TESTIMONY OF AMANDA RENTERIA, CEO OF CODE FOR AMERICA
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM SUBCOMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS, U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
HEARING: "CATALYST FOR CHANGE: STATE AND LOCAL IT AFTER THE PANDEMIC"
JUNE 30, 2021

Opening

Chairman Connolly, Ranking Member Hice, members of the Subcommittee, and all the staff who have helped put this conversation together, thank you. I appreciate the invitation to be here on behalf of the entire team at Code for America, as well as our broader network of government technology experts and practitioners. We are honored to be part of such an important conversation about the role of Congress and the federal government in helping states and localities with critical IT needs, especially in the face of unprecedented events like the coronavirus pandemic. Empowering state and local governments to be responsive, supportive, helpful, flexible, fully serving all constituents, especially those in the most need, cost-effectively and securely, should be a critical priority. We view this hearing as an important step towards that effort. As the CEO of Code for America, a 501(c)3 non-profit with a presence in all 50 states that has worked for over a decade supporting US government entities at all levels, my remarks today will take a broad view of learnings and perspectives from our experiences. Especially with a focus on how Congress and the federal government can support state and local governments, improve collaboration, deliver services efficiently and effectively, to lift up all Americans while reducing complexity in challenging environments.

Background

Let me begin with the history of Code for America, a nonprofit organization that partners with government and community organizations to improve people's lives at scale. We started more than a decade ago with the simple notion of helping to create "a government by the people, for the people, in the digital age." In our vision, government services—especially services meant to help those who need it most—should be simple, easy to use, and fully accessible. From a low-income family facing unemployment due to the pandemic to a veteran who served honorably and is now facing a complex healthcare benefits system at the VA, to small businesses on Main Street struggling to stay afloat as the world shuttered up in March 2020—the government services that all these Americans access should be as good as the services we are accustomed to getting from the private sector. Outcomes should be measurably better and better can and should cost less. And perhaps most importantly, we believe that government services can and must treat everyone with respect and dignity. So we work shoulder to shoulder with community organizations and government to build digital tools and services, change policies, and improve programs.

To do this effectively, we center the people we serve as our starting point. We sit at kitchen tables, in living rooms, and in long lines at government agencies to learn how real people interact with government systems. (And during the pandemic, we shifted to doing this virtually!) For ten years, we have been listening, researching, and asking questions about people's basic needs, the challenges they encounter, and the barriers they face when accessing government services. From those deep conversations and further research and analysis, we design technology, processes, and policies with government executives, administrators, and workers on the front lines to create systems that work. Finally, we analyze the data in real-time and measure outcomes to inform a cycle of continuous improvement.

Our team of data scientists, engineers, researchers, product managers, and client experts have been working with hundreds of governments across the country—sharing what we learn, teaching them human-centered practices, and helping measure and understand data to iterate and continuously improve services. Our end goal is government adoption because we hope to fully modernize systems in preparation for the challenges ahead due to a more volatile, ever-changing environment and the opportunities that await in a more tech-savvy, diverse, and socially conscious generation.

Code for America has always known that government and technology are the two best levers we have to change people's lives at scale. As the country resets post-pandemic, we believe we have a once-in-a-generation moment to partner with all of you to finally create "a government by the people, for the people in the digital age." This kind of government can truly unleash the country's potential.

Five Case Studies of State/Local IT

Here are five examples of how Code for America has supported governments across the country, both before and since the pandemic started. We hope these examples illustrate the bread, depth, and complexity of the role of technology in state and local service delivery and underscore the need for Congress and the federal government to take action to support scaling these best practices for government IT and service delivery across the country.

#1 Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) implementation

P-EBT is part of the US government response to the pandemic, as passed by Congress in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act. Through P-EBT, students eligible for Free/Reduced Price Meals (FRPM) and would have received those meals in-person if their schools were operating were entitled to P-EBT benefits. To implement this, states would have to determine FRPM eligibility for students and distribute federal funding. States that were equipped to do this, such as Massachusetts, Michigan, and Ohio, simply took the data they had on-hand about eligible students, loaded Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards commonly used to distribute public assistance, and mailed them to the student's parent or guardian address on record. Eligibility could be cross-checked against other sources of data, and students' addresses, phone numbers, and other information could be matched to their parents or legal guardians. States prepared with the data and delivery mechanisms could get their plans approved by USDA quickly, and children could have funds for food during the pandemic even if they

relied on FRPM from in-person school for nutrition. This was low-cost, as it was automatic, efficient, and did not have any additional steps or hoops to jump through—an example of a government service that worked automatically, seamlessly, cost-effectively, and efficiently, and that treated people with dignity and respect.

