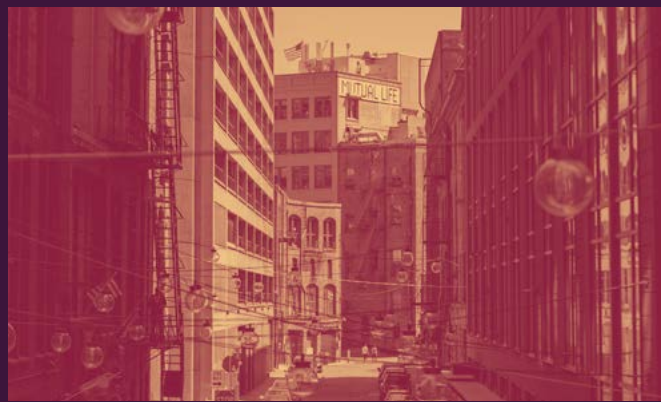




**STATE**



**& LOCAL**



**MAKING**



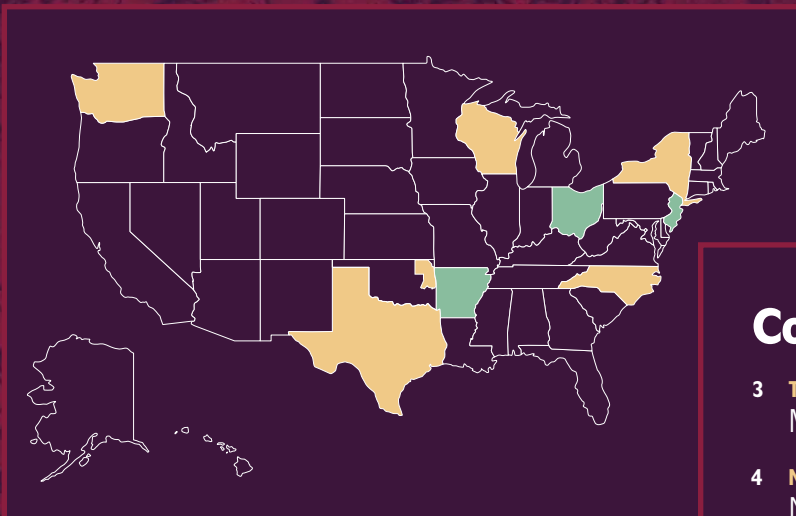
**AN IMPACT**

**A GOVLOOP + CARAHSOFT GUIDE**



carahsoft





## Introduction

When we think about transformation, we often focus on what goes on internally — changing processes and technology.

But the ultimate point of transformation is to serve our communities better.

In this guide, we've gathered nine examples from state, county, municipal and tribal governments where change has had a direct positive impact on constituents — whether, for instance, they are seeking unemployment benefits, flood warnings or a loading zone.

These projects come in all sizes. What they have in common is that someone recognized a need and took the steps to address it.

It's been a rocky time for citizen trust in government. With these programs, local agencies found ways to demonstrate that government really is there for everyone.

We hope they will inspire you.

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## Travis County Makes Audits Less Taxing

Like many local agencies, the Auditor's Office in Travis County, Texas, needed to do more with less: While a dynamic housing market increased the volume of property tax refunds by 25% annually since 2018, the office received no extra funding to complete its legally required audits.

To ease the burden, the office's Risk Evaluation and Consulting (REC) Division built automation and analytics tools, and achieved dramatic results.

The time to process property tax refund audits has plummeted by 91%. It now takes less than five minutes to analyze large batches of property tax refunds; it used to take weeks. And whereas REC previously clocked more than 1,000 auditor hours per year, that number now is roughly 40, and dropping.

The digital transformation began in 2018 when REC launched a dashboard for remote auditing, and it gained speed during the pandemic — a situation that “push[ed] forward how much more data is being collected during that whole refund process,” said John Gomez, the county's Senior Data Scientist.

Auditors can see when personnel scanned a check into the system or when a refund application was received and scanned, and by whom. Using an algorithm developed with input from the county's senior auditor, humans need to review only audits that the automated system flags as questionable.

REC believes that regardless of automation's efficiency, humans always will have a role. But liberating staff from mundane tasks has allowed REC to offer people more interesting work.

