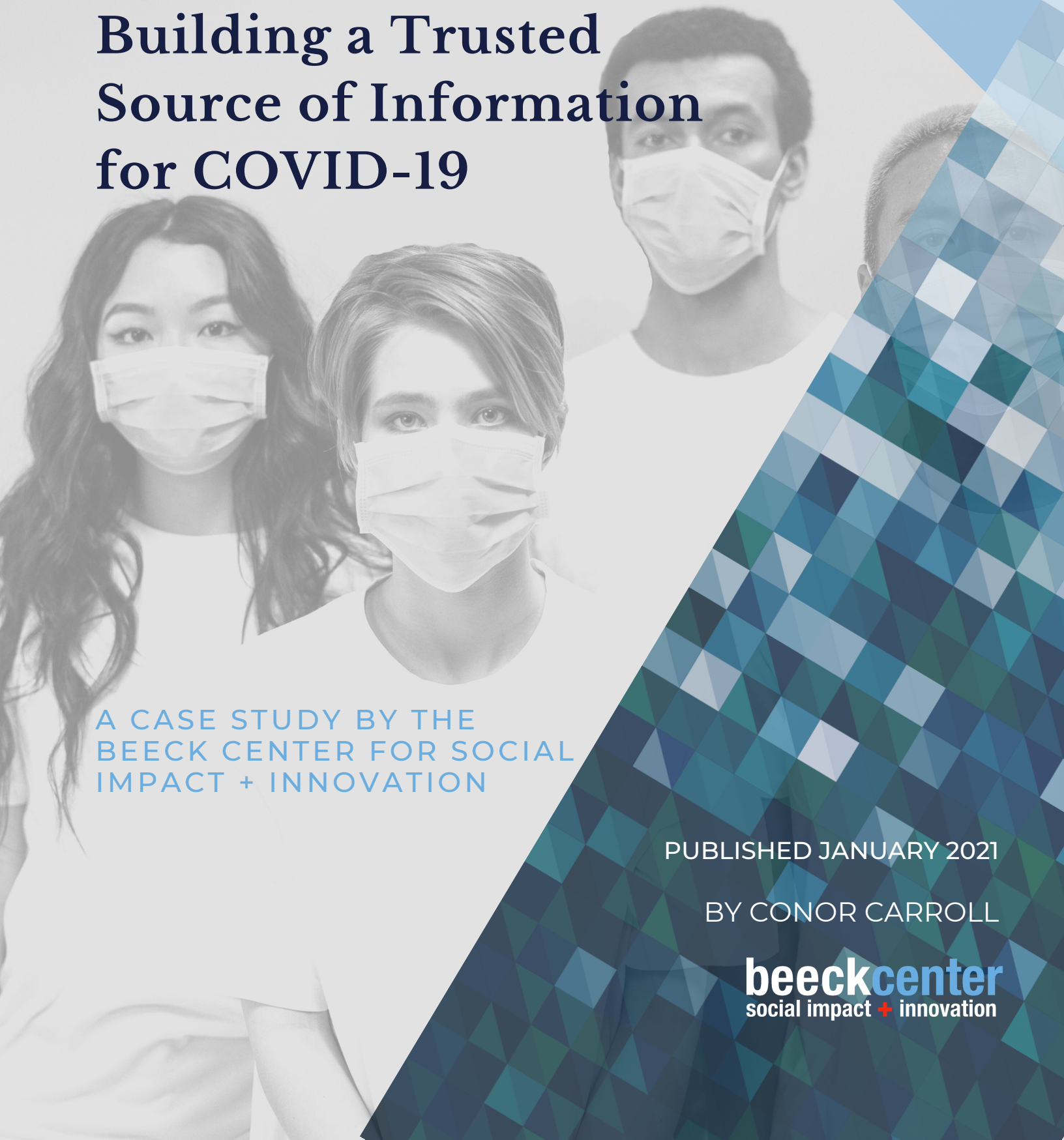
BREAKING THROUGH THE NOISE

Building a Trusted Source of Information for COVID-19



A CASE STUDY BY THE BEECK CENTER FOR SOCIAL IMPACT + INNOVATION

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About the Beeck Center for Social Impact + Innovation