However, many states faced a variety of challenges to do so. For example, the decentralized, local nature of the K-12 school system meant that each school district often held FRPM data while data on parents and guardians' eligibility in public assistance programs were held across different state agencies and matching that data to create a single source of truth for each student proved to be a challenge. The usual data challenges included people moving, updating contact information, and especially data quality, formatting, and matching. Furthermore, each state's policy about who was eligible for P-EBT was different. All of the above and more led to a "data gap" of "unidentifiable" students eligible for P-EBT but could not be easily identified, or could not be matched to parents/guardians or verified, or without contact information. Furthermore, states were sometimes not equipped, trained, or prepared to work with data across agencies and vendors—often needed to coordinate across their technical vendors using different data formats and policies. To meet the challenge, many states realized that to deliver P-EBT benefits to children, they would have to create and implement an application and delivery process, often with an online application, to get the data from parents and guardians to apply.

We advised state social and human services agencies in their implementation of P-EBT in Colorado, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Utah, Virginia, and Washington, supporting on topics such as data matching, data integrity, and accuracy, coordinating with vendors, and community outreach to raise awareness if an application was necessary. We also worked with California and Minnesota to build mobile-first, easy-to-use application websites for parents/guardians of the "unidentifiable" students. In partnership with both states, we worked to build outreach strategies with local community-based organizations to assist eligible families. These efforts resulted in identifying and verifying ~3.5M previously "unidentifiable" students, helping to combat child hunger during the pandemic.

#2 Integrated Benefits (e.g., SNAP, TANF, Medicaid, WIC, LIHEAP)

Our work in public benefits first started in food assistance programs in California in 2013 when we examined the high SNAP participation gap in California, where less than two-thirds of eligible people were receiving food assistance—landing the state's enrollment rate in the bottom five nationally. Code for America found that the online application process was a huge barrier for people seeking help. Applicants had to answer 200 questions over 55 unique screens, couldn't save their progress or go back a page, and many of these questions were redundant to those they would later be asked again in an interview. In partnership with the San Francisco County government, we created a "digital assister" that guided users through each step of the eligibility and enrollment process. Utilizing our principles and practices of digital delivery, we guided the state to a more efficient, empathetic, and equitable system.

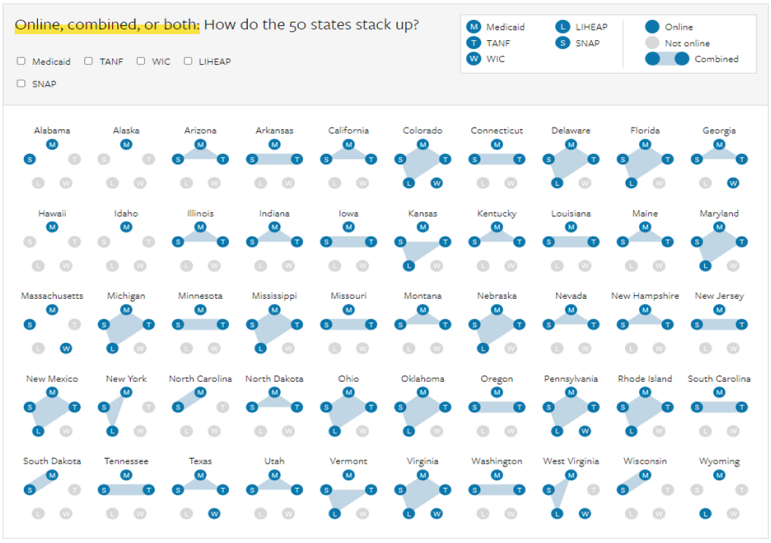
	Before CfA …	After CfA …
1 | Discovering + Applying for benefits	• **Difficult** to find out about benefits (word of mouth, flyers, or complicated websites) • **Stigma and myths** lead people to believe benefits aren't for them or could be harmful for them • **Clunky** website (no "apply" button, "help" link broken) with **error-inducing, bureaucratic** language • Paperwork must be brought **in-person, mailed, or faxed**	• **Digital outreach** (SEO, targeted social media, cross-enrollment opportunities) to find them so they don't have to find us • **Clear information** about what SNAP is and why it's helpful, in commonly understood language • **Online, mobile-friendly** application, with searchable, shareable content • **Simple process,** with clear guidance, reminders, and live chat and SMS/email support
2 | Eligibility notification + Determination	• **Weeks** (or longer) spent wondering about outcome • Notices filled with **legal jargon** • Notified by **postal mail** (may miss the notification altogether)	• Fast-track clients to **same-day** service whenever possible, and proactively notify about remaining steps needed to complete • **Plain language;** clear if action is needed • Notified via **preferred method of communication** like SMS, email
3 | Using + Maintaining benefits	• Additional **onboarding hurdles** (e.g., signing & returning paper documents) • Have to submit reports by snail mail **every 6 months**; may not be aware, forget, or miss the deadline	• Able to get benefits **quickly** and start using benefits **right away** • When reporting is necessary, also notified by SMS & email, with **clear, simple steps** • **Pre-filled report** to send back by phone

