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Digital First

Federal agencies are ditching paper processes
to better serve citizens—and each other.

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Foreword

As computers took over offices, digitization was supposed to kill off paper. Instead, at many agencies there's more than ever.

Paper processes still dominate the federal government. An online form often captures information that gets printed, passed around and then re-entered into other systems by hand or by scans. Then, the whole process may repeat. But agencies are trying to break the cycle, driven to better serve their customers and accomplish their missions more efficiently and effectively.

In 2012, a team at the Office of Personnel Management set out to build a customizable digital performance review system that any agency could use. It's a complex feat to develop a system the entire federal government can use, but 35 agencies and offices already signed on to use the customizable USA Performance app.

Going digital first takes rethinking workflows around the users' needs. Defense Digital Service designers embed themselves with the end users of their products, whether revamping the website military families use to move around the world or reworking the Army Cyber Command's cyber training. The Agriculture Department's Farm Loan Discovery Tool didn't put the entire application process online—but only because farmers didn't want that. Instead the agency focused on answering the questions of potential borrowers so

they feel prepared.

That customer focus—whether it's for citizens or fellow agencies—push agencies to find digital transformation opportunities. The National Archives and Records Administration is curating tools to support agencies in electronic records management efforts and the Federal Communication Commission plans to shift to all-online licensing. The Technology Modernization Fund, the government's central IT fund, recently announced it would pony up money to help Agriculture and the Equal Employment Opportunity Council projects shift to the cloud.

"It's two projects that were operating on paper-based processes to serve citizens, one of them used triplicate copy forms—I don't even know where to buy them anymore," Federal Chief Information Officer Suzette Kent said Oct. 21.

This ebook explores all of those projects and how digitization efforts are changing the ways agencies deliver while saving some trees in the process.

Heather Kuldell
Managing Editor, *Nextgov*

How OPM Cut the Paper Out of the Performance Review Process

The USA Performance app tracks more than 35,000 federal employees—a number expected to more than double in 2020.

By Aaron Boyd

USA Performance—an in-house app created by two teams in the Office of Personnel Management—is set to grow by more than 117% in 2020 as adoption of the digital performance review system spreads across government.

Up until seven years ago, OPM would intake reams of paper every year on every federal employee as part of the annual performance review system. In 2012, the agency began a long digitization process that has coalesced into a comprehensive system that is based on a single code base while also being highly customizable for the agencies that use it.

As of October, 35 agencies and offices have signed on as customers of the USA Performance app, creating an end-to-end digital performance review system for some 35,000 federal employees. Soon, that number is expected to more than double, as the program is expecting

to add another 41,000 users in 2020, officials told *Nextgov*.

But developing a single system that could be used by every federal agency was no easy task.

“It’s complex,” said M.C. Price, associate chief information officer for infrastructure and a senior leader managing technical development, hosting and maintenance of OPM’s websites, including USA Performance. “It was very complex to digitize it and to meet all the agency requirements on the different forms. Even within our group, we wanted to weight the performance standards differently than maybe the [Human Resources Solutions office] does. It has to be configurable and meet all those demands.”

In 2012, Price and Rebecca Ayers, manager of OPM’s performance management solutions area and the USA Performance program manager, set out to digitize the process. Over the course of

seven years, Ayers, Price and their teams worked together to build an entire human resources system from scratch, developing the entire platform and software in-house and running it completely on OPM infrastructure.

The result: a fully self-contained, customizable performance management system that has the potential to save the government millions annually in work hours and printing costs, alone.

The review is a year-long endeavor that starts with a conversation about goals for the coming year. Managers meet with employees again for a mid-year review and then once more at the end of the year, at which time they get a performance rating. In the traditional process, the entire review is cataloged on paper forms—stacks and stacks, generated year over year. At the end of the annual review process, those stacks are mailed to third-party vendors that scan the forms into non-machine-readable PDFs that are then delivered to OPM for storage.

“They will literally mail them boxes of PDFs and the vendors will scan them—and the agencies are paying the vendors—and then those get scanned into our [Electronic Official Personnel Folder],” known as the eOPF, Price said.

