with what one customer experience leader described as "bubble gum and scotch tape"—temporary solutions such as bringing in people on detail under the Intergovernmental Personnel Act and relying on

extra capacity provided by innovation teams working on but not dedicated to improving customers' experiences with government.

- Agencies should make full use of their OMB-mandated annual customer experience capacity assessments to identify personnel needs—whether they are permanent or contract positions—and connect those requirements with annual budgeting processes and acquisition planning.
- Organizations that provide centralized digital services—such as U.S. Digital Services–should collaborate with agency high-impact service providers to dedicate teams of digital services employees to customer experience goals.
- Congress should take legislative action to provide resources to OMB and to agencies to hire long term, sustainable customer experience talent, prioritizing talent for cross-agency teams that could support life experience projects.
- Over time, OMB, the Office of Personnel Management, and the agency customer experience community should further professionalize the customer experience career field and embed customer focus into other occupations, to include establishing career paths that encourage public servants to get experience across the many channels customers use and creating opportunities to help people develop user experience, design, digital, communications and policy skills.

BUDGETING FOR SUCCESSFUL CUSTOMER SERVICE

To make a collaborative customer experience approach possible, Congress and the executive branch must fully and flexibly fund federal customer experience from the customer's perspective. Agencies often have a siloed picture of their overall customer experience budgets, given the separate budget lines for individual programs. Program offices may be reluctant to, or even prohibited from, investing jointly in a seamless customer experience. Services designed with the customer in mind must be funded with the customer in mind, which is not the state of play today. But service-providing agencies, OMB and Congress can still make progress through the following actions.

- Agencies should consolidate customer experience portfolios in agency budget planning to allow for a comprehensive picture and understanding of gaps and tradeoffs among research, data, digital services and needs. The VA, for example, consolidated a veterans experience IT budget portfolio to tell a better story and support decision-making.
- OMB and other federal agencies should identify and, with Congress's support, mitigate statutory roadblocks to funding cross-program or cross-agency initiatives.
- OMB and other federal agencies should collaborate to build a package of flexibilities to pursue good customer experience practice, with for Congressional support, such as:

- o Consistently building in budgeted program flexibility to reflect discovery research and-driven program changes.
  - o Creating cross-agency funding support for life experience projects.
  - o Establishing clear approval processes for agencies compensating customers involved in customer research.
  - o Creating a library of cross-agency shared resources and services so agencies can access common templates, toolkits or technologies.
- Congress should pass appropriations bills on time so that agencies—especially high-impact service providers—can deliver what are often time-sensitive and critical services to the public without disruption.

DATA-SHARING FOR SEAMLESS CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

To deliver customer-centric services, the executive branch and Congress must enable agencies to share common customer data in a secure environment. This demands a new approach to customer data that prioritizes enterprise solutions, not temporary workarounds. The federal government must recognize that it is not only possible but vital to embrace customer data protections and reduce the administrative burden on customers—but doing so will take bold action, investment and a willingness to consider innovative approaches. Recommended actions:

- Agencies should invest in APIs—software that enables two computer programs to communicate–or other emerging technology tools that enable secure data verification; for example, validating income eligibility for specific benefit programs. As needed, OMB should generate policy to govern these arrangements.
- OMB should designate a central authority or council to establish government-wide approaches for research and data protection laws and regulations relevant to customer experience missions, such as the Privacy Act. They should also create shareable, standardized parameters for conducting customer research, collecting customer feedback and data, and research compensation.
- OMB and other federal agencies should conduct an audit of data collection, data protection and data sharing statutes and regulations that are relevant to customer experience programs, building on the life experience projects to understand where these policies prevent seamless and secure customer experiences. With these findings, they should seek regulatory or congressional relief as needed.
- Federal agencies should explore proposals to give customers the opportunity to opt in or out of allowing agencies to share their data across programs or agencies, or pursue an "ask once" goal for data collection, subject to legal requirements.
- Congress should pass additional customer experience legislation, along the lines of the Federal Agency Customer Experience Act, that will improve agencies' ability to

understand the diverse needs of the people they serve and securely use customer experience data to improve federal service delivery and build public trust.
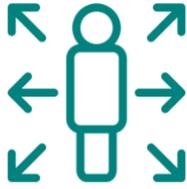
CUSTOMER-CENTRIC STATUTORY AND REGULATORY DESIGN