In the first year, we assisted 1,000 SNAP applications in one county. We then started to expand across the state, focusing on remote, rural populations in the far north, students along the Central Coast, and families in the Central Valley. As a result, partner counties saw online applications close gaps four times faster than other counties (44% vs. 11% year over year). In addition, total applications grew 10% year over year while gaps and expensive churn costs increased in other counties. Based on this success, the California Department of Social Services contracted with Code for America to bring GetCalFresh to the entire state in 2019. As of today, GetCalFresh has now assisted with over 2.5 million applications and 250,000 renewals, helping over 6 million people and generating $5.9 billion in GDP for the state of California.

GetCalFresh has demonstrated the power of human-centered design in enrollment and retention within one benefits program. As the work evolved, it became clear that if a person is eligible for one safety net benefit, it's likely they are eligible for another. However, getting those benefits requires filling out multiple applications with lots of duplicative questions and sometimes traveling to multiple government offices. This isn't just a frustrating experience for the person; it creates mountains of extra paperwork, backlogs, and redundancies for government.

To better understand the national potential for integration, Code for America developed the first fifty-state view of the safety net across the nation using three of the most valuable indicators of whether a system is accessible, usable, and efficient:

- **Online:** For many users, mail is frequently unreliable, business hours conflict with their work schedules, and field offices are located far from home. Making applications easily available online is one of the most important first steps in meeting users where they are and reducing administrative costs of duplication for county governments.
- **Easy to complete:** Whether a benefits application is online does not say much about the application itself. One of the best measures of how an application functions is time to completion, which indicates the amount of friction in the user experience, like registration challenges, complexity, and form design. It is essential that websites be mobile-friendly, as one in four low-income households relies on a smartphone for internet access. Other barriers include requiring login and/or Remote ID Proofing, as an estimated 35-54 million Americans don't have enough credit history to be able to verify their identity online.
- **Combined:** If someone is income-eligible for one program, there is a strong chance they are eligible for others, and there is usually considerable overlap in application questions across programs. Combining and streamlining applications is a win-win: for applicants and agencies, it raises awareness of other programs and creates a single, simplified experience; for states, it can reduce demands on limited caseworker time and improve cross-agency coordination.



Since then, we have been working with states to deploy human-centered technology and integration tools. A few exciting examples in this effort are:

- **Pennsylvania:** Our team is improving outcomes on SNAP enrollment with data analytics, qualitative research, and service design.
- **Minnesota:** We have partnered with the state to build a single, streamlined online application for nine different benefits programs that can be completed in as little as 12 minutes, which is currently live in 16 counties covering 45% of the state population.
- **Louisiana:** We have recently closed out our initiative to help Louisiana residents enrolled in WIC, SNAP, TANF, and Medicaid maintain their benefits with timely and specific text message reminders. But shortly after our engagement ended, Louisiana used lessons from our

integrated benefits pilot to deliver services during COVID-19, including text messaging more than 400,000 SNAP clients for continuity of benefits. The state also used emergency provisions to hire clients to form a new advisory and delivery working group.

In a world where technology has transformed almost every industry and aspect of our lives, it's time to utilize those same integration skills and tools for government systems that impact our lowest-income families. States are already on their way, but we are just at the beginning of that transformation.

#3 Tax Benefits in the Digital Age

The ability of technology to help the pandemic recovery goes beyond the safety net. Early last year, we launched a tax benefits product called GetYourRefund that brings the experience of working with the government's free, trusted tax filing service, the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program online. As in-person VITA offices closed, we rapidly scaled our service to assist dedicated volunteers to help people file taxes online to claim the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and all other eligible tax benefits, including stimulus payments. By the end of the year, we were able to disburse $62 million in flexible cash in tax credits and stimulus payments. Our breakdown showed that we were able to reach a set of new filers: 35% of clients identified as Black, 22% identified as Latinx, and 25% were from the disabilities community. Technology, when built mindfully and intentionally, can have multiple positive outcomes. Our GetYourRefund work is just one example of using technology to help create a more efficient, accessible, and equitable system. This year we have already exceeded over $250 million distributed in tax benefits delivered with the assistance of more than 7,000 registered volunteers across the country. These learnings are being applied to our efforts in helping families access the Advanced Child Tax Credit in the coming months to ensure efficiency and good governance.

