■ **BRIEF**

Building Public Capacity to Deliver People-Centered Services

A Case Study of Massachusetts

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Across the country, people seeking public benefits too often face frustrating, confusing, and time-consuming digital systems: websites that do not work, applications that repeat the same questions, and processes that seem designed without them in mind. These barriers are frustrating and they lead to fewer people receiving the help for which they qualify. At the root of these failures is a digital benefits infrastructure that has too often relied on external vendors to drive strategy, design, and implementation. Many state governments are now left managing legacy systems they neither fully understand nor control.

These challenges are not just technical—they are structural. The failure to invest in public capacity has left governments without the in-house expertise, infrastructure, and practices necessary for effective service delivery. As a result, constituents are left navigating outdated systems and siloed programs, forced to input the same information repeatedly across multiple applications, juggle different eligibility rules, and figure out on their own how to move between services. These challenges only intensify during moments of crisis—like after losing a job, when facing eviction, or while mourning the death of a family's primary breadwinner—which is often when people turn to government for support. This is precisely why the Georgetown Center on Poverty & Inequality launched the People-Centered Digital Benefits Project: to understand how states are reimagining the delivery of public benefits through better technological tools and new approaches to institutional design, management, and practice.[1] The project is grounded in the belief that real progress depends as much on how agencies are structured and led as on the technology they use.

Massachusetts offers a particularly powerful example of people-centered public benefits modernization. The Massachusetts Digital Service (MDS) is leading a creative, multi-pronged effort to build public-sector capacity across the state government to better equip agencies to design, deliver, and continuously improve digital services that meet residents' needs. This work rests on three mutually reinforcing strategies:

- Building a multidisciplinary team within MDS with expertise in product management, experience design, engineering, and experience research;
- Providing agencies with tools, training, and a peer learning network through the Constituent Experience Center of Excellence (CX CoE)—so they can build the skills needed to modernize benefits; and
- Partnering with agencies with more hands-on support to help them develop and sustain their own digital and design capabilities.

By building public capacity for benefits modernization, Massachusetts is helping ensure that the people designing and overseeing delivery of digital benefits are the same people who hear from residents, spot system failures, and are held accountable for fixing them. When service delivery is better aligned with the realities of people's lives, residents navigating benefits systems are more likely to encounter clear information, intuitive processes, and applications that meet them where they are, making it easier to access the help they need, when they need it.

Public Capacity Is Improving the Real-World Experience With Benefits in Massachusetts

Massachusetts' capacity-building strategy is showing results across the government, from housing to health and human services to early education. The three examples described below reflect the broader value of Massachusetts' approach: building the skills, roles, and structures that allow agencies to deliver better services on their own, and for the long term.

CREATING A COMMON APPLICATION FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING

A team at the Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities sought to create a common application for publicly supported affordable housing—a process that has been fragmented, duplicative, and difficult for residents to navigate. Initially, the agency engaged MDS for input on vendor selection, but that support quickly expanded. The MDS team worked alongside project staff, and provided ongoing strategic advice, coaching, and access to communities of practice in the Constituent Experience CX CoE. They helped the agency and its vendor shape a more constituent-centered discovery phase and later supported the agency in hiring an internal experience design lead, who is building out a team to drive their people-centered modernization work moving forward. That internal capacity now positions the agency to lead an initiative grounded in lived experience and people-centered delivery.

INTEGRATING BENEFITS APPLICATIONS ACROSS HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services is developing a more integrated benefits application across programs like Medicaid, SNAP, TANF, and WIC. This is a critical opportunity to improve the lives of residents navigating complex safety net programs by replacing a maze of separate, duplicative applications with a single, streamlined process. Consider a single parent applying for SNAP and Medicaid. In the past, she would likely need to fill out multiple forms on different systems. Massachusetts' work to integrate these benefits into a single application means she will be more likely to complete the process quickly and receive help faster.

The work was initially scoped as a vendor-led technology build. Program and agency leadership wanted to involve constituents, but they didn't know exactly how to and had limited internal research capacity. When the digital team was brought in for a consultation, they proposed a deeper form of engagement: embedding MDS staff alongside the project team to help the agency take fuller ownership of the product vision, ground development in the people who will be using the application through experience research, and build the technical fluency needed to lead—not just manage—benefit modernization.

The digital team helped the agency conduct experience research, overcome operational hurdles like participant consent and recruitment, and influence how the vendor incorporated feedback. More importantly, they supported the agency in hiring its first in-house experience design and research lead— co-designing the job description, vetting candidates, and developing onboarding supports. Embedded with the team, the new research lead now helps ensure the application reflects the lived experience of people applying for benefits, including by observing where users get stuck during testing, and working

with designers and developers to simplify the process. They are also responsible for growing the experience design and research capability across the entire agency.