“The vision is to automate all of our processes that we can and free standard auditors to just look at exceptions and to look at a whole lot of other areas,” said Gomez. “You need a human being to verify the potential findings.”

The award-winning system could apply to any type of REC audit, with adjustments depending on the specific objective.





## NYC Broadband Program Closes the Digital Divide

Despite its reputation as an epicenter of business and finance, New York City has an internet problem: Hundreds of thousands of residents lack reliable broadband access, which puts them at social, educational and economic disadvantages.

To help close the digital divide, the city created Big Apple Connect — a subsidy program that provides free broadband and basic cable access to people living in NYC public housing. The program is in its third phase and offers broadband to more than 330,000 people in 150,000 households. So far, coverage is available in 220 public housing developments.



Officials say that Big Apple Connect will be the largest broadband subsidy implemented by any U.S. city, and that it nicely complements the Federal Communications Commission's Affordable Connectivity Program. New York's program is funded by \$40 million previously budgeted for an ill-fated Wi-Fi network designed for NYC public safety agencies.

## Modernize Without Losing Your Legacy

An interview with **Chris Oskuie**, Vice President, State and Local Government and Education, Software AG Government Solutions



Most state and local governments face the challenges of updating access to services, streamlining internal workflows, and modernizing IT infrastructure.

“Digitizing services that governments provide can be a time and efficiency improvement,” said Chris Oskuie of Software AG Government Solutions, which provides platform integration software and services.

For example, when signing up for social services, there can be a life-saving difference between verifying eligibility online and going through a help desk, caseworker and lengthy waiting period, he said.

### Make the Most of What You Have

Saddled with legacy systems that might not communicate across departments and with paper-based processes, agencies may be tempted to start from scratch — if cost didn’t make that impractical.

For one thing, Oskuie observed, applications and business rules have been incorporated into those systems over years. “Trying to rewrite those applications is very, very expensive,” he said.

It can also take time. Speaking of the request for proposals (RFP) process, Oskuie said, “you’d have to do a capability assessment, write an RFP for a planning systems integrator, and put it out. That’s a two- to three-year process. Once you have the systems integrator, you’ll need design development and implementation RFPs. That’s another year for issuing them, let alone selecting somebody.”

Innovations such as iPaaS — integration platform as a service — can help. “You leave the existing system in place, doing what it’s supposed to do, but modernize engagement [with it],” Oskuie explained.

“Being able to use tools that are available today to expose the business logic, programs and data from those legacy systems is a huge advantage,” he added. And it can show results in a matter of weeks.

### Putting It in Place

Successful implementation requires good communication between program managers and IT employees. “It’s a matter of [matching] what the program people need with what’s possible from an IT perspective,” Oskuie said. “You need both the business side and the IT side to come together and say, ‘We’re going to go through this process jointly.’”

It also helps to have a vendor familiar with both sides of the equation, especially one offering a built-for-government approach. This means designing solutions that can handle both the mission and the technical requirements to help agencies succeed — now and into the future.

“We at Software AG have a long history in some of these legacy systems,” said Oskuie. “Some of our mainframe software is still in use in large state and local programs across the country. So, we have the intrinsic knowledge about how to [access] legacy software, whether it’s ours or someone else’s. Because of that experience, we’re able to create purpose-built adapters for legacy systems and [give] them new, modern systems of engagement.”

“It’s not hard to find opportunities to improve efficiency both internally and in constituent services,” he said. “And it doesn’t have to mean putting out a massive RFP that will cost you hundreds of millions of dollars.”