Those paper records also require additional identification to ensure each page is associated with the correct employee. That requires adding a sticker to each page with the employee’s Social Security number—a privacy nightmare if those records were ever misplaced. The USA Performance platform removes the need to include paper in the process and maintains the

“It was very complex to digitize it and to meet all the agency requirements on the different forms.”

Office of Personnel Management’s M.C. Price

records in a secure database with an authority to operate, or ATO, a federal certification that ensures a baseline of cybersecurity.

“That’s what the system does,” Ayers said. “It takes that traditionally paper-driven process that we’ve done in the government, which is,

‘I’m going to meet with you, sit down, talk about what you’re going to do this year. We’ll meet again at the end of the year and I’m going to give you a performance rating and a write-up. Then that goes in your personal record.’”

Under the old process, those ratings and write-ups were printed out and mailed to OPM, at which point the agency would scan all of those in non-machine-readable PDFs.

That process has been in place since the government began doing performance reviews. The last major revision to the process was in 1995, Ayers said.

Since then, “I don’t know if agencies were doing anything automated within the HR process other than maybe some payroll or other things,” she said. “In the last 25 years, slowly all these different HR processes are starting to get digitized and automated. I think performance management because it was something you could file on paper, put on a form and file somewhere, I think it’s been one of the last that we’ve attempted to try to digitize across the government.”

In order to get moving without having to immediately delve into the complexities of the federal employee review system, Ayers said the team decided to start with the Senior Executive Service, a subset of the federal workforce who

fill executive management positions throughout government. Not only are there fewer of them—only 8,000 of the 2.1 million federal employees—but their annual review process is highly standardized, especially when compared with the wide variety of options for the remaining 1.3 million feds.

From there, the team started the arduous process of creating a platform that could handle every other kind of performance review.

“Within the federal regulation, our summary rating patterns go from A to H—A being pass/fail all the way to H, which is five-tier,” Ayers said. “And then, within that, there are different derivation formulas that you can use—pass/fail, whether you do mean or you do weighted, whether you just pick and choose. There’s, like, 150 ways to do performance management in government. You go from agency to agency, everybody does it a little different.”

The SES portion of the system was completed by 2015, at which time the team began work on a Performance Plan Wizard that walks new users (managers) through the platform and allows them to customize the performance review process based on the agency’s preferred method.

The wizard functionality was key to making USA Performance usable for anyone outside the executive service.

“Think of it like TurboTax,” Ayers said, “Where it takes the HR specialist through a series of steps that says, ‘What’s your summary of rating pattern? What’s your derivation formula? How many performance elements do you use? What’s the order of signatures on the plan? How many progress reviews do you have? Do you require self-accomplishment narratives? Do you require them at the individual level; do you require them at the summary level?’ They take you all the way through and it rebuilds your plan in the system. Then, once you have this template, you can assign it to those employees.”

Non-SES employees were being reviewed in

the system by 2017 and the next year a host of agencies adopted the platform, including USA Performance’s biggest customer to date, the Homeland Security Department. By 2018, the system was able to process multiple, customized plans and rating cycles for each employee and customer agency.

In 2019, a swath of larger departments joined the program, including Health and Human Services, Justice, Census and the General Services Administration.

Ayers and Price were not able to provide hard numbers on savings due to the program but offered some stats to give an idea of how the process has changed. Using the paper process, agencies would spend some 320 work hours a year processing paper documents—with an average of four human resources specialists working for about 7.5 days for a total of 240 hours, another specialist spending 40 hours maintaining spreadsheets and paper plans, and an HR supervisor spending 40 hours over five days monitoring the process.

The team also estimates each agency goes through an average of 100 trees each year using the paper process.

On top of workforce and environmental costs, an agency would spend an estimated \$25,000 on vendor services to process and scan all that paper into PDF form.

Agencies using the USA Performance system pay by the seat, depending on how many employees they review through the platform.

“So, we had to solve the problem of: Everybody does it a little bit differently, we have to follow OPM rules and we’ve got to build it in a cost-effective way so that agencies—whether you have 10 people or, like [the Defense Department], you have 90,000 people—you can afford this system,” Ayers said.