The Executive Office of Health and Human Services holds weekly research meetings and has begun incorporating constituent input earlier and more frequently in development cycles. This allows the agency team to catch constituent experience issues before rollout and adapt the experience informed by people's actual experiences, behaviors, and perspectives—whether it's simplifying confusing language, clarifying eligibility steps, or improving navigation across multiple programs. The agency now views this as a model for improving the experience across more of its programs.

STREAMLINING THE CREDENTIALING PROCESS FOR EARLY CARE & EDUCATION PROVIDERS

Massachusetts is applying this public capacity building model in the Department of Early Education and Care, which is responsible for expanding access to affordable, high-quality child care. There, MDS embedded team members complement the agency's own experience-focused staff and help redesign key touchpoints between the Department and its constituents. Starting with the process of applying for educator credentials, the team improved both front-stage educator interactions and back-end administrative workflows, delivering quick wins to build trust. They expanded their collaboration to help more residents start certified family child care programs, a vital strategy for expanding care options in underserved communities.

A Centralized Digital Team Builds Modern Services

Digital modernization efforts in Massachusetts are led by the Executive Office of Technology Services and Security (EOTSS), the state's central technology agency. Created through legislation signed by Governor Charlie Baker in 2017,[2] EOTSS elevated the former information technology (IT) office to a cabinet-level entity with broad statutory authority.[3] Today, the agency serves as the state's enterprise IT backbone, overseeing cybersecurity, digital infrastructure, and technology services for more than 125 agencies across government.

MDS, a team within EOTSS, is responsible for improving public-facing digital services across the state. With approximately 75 staff and partners embedded within agencies, the team plays both a strategic and a delivery role—developing shared infrastructure and supporting agency-led transformation initiatives, including the Mass.gov web platform that aims to centralize government content for constituents in a single place.[4]

The work of MDS is supported through a blend of funding sources: annual operating appropriations, chargebacks from agencies for shared services such as Mass.gov, and capital funding through the state's IT bond. This structure enables MDS to operate not as a temporary innovation team, but as a durable, long-term digital delivery organization—with both the authority and capacity to lead people-centered modernization efforts across state government.

Massachusetts Public Capacity-Building Strategy Drives Better Service Delivery

As Massachusetts works toward people-centered digital benefits, the state is investing not only in new tools and platforms, but in the public workforce itself. Massachusetts' approach to public capacity develops in-house expertise, offers light-touch and deep support through the Constituent Experience Center of Excellence, and helps agencies grow their own digital teams.

IN-HOUSE EXPERTS LEAD DIGITAL STRATEGY, ENGAGE CONSTITUENTS, & SUPPORT AGENCY MODERNIZATION EFFORTS

At the center of Massachusetts' strategy is the multidisciplinary digital experience team at MDS that provides in-house leadership on public service delivery. The team includes staff with deep expertise in product management, experience research, and experience design. Unlike many states that outsource strategic direction to vendors,[5] Massachusetts has made public ownership of core functions a cornerstone of its modernization strategy. Product management, in particular, is not outsourced— vendor partners may support engineering or implementation, but the vision, prioritization, and leadership remain state-driven by design. This in-house leadership helps ensure that public benefits systems are shaped by public values, and helps keep constituent needs, policy intent, and long-term accountability at the center of service delivery.

A key pillar of MDS' approach is ongoing, direct engagement with constituents—during the digital product development process and beyond—to understand how they access benefits, where they encounter barriers, and what support would make the process easier. This kind of research takes many forms: from usability tests that observe where users get stuck on a website or form, to participatory workshops where residents help shape new tools and processes. It can also include structured analysis of common themes in user feedback received via emails, call centers, or online. By grounding design and delivery in this real-world insight, the state is better able to ensure its benefit systems are understandable, accessible, and responsive to the constituents who use them.

The MDS team plays a dual role. It maintains and improves shared platforms like Mass.gov, ensuring core pieces of infrastructure are secure, accessible, and responsive to constituent needs. The team also supports other state agencies with their design, research, and modernization efforts—often embedding alongside program staff to guide discovery, improve constituent experiences across channels and touchpoints, translate feedback and insights into actionable change, and foster an iterative people-centered design and development approach. This structure gives state agencies the ability to learn, adapt, and iterate—rather than relying on expensive, hard-to-change systems managed by external contractors. Just as importantly, it ensures that service improvements are led by public teams with training to understand constituent perspectives and interactions with public benefits, learn from what is not working, and remain accountable for making it better. For constituents, that means clearer information, fewer barriers, and government services that actually respond to real-world needs.