The Beeck Center is an experiential hub at Georgetown University that trains students and incubates scalable, leading edge ideas for social change. We believe impact at scale requires the courage to think and behave differently. Our work centers on investing in outcomes for individuals and society. We equip future global leaders with the mindset to promote outcome-driven solutions, using the tools of finance and data + digital. We convene actors across the public, private, and civic sectors to advance new tools, frameworks, and approaches necessary to achieve these outcomes.

About this Case Study

This case study is part of the Beeck Center's New Digital Service Teams research by Fellow Conor Carroll.

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Introduction

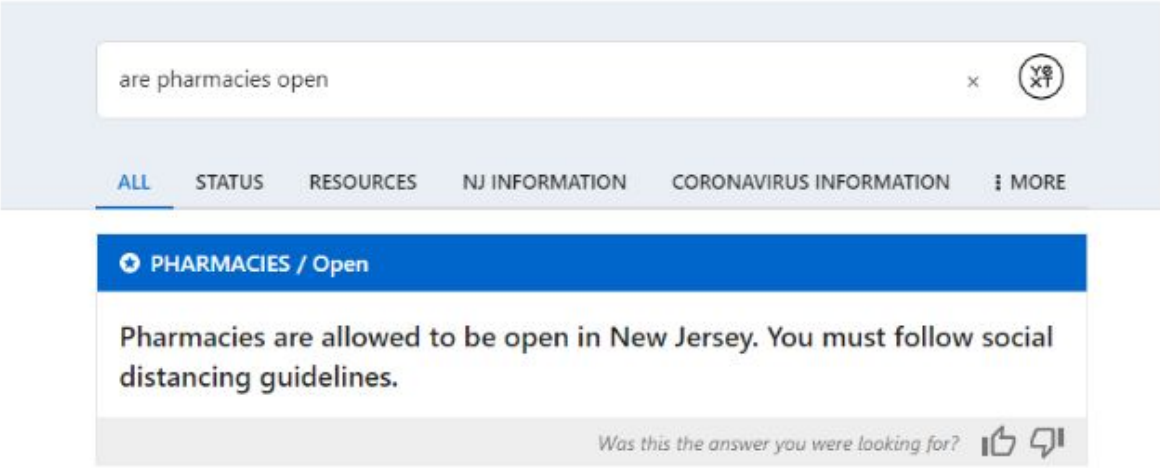
Two-way communication between government and the public is vital during a public health emergency, especially one as significant as the COVID-19 pandemic. Residents need to be informed of the prevalence of the disease in their communities as well as what they can do to keep their friends, families, and neighbors safe. Public officials depend on information from the public in order to monitor and mitigate the spread of the disease, as well as understand challenges people are experiencing in complying with policies such as social distancing. The State of New Jersey recognized both needs as this pandemic unfolded and quickly mobilized to stand up COVID19.nj.gov, a one-stop resource for New Jerseyans' pressing questions about the virus.

Problem

The imperative of clear two-way information flows during the crisis poses a challenge for the standard tools of government communication. The websites of public agencies are often designed to communicate technocratic rules, policies, and regulations that are of particular interest to narrow segments of the public. That means the content is often static and evergreen, and isn't always set up to provide rapid updates in a changing environment. During the pandemic, policy affects the daily routines of residents and, at the outset, was changing on a daily basis. Individuals, businesses, and public institutions (e.g., schools and hospitals) are navigating an unprecedented situation. Government needs to cut through a noisy and occasionally panicked public discourse to provide clear, trustworthy, timely, and authoritative information. Conversely, State agencies need an ongoing understanding of residents' changing information needs regarding the pandemic, including what questions are most urgent for the public to make sound decisions.