However, despite seven years of work, the system still does not fully adapt to all the intricacies of federal employment. But the teams

*“The next big steps for the system are... **organizational structure**. Federal agencies are very complex.”*

Office of Personnel Management’s Rebecca Ayers

are still working at it.

“The next big steps for the system are we’re going to tackle—which I don’t think another system has done yet—is organizational structure. Federal agencies are very complex,” Ayers said. “You have all these layers and [employees and managers] sit in different parts of the organization. I think we’re going to be one of the first—at least federally-built systems—that tries to tackle how can we better manage an organization’s structure so that we can just better manage the performance management process.”


“The other piece is always data analytics,” she added. “We spent our time building this system and now we have a bunch of data. So, how can we better access and better utilize that data.”

And that goes both ways, she noted, as managers get better data about their workforce

and OPM gathers useful data on the workforce and its review processes.

Further into the future, Ayers said she believes USA Performance could be used to fundamentally change the way federal employee performance is tracked and rated.

“We’ve been able to recreate the [code of federal regulations]—the government policy. What we want to do is take the next step into adopting what we’re seeing outside of government and how we understand how to manage performance. But we’ve got to figure out how those people and those networks relate in order to build the foundation and the tools.”

Someday soon, that might be having an app on employees’ work phones that allow them to give immediate feedback on their colleagues and, when constructive, allow that to be shared more widely with other managers. 

Inside Defense Digital Service's User-Centered Approach

Designing with users—not for them—has been a key to the agency's innovative success.

By Brandi Vincent

The Defense Digital Service practices a principle that's proven to be integral in driving digital transformation across the Pentagon and executives think it could propel modernization across all agencies: Design with the technology's users, not for them.

"What we like to say is that changes are made by those people that show up," Chief of Staff Katie Olson said at a September FCW workshop in Washington.

As an agency-specific team of the U.S. Digital Service, DDS rapidly responds to a variety of technological challenges across the Defense enterprise and runs projects that aim to transform federal systems and processes. The agency is made up of "a SWAT team of highly skilled nerds," Olson said, who serve two-year terms. Their diverse backgrounds span across design, engineering, product management and other versatile skills.

"It's important that we are not just a team of software developers," she said. "But the fact that we have bureaucracy hackers on the team—who are really sort of mining the process for what's happening behind the scenes and we also have designers who, again, can sit side by side with the users to make sure we are coming up with a comprehensive solution—this is really important to the work that we are doing."

Since it was stood up four years ago, Olson said DDS has run 29 projects and 22 "rogue squadrons," which are 2-week sprints to implement new technology. And on top of working to create new technical capabilities within Defense, the service has also asked for 33 waivers to put different types of commercial technology in place in the department and has run 17 bug bounty programs to date. "What's really, I think, a testament to our team and the success we've had so far in some of the major

“This idea of designing with and not for users—I cannot underscore it enough.”

Defense Digital Service’s Katie Olson

transformations we’ve had is that we think about who we are designing this with and we’re not just thinking about this as something we’re just dropping off and handing over,” Olson said.

She also highlighted some of the projects that illustrate how insiders practice the principle of designing with and not for their users.

One example came in the development and rollout of the website, [move.mil](#). Olson explained military personnel often face monumental challenges when they must move across the country for their service. The process was originally a sort of “black box,” she said, and many service members did not get the support they needed in transferring their families around the world. DDS was asked to revamp the system.

Through conversations directly with service members and their families about their needs, the agency ultimately opted to create a front-facing website that would allow users to plan their moves in one streamlined place. Today, service members can go in and see all the moving resources that are available to them—and soon it will evolve into a portal where they can access their orders, find moving insurance and figure out all that they need to manage their moves.

“We worked directly with users to do that,” Olson said. “So, this is a case where if we would have just had engineers, we probably would have just fixed the backend and fixed some inefficiencies to make the orders more readily available and streamline the process, but because we are so embedded in working with the users, we were able to create a front-facing website that is now going to serve over 400,000 families as they move around the world.”

Another project that she said embodies this principle around transformation is their work to remake Army Cyber Command’s Army Cyber School curriculum to train the nation’s top cyber soldiers, through their Digital Dojo program. The


DDS team went to the school and sat in on classes “shoulder-to-shoulder” with the students they’d be designing for to help instructors boost the curriculum.