# It's time for a new way to think about integration

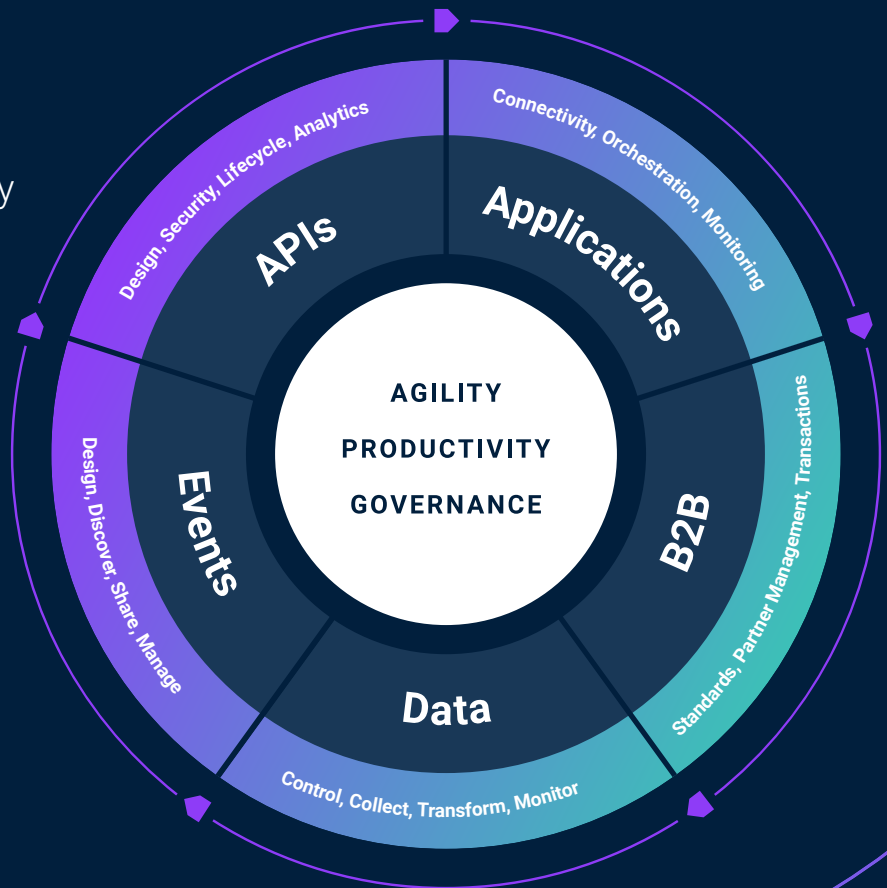
## Say hello to the Super iPaaS

A Super iPaaS finally brings together application, data, APIs, B2B, and events integrations in the same unified platform.

It is powerful enough for integration specialists, but easy enough for agency integrators.

It is built for the future of government.

[www.softwareag.gov.com](http://www.softwareag.gov.com)



## NJ Makes Applying for Unemployment Benefits Easier



An interview with **Gillian Gutierrez**, Senior Advisor/Director of the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development's Office of Unemployment Insurance Modernization



**Imagine that you've lost your job. With bills to pay and perhaps a family to support, you go online to apply for unemployment benefits. Yet rather than take some comfort in the process, you struggle with a hard-to-use application form, confusing language and unclear directions.**

**That's not how government is supposed to help.**

In New Jersey, officials are finding ways to make agencies the resource they should be. Through a [pilot project](#) with the U.S. Department of Labor and the U.S. Digital Service, the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development (NJDOL) is leading a national effort to redesign claimants' experience.

From beginning to end, the benefits process is clearer, more seamless and more compassionate.

### What Has Changed

There is a new, [mobile-friendly application form](#) and emphasis on plain language and Americans with Disabilities Act compliance. Email and paper communications are more helpful. The phone system better serves people who want to speak with a human.

At the back end, more flexible technology replaces an older, less nimble system. And using an agile approach, NJDOL can make individual improvements as needed.

"We're evaluating policy, we're evaluating technical practices to try to build a system that is both resilient to huge upswings in people needing the service as well as flexible, so that when policy requirements at the federal level or state level change, we can meet that," said Gillian Gutierrez, Senior Advisor/Director of NJDOL's Office of Unemployment Insurance Modernization.

## How It's Changed

Reform has come in two parts.

First, to more immediately improve what people experience (e.g., when applying online or responding to NJDOL emails), the agency “figured out a way to overlay all of those improvements on top of our existing system,” Gutierrez explained. “Our underlying system stayed the same, but the experience that the consumer [has] is completely different.” The [new visual design](#) of the application form is based on the New Jersey Web Design System, which itself is based on the [U.S. Web Design System](#).

Second, the agency is relaunching the infrastructure that supports the claimant intake system. But rather than purchase technology that exists in another state or that a vendor says will meet 75% of NJDOL requirements, the agency is building a new system that gives it more control.

