



**PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE**

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**“The Need for Universal Broadband: Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic”**

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## Introduction

Chairman Quigley, Ranking Member Womack, and members of the Financial Services and General Government Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the importance of modernizing the federal government's online service delivery.

I am Max Stier, President and CEO of the Partnership for Public Service, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that strives for a more effective government for the American people.

The Partnership works to improve our federal government in many ways. We work with federal employees to strengthen their leadership skills, prepare them to build strong teams and work across organizational boundaries. We help agencies to attract top talent, engage and support their workforce, manage performance and foster innovation. Our programs help acclimate new political appointees to government, and through our Center for Presidential Transition we support presidential candidates and their teams in laying the groundwork for a new administration or for a president's second term. We also honor the important contributions that federal employees make every day to help strengthen and protect our country through our annual Samuel J. Heyman Service to America Medals program.

Core to our work is the belief that Americans deserve accessible, user-friendly services from their government, whether they are veterans in need of health care, taxpayers seeking IRS assistance or college students applying for financial aid. The private sector sets a high bar with its services that government must also clear – one [survey](#) found that 85% of customers expect government to meet or exceed standards set by commercial services.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the public consistently rates federal agencies [far behind](#)<sup>2</sup> other sectors and industries in terms of customer satisfaction, leading to a [lack of trust](#)<sup>3</sup> in government overall, a figure that is currently near an all-time low.

Fortunately, there are bright spots across government where agencies are improving the customer experience – providing models that others might replicate. For example, over the last six years, the Department of Veterans Affairs has set customer experience as its top priority, established a well-resourced Veterans Experience Office, developed its leaders to drive improvements and wrote customer experience principles into its department-wide regulations. Trust in the VA among veterans rose by 18% between 2016 and 2020, and in 2019 the VA's National Cemetery Administration scored a [97 out of 100](#)<sup>4</sup> on the American Customer Satisfaction Index, the highest score ever recorded by any private or public sector organization.

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<sup>1</sup> Accenture, "Digital Government: Great Expectations and Untapped Potential." 2016. Retrieved from [https://www.accenture.com/\\_acnmedia/PDF-109/Accenture-Digital-Citizen-Experience-Pulse-Survey-Highlight.pdf](https://www.accenture.com/_acnmedia/PDF-109/Accenture-Digital-Citizen-Experience-Pulse-Survey-Highlight.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Forrester, "US Federal CX Eked Out A New High But Still Trails The Private Sector," October 1, 2020. Retrieved from <https://go.forrester.com/blogs/us-federal-cx-eked-out-a-new-high-but-still-trails-the-private-sector/>.

<sup>3</sup> Pew Research Center, "Americans' Views of Government: Low Trust, but Some Positive Performance Ratings," September 14, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/09/14/americans-views-of-government-low-trust-but-some-positive-performance-ratings/>.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "The National Cemetery Administration Tops Customer Satisfaction Survey," September 6, 2019. Retrieved from <https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/USVANCA/bulletins/25b82f6>.

The Partnership is working with federal agencies to accelerate effective customer experience practices, help government earn the public's trust and deliver services more equitably. Through our research and events, we share knowledge and leading practices on improving the customer experience with federal services. We also advocate for removing policy and legislative barriers that agencies face when delivering services, and we publish research insights on their performance that help hold agencies accountable for improving customer service.

Our research highlights the government's opportunity to modernize its approach and deliver intuitive, simple, user-friendly online services. However, with many of government's customers lacking reliable internet access, doing so requires addressing the digital divide.

### **Benefits of effective online service delivery**

A government that serves the public online is more effective, efficient, user-friendly and secure. The federal government is continuing to modernize its service delivery capabilities and bring more core services online. This is essential for ensuring that government can manage information effectively, meet public expectations, control costs and adapt to changing customer needs.

Delivering modern online services to the public can help the government:

- **Reduce costs.** The IRS spends an [estimated](#) \$41 to field each phone call it receives, as opposed to pennies when a taxpayer resolves their issue online.<sup>5</sup>
- **Enhance security.** Providing an easy online option to report a lost or stolen passport resulted in a [46% increase](#) in reporting, helping the State Department to cancel more missing passports and ensure the security of these documents.<sup>6</sup>
- **Improve data and information management.** A mobile app increased the [accuracy and frequency](#) of wage information reported to the Social Security Administration, helping the agency improve data accuracy and reduce improper payments.<sup>7</sup>
- **Increase customer satisfaction.** Satisfaction with filing taxes electronically is [14 points higher](#) than paper filing. People who file taxes online have a better experience, and because the process is easier, they are more likely to complete the steps need to fulfil their tax obligations.<sup>8</sup>
- **Expand access.** Online benefit applications help all levels of government increase access by [integrating benefit applications](#) across programs, ensuring that more people register for benefits for which they are eligible.<sup>9</sup> This also helps governments manage program data more effectively

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<sup>5</sup> Nextgov, "It Costs Taxpayers \$41 Per Phone Call To IRS," February 9, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.nextgov.com/emerging-tech/2018/02/it-costs-taxpayers-41-phone-call-irs/145870/>.