Solution

In response, the New Jersey Office of Innovation broke down silos to partner across government agencies to launch COVID19.nj.gov. This official State Information Hub for the pandemic provides plain language answers to pressing questions on public health directives, options for testing and treatment, and other urgent public concerns. Content is available in English and Spanish, updated on a daily basis to reflect the latest policies, and is accessible to residents via a natural language search function. In addition to disseminating policy changes, the site also provides a channel for State agencies to communicate with the public regarding critical initiatives such as emergency assistance programs, PPE donations, and COVID-related jobs.



Policy is communicated as a plain-language answer to a natural language question.

Implementation

COVID19.nj.gov launched on March 21, 2020, in coordination with Governor Phil Murphy's "stay-at-home" order for New Jersey residents that also closed all non-essential retail businesses. Three key government stakeholders began collaborating early on to enable this rapid response.

- The New Jersey Office of Innovation facilitated interagency conversations and provided expertise in developing, managing, and improving the Information Hub.
- The Governor's Office ensured that the site's content emphasized key messages and accurately reflected the latest policy changes.
- The New Jersey Department of Health (DOH) provided detailed data and domain expertise for public health guidance.

In addition to the government stakeholders, Yext, a New York-based search technology company, worked pro bono with the government team to stand up the website within a matter of days. To quickly provide reliable scientific information on the virus, the site incorporated content created in the previous weeks for the FAS COVID-19 "Ask a Scientist" collaboration between the Office of Innovation and the non-profit Federation of American Scientists.

Standing up the website and developing its functionality relied on team members from the Office of Innovation and Yext with product and technical skillsets, and once the Information Hub was up and running, the emphasis shifted to design and communications work. A content team was formed with a staff member from the DOH communications office and two members of the Office of Innovation with experience in policy analysis and writing. Their first contribution was to conduct a thorough audit of COVID-related guidance that had been published by key agencies, such as the New Jersey Departments of Health and Education. Answers to pressing questions were publicly available, but were contained within PDFs covering a range of issues. The team took inventory of this information and began to repackage it in a digestible, easily searchable format.

Best Practices Insight 1: Translate Legalese to Plain Language

Public policy in response to the COVID-19 outbreak often took the form of an executive order, a legal document written to hold up in court, but not necessarily designed to inform the general public. The content team, with the guidance of domain experts in the Department of Health or other agencies, translated COVID-related executive orders and other policy documents into straightforward answers to pressing public questions. Articles were also made available in Spanish.

BUSINESSES THAT MAY OPEN

Workplaces that do not have walk-in customers or products for sale, including office spaces, were never closed, but must allow employees to work remotely if their job can be performed remotely. At a minimum, **businesses must have policies that require individuals to wear face coverings indoors** when in close contact with others for long periods of time, and are strongly encouraged to follow safety and sanitization protocols.

Retail businesses and indoor portions of retail shopping malls may open to customers, while following required mitigation requirements.

Bars and restaurants may reopen while following appropriate safety and sanitization protocols.

Microbreweries and brewpubs may be open for home delivery. Depending on the type of license they hold, food service may also be allowed.

Child care centers can reopen their doors to all clients, while following all safety guidelines.

Golf Courses may open so long as they adopt minimum social distancing policies.

