4 KEY LESSONS GOVERNMENTS LEARNED IN 2020
— AND HOW THEY CAN MAKE GOVERNMENT BETTER IN THE FUTURE

State and local governments are at a key inflection point. They are still working hard to combat and control the COVID-19 pandemic, but they are also turning their focus to the strategic challenges that lie ahead. As they pivot from crisis response to longer-term enterprise planning, it's important that governments apply the lessons learned from the pandemic that can best prepare them for the future.

Here are four key lessons state and local governments learned in 2020 that can serve as best practices going forward.

LESSON 1: THINK SMALL

Traditionally, governments have focused on a big bang approach to development, which led to them adopting inflexible, monolithic legacy systems that are difficult to modernize and don't evolve with the changing needs of their organizations.

However, the pandemic taught governments a valuable lesson: Focus on bite-sized chunks and get them done fast.

"It's about the ability to think smaller — how can I do something that can add discernible value quickly and that can solve an immediate pain point?" says Celeste O'Dea, business development director for the public sector at Oracle.

Some governments have already taken this advice. The state of Oklahoma, for example, created an internal chatbot for its IT team and employees. As the state government rapidly shifted to remote work, it saw a spike

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in the number of IT support calls to its help desk. Before the pandemic, the Oklahoma Office of Management and Enterprise IT desk handled 500 calls a month, but overnight that number increased to more than 1,500 a day. To deal with this surge, the department sought Oracle's help to create and deploy a chatbot in just eight days. The chatbot, called Oracle Digital Assistant, answers common support questions such as how to reset a password or download various digital workplace applications. The chatbot helped significantly reduce the volume of calls the IT help desk receives and ensures it provides timely support to the state's 30,000 employees.[1]

The city of Los Angeles also embraced thinking small to deliver an even bigger impact. The city collaborated with Oracle and Mastercard to quickly launch a program to provide economic relief for low-income residents.

The city raised money from the public and worked with nonprofit partner organizations to distribute the funds to residents in need. It received more than 400,000 applications before winnowing the list down only to those who met the income eligibility and residency criteria. The city then

used a lottery system to decide who would receive financial assistance of either $700, $1,100 or $1,500, depending on their household size.

Initially, the city called residents and used spreadsheets to verify their identity when they came into local distribution centers to confirm their eligibility and pick up a prepaid card, which the city called "Angeleno Cards." However, leveraging Oracle's customer experience software suite, the city eventually pivoted to digitize the eligibility, verification and payment process and make it more efficient.

Budget constraints will continue to drive the need for new technologies, public-private partnerships and outside-the-box thinking that enables organizations to squeeze as much value as they can from limited resources.

To facilitate the online application process, Oracle and Mastercard collaborated to create an end-to-end digital qualification and payment solution that integrated into the city's existing website. Through the solution, which was created in just three weeks, residents could apply for benefits via mobile device or the web, upload required documents and get prequalified, schedule an in-person appointment to get an eligibility determination, and then receive either a digital payment or disbursement via an Angeleno Card or their preferred payment method.[2]

Though the city still had to call some residents, introducing these self-service capabilities helped to streamline the process and prevent fraud. So far, more than 50,000 appointments have been scheduled across 21 distribution centers and 86 percent of residents who receive funds scheduled an appointment themselves.

The city distributed more than $30 million to residents in need of financial assistance, says Mary Hodge, the city's chief of operations. Hodge adds that the city intends to replicate this approach for other initiatives, such as its rental assistance program.

"The system we set up is definitely replicable and we can use it for any kind of situation," Hodge says. "It just shows us that any time we have a problem or issue that comes up like this, we can use the system we built and then also dig back into all of the private-public partnerships that we have available to us to basically solve anything."

LESSON 2: THINK NIMBLE

State and local governments also must be nimble if they want to improve service delivery. This means they must break down traditional silos both internally and externally.

"Governments have always been really good at understanding what their constituents need and trying to find innovative ways to deliver it with constrained budgets," O'Dea says. "The ability to be nimble is the new paradigm for them."

To O'Dea's point, state, county and local governments face an estimated $700+ billion revenue shortfall over the next two years.[3] Budget constraints will continue to drive the need for new technologies that increase operational efficiency, public-private partnerships that allow governments to access new innovations more cost-effectively and outside-the-box thinking that enables these organizations to squeeze as much value as they can from limited resources.

We're already seeing this approach in municipalities like Tarrant County, Texas. The county collaborated with the organization Alliance for Innovation and two cloud and data management providers to launch a new website that provided information on drive-through testing locations — which the county had created to expand local COVID-19 testing capacity — in less than a week.[4] The website, which was created at no cost to the county, features a self-screening tool and other educational components to help residents determine if they should get tested. Almost 5,000 appointments were scheduled the first month the site went live, says Vinnie Taneja, the county's public health director.

Taneja says these kinds of partnerships help governments be more responsive to the needs of their constituents. The county is considering adopting the same approach for vaccine registration and distribution.

"It's just amazing to see how quickly they've been able to respond with no money involved," Taneja says of the county's technology partners. "As a public health department, we're always short on money, so that becomes a challenge for us to get approval for those dollars. It takes a long time to get all of that organized, so to have partnerships like this come through in a major emergency helps out. If future development can be done in a collaborative model like this to meet future public health needs, that would be tremendous."

Solutions are already emerging to aid these efforts. For example, Oracle's Public Health Management System allows those who have received vaccines to report any side effects or symptoms and directly communicate with their health care provider via a secure cloud platform. Its application suite also can help state and local governments manage vaccine inventory and distribution and access important information to ensure

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appropriate cold storage and delivery tracking. These kinds of technologies can provide valuable data that improve public health and safety and better prepare government organizations for future crises.