Gutierrez said that when policy directives change or other adjustments are needed, the new approach “allows us to pick off a piece, make the edits in the technology and then put that new thing back, instead of having to replace wholesale the [entire] thing.”

## The Right Direction

The state processed 2.4 million applications between 2020 and 2021. Before the pandemic, it consistently led the country in the percentage of unemployed people who ultimately receive unemployment benefits.

But Gutierrez said that 66% of people applied using their mobile phones and because the application form wasn't mobile-friendly, many made input errors as they “pinched and scrolled and looked for a dot to fill.”

The changes seem to be working. After filing their initial online applications, claimants may complete a survey, and overall response trends are positive, she said.

The agency also asks for feedback on the redesigned emails: 53% of respondents say today's emails are less confusing than prior versions, 51% say they're more trustworthy and 57% feel the emails make it easier for them to take actions.

“We believe we're going in the right direction,” Gutierrez said. “States have always procured systems in a specific way. I think the pandemic opened up, at least in New Jersey, the small political space to say, ‘Let's try something different.’”





## Data Integration Helps Agencies Deliver

An interview with **Nadia Hansen**, Digital Transformation Executive & **Anthony Young**, Director of Solution Engineering, Salesforce



In today's world of siloed and scattered data, agencies often have an incomplete picture of their constituents. But adopting an integrated, digital data platform can vastly improve how agencies do business and interact with the public.

"Digital transformation represents such a fundamental shift in the way government entities operate, deliver services and engage with citizens," said Nadia Hansen with Salesforce, a constituent relationship management company that gives agencies a 360-degree view of their customers.

An integrated platform saves money, automates routine tasks, encourages collaboration, and allows state and local agencies to provide more personalized services. "The most fantastic benefit of digital transformation is [that] everybody's singing from the same sheet of music," said Anthony Young, also with Salesforce.

### A Comprehensive Approach

Rather than buy potentially dozens of solutions to address different needs, including customer relationship management (CRM) demands, an agency can turn to Salesforce, Hansen said, and ultimately provide an "omni-channel approach to [offering] accessible government services."

With a single, integrated platform, an organization can "build out," she said, to accommodate various use cases — to address different licensing, health and human services, economic development, and emergency management concerns, for instance. And the agency can offer constituents online, self-guided applications and mobile-first experiences, among other features.

## Case Study: State Medicaid Program

People often analyze data in a superficial way, largely because of time constraints and because data can be disorganized, Young said. But agencies that look more deeply can greatly impact lives.

A state Department of Health, for example, used an integrated platform to evaluate Medicaid recipients who frequently used emergency services for non-emergency care. Digging into the data, going beyond just the zip-code level, department employees identified a specific claimant with chronic kidney disease being treated in emergency rooms. They followed up, learning that he had no nephrologist nearby. The department recruited into the Medicaid program a new provider closer to him — which enhanced the claimant's wellbeing, benefited the entire community and saved millions of dollars.

"The byproduct of good government," Young said, "is the intangibles that really improve [citizens'] quality of life."

## Case Study: Town of Cary, NC

The [town of Cary](#), North Carolina, is another instance of government "pushing the boundaries, pushing the envelope to be more innovative while maintaining efficiency," Hansen said. Officials turned Alexa, the increasingly common Internet of Things (IoT) device, into a new contact center agent, of sorts.

Residents can use Alexa to submit service requests, report traffic problems and potholes, and lodge complaints, among other options. Based off an integrated management platform, the city uses technology to connect with constituents in a very original way.

"Having [the Salesforce] platform allows you to make it easier for citizens to interact with government and complete tasks more quickly," said Hansen.

"You've got a platform that's flexible," Young added, "and just a much clearer path to [meeting] emerging needs."

# Modernize customer experiences.







## Digitizing the Curb Appeal

When we talk about traffic, curbs aren't the first thing that come to mind, but they play a big role in how city streets function. Delivery vehicle drop-offs are crucial, and the logistics of parking in busy areas can be more than tricky.

Seattle has 500 loading zones for package, food and supply deliveries, but what happens when a truck pulls up and every zone is full? The drivers may end up blocking a lane, increasing congestion and air pollution, and they may be delayed as well. In short, curbs are a battlefield.