<sup>6</sup> Partnership for Public Service, "The Most Important Customer: Improving the citizen experience with government," March 22, 2017. Retrieved from <https://ourpublicservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/9e630a96a9480ae7322dd4bca1068350-1490907903.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Partnership for Public Service, "The Most Important Customer: Improving the citizen experience with government," March 22, 2017. Retrieved from <https://ourpublicservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/9e630a96a9480ae7322dd4bca1068350-1490907903.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Partnership for Public Service, "Government For the People: Profiles on the Customer Experience." Retrieved from <https://ourpublicservice.org/our-work/customer-experience/individual-taxpayer-services-2/>.

<sup>9</sup> Code for America, "Making it easier for people and families to access all their benefits in one place," 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.codeforamerica.org/programs/social-safety-net/integrated-benefits/>.

and improve performance – for example, by sharing applicant data across programs, rather than building new and siloed systems to collect and store data for each program. Unfortunately, though, as of 2019 [no states](#) had a combined application process for all five of their major social safety net benefit programs.<sup>10</sup>

### **The importance of investing in online federal services**

It is important to remember that access to high-speed internet is not an end in itself, but a tool for achieving other incredibly important goals such as improved education, better healthcare and accelerated economic development. Because of this, government should be thinking beyond simply ensuring availability of high-speed internet toward promoting technological literacy among those who may struggle to use digital services and ensuring that those services are built to be simple, intuitive and easy-to-use – even for populations that are not particularly tech savvy.

**The coronavirus pandemic supercharged the need for government to deliver modern online services and collaborate digitally. Several agencies rose to the challenge, but some struggled to make the shift due to antiquated technology and paper-based processes.** The coronavirus pandemic required many federal agencies to drastically transform their service delivery strategies almost overnight – and in most cases this entailed shifting to digital services. Many agencies rose to the challenge, finding creative ways to connect with their customers and maintain important services. This required both government employees and the public to have reliable internet access.

Some examples include:

**Expanded VA telehealth services.** The Veterans Health Administration quickly expanded telehealth capabilities for both mental health and medical services so veterans could get treatment without risking exposure to the virus. About a month after the crisis reached the U.S., health care video visits had increased seven-fold with more than [18,000 daily visits](#). After increasing agency bandwidth, the VHA was conducting 169,000 video visits each week by late August, a more than 1,000% increase since the pandemic began. The Partnership highlighted this amazing achievement by awarding executives from the VA’s Office of Connected Care with a [Service to America Medal](#)<sup>11</sup> for management excellence in 2020.

**New digital options for farm loans.** The pandemic closed most U.S. Department of Agriculture field offices just as many farmers and ranchers were struggling with plummeting prices, labor shortages and supply chain disruptions. To keep critical financial support moving, USDA adopted new digital tools for secure online file sharing, electronic signatures and video conferencing, which helped facilitate farm loan application and closing processes.

**Virtual Medicare customer support.** When the pandemic hit, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services was receiving a flood of calls about topics such as whether Medicare covered coronavirus tests, and what telehealth services were covered. However, the contact centers where agents worked to answer those questions were closed for safety. Working with private sector partners, CMS quickly

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<sup>10</sup> Code for America, Bringing Social Safety Net Benefits Online Examining online platforms for all 50 states,” August 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.codeforamerica.org/features/bringing-social-safety-net-benefits-online/>.

<sup>11</sup> Partnership for Public Service, “Samuel J. Heyman Service to America Medals,” 2021. Retrieved from <https://servicetoamericamedals.org/>.

transitioned about 2,000 Medicare contact center representatives from across the country to full-time telework, without disrupting customer service. This was a noteworthy achievement, as telework had not been allowed prior to the pandemic.

**Cross-agency collaboration to support coronavirus research.** A collaboration between the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, IBM and the Department of Energy brought access to vast super-computing capacity to scientific researchers studying the coronavirus, helping them better understand the virus and test theories about how to combat the disease and control its spread.

Other federal services, particularly those relying on antiquated technology or paper-based processes, struggled to adapt and shift to new service delivery strategies, leading to backlogs and delays. In part because of technology constraints, the Department of State does not accept passport applications electronically. With passport offices closed or operating at limited capacity at the start of the pandemic, and limited staff available to receive mailed passport applications, a backlog of 1.6 million applications grew and processing times increased substantially.

