

Gender-Inclusive Data Collection in the City of Boston

A Digital Service Network Spotlight

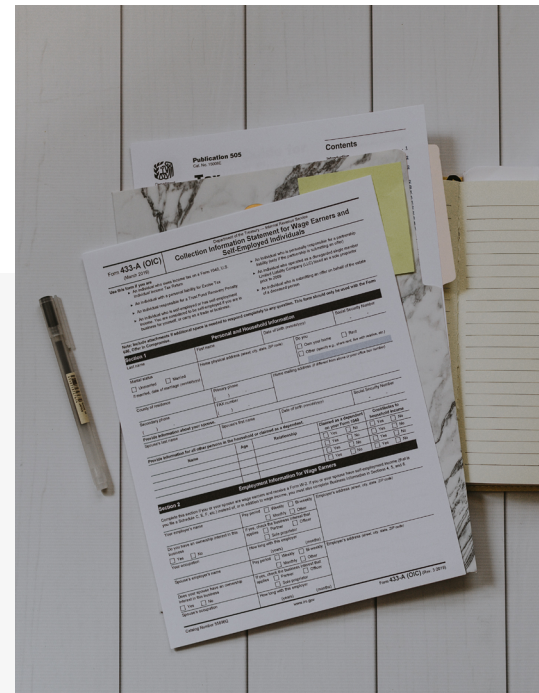
DSN Spotlights are short-form project profiles that feature exciting work happening across our network of digital government practitioners. Spotlights celebrate our members' stories, lift up actionable takeaways for other practitioners, and put the artifacts we host in the DSN Resource Library in context.

Background

Mayor Michelle Wu has a vision to create a “Boston for everyone.” Part of the work to make this vision a reality includes changing how the City asks residents about gender with an eye toward greater inclusion. “Right now, we ask residents about gender identity to deliver key services,” the [announcement](#) for the work states. “But when we ask, we often aren’t using language that represents all gender identities and may not even need gender identity to deliver some of these services. We want to understand how to ask about gender identity in an accessible, affirming, and safe way.”

This effort stems from an [ordinance](#) Mayor Wu helped pass as a city councilmember in 2020, which stipulates that the City must ensure all forms – existing and future – include a third, non-binary gender identification option, to be marked as “X.” The implementation of the ordinance thus far has embraced its original spirit of inclusivity, while promoting changes to gender-based data collection practices that are human-centered and resident-driven.

To learn more, the Beeck Center’s Digital Service Network (DSN) spoke with Chief Digital Officer (CDO) Julia Gutiérrez of the [Digital Services \(DS\) Team](#) in the [Department of Innovation and Technology \(DoIT\)](#) and Chief Mariangely Solís Cervera of Boston’s [Equity and Inclusion Cabinet](#).



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The Pilot and the Playbook

The project [announcement](#) serves as a roadmap for Boston's efforts to improve its gender-based data collection practices. The DS Team, in tandem with the newly-created Mayor's Office of LGBTQ+ Advancement (MOLA) and the City Registrar's Office, or "the trifecta", as Chief Solís Cervera affectionately refers to the trio, are collaborating to:

- + Review and compile a list of best practices in gender-based data collection;
- + Pilot new approaches to gender-based data collection in the marriage license process; and
- + Engage with the governor about gender-inclusion priorities, as some gender-based data collection processes are governed by state-level statutes.

The marriage license pilot is the first major initiative in the City's broader effort to overhaul its approach to gender-based data collection. Notably, marriage licensing is one of the City processes that must comply with state-level requirements and statutes, making it one of the most complex forms the City must revise, according to Gutiérrez and Solís Cervera.

By starting with marriage licensing — a complex use-case for gender-based data collection — the team was able to identify challenges that a simpler use case may not have surfaced. The learnings from this pilot will be compiled into a "Gender Data Collection Playbook" that will serve as a foundation for guidelines that all departments will use to ask residents about gender identity, helping overhaul gender-based data collection across the City.

Centering the resident experience and building user experience research capacity

The [ordinance](#) is prescriptive about how gender-based data should be collected: "All existing and future City-issued forms, documents, and certificates that provide for a gender or sex designation, shall include a non-binary gender identification option, to be marked as 'X', that may be selected as gender designation. All forms shall reflect gender inclusion and inclusion of all family structures."



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JULIA GUTIÉRREZ

Chief Digital Officer, City of Boston

Gutiérrez wanted to ensure those prescriptions were in line with the ordinance’s “spirit of inclusivity” and do the “upfront work to get it right” by bringing residents’ experiences into the fold. The DS Team built out a user experience research (UXR) agenda that could help the City “understand what makes [residents] feel included and represented – and how that could be translated into form language,” Gutiérrez said.

This was new territory: there was virtually no existing City infrastructure to conduct UXR at this scale. From research planning to recruitment and compensation, new processes had to be built. With the support of pro-bono external partners, including U.S. Digital Response (USDR) and Harvard’s Tech for Social Good, the DS Team stood up these new processes and kicked off the largest internally-led UXR agenda Boston has conducted to date.

