



Geeks to the Rescue

Code for America launches a major effort to improve benefits enrollment.

America's safety net is huge. It keeps more than 50 million people above the poverty line with a combination of benefits that support everything from health care and education to housing and food assistance. But thanks to complex eligibility rules, enrolling for even one of these benefits can be complicated. Just imagine trying to enroll for several benefits at the same time.

Not surprisingly, when it comes to government technology, integrated benefits enrollment is more a lofty goal than a reality. Yet it's a challenge that Code for America (CfA), which matches cities with software developers to solve a problem, has decided to tackle.

CfA is working with the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, the philanthropic organization started by Facebook's co-founder and his wife, as well as with the tech startup Nava, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the state of Michigan. CfA hopes to strip out the complexity—and cost—that gives online benefits enrollment such a bad name. The goal then is to design a simple way to enroll people who are eligible for both Medicaid and food stamps.

Jennifer Pahlka, founder and executive director of CfA, says the team is “using approaches that have been successful and are starting to have significant outcomes.” These approaches include a human-centric design, as opposed to one that is bureaucratic and rules-based, and an iterative development methodology, in which pieces of software code are designed quickly and collaboratively. The result is less expensive software that is usable right away, rather than having to wait for one massive system that is often delivered late, over budget and with several system bugs. The organization often

relies on open source tools, which reduces the cost of its solutions.

These approaches were tested in California in 2015 when CfA revamped the state's online enrollment for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. The effort simplified a stodgy online application process that once took a person a teeth-gnashing 45 minutes to complete. CfA cut the time to less than 10 minutes. Just as it plans to do with Michigan, the goal was to keep things simple, says Pahlka. And it did. The new enrollment program sits on top of, rather than replaces, the underlying systems.

Once the integrated enrollment software has been tested and proven to work in Michigan, the hope is that other states will deploy it, making it a national model for online enrollment. Kevin Desouza, a professor of public affairs at Arizona State University, says CfA has taken the right approach in bringing together different groups from different political environments to get the kind of buy-in necessary to overcome possible governance and policy challenges that might arise. “Initiatives like this, where you have an external organization conducting the assessment

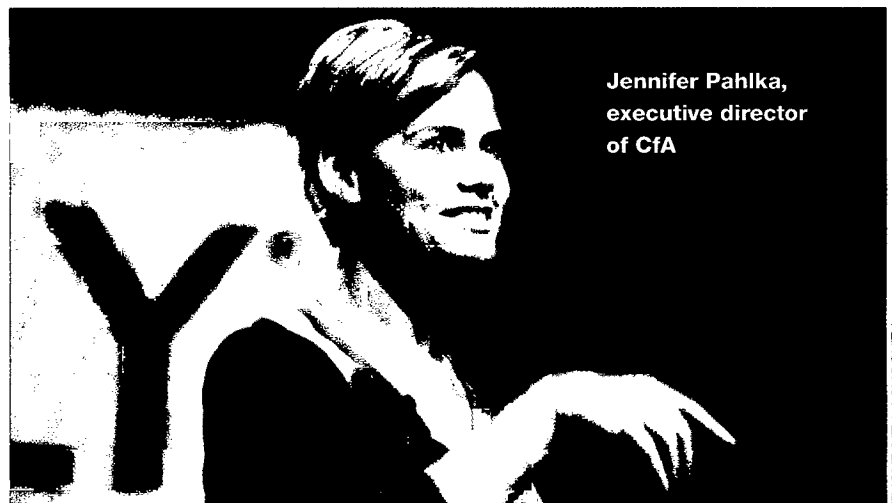
and building the prototype, remove risk for the agencies,” he says.

But building an integrated enrollment solution isn't easy. Getting past hurdles that include data privacy, security, control and access by multiple agencies can be challenging, says Desouza. He adds that most state IT infrastructure is not open source, which can add some friction to how the technology is used.

But Pahlka, who calls CfA “the Peace Corps for geeks,” is excited about the project's impact. “It's going to make more benefits accessible to more people, and it's going to challenge government around the negative impact of working in silos.”

And on that quote, I want to take this time to let you know that this will be my last column. After this month, Tech Talk will no longer appear in this magazine. I've enjoyed breaking down important technology issues and what they mean for states and cities, and I want to thank you for reading along. I'm moving on to new endeavors within the company, where I'll continue writing about the intersection of technology and government. **G**

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