#4 Justice Systems in the Digital Age

Beyond economic programs, we have also seen the promise of technology transform the process of record clearance. In the US today, one in three people have a criminal record that appears on a routine background check, and nearly half of all children have at least one parent with a criminal record. We've seen how a criminal record can be a life sentence to poverty, creating countless barriers to opportunity in jobs, housing, education, and more. In fact, nearly every state has existing laws that allow people to seal or clear their record after a crime-free period. However, tens of millions of Americans currently eligible for record clearance under existing laws are held back because those laws require confusing and complex legal processes. Today, only 6.5% of eligible people receive relief—which has significant consequences for the success of re-entry, the well-being of communities, and the cost of recidivism for state governments.

Two years ago, Code for America began working with states across the country to design an end-to-end automatic record clearance service. We are currently helping more than 20 governments move from the petition-based service model to a model where the government provides automatic expungement relief for all eligible records at the moment the record becomes eligible. The technology capability to conduct careful data matching and sync with multiple agencies simultaneously is the key to automatic expungement and successful efforts to improve re-entry and reduce the economic and social costs of recidivism.

#5 Mutual Aid in the Digital Age

As we strive to strengthen our government programs, we also know volunteer community networks play an essential role at the local and community level. Our volunteer groups, known as the Brigade Network, include more than 25,000 volunteers distributed across over 85 metropolitan statistical areas nationwide, committed to Code for America's values and dedicated to helping their local governments be responsive, especially during crises. A few recent examples are as follows:

- In partnership with FEMA's crowdsourcing team, we recruited two dozen volunteers from our Brigade Network to help low-income families find food with the World Central Kitchen Coronavirus Food Relief map.
- Open Twin Cities built a digital map for mutual aid efforts in their community called Twin Cities Mutual Aid Project, which helps Minneapolis-St. Paul residents find and distribute essential supplies like food, clothing, PPE, and more.
- Code for Tulsa partnered with public schools, the nonprofit Hunger Free Oklahoma, and the state's department of human services to build a SNAP screener to help families find out if they are eligible for food assistance.
- Code for San Jose worked with their city government to improve accessibility, mobile responsiveness, and user experience with a tool to help people find free food and groceries during the height of the COVID-19 crisis.
- Members of our Brigade Network were also critical in our efforts to rapidly scale our GetYourRefund service in 2020. Hundreds of Brigade volunteers stepped up to help onboard new VITA partners whose in-person tax clinics had closed—providing them with comprehensive documentation, helping them train their volunteers with a set of video modules, and more. Some volunteers even became VITA-certified themselves to directly help filers with their questions and help them claim tax credits.

Over the years, our Brigades have always stepped in during moments of crisis. In addition to all the work above, they have built resources to help people find food and shelter in the aftermath of natural disasters, learn about tenants' rights when they've lost income, connect directly with their local government, and more.

The Lessons of COVID

It was only a handful of months ago when record-breaking numbers of people were out of work, families were lining up in parking lots across the country in need of food and basic necessities, and people were completely unable to access a government office for critical benefits. It was the first time since the Great Depression where the entire nation was, at once, in crisis and in desperate need of a government that worked.

But, for us, the pandemic was a window into what we have been seeing for some time now. There is a monthly cadence of regional emergencies: wildfires out west, hurricanes along the coast, tornados mid-country, and, more recently, cyberattacks on critical infrastructure. When they happen, government systems consistently fail. Government buildings close, and too often, systems go completely dark and offline for weeks. We simply can't allow that to happen in America, ever. Our government systems must be prepared for a more volatile future, and we must ensure that government works to meet everyone's basic needs.

My intention is not to focus on the past but to take all we've learned from the last year and a half and do better. In fact, we did see more than just a glimmer of hope. We had a test-run of what is possible with technology as a true partner across our portfolio case studies as detailed above, and I'd like to offer the following three key takeaways.

Takeaway #1: Government services should be human-centered, focusing on ease of use, a dignified, fast experience, and minimize complexity and administrative burden and costs.

Not enough is said about the burden of administrative complexities and costs when it comes to government services. In much of our work, we have found that even when government intends to deliver a service, so much of the success relies on actually delivering. When that means an application form, that application form should be easy to use. In the same way that we can use private sector services to quickly and easily book a plane or train ticket, manage bank accounts, or order food delivery, Americans should be able to access simple, easy-to-use government services, rather than wait in line or on the phone and wade through difficult-to-interpret language on slow websites that are not mobile-friendly.