“We’ve actually shortened the amount of time that it takes, and we think, have made the curriculum much more effective in terms of what they’re learning,” she said.

Olson noted that it’s an example of how the agency is not just dropping off new technology to those that need it, but installing permanent capabilities that can be used without their help going forward. She added that the agency always takes a phased approach to transition. Initially, DDS officials were teaching the new curriculum, but this fall the Army will take over, though the digital service will check-in and continue to help out as needed.

“It’s really important to be embedded with the people who are ultimately going to be using the technology to make sure that we’ve gotten not only the product itself right, but also the supporting processes as well,” she said. “This idea of designing with and not for users—I cannot underscore it enough.”

Also at the event, Olson’s colleague who serves as USDS’ Procurement Expert, Florence Kasule further reiterated the point. Kasule shared the Digital Service’s [Maturity Determination Tool](#), which can be used by federal insiders to determine whether their organizational culture supports modernization. She said as teams work alongside users in a collaborative process, it’s also critical to ensure everyone involved in digital transformation feels like they have the opportunity to speak up and participate.

“The best way I’ve seen for digital transformation to happen is when the organization is set up for everyone to win, for everyone to have a voice, and for there to truly be a culture of delivery,” she said. 



ANDRII ZASTROZHNOV/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

USDA Launches Tool to Match Farmers to the Loans They Need

The latest tool on farmers.gov helps take the mystery out of the loan application process.

By Brandi Vincent

Capital is critical when it comes to maintaining the viability of America's agriculture and farmers across the nation depend on direct loans from the Agriculture Department to fund and boost their business operations.

To support producers in identifying the Agriculture loans that best meet their specific needs, the agency launched a new Farm Loan Discovery Tool through farmers.gov in July.

"From a personal standpoint, obtaining a loan for a lot of folks can be intimidating and the process is possibly borderline confusing," Farm Service Agency Administrator Richard Fordyce told *Nextgov*. "So this intuitive new tool helps answer questions and makes our potential borrowers more comfortable and more prepared."

A fourth-generation farmer, Fordyce has faced the challenges producers experience in funding their efforts firsthand. He explained that though it can be a convoluted process to

apply, the 2018 farm bill increased fiscal limits on several of Agriculture's loan products. Compared to this time last year, Fordyce's agency has seen an 18% increase in the amount that is obligated for direct farm ownership loans, meaning farmers could see more funding available in the future.

The agency hopes this new tool will leverage technology to make the entire loan application and approval process less daunting for its customers.

The tool can be accessed through the agency's farmers.gov site, the department's go-to online resource for farmers and ranchers across America. Chad Sheridan, chief of USDA's Service Delivery and Operations, and instrumental in the development and rollout of farmers.gov, said the whole journey to offer a farm loan tool on the site started with the idea that farm loans should be as accessible as commercial credit loans and simple mortgage-type loans.

“It’s been eye-opening—we are really walking the walk. A lot of times, we talk the talk and we go out and get feedback and then don’t do anything with it.”

Agriculture Department’s Chad Sheridan

“We are all used to operating in a digital environment with those kinds of things,” Sheridan said.

After completing a series of five questions via the tool, farmers and ranchers will receive specific answers and resources on how to prepare to visit their local service centers, as well as step-by-step insights on what to expect through their farm loan journey, and materials to help them get started with their loan application.

The tool covers youth loans, microloans, farm ownership loans, farm operating loans and guaranteed loans, which farmers use to cover a variety of expenses including buying new land to expand their operations, investing in new equipment, or purchasing seed or livestock.

Insiders said the tool is not meant to replace one-on-one interactions that customers experience at their service centers, but it is instead meant to enhance those encounters by providing farmers with all the baseline information they need before meeting with loan officers to complete their applications.

This is expected to be particularly helpful for new customers hoping to identify and apply for the right type of loan for their farm or ranch, or those working with Agriculture for the first time.