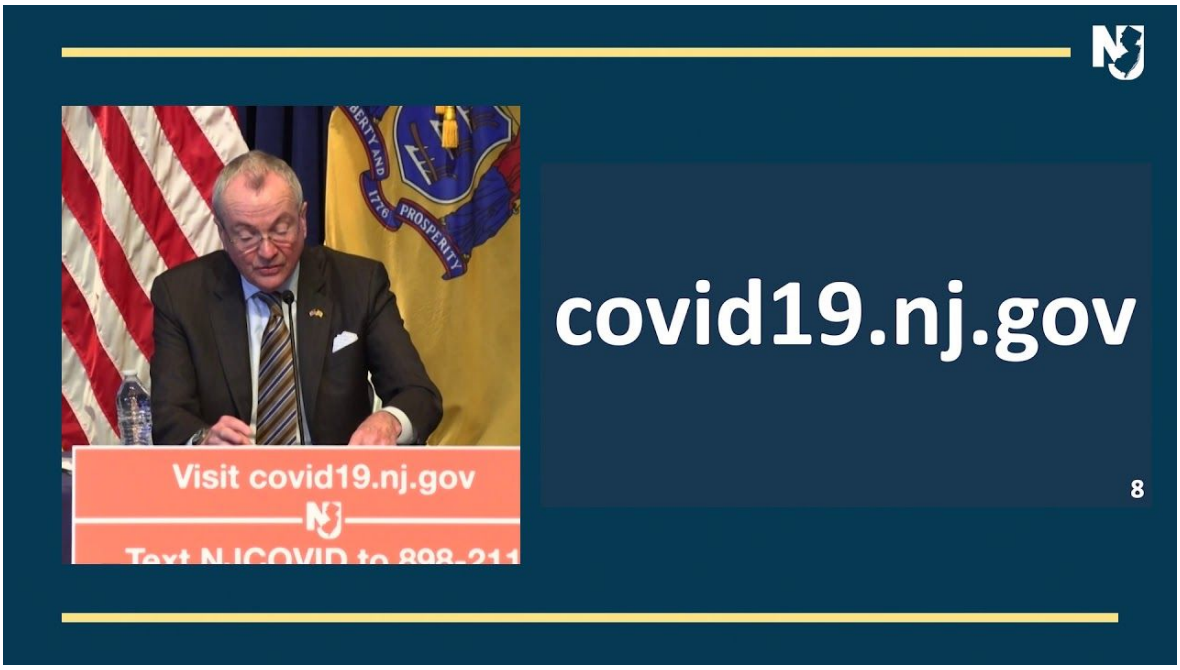
Recreational businesses can reopen, while following required mitigation requirements.

Information Hub articles summarized relevant information from across a range of policy documents.

Regular coordination between the content team and the policy, legal, and communications staff from the Governor's Office kept the Information Hub up to date and accurate. The content team monitored the Governor's daily remarks and updated articles on the hub to reflect new policy, programs, and services. Such updates were cleared with the Governor's policy staff and counsel or pulled directly from previously-vetted documents — such as executive orders and press releases — to ensure that they were consistent with the legal effect of the policy.

Best Practices Insight 2: Plan for Rapid Updates

Given the frequency and broad impact of pandemic policy changes, the Office of Innovation's content team needed to operate more like a newsroom than a government communications office. In addition to leveraging qualitative and quantitative search data and site analytics, the content team was in regular contact with the Governor's staff, monitored daily press briefing, and consulted with domain experts in order to keep the hub up to date and accurate. For example, the team used questions from the press asked at the Governor's briefings as a proxy for public interest, and proactively updated articles on the site with clarifications as necessary.