With the [Open Mobility Foundation](#), Seattle's Department of Transportation is creating a way to digitally define loading zones and measure their effectiveness through a Curb Data Specification (CDS). The goal is to have a publicly available digital representation of the loading zones and a digital feed that guides curb users to where, when and how long they can park as they make deliveries. The specification can match delivery vehicles with curb spaces and provide them with the best route to get there.

The city and researchers can also use the real-time open source data about loading space usage to design better curb management. For instance, the city can increase curb regulations to preserve needed space and identify underused zones.

The department plans to work with partners to pilot a digital permit program for commercial vehicles to reduce congestion, expand curb access and promote sustainability in delivery across the city.

Names for polygon geometry *places* used within the CDS Curbs API.



**Area** - *Optional*. Area of interest around a curb Zone used to share vehicle proximity, approach, conflicts, circling, exit, double parking, other activity.

**Zone** - *Required*. Curb zone defining the area that can be used by vehicles. Includes properties and references to outside regulations or LRS.

**Space** - *Optional*. A defined vehicle parking space within a curb Zone. Flexible zones may not have these.

Map image credit: Apple

*A visual example of how CDS defines curb zones.  
Image credit: Open Mobility Foundation*





## Caring for Survivors of Violence in the Cherokee Nation

According to the National Institute of Justice, 83% of Native American and Alaska Native adults are victims of violence in their lifetimes. Intimate partner violence affects Native women and men at similar rates.

The Cherokee Nation is the largest tribe in the United States and has more than 450,000 citizens worldwide. More than 141,000 live on its reservation in Oklahoma, which covers 14 counties and 7,000 square miles. In 2013, at a time when few resources were available in the region for survivors of domestic violence, the tribal government began to address their needs more comprehensively.

Our Nation Ending Fear, Intimidation, Rape, and Endangerment — ONE FIRE — began as a single point of contact for services victims might need, including temporary shelter, emergency groceries, transportation, legal representation and even someone to go to the hospital with them.

Since then, ONE FIRE has added services to help survivors beyond their immediate crisis, providing therapy, life skills and help with job searches. The program offers cultural healing through classes in traditional arts. And in 2022, the tribe opened a transitional housing facility for individuals and families escaping domestic violence. It can house up to 10 families.

Since its founding, ONE FIRE has helped at least 2,000 survivors. In 2021, it received the Harvard Project on Indigenous Governance and Development's Honoring Nations award, which celebrates outstanding examples of tribes that help expand the capacities of Native nations.





## A Plan for Access in Arkansas

An interview with **Marty Sullivan**, Director of the Arkansas Administrative Office of the Courts, and **Tim Holthoff**, Director of the Arkansas Court Information Systems Division

**Arkansas has long been a national leader in providing public access to court information.**

**Now, the Arkansas Administrative Office of the Courts is making good use of American Rescue Plan funds to create a better, more user-friendly case management system that will allow for easier public access to court records.**



### Time for a Change

Several years ago, Marty Sullivan, Director of the office, and Tim Holthoff, Director of the Court Information Systems Division, realized it was time to move away from an outdated case management system. They wanted to embrace new technology to better support constituent access.

When Sullivan decided to transform the records system, he saw it as a wise long-term investment and an opportunity “to think about the future, and not focus on how we’ve always done things, but think about how we could evolve and do things better moving forward,” he said.



## Evolving With a Team

Because an off-the-shelf system would cost about \$70 million, they decided to build a custom, cloud-based system, pulling together elements from multiple vendors.

“Building our own case management system will provide more transparency, more accountability, and more access and a cheaper cost,” said Holthoff, who has worked in court IT for 30 years.

“No one knows the court user in Arkansas better than we do,” added Sullivan. “We know what our court community needs, and we have the capability to build a system that will be far better than anything we could buy.”

Throughout the planning period, Sullivan set up challenges to encourage employees to stretch and grow their case management mindset. He also sought to create an organization that was more team-based than hierarchical to allow experienced staff to develop solutions and lead.

## Innovative Impact

The plan is to roll out the case management system for district courts in 2024.