### **Challenges facing online federal services.**

**As more services move online, the federal government needs to address the digital divide to ensure equitable access.** Government has the responsibility to serve everyone, and this requires federal agencies to adapt services to people with a wide range of circumstances, situations and challenges. Unfortunately, many people who rely on federal programs and services do not have reliable access to high-speed internet. For example:

- More than [41% of Medicare beneficiaries](#) lack access to a desktop or laptop computer with a high-speed internet connection at home.<sup>12</sup>
- [35% of the population on rural Tribal lands](#) does not have access to high-speed internet.<sup>13</sup>
- [15% of veteran households](#)<sup>14</sup> do not have a paid subscription to the internet at home; and [42% of rural veterans](#)<sup>15</sup> do not have internet access that would support their use of VA telehealth and other online services.
- [60% of U.S. farmers and ranchers](#) do not believe they have adequate internet connectivity to run their businesses.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Roberts, PhD, Eric T. and Mehrotra, MD, MPH, Ateev, "Assessment of Disparities in Digital Access Among Medicare Beneficiaries and Implications for Telemedicine," August 3, 2020. Retrieved from <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamainternalmedicine/fullarticle/2768771>.

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior, "National Tribal Broadband Strategy," January 15, 2021. Retrieved from [https://www.bia.gov/sites/bia.gov/files/assets/as-](https://www.bia.gov/sites/bia.gov/files/assets/as-ia/doc/2020.%20December.%20National%20Tribal%20Broadband%20Strategy%20FINAL-cover%20change.pdf)

[ia/doc/2020.%20December.%20National%20Tribal%20Broadband%20Strategy%20FINAL-cover%20change.pdf](https://www.bia.gov/sites/bia.gov/files/assets/as-ia/doc/2020.%20December.%20National%20Tribal%20Broadband%20Strategy%20FINAL-cover%20change.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Wireline Competition Bureau, "Report on Promoting Broadband Internet Access Service for Veterans, Pursuant to the Repack Airwaves Yielding Better Access for Users of Modern Services Act of 2018," Federal Communications Commission. May 2019. Retrieved from <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-357270A1.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Department of veterans Affairs, "VA partners with Microsoft to bring internet to more Veterans," June 28, 2019. Retrieved from <https://blogs.va.gov/VAntage/61913/multiple-vha-partnerships-work-bring-veterans-online/>.

<sup>16</sup> United Soybean Board, "Rural Broadband and the American Farmer: Connectivity Challenges Limit Agriculture's Economic Impact and Sustainability," August 29, 2019. Retrieved from <https://api.unitedsoybean.org/uploads/documents/58546-1-ruralbroadband-whitepages-final.pdf>

This lack of reliable internet access has real-world consequences to people across the country. Rural veterans who are unable to receive telehealth services may have to travel, in some cases, more than 100 miles to a VA medical center. People may struggle to get support from the IRS that they need to file their taxes or access to their economic impact payments, with the IRS only answering about [1 in 50 calls](#) on some phone lines and encouraging people to find their answers online.<sup>17</sup> And recipients of other federal programs, including Federal Student Aid, Medicare and Social Security will have a difficult time getting answers to questions and managing their benefits without reliable internet.

### **Solutions for enhancing federal service delivery online.**

The challenges faced by those seeking support from government while caught in the digital divide are clear. Fortunately, there are steps government can take to address this issue.

#### **1) Collaborate across agencies to address the digital divide.**

Like most of the big challenges that government tackles, the digital divide is a complex problem connected to underlying issues such as education, public health, economic security and infrastructure development. No one federal agency is equipped to address these problems on its own – highlighting the need for an “all-of-government” approach. With federal agencies and programs spending billions of dollars to tackle pieces of this challenge, we need strong coordination mechanisms to ensure initiatives are working towards common goals, sharing information, using resources effectively and not duplicating efforts.

There are several options for coordinating digital divide efforts across government. Cross-agency councils are often helpful mechanisms for driving collaboration. Under the Obama administration, the federal government convened a Broadband Opportunity Council to coordinate efforts on broadband deployment and adoption. The Biden administration could consider reinstating a version of this council – starting with a review of the achievements and challenges of the previous council to frame a future vision for its work.

Other existing mechanisms and structures could also help drive collaboration. Sitting at the “center-of-government,” the Office of Management and Budget is a natural hub for cross-agency collaboration. OMB could look for opportunities to coordinate more effectively on the digital divide through the cross-agency priority goals required by the GPRA Modernization Act.<sup>18</sup> Through a cross-agency priority goal and issuance of the first-ever government-wide guidance on improving the customer experience, OMB and agencies have made substantial progress in transforming how the government delivers services. Small investments in additional staff and funding for this effort could have an outsized effect. OMB’s coordinating role is currently staffed with one full-time OMB employee and a few detailees; with additional support, OMB, including the U.S. Digital Service, would have more capacity to coordinate

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<sup>17</sup> Singletary, Michelle, “If you call the IRS, there’s only a 1-in-50 chance you’ll reach a human being,” Washington Post. April 23, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/04/23/irs-1040-hotline/>.