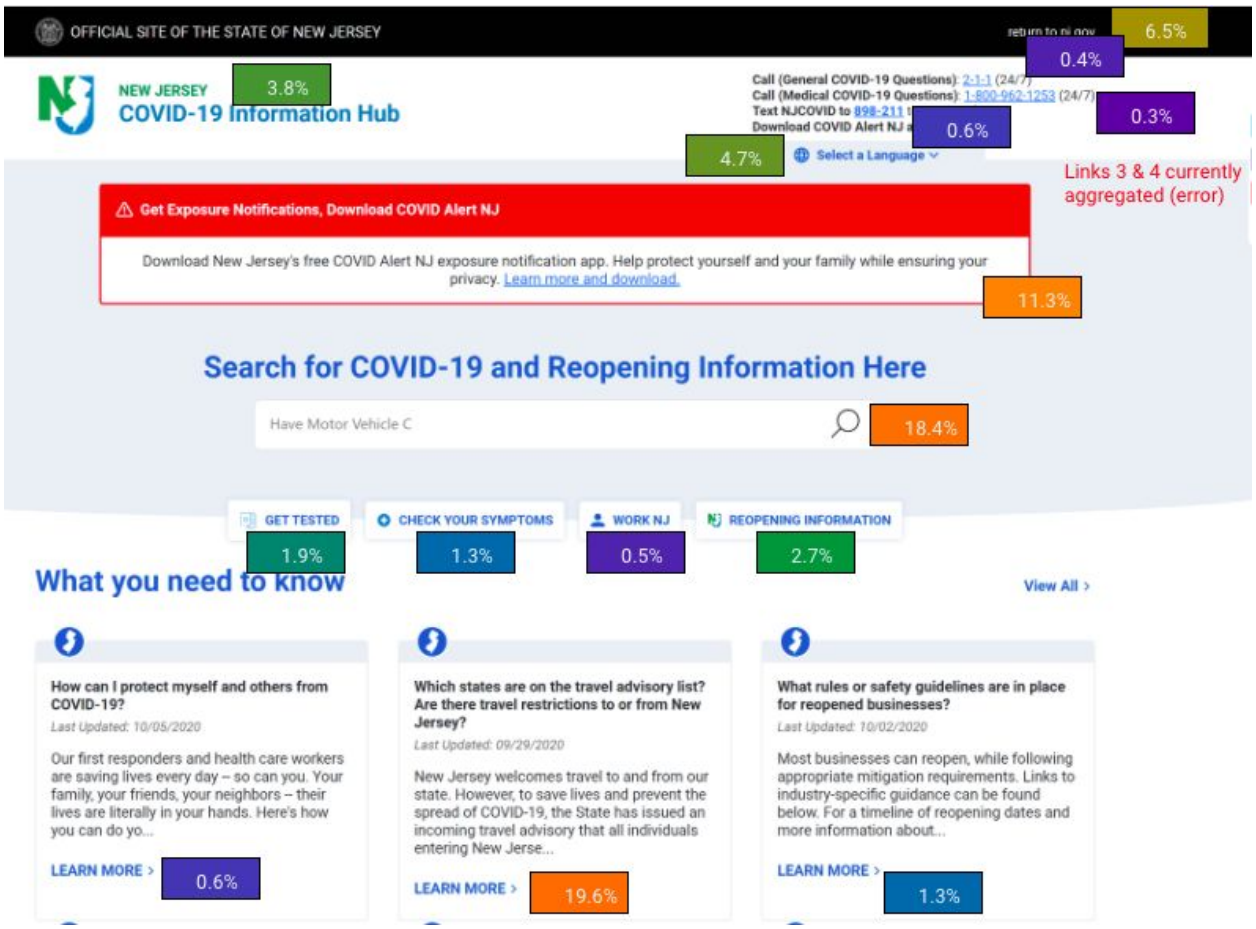
The Information Hub content team closely monitored the Governor's daily briefings to ensure content was aligned with policy set by the Governor and senior officials - the briefings also promoted the Hub as the go-to source for up-to-date information.

Once operational, analytics from COVID19.nj.gov reported which articles were most popular and which questions were most common among users of the search function. Site search data also provided insights regarding what content was missing. Members of the content team monitored this information daily and formally reviewed it as a team weekly. Insights from this process were balanced against the priorities of the administration to communicate important public health information that may not have been proactively sought by the website's users. Office of Innovation staff also conducted usability sessions with residents to ensure the site's design was both responsive to residents' needs, while also communicating

crucial public health information. Different articles were featured on the home page depending on which questions were most common in a given week. When popular searches didn't correspond directly to existing answers, the team wrote new articles to address them.