One of the first key deliverables will launch by the end of this year — a new public interface that holds the legacy data. That will replace the current interface, which they describe as “clunky,” with one that is much more user-friendly and allows all Arkansans to easily access circuit court records for free.

But that’s not the end of their innovations, which could improve operations for constituents and the courts alike.

In Arkansas district courts, the “failure to appear” rate can be high — more than 45,000 people no-showed in 2022. That wastes time and effort and can lead to arrest warrants. Sullivan said he realizes that many litigants don’t miss their dates intentionally but are juggling the demands of their busy lives.

In the future, he would like the court to send automatic reminders by text, communicating with constituents as a medical provider might. Adding this touchpoint would mean fewer missed appearances, more resolved disputes and cost savings for the court.

More virtual points of contact help everyone, but especially people with physical, intellectual or psychological challenges, or those experiencing a challenging time.

“If everyone can come to this virtual courthouse without regard to what impediments they may have, then we’ll build trust, we’ll build confidence, and the justice system will be here for them,” Holthoff said.



## Leverage Resources for Transformations With Impact

An interview with **Scott Pross**, Vice President of Monalytic at SolarWinds



Most state and local governments struggle with limited resources. When considering digital transformation, they must weigh both service improvement and cost savings.

“Digital transformation is really about being able to automate processes to make things work for the community,” said Scott Pross of SolarWinds, whose flagship product is a unified monitoring, observability and service management platform. “It can make everybody’s lives easier, [from] the engineering team [to] the residents of that community.”

### Getting Started

Even small steps can be significant.

For example, “it could be something as simple as being able to contact somebody in an agency through a website or having a chat function where somebody could handle multiple calls at the same time,” Pross said. Such measures can reduce the pressure on staff while providing better customer service. “The less human intervention we need, the better off we’re going to be.”

Also, organizations should get to know the tools they already have. Frequently, agencies don’t use all the functions of their software, or they have products with overlapping capabilities.

### Security

State and local agencies have become a frequent target for ransomware attacks. That has them scrambling to secure systems at multiple levels. “Local agencies are holding on to a tremendous amount of citizen information, and just because you’re small doesn’t mean that data is any less important,” Pross said.

Automating processes to reduce points of entry to the system and taking advantage of cloud platform security provisions are relatively simple ways to enhance protections for your data.

### Behind the Scenes

For IT staff, improved monitoring of systems and applications helps head off intrusions and other service interruptions.

“One of the great things about monitoring is you’re always collecting data,” Pross said. “So, you can use AI to observe what a particular system does on a daily basis.” If the AI sees something amiss, it can alert a person or even act on its own to shut down access.

Cloud’s built-in redundancy helps keep things working when problems with an application arise, letting you bring a version elsewhere in the cloud online. If a bad actor deletes your data, you can bring it back seamlessly.

Networks and infrastructure are getting more complex, and a local government may have thousands of devices that need to be patched, secured and configured. Plus, they need to stay compliant with ever-changing regulations.

Using a platform such as the one from SolarWinds means those functions can be pushed out across the system immediately rather than waiting for a team of engineers to install them on each device.

### How SolarWinds Can Help

SolarWinds’ products are built to address all these challenges, whether moving digital operations to the cloud, improving monitoring and observability, or finding ways to make more efficient use of staff while providing better service.

“It sounds complex, but companies such as SolarWinds are allowing smaller communities to be able to implement this amazing technology,” Pross said.

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## When It Rains, It Pours

Extreme rain events are becoming more frequent in North Carolina, which means more flooding, particularly during hurricane season.

To lessen danger and damage, the North Carolina Department of Transportation has built an extensive early flood-warning system. It provides the department with real-time information that can be used to map out flood risks.

“This state-of-the-art warning system our department has created will help us be better prepared for the next major storm,” according to former Transportation Secretary Eric Boyette, who retired October 1. “Even though we’ve had some quiet hurricane seasons recently, we cannot let our guard down.”

The system receives information from a network of 500 river and stream elevation gauges, as well as flood cameras. The monitored network covers nearly 3,000 miles of roads in addition to more than 15,000 bridges and pipes that divert water from roadways.

Stormwater staff and emergency management officials can access the data to mobilize services that protect constituents. The new system gives better public access to [DriveNC.gov](https://www.drive-nc.gov) information on where roads are closed due to flooding.