“Our goal with this tool is to make producers feel more comfortable—and more informed—as they consider and apply for an FSA farm loan,” Elizabeth Creech a representative from USDA’s External Affairs Division told *Nextgov*. “If this tool can make the farm loan process feel more transparent and approachable for producers looking to us for funding support—if we can

answer those first few questions and help them feel more confident and informed—I will absolutely consider this a smart investment.”

And much like the evolution of farmers.gov, the agency’s motto “for farmers, by farmers” strongly influenced the conception and buildout of the tool, with improving customer service placed at the forefront of the entire decision-making process.

“The secretary demands that we deliver exceptional customer service,” Fordyce noted.

“And we wanted to make a concerted effort to get the input of our regional and field offices and our customers before we went out and built something that we thought was the right answer,” Sheridan said.

In cooperation with Agriculture, members of the General Services Administration’s Customer Experience Center of Excellence team conducted field research with customers and employees to ensure the creation of the tool would be informed by those who would use it most. They traveled across eight states and spoke to more than 100 producers and Agriculture staff members to adequately grasp the unique experience of applying and receiving a direct farm loan.

Their findings informed the Farm Loan Discovery Tool as a whole.

Sheridan noted that the team initially thought customers wanted the ability to completely apply for a loan online, but they learned through research and journey mapping that most users instead wanted new capabilities that would enable them to access information that would simplify the entire process and reduce the burdens that come with it.

“It’s been eye-opening—we are really walking the walk,” Sheridan said. “A lot of times, we talk the talk and we go out and get feedback and then don’t do anything with it. With farmers.gov, we are starting to see in everything we do, and especially in the farm loans journey, that we are walking the walk and we are going after the

things that our staff and producers have said ‘this is really going to make a difference for us.’”

The agency also plans to add new functionality and capabilities to farmers.gov going forward. They’re considering enabling self-service for farm loans, planning new releases around disaster programs and new document management and electronic signature capabilities so that farmers don’t have to leave their farms to chase down different administrative functions.

“We’ve got a huge portfolio of programs that, as we continue to evolve and farmers.gov continues to mature, we’ll start putting additional things for more of our customers to participate in and I think that’s really exciting,” Fordyce said.

The administrator also further emphasized the department’s efforts to set an example for

modernization across government—and for him, it’s personal.

Fordyce explained that his father is 87 years old, he is in his mid-50s and his son is 23. He said his father would flat out “refuse” to use new technology like the loan discovery tool, and he could go either way, using the tool remotely or meeting with an officer in person.

“Not to discount myself or my dad’s generation, but the one I think that’s most important is the future. The future of agriculture and the future of this industry—our current and future customers—they not only want these digital services, they demand them,” Fordyce said. “So we need to think about who we are going to be serving in the future and making plans for that now.” **N**

NARA, GSA Offers New Tool to Support Agencies' Records Management

Acquiring records management software may change in a hurry for agencies.

By Brandi Vincent

The National Archives and Records Administration and General Services Administration collaborated to create a new market research tool that offers agencies “a wide range” of electronic and physical records management solutions.

The effort is part of NARA's work to support agencies as the paradigm for preserving government records shifts away from hard copies, federal insiders told *Nextgov*.

The agencies recently cooperated to create a new Special Item Number, or SIN, [51 600](#) under Schedule 36 that's specifically for Electronic Records Management and launched a new contracting vehicle, 'ERM Solutions', on [GSA's Discovery](#) website in July. It features a modern market research tool to help agencies identify the best records management vendor services to meet their needs.

“[We're] getting out of that mold where

records management was a paper process that was predicated on storing thousands and thousands of boxes, and that old model of what records are,” said Arian Ravanbakhsh, supervisory records management policy analyst in NARA's Office of the Chief Records Officer. “The new approach is going to be electronic and digital.”

Upon recognizing that the future is digital while the federal government's paper-centric approach is not, the Obama administration set a variety of goals and deadlines to help agencies move to a 21st-century model for records management. And by the end of this year, agencies are directed to manage all their permanent electronic records in an [electronic format](#), as opposed to printing them out and shipping them off for preservation.

NARA is tasked with fleshing out the practices agencies will use to execute this

robust modernization mission. The agency recently launched its Federal Electronic Records Modernization Initiative, or [FERMI](#), to give agencies the tools they need to get there.