Best Practices Insight 3: Balance Responsive and Proactive Messaging

Human-centered information tools serve the purpose of getting answers to the public, and also of understanding residents' information needs. The Office of Innovation team regularly reviewed analytics from the Information Hub, made popular content more prominent, and drafted new articles to address common searches. The most visible space on the Information Hub balanced in-demand content with less searched-for but important public health messages that were a priority for the administration.



Analytics reports provided insights on how New Jerseyans were using the Information Hub

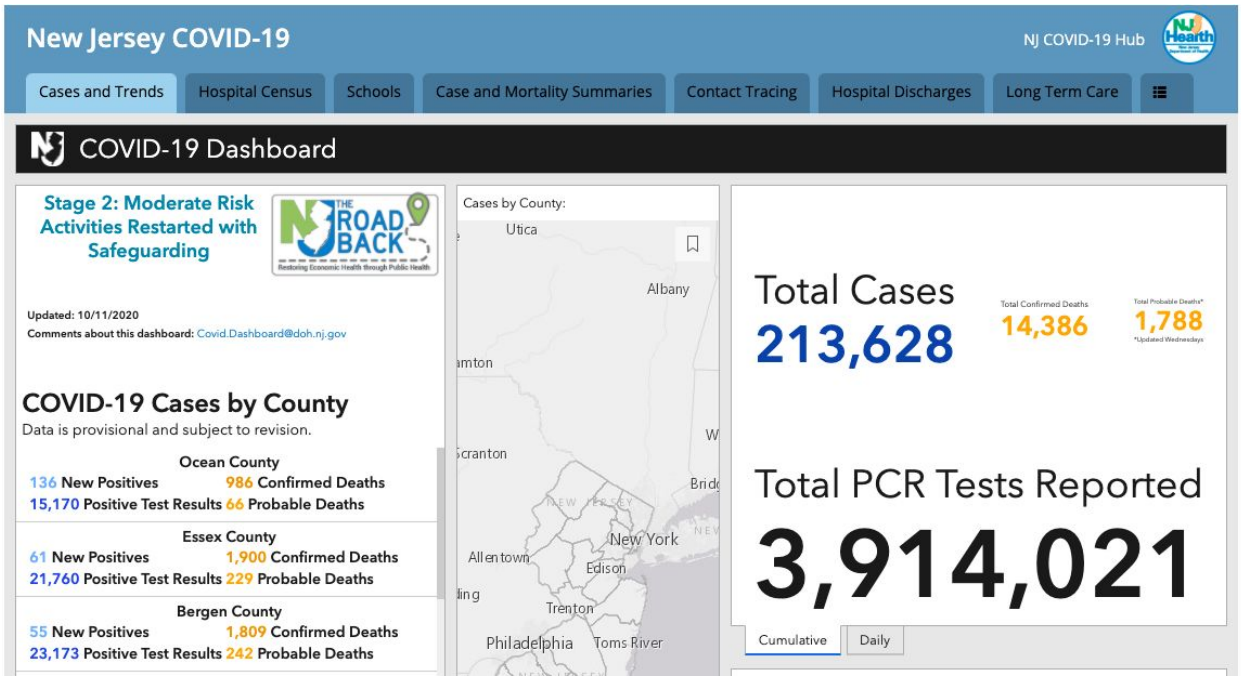
Outcomes and Additional Use Cases

Traffic to COVID19.nj.gov demonstrated its status as the go-to resource for information about the State's pandemic response. Since launch, the site has been visited approximately 34 million times by more than 19 million users, and attracts an average of nearly 900,000 visits each week.

Since the Hub's launch, the State has capitalized on its role as a single go-to information source for the public, and has leveraged the site and its infrastructure to both communicate and engage with the public for an array of purposes.