The American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials has named the project among the [Top 12 finalists](#) in the 2023 America’s Transportation Awards.

“This advance warning system is a testament to the great things that come when strong partners collaborate,” said William Ray, Director of Emergency Management for the state. “Together, these systems are helping our agencies quickly respond to storms so we can better protect the public from major flooding events.”



## Automated Licensing Helps Wisconsin Get to Work

An innovative program at Wisconsin's Department of Safety and Professional Services (DSPS) allows medical and business license applicants to submit applications and some renewals online. Once all their documentation is uploaded to the site, people receive their licenses in less than a week, on average. The agency plans to add trade professional licenses next year.

Called LicensE, the program has vastly shortened the wait and hassle in getting licenses and increased the number of applications DSPS can handle. For example, in the first three quarters of this year, DSPS processed 38,827 applications, compared with 30,200 in all of 2018. Before the system's launch last year, the average wait for a license was 45 days. The average time to review now is less than five.

LicensE also includes a status tracker that lets applicants follow the progress of their request. The cloud-based platform allows both applicants and third parties — schools, testing centers, employers and others — to upload documents to the site, rather than having to mail paper copies. The uploads are linked to the relevant application, and an automated process extracts data from the documents. For employees, that means spending less time opening envelopes and manually entering data and more time for reviewing applications. Other workflows have also been automated.



The system continues to improve. In August 2023, DSPS announced a new publicly available dashboard that shows the average number of days it takes to review new applications, including review of any additional documentation.

"This is an investment in the people of Wisconsin who need their licenses to enter the workforce," Governor Tony Evers said at the start of the project. "Modernizing license application review will get folks on the job and earning paychecks more quickly."



## How to Secure Your Network Identities

An interview with **Alexandra Weaver**, Senior Solution Architect, Semperis



Cloud computing has dramatically changed how agencies offer services, much like smartphones have transformed how people access and use information. But these new data-sharing opportunities create new identity-related risks.

“Think of the old-school pictures where you had a [physical] data center,” said Alexandra Weaver, with Semperis, a firm that provides comprehensive identity protection. “That really isn’t the case anymore with the cloud. We have all these offerings that are everywhere, and ... we need to [say], ‘Hey, what am I now protecting? Well, I’m now protecting my identity.’”

It’s the new network perimeter, she explained. But despite the importance of safeguarding it, organizations often struggle to make the transition.

### Friction Is Real

“There’s going to be friction when [agencies] change processes,” Weaver said. “A lot of these agencies have been doing solid work ... for years and transforming becomes difficult.”

In fact, legacy applications and technology are often the babies that agencies have proudly nurtured for decades. Speaking from personal experience, she said there can be emotional ties to old IT that someone has “kept solid for [the] environment” for years.

It’s important to have an industry partner, such as Semperis, that can talk early on about future efficiencies and other benefits and include agency staff in designing new workflows. “Building team camaraderie in the decision-making process is important from the beginning,” Weaver said. “It’s having everyone together at that table, defining their goals and aligning them and making sure that we’re meeting their business outcomes.”

### Suite of Services

Semperis gives agencies visibility into their environment’s security and helps make them proactive instead of reactive. A full product suite offers tools for before, during and after a cyberattack, Weaver said.

That includes continuously scanning an agency’s Active Directory for vulnerabilities, monitoring for indicators of exposure and compromise, and having uninterrupted visibility into attacks other monitoring tools can’t see.

The platform automatically remediates breaches when waiting for human intervention would be too risky and gives real-time threat notifications.

In the event of a cyberattack, Semperis has a two-pronged approach to restore the system, said Weaver. First, identify what happened, go step by step to look for loopholes and hidden objects, backdoors that the attacker might have created and, second, restore to a trusted state.

Restoring data is harder when an agency turns to Semperis only after an event. “A lot of [agencies] won’t have the internet, so I helped one organization while they held up their cellphone so I could see their screen,” she recalled.

### Purple Knight

Developing a baseline understanding of your system’s vulnerabilities is the first step to a strong cyber defense. Running Semperis’s Purple Knight on a network computer is one option, Weaver said. “No elevated permissions, no superpowers, just a regular user on a computer” can do it, she said.