Creating the new SIN specifically for records management solutions was a start, and producing this new tool with GSA is part of that undertaking.

“What we heard from agencies is that they needed help identifying solutions for electronic records management from vendor services and that they needed help with the procurement processes and knowing what was out there,”

said Electronic Records Policy Analyst Courtney Anderson, who works closely with Ravanbakhsh at NARA.

Ravanbakhsh and Anderson

said the new tool from GSA will help agencies obtain these services more easily by simplifying the procurement process, while also fostering innovation among vendors.

“[They’re] making that whole market research process easier, so agencies aren’t starting from scratch just looking at the whole world of solutions out there,” Anderson said.

She explained that there are currently more than 40 vendors listed that have self-certified that they meet NARA’s universal ERM requirements. Agencies will use the tool to conveniently review them, as they would a normal schedule. If agencies need a records management solution for email, web records, websites or social media, they’ll be able to filter through all the options in one place to see the best vendors that can meet both NARA’s requirements and their specific needs.

Anderson said vendors include consultants that can help agencies with ERM policy and strategy development, integrators that work with

the software vendors to help agencies get up and running with applicable solutions, and will include actual software vendors listed to assist agencies that need to purchase some type of content analytics tool to help find out what types of records they have.

She also said the contracting vehicles on GSA’s Discovery page are now primarily made up of PDFs and are clunky to wade through. The ERM tool allows a keyword search and enables agencies to sift through vendors that meet different requirements.

“It’s just a little bit more searchability than they currently have,” she said.

To aide in their decision-making, customers will also eventually be able to observe demos and use cases for specific products.

A GSA spokesperson told *Nextgov* that the agency’s work with NARA is ongoing, which allows for new vendors to be onboarded and new use cases to be approved.

“The process will use demos to provide a clear picture of each vendor’s capabilities as they pertain to the use cases,” the official said. “This tool will also help federal customers determine the level of competition available for their requirements and aid in market research.”

And as NARA continues to embrace emerging technologies to streamline agencies’ records management practices, officials said a large part of their goal is to make the entire process as automated as possible—and eliminate the burden on end users.

“We don’t want end users sitting there and thinking about ‘is this a record and how do I file it?’” Anderson said. “We just want them to focus on their mission work and have all the records management going on in the background, so they don’t have to think about it anymore.” **N**

*“[We’re] getting out of ...**that old model** of what records are.”*

NARA’s Arian Ravanbakhsh

FCC Plans to Fully Digitize Its Largest Licensing System

The agency filed approximately 5,000 applications manually last year.

By Brandi Vincent

The Federal Communications Commission sought public feedback on the agency's latest digitization efforts to fully transition to electronic filing, licenses, authorizations and correspondence.

The agency unveiled plans in September to move its largest licensing system—the Universal Licensing System—from paper to electronic format and enhance electronic filing and correspondence across other related systems. ULS manages applications for all wireless radio licenses. The public comment period closed Oct. 30.

“While the vast majority of ULS applications today are submitted electronically, some are still manually filed, largely from exempted filers,” agency officials said in the original notice for proposed rulemaking.

Though most ULS applications are already required to be filed electronically, FCC aims to

overturn several exceptions to the rule, including those that currently allow Private Land Mobile Radio and Amateur Radio Service documents to be filed manually. ARS is specifically open to individuals who are “interested in radio technique solely with a personal aim and without pecuniary interest,” and PLMR are used by both public and private entities for a wide range of person-to-person voice communication needs.

The agency notes that, last year, of its total of about 425,000 applications received, 5,000 were manually filed. Of those, approximately one-third were from PLMR filers, and another third were from ARS filings.

“Given the drastic changes that have occurred with regard to the ubiquity of the internet and increased personal computer access, we find it unlikely that electronic filing remains infeasible or cost-prohibitive for the previously exempted types of filers, or that they lack

*“As the communications marketplace is being transformed by the digital revolution, **we must continue to modernize our own operations.**”*

Federal Communications Commission Chairman Ajit Pai

resources to file electronically,” FCC officials wrote.