The research agenda included focus groups and 1:1 interviews with residents, with a volunteer team from USDR conducting targeted research aimed specifically at understanding the [marriage license process](#). With MOLA wielding its networks of community-based organizations and neighborhood groups, the City recruited, engaged, and compensated approximately 150 people as part of its research on gender-based data collection.



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MARIANGELY SOLÍS CERVERA

Chief of Equity & Inclusion, City of Boston

The research surfaced some surprising and important learnings. Gutiérrez and Solís Cervera shared that, critically, they learned that residents prefer to be asked about their gender differently than what the ordinance prescribes. By requiring a nonbinary “X” option, the ordinance reflected assumptions that were not necessarily in line with residents’ needs. “We were ready to implement,” Solís Cervera shared. “But after the focus groups, we learned that people don’t want ‘the third box’ — they want something else. We thought we had the answer, and then the answer changed. This was a great example of how we can build more democratic, inclusive policy.”

They also learned that residents want to know how their gender-based data – and, more broadly, all personal data collected by the City – will be used. “Some of the focus groups I went to had residents that were very pro collecting gender identity information to support what the ordinance set out to accomplish. But some folks said, ‘No. If you don’t need to know this information, I don’t care to provide it,’” Gutiérrez explained. “But we also heard: ‘If you can explain to me why you need certain information, I am way more willing to provide it.’ That, to me, was a great lesson – and it cuts across the way we collect all kinds of data for all kinds of services.”

This initiative demonstrated what was possible for the City’s ability to conduct UXR. Now, with more standard methods, recruitment processes, and pathways for compensating participants, Gutiérrez and her team have started to build a robust UXR infrastructure. “Since we’ve done this, we’ve been able to use these processes for a couple other projects,” Gutiérrez added about how this investment is paying early dividends. “The more common practice this becomes, the bigger user experience team I’m going to need.”

Cross-department efforts for cross-department goals

The collaboration between DoIT’s DS Team, MOLA, and the City Registrar’s Office – the “trifecta” – is a first for these teams. Each brings specific skills and strengths to the work.

The DS Team’s role, according to Gutiérrez, is to place residents at the center of service delivery and offer UXR and implementation expertise. This role is complemented by MOLA’s general subject-matter expertise and unique ability to connect deeply with LGBTQ+ communities across the city. Finally, the City Registrar’s Office leads as a piloting partner of this work with the marriage licensing effort, but as Gutiérrez explained, the Registrar’s Office has also been also crucial in understanding the state-level statutory obligations governing the licensing processes and engaging with state government.

“This is a great partnership – and a good test for us for how we work together across departments to improve the way digital services are implemented,” Gutiérrez said. Solís Cervera shared that a key driver of this productive collaboration is Mayor Wu’s priority to strengthen relationships and interactions between City departments and promote a more cross-departmental way of working. Promoting greater inclusivity in gender-based data collection is not the work of any single department or office, she stressed. “Collaboration is a muscle we have to build.”

What’s next for gender-based data collection in Boston?

In the coming months, the “trifecta” will continue reimagining and implementing changes to the marriage licensing process, and refining the draft playbook and roadmap for its deployment. Deploying the playbook will include a landscape analysis of all the places where gender-based data are being collected, with a goal to update all gender-based data collection points in line with the playbook’s guidance by the end of 2023.

Looking even further ahead, Gutiérrez hopes that the playbook can serve “as a model for how we do this [work] across different areas where there are opportunities to be more inclusive,” referencing other dimensions of identity frequently recorded on forms, like race and ethnicity.

Lessons learned

UXR helps teams interrogate assumptions to produce better solutions. A strong UXR function is open to revising its assumptions and preconceived ideas in the face of new evidence, resulting in better solutions and outcomes for residents. “Our residents deserve quality solutions and we are learning that while it may take longer, UXR ensures that we are building a city for everyone,” Solís Cervera stressed. She and Gutiérrez both emphasized that UXR not only helped the City get an accurate read on what residents wanted to see from this work, but it also helped the team identify areas of oversight they could correct. For example, as part of the marriage licensing UXR, interviewees pointed out that an updated form still used gendered language when asking about parents, not just the people applying for a license to wed that were the initial focus of the research team. Instead of saying “Person A” and “Person B,” the form still asked “father” and “mother.” The team took that feedback and changed to using gender-neutral language for the entire form.



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Starting with the “hardest thing” in a change project can pay off in the long run. By focusing on the marriage license process as a pilot case – with all its complexities – the team knew they would be well-positioned to address subsequent implementation challenges as they scaled their work across the City. The pilot’s findings offered reasonable expectations about the City’s needs as it progresses to other services and form revisions, and will inform Citywide guidance with the forthcoming Gender Data Collection Playbook. Working on the “hardest thing” first puts a team’s skills and coordination to the test, which can help avoid generating a false sense of security or inaccurate ideas about the nature of the work that can come from starting with simpler test cases.

Resources and artifacts

To see how this work was put into practice, explore the following assets in the DSN Resource Library:

- + Boston’s [Ordinance to Ensure Gender Inclusivity on City Forms](#)