Take the Paycheck Protection Program administered by the SBA, for example, as a short series of questions for applicants, straightforward approval, allowing $669 billion to be disbursed to small businesses quickly in time of need. Contrast that with the forms, applications, authorizations, and waiting period that a veteran experiences at the VA when accessing benefits. Consider the automatic P-EBT disbursement by some states versus the application process and processing time in others.

The major key to success that we have found? Centering people who government intends to serve in the delivery. We have found that learning what works best not just from a policy perspective, but from an implementation view, by bringing in people, whether that is a small business, veteran, unemployed job seeker, low-income family, or driver's license applicant, and having them test the service and provide feedback during its implementation, is the most important thing that local and state governments can do. We have seen this in pockets of innovation across the country, from the City of San Jose, California to the Louisiana Department of Children and Family. By bringing in would-be users of a service to test the system, we unearthed potential challenges and obstacles such as

unwieldy forms, confusing text, or unpleasant experiences before a system was delivered. We even saw that this could be done quickly during the pandemic!

It may seem ironic that our top takeaway when talking about state and local IT is actually not a technical one, but rather one around listening to the people who actually would be using the system that government intends to serve. However, as the private sector has known for decades, the most efficient way to learn and improve is to engage users as services are built and deployed to understand what's working and what needs to be improved to deliver satisfying experiences. If companies that deliver pizza, stream music, and sell power tools all focus on customer satisfaction, governments should focus on it, too—especially given the criticality of the services they provide.

Takeaway #2: The importance of better data operations cannot be understated.

You may have heard the saying "data is the new oil" in reference to private enterprise having a competitive advantage with data. The spirit of this saying is true in government as well. We saw governments that had accurate data serve its people better and faster with automation, program integrity, and lower fraud rates, while those that did not struggled. In addition, states with departments on standardized data formats could share information and collaborate more effectively to deliver cross-functional services and coordinate their pandemic response (such as public health data or vaccine delivery) more smoothly than those that could not.

Better data operations allow for learning quickly up-front. For example, we can detect fraudulent activity earlier than most government systems currently do, just as the financial sector can detect a fraudulent credit card charge as it's happening. Integrating systems allows for cross-checking data, whereas separate fragmented systems operated by different vendors can lead to higher rates of anomalous behavior in Unemployment Insurance (implemented separately by each state) versus what is typically seen in SNAP, TANF, and Medicaid, which are often implemented together.

Better data operations also enable measuring what matters - monitoring important metrics like average wait times, participation gaps by race, ethnicity, urban vs. rural, or other breakdowns, and adjusting accordingly to ensure underserved populations are served better.

Takeaway #3: Empower state and local governments and invest in talent and capabilities.

Investing in technology talent and capabilities and empowering state and local governments is an incredibly high-return investment, as the pandemic has shown. A dollar put into IT—not just the bare steel and silicon, but the people who manage them and are involved in such processes as procurement and data government—yields orders of magnitudes of benefits, including lives saved through accessing critical services like healthcare and food assistance. All while having digital services

delivered efficiently, effectively with industry best practices, rather than bloated, with outsourced multi-year IT mega contracts, state and local governments are not equipped to manage well.

This is not to say that government should bring all technology development in-house—but rather, that government must evolve, growing the talent and capabilities to do so. The State and Local Digital Service Act is a promising and exciting initiative to do just that, and we urge your support.

In addition, consider what elements are best done by the federal government, such as through GSA. So often, each state and local government is forced to reinvent the wheel, from identity verification to document upload to building complex procurement processes, leading to a variety of results. In many cases, perhaps the federal government could create common components and standards to help state and local governments focus on the things they're good at, such as delivering on their mission, rather than basic technological building blocks that vendors profit from by building custom bespoke versions for each of their clients.

Closing Thoughts

We are heartened by the voices and questions asked in this hearing, and we hope to inspire you towards a vision of state and local IT that brings out the best of America. Now, as states anticipate an infusion of resources from legislative relief packages like the American Rescue Plan, American Families Plan, and the American Jobs Plan, we have a chance to set in place a new way of delivering services. A system that utilizes human-centered technology to improve reach, efficiency, and equitable delivery of government services and supports for all Americans.

For the first time in more than a generation, financial incentives and government directives seem to be aligned for states to rebuild stronger, more effective, efficient, simple systems without complexity to help all Americans recover from the pandemic. We at Code for America stand ready to partner with governments at all levels to achieve that mission.

Thank you.