The new rule aims to eliminate certain exemptions to mandatory electronic filing, including ASR and PLMR. In the document, the agency questions if it is correct to oust the current exemptions, or if it should leave some in place to account for small entities or individuals with disabilities. The FCC also asks whether six months is sufficient lead-time for licensees, applicants and registrants to convert to electronic filing.

Additionally, the agency poses a variety of

questions around its included proposal to require all applicants to provide an email address on FCC forms related to these systems.

Once all comments are submitted, the agency plans to offer responses by Nov. 14.

The agency’s Chairman Ajit Pai initially announced these plans and how they fit into the agency’s broader digitization initiatives in late July.

“As the communications marketplace is being transformed by the digital revolution, we must continue to modernize our own operations,” he said. **N**



Technology Modernization Fund Tapped for Two More Projects

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The latest batch of grants will help two agencies ditch paper-based processes.

By Jack Corrigan

The federal leaders who head the Technology Modernization Fund in October selected two more IT improvement projects to receive extra injections of government cash, marking the first batch of TMF awards since February.

The latest round of grants, which total \$12 million, will leave the fund operating at less than 20% of its full capacity, and it's unclear whether Congress will refill its coffers next year.

The Agriculture Department will receive \$8 million to revamp the Agriculture Marketing Service's Specialty Crops Program, which is responsible for inspecting and certifying more than 60 billion pounds of fruits and vegetables each year. Today, the program relies heavily on paper-based processes and legacy IT systems, and the additional funds will help the agency digitize its inspection program and migrate operations to the cloud.

The board also gave the Equal Employment

Opportunity Commission a \$4 million grant to stand up a new cloud-based charge and case management system. The project is expected to both decrease software and operational costs for the commission and allow for more efficient customer services.

"It's two projects that were operating on paper-based processes to serve citizens, one of them used triplicate copy forms—I don't even know where to buy them anymore," Federal Chief Information Officer Suzette Kent said at an ACT-IAC conference in Philadelphia.

The board has previously handed out seven other grants through the TMF, including two awards to both Agriculture and the General Services Administration, and single awards to the Energy, Labor and Housing and Urban Development departments.

The Technology Modernization Fund, established in 2017 by the Modernizing

“It’s two projects that were operating on paper-based processes to serve citizens, one of them used triplicate copy forms—I don’t even know where to buy them anymore.”

Federal Chief Information Officer
Suzette Kent

Government Technology Act, originally included \$100 million to support critical IT modernization efforts at agencies across government. Congress allocated the fund another \$25 million last year, but its coffers could soon dry up without any new appropriations.

Less than \$24 million remains in the TMF following this latest batch of awards, and lawmakers haven’t yet agreed to refill it. The House proposed allocating another \$35 million to the fund in its 2020 appropriations bill, but the Senate didn’t include any additional resources in its own version of the legislation.

And even if the board awards no additional

grants, the TMF could see its resources dwindle down further due to an imbalanced cash flow. The fund was intended to be a self-sustaining pot of money, with agencies eventually paying back the grants they receive plus additional fees, but today the TMF program management office is spending more on overhead costs than it’s recouping from grantees.

Over the next five years, federal auditors expect the PMO to operate at an annual loss of roughly \$1 million. The Government Accountability Office plans to release a complete audit of the TMF program in December. **N**

Authors



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Aaron Boyd is an award-winning journalist currently serving as senior editor for technology and events at *Nextgov*. He primarily covers federal government IT contracting and cybersecurity issues affecting both civilian and defense agencies. As a lifelong nerd and policy wonk, he feels right at home covering the intersection of technology and policy in the nation's capital.



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Heather Kuldell joined *Nextgov* in the summer of 2016 after working at *Federal Times*, *C4ISR & Networks* and 1105 Media publications. She started her journalism career at *Creative Loafing*, an altweekly based in Atlanta, Ga., and still appreciates proper fried green tomatoes.



Brandi Vincent | Staff Correspondent, *Nextgov*

Brandi Vincent reports on the federal government's use of and policies for emerging technologies—including but not limited to supercomputing, artificial intelligence, biometrics, and the internet of things. Before joining *Nextgov*, Brandi helped create news for millennials at Snapchat and mixed media at NBC News. She grew up in south Louisiana and received a master's in journalism from the University of Maryland.