<sup>18</sup> P.L. 111-352.

across agencies and ensure that digital services are well-designed, and that those lacking access to online services have other options.

## **2) Leverage public-private partnerships.**

Just as agencies must work together to address the digital divide, they should also build partnerships with the private sector. The VA provides a strong example which could be replicated by other agencies that serve populations who lack internet access. The Veteran's Health Administration formed an alliance with Microsoft and internet service providers to identify opportunities to bring broadband to rural areas with large veteran populations. Similarly, the IRS leverages extensive partnerships and information sharing with the tax preparation industry to streamline its online services. For example, taxpayers can update some of their IRS account information, including what language they want the agency to communicate with them in, directly in private tax preparation software.

## **3) Deliver a modern digital experience.**

Access to the internet is not enough. People will not use digital services that are poorly designed, and this is especially true for people who may have low levels of digital savvy and comfort. Government's online services need to be simple, intuitive and designed around user needs. Congress should pass the bipartisan Federal Agency Customer Experience Act of 2021 (FACE Act), which has been favorably reported by the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs.<sup>19</sup> The bill would streamline the process agencies use to collect customer feedback when designing services and would hold agencies accountable by requiring publicly reported data and customer feedback. The FACE Act will enable data and insights that will help the government create a better customer experience across the board.

Federal agencies also have more work to do in implementing the 21<sup>st</sup> Century IDEA Act, a law that requires federal websites to meet minimum standards for accessibility, ease of use and security. The law was passed more than two years ago but the Office of Management and Budget has yet to develop guidance for agencies on the details of meeting this mandate, slowing implementation. Ten members of the House recently [requested](#) that OMB issue guidance by June.<sup>20</sup>

## **4) Give the federal workforce the tools and flexibility they need to serve the public effectively.**

Most federal employees are incredibly dedicated and passionate about serving the public. Unfortunately, they are often hampered by outdated technologies – or stuck following strict policies that make it difficult for them to help customers. For example, the IRS's outdated IT systems limited many of its employees from working remotely once the pandemic struck, causing lengthy service delivery delays.

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<sup>19</sup> S.671.

<sup>20</sup> House Committee on Oversight and Reform, Letter to Acting Director Shalanda Young, May 6, 2021. Retrieved from <https://oversight.house.gov/sites/democrats.oversight.house.gov/files/2021-05-06.GEC%20et%20al.%20to%20Young-OMB%20re%2021st%20Century%20IDEA.pdf>

Agencies need to invest in modern IT systems, including cloud-based environments that allow secure remote access to systems and information. The Technology Modernization Fund is one existing source that can support these efforts. Congress has allocated \$1 billion to the fund through the American Rescue Plan Act, and agencies should prioritize investments which will make the largest positive impact on their customers.

Expansion of high-speed internet will also make the government more efficient and effective by enabling it to hire top talent, wherever that talent resides. Most of the federal workforce is already located outside of the Washington, DC area, and the experience of the past year has shown that much of the work of government can be performed remotely. As we move past the pandemic, we should ensure that agencies use the flexibility of telework and remote work as a strategy to recruit and retain highly skilled workers.

**5) To increase accountability, agencies should regularly collect and report on data around access, use and satisfaction with their digital services.**

Agencies often hold themselves to output measures such as how many web applications they launched or how many people visited their website. More importantly, they should collect and publish performance data that highlights how helpful their services are from their customers' perspective. For example, were people able to find the information they needed easily? Did they have a good experience? Do they trust the information the agency provides?

Currently, the Partnership for Public Service publishes data and insights on the customer experience with key federal services through our annual [Government for the People](#) report.<sup>21</sup> We glean information from many sources, but the government lacks a consistent approach for collecting and publishing customer feedback across agencies, hampering its ability to compare across services and track progress over time. As noted above, the Federal Agency Customer Experience Act of 2021 addresses this issue by setting standards across government for collecting and publishing customer-focused performance data.

**Conclusion**

Chairman Quigley, Ranking Member Womack, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you again for holding this important hearing and the opportunity to share the Partnership's views on how expanded broadband access could improve federal services. We look forward to working with the Subcommittee to build a government that delivers the modern, user-friendly services that the public deserves.

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<sup>21</sup> Partnership for Public Service, "Government for the People: Serving the Public in a New World," October 2020. Retrieved from <https://ourpublicservice.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Government-for-the-People-2020.pdf>