At the outset of the pandemic when the State's testing capacity was limited, the Office of Innovation worked with the State's public health experts to launch a symptom tracker on COVID19.nj.gov. This self-assessment tool prompted New Jerseyans to list their symptoms and offered guidance on when to seek testing and treatment. Since its launch on March 19, 2020, residents have used the symptom tracker close to 600,000 times, helping the public make important health care decisions, and providing anonymous data to analysts modeling the prevalence of the virus at a time when testing capacity and data was still limited.

Prior to the site's launch, Department of Health reports and guidance were previously disseminated as Microsoft Word documents converted to PDFs and published on the agency website. By simply forwarding relevant documents to the Information Hub content team, DOH reached a broader audience as their knowledge was repackaged and published in a more digestible and searchable form on COVID19.nj.gov. Up-to-date statistics on the spread of the virus were also featured on the Information Hub home page in a data dashboard.



The Department of Health's COVID-19 data dashboard is featured on the Information Hub homepage.

Other agencies also leveraged the potential of the Information Hub to reach a broader audience. The New Jersey Economic Development Agency (EDA), through their relationships with businesses throughout the state, recognized that many employers were quickly *adding* jobs, even as there were huge numbers of layoffs in other sectors. There was an urgent need for more workers at grocery stores, shipping and logistics companies, and other industries where demand for services were spiking. To address this labor market gap, the EDA worked with the Office of Innovation and the New Jersey Department of Labor to quickly stand up a jobs portal that was featured on COVID19.nj.gov where these new positions were listed. While managing a job board is not typical of the agency's work, EDA recognized the uniqueness of the situation wherein many people were newly looking for jobs and standard search tools would not enable them to filter out businesses which were not allowed to operate. By launching the jobs portal as part of COVID19.nj.gov, the State was able to access a much broader audience. Since its launch in March, the jobs portal attracted postings for 56,000 jobs from more than 1,200 employers, and was visited more than 1.1 million times.

The Information Hub has also served as a crucial tool in promoting compliance with the State's COVID-19 regulations. More than 54,000 Executive Order violations have been reported through the Violation Reporting Form, and a similar tool used to report misconduct in nursing homes garnered hundreds of responses. When the State instituted an out-of-state travel advisory, the Information Hub's infrastructure allowed the State to quickly deploy public communications related to the advisory, as well as a traveler registration form to advance compliance efforts.

Conclusion and Lessons Learned

The COVID-19 Information Hub epitomizes the work of the New Jersey Office of Innovation. Brokering a cross-sector, cross-agency collaboration and partnering with external experts, the team used human-centered design to develop a digital tool that streamlined the experience of New Jerseyans seeking answers from their government, and increased the efficiency of government operations. The result was a rich flow of information between residents and policymakers that supported the State's pandemic response.

The team's experience with the site yielded several valuable lessons for government stakeholders who want to improve their communication with the public:

- **Design content for digital**: The information residents need is often publicly available on a government website, but is not optimized for the digital channels many residents prefer. Public agencies should make their content mobile friendly, scalable, and written in plain language.
- **Direct lines of communication save time and effort**: Effective communication with the public is enabled by effective communication within government. This can be achieved without interagency task forces and standing meetings between senior-most stakeholders. When the staff managing the most visible communications channel have direct channels to communicate with relevant experts, questions can be answered with an email.
- **Iteration is key to building human-centered tools**: Digital service teams in government may build a tool for a specific use case, but should be prepared to adapt the product to how residents are using it. Capturing analytics and incorporating insights into content and design choices can ensure the tool is informed by a deep understanding of user needs.

The State has held best-practice sharing sessions with California, presented on this publicly to government audiences numerous times, and Alabama copied the site model after seeing New Jersey's success. Data collaboration on more narrow initiatives (contact tracing, travel advisory form, etc.) has also occurred extensively with New Jersey's regional partners. Lastly, the jobs portal alone had a half-dozen sharing sessions, and has also been replicated by several other states and municipalities..

These practices have facilitated more open communication between New Jersey government and its residents, laying the groundwork for a unified front in the fight against the virus.

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