The free tool scans an agency’s system, identifies weaknesses, assigns a vulnerability score and offers prioritized guidance.

“With all of the threats that exist today, we have to be one step ahead,” she said.

ACTIVE DIRECTORY IS THE COMMON ATTACK TARGET

# Protect Public Sector Organizations from Ransomware

Ransomware attacks against state and local governments, schools, and other public sector organizations are on the rise.



Sophos Report:

**60%**

of public sector organizations were hit by ransomware in the last year, up one-third from the previous year

Sophos Report:

**75%**

of public sector organizations had data encrypted the last year—one of the highest across sectors

IBM Cost of Data Breach Report:

**1.37M**

average cost for public organizations to remediate a ransomware attack

## Gain control of public sector identity security



I recommend Purple Knight for its ease of use—it's GUI-based, it gives you a quick report card, and gives you a good, easy checklist of things to start working on.

[Learn more →](#)

**Jim Shakespear**

Director of IT Security, Southern Utah University





## A 21st-Century Education in Ohio Prisons

An interview with **Jennifer Sanders**, Superintendent of the Ohio Central School System (OCCS) at the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections (ODRC)



**The Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC) is responsible for a population of more than 44,500 prisoners. Their average age is a little older than 40, and the average stay in prison is 2.6 years.**

**That means most inmates will get out of prison while they're of working age. "It's important for people to recognize that. The people who are incarcerated, not just in Ohio but everywhere, a lot of them are coming home," said Jennifer Sanders, Superintendent of Schools at the ODRC's Ohio Central School System (OCCS).**

**"It's our job to enforce the sentence given by the courts. But when they leave us, we should have made them better."**

Prison education correlates with reduced recidivism. One study of 30 states found that three-quarters of released prisoners were rearrested within five years. But only 14% of those who obtained an associate degree before getting out were rearrested. The number drops to 5.6% for bachelor's degrees and zero for master's degrees.

## Connected Education

Education has long been a priority for ODRC, which has 30-plus-year relationships with colleges and offers a robust selection of technical training programs, literacy education and three paths to a high school diploma.

When Sanders became superintendent in 2019, she and ODRC leaders agreed that they needed to educate inmates for 21st-century opportunities, with 21st-century tools. “It’s important for us to make sure we’re delivering education in a way that makes sense today,” she explained.

They’ve launched a program providing one of today’s most easily recognized educational devices: Chromebooks. OCCS has distributed the minimalist laptops to about 10,000 students. They are also available in prison classrooms and libraries.

The devices give students the flexibility to study on their own schedules. “We have adult learners, who benefit more from setting their own pace,” Sanders said. In addition, the Chromebooks are used for ACT WorkKeys assessments of work skills that can help students earn a high school diploma, and they’re used to connect prisoners before their release with the state’s job resources programs.

The security and user protections built into Chromebooks for K-12 education have been adapted for similar concerns with incarcerated students. The devices link to a specialized student wireless network and can’t be used outside it. “We can build connections to the internet and strip out the things that we don’t want our students to have access to,” Sanders said.

## The Future Is Bright

Pandemic-era funding helped set up the system, Sanders explained, but the program also got a vote of confidence in Ohio’s most recent biennium budget, when state legislators approved funds to continue providing devices.

Although the program is new enough that it’s not possible to correlate the Chromebooks with educational achievement, in fiscal year 2022-2023, ODRC students earned 3,247 college certificates and degrees and 1,484 career technical certifications. Its three high school programs graduated 1,040 students.

“A lot of people think of corrections as fences and gates and doors and locks. But in reality, corrections is a people industry,” said Sanders. “We work very hard to make sure that the people that leave us can and do become your neighbor, your coworker and a person you [could] call a friend.”



## Takeaways

Here are some lessons from the successful programs we've shared here.

- Focus on a specific need in your community. That is your starting point.
- Walk through the user experience to see what works and what doesn't.
- Investigate solutions after you've identified the issues, not before.
- Start with small fixes that have outsized impact.
- Check out existing solutions, but be prepared to build your own.
- Measure your results, and make adjustments where necessary.

## About Carahsoft

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## About GovLoop

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