To design services prioritizing the public, much of today's customer experience statutory and regulatory foundation may need to be redesigned. A seamless approach to customers' life experiences—like experiencing a disaster or managing financial insecurity—is impossible without a fundamental rewiring of policy architecture and the oversight infrastructure that comes with it. But until such fundamental reforms are realized, smaller-scale redesigns could go a long way to improving the public's relationship with the government. Recommended improvements:

- OMB should collaborate with agencies serving public customers to identify the program recertification requirements that increase the administrative burden on customers and either address through regulation or propose that Congress streamline or eliminate them where possible.
- Agencies should work with Congress to expand "presumption of eligibility" policies for relevant benefits and across aligned service areas, which would lead to automatic program enrollment for eligible customers. For example, through the PACT Act, the VA confers the status of "presumptive eligibility" for veterans who have one or more of two dozen conditions, reducing paperwork and processing because qualified individuals do not need to apply for benefits.
  - More broadly, OMB and other agencies should conduct a government-wide audit of benefit eligibility requirements for greater consistency, communication and presumptive eligibility.
- Agencies should work with Congress to make permanent the eligibility and delivery flexibilities that were used successfully during the pandemic, such as virtual FEMA inspections, telehealth support and digital signature eligibility.
- Agencies should build a culture and expectation of decision-making that is to the customer's benefit—a culture in which these flexibilities are a norm, not an exception, and where active customer inclusion in design is the standard.

Ideally, the customer experience in government would rival the best of the private sector's efforts, and we have outlined many ways for government to move in that direction. These actions put them on a path to meet that expectation and the commitment and promise of a government for the people.

Authors

Nadzeya Shutava works on several of the Partnership's research projects, including the improvement of customer experience with federal services, leadership in government, as well as public opinion and government. She holds a Ph.D. in Social Sciences with a focus on political science, ethnography and social anthropology from the University of Tsukuba in Japan. Nadzeya is passionate about bringing academic research and public service practice closer together and believes in the potential of evidence-based policy making. Her favorite public servant is Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who inspires Nadzeya with her charisma and relatability, both skillfully amplified through social media, and her talent of effectively communicating complex issues to broad audiences.

Loren leads the Partnership's efforts to develop forward-thinking solutions that change the way government works and evaluate our impact. She began her career in public service as a Presidential Management Fellow and devoted ten years at the Department of Defense and National Security Council to building networks and ideas for problems only the government can solve. For the last five years she has led research efforts at the Center for a New American Security to elevate the national security debate and prepare the national security leaders of today and tomorrow. Her favorite public servants are former Secretary of Defense William Perry, who understood how America's innovation was a foundation to its security, and former U.S. Representative Barbara Jordan, who declared that when it came to the Constitution she would not be an idle spectator.

Sarah crafts and manages research projects that aim to understand how government services can keep attuned to the dynamic and diverse needs of the public. Prior to joining the Partnership she co-led a number of Customer Experience projects that highlight ways government can more tightly align services to Veterans' needs. Her research practice is shaped by ethnography and human centered design. Her favorite public servant is the late Representative John Lewis who imagined and brought into being a more just and democratic society.

Appendix I: Acknowledgements

The individuals listed below generously offered their input on this report, in addition to several others who provided expert insight throughout the project. We greatly appreciate their time and counsel. However, the contents of this report do not necessarily reflect the views of those we interviewed. Additionally, the views of participating federal officials do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the federal government or its agencies.

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