LESSON 3: FOCUS ON BUSINESS CONTINUITY

Business continuity planning is vital to prepare for the next disruption, whether it's a pandemic, an extreme weather event, an economic downturn or another crisis that threatens ongoing operations and service delivery.

The cloud is a vital part of business continuity because it can facilitate remote work and digital service delivery from anywhere, which is critical as many public sector organizations continue to operate in hybrid work environments.

Northern Illinois University increased its operational resilience by migrating mission-critical applications to the cloud during the pandemic. The university migrated its ERP, human capital and supply chain management systems, and campus technologies onto Oracle Cloud Infrastructure, which helped it save on data center-related costs, improve reliability and availability, scale resources based on demand, and automate and streamline IT management.[5]

Jackson, Mississippi's utility department also turned to Oracle Cloud Infrastructure to achieve business continuity. The city's Water Sewer Business Administration (WSBA) had lost significant revenue because aging servers led to inaccurate billing and delays in identifying leaks and payment delinquencies. These issues created a poor experience for constituents, who would unexpectedly receive high bills, and for staff who were inundated with customer service calls. To address these challenges, Jackson decided to migrate its existing Oracle Customer Care and

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Billing application to Oracle Cloud Infrastructure, leaning on the cloud provider for implementation design and on-call management of its new infrastructure.

The move resulted in the city collecting $10 million more in revenue year over year because it can bill more accurately. It also laid the foundation for WSBA to better serve customers during the pandemic. Using its new cloud infrastructure, the city was able to set up kiosks throughout the area to accept payments from utility customers — something it wouldn't have been able to do with its legacy servers. City employees have also been able to securely access the applications they need while working remotely, allowing them to serve constituents and troubleshoot issues from anywhere.

The pandemic highlighted the need for organizations to maintain, update and execute business continuity plans — and to leverage modern technologies like the cloud to increase system and application availability and business agility. By doing so they can deliver more responsive service and increase their resilience.

LESSON 4: TAKE AN ENTERPRISE APPROACH

With ongoing budget constraints, many governments may not be able to migrate all their systems and applications to the public cloud. However, in a hybrid cloud environment, they can still take advantage of a holistic, secure and scalable solution to meet their organizations' evolving needs. They can focus on four key things to successfully execute a hybrid strategy:

Analytics and reporting. Governments need accurate, timely insights to drive better decision-making. The state of Maine, which had been relying on an ad hoc data warehouse for more than 20 years, decided to leverage a cloud-based analytics platform to enhance data quality, reduce data duplication and improve data sharing across its agencies. The state adopted Oracle Analytics Cloud to create a single source of truth for all its data, which allowed employees to more securely and easily access and analyze data across state government via dashboards and custom reports.[6]

Maine's example illustrates that governments must become more data-driven to truly impact change within and outside of their organizations. State and local governments have been moving in this direction for years, but now it is crucial for them

to use cloud-based technologies to accelerate these efforts, especially to improve service delivery during times of crisis.

Technology integration. Technology integration is critical for several reasons. First, it helps governments bring together siloed systems and consolidate data. Secondly, it can drive IT optimization by giving governments greater visibility into what solutions actually help them achieve their mission and which solutions they can do without. As governments face significant budget challenges, technology integration will become even more critical to improve efficiency, increase transparency and generate cost savings that can be reinvested into various programs.

For governments to truly embrace an enterprise approach and become more agile, they need to start by identifying their key business imperatives and aligning their technology strategy with these priorities. Technology integration can ensure the tools their organizations use align with their vision and overall mission.

IT infrastructure management. As state and local governments adopt more cloud solutions, they'll need to improve how they manage their infrastructure. Adopting a hybrid cloud management platform can help them gain more visibility into their IT ecosystem, access performance and security monitoring capabilities, better understand their cloud usage and better manage data sprawl. All of these capabilities can help governments create a single cloud foundation for their applications and systems and manage their IT resources more cost-effectively as they operate in a hybrid environment.

Enterprise security. Security and compliance will be critical as governments execute a hybrid strategy. As governments modernize, they can use cloud technologies not only to increase their agility but also to enhance enterprise security. Cloud infrastructure has evolved, with multiple layers of security that make public clouds just as secure as private clouds. Security threats are constantly changing and becoming more sophisticated. With cloud infrastructure, organizations can easily onboard new capabilities

that increase security. Oracle's next-generation cloud infrastructure, for example, offers always-on encryption and can integrate artificial intelligence (AI)-based applications and machine learning security enhancements that provide ongoing threat intelligence and detection, allowing organizations to automate incident response and recovery.[7] St. Paul Public Schools in Minnesota, for example, took advantage of Oracle Cloud Infrastructure to reduce IT complexity, standardize operating systems, and access capabilities such as automated patching and upgrades that have improved overall IT security.

CONCLUSION

If there's any silver lining in all the challenges state and local governments faced over the last year, it's that they've learned to be more nimble. It's likely the solutions they've adopted during the crisis — whether it's AI-enabled tools or cloud platforms for digital service delivery — may stick around for the long term. Opportunity and innovation often emerge during times of crisis, and the lessons state and local governments have learned during this pandemic may accelerate their transformation into truly data-driven, digitally enabled organizations that can better meet the needs of constituents.

This piece was developed and written by the Government Technology Content Studio, with information and input from Oracle.

Endnotes:
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