THE CONSTITUENT EXPERIENCE CENTER OF EXCELLENCE DEVELOPS RESOURCES TO IMPROVE DIGITAL PRODUCTS

To extend the reach of their support for state agencies, Massachusetts created the Constituent Experience Center of Excellence (CX CoE), which provides a robust suite of resources to help agencies adopt best practices in people-centered design, accessibility, content strategy, and experience research, including:

- Plain language guidance to help agencies write everything from benefits applications to eligibility rules, and service information in ways real people can understand;[6]
- Guidelines for compensating research participants so that low-income residents in particular can afford to share their experiences and shape the programs that affect them;[7] and
- Support for conducting thematic analysis of constituent feedback so that agencies can spot patterns in where people get stuck or drop off when applying for benefits, and use those insights to improve the experience.[8]

The CX CoE also facilitates several active communities of practice—spaces where government employees share experiences and challenges across domains.[9] These include peer networks focused on content strategy, experience research, and social media engagement. The communities of practice now include over 150 members across nine agencies, forming a cross-agency network of practitioners who support one another in using people-centered design methods, sharing lessons, and applying best practices.

The CX CoE helps agencies make their services more accessible and people-centered, particularly for residents with disabilities. CX CoE provides guides for developing accessible PDFs and visualizations, and a series on Digital Accessibility Fundamentals that touches on alternative text, color, content and typography, and documents and page structure.[10] These tools support agency efforts to ensure that applications and benefit information can be read by screen readers and understood by people with cognitive or visual impairments. This helps people with disabilities complete benefit applications and access critical service information.

To support agency leaders looking to launch or strengthen people-centered digital services, the CX CoE has a starter kit for content, experience research, and design.[11] Whether an agency is redesigning a benefits application, improving program communications with constituents, or setting up a new digital tool, the kit introduces the principles of constituent-centered service delivery and offers actionable tools. Importantly, the CX CoE is staffed by educators, designers, and researchers who approach the work not just as service delivery experts, but as coaches. Their role is to support government employees as they adopt new mindsets, tools, and methods for engaging constituents and using their feedback to drive digital product development.

MDS HELPS AGENCIES BUILD THEIR OWN DIGITAL TEAMS

Perhaps most critically, Massachusetts helps agencies build the internal capacity to deliver more people-centered digital services themselves. This third strand of the capacity-building strategy focuses on hiring, coaching, and sustaining cross-functional digital teams within state agencies to help power their own people-centered modernization projects.

In more hands-on engagements, MDS works directly with agencies to scope new roles—such as content strategists, user experience researchers, or product leads—and advises on hiring and onboarding. This includes helping define job descriptions, reviewing resumes, and even co-leading interviews. In many cases, the digital team embeds a temporary staff member (such as a researcher or designer) to demonstrate value while the agency works to hire someone permanent.

Once hired, these new staff members are not left to navigate alone. MDS connects them to existing communities of practice in the CX CoE, where they can access shared tools, infrastructure, and coaching support. This ecosystem reduces isolation and increases retention, helping ensure that new hires can succeed and grow their teams over time.

This approach allows agencies to move from dependency to ownership. Instead of outsourcing core functions to vendors, Massachusetts is helping agencies build their own long-term capability, empowering them to own the strategy behind digital product development. Bringing product leadership in-house gives agencies the ability to ensure digital benefits are delivered in ways that reflect the needs of their constituents.

Massachusetts Is A Model for Delivering Benefits Other States Can Build On

Massachusetts shows that modernizing digital services doesn't require reinventing government from scratch. It requires rethinking who does the work and how. MDS embeds support, builds distributed capacity, and sustains change through long-term relationships and the shared infrastructure of the CX CoE. Massachusetts is growing a community of public servants across government with a shared mission. State employees support one another in developing and applying the skills, mindsets, and practices required to deliver great people-centered experiences and outcomes for constituents.

This approach is designed to lead to cleaner websites, better technology, and—most importantly—services for residents that feel understandable, respectful, and responsive during moments of real need. Whether it's a parent applying for health coverage, a worker seeking unemployment support, or a family navigating housing assistance, Massachusetts is increasing the odds that people can get the help they need, without confusion, delay, or unnecessary hardship.

Massachusetts offers a compelling roadmap for how states can deliver better services by keeping key decisions and responsibilities in public hands. For states seeking to modernize their digital benefits systems with creativity, accountability, and care, the lesson is clear: invest in the people who serve the public, and equip them with the capabilities required to make people-centered design and delivery a permanent feature of government rather than a temporary project.

About

Andrés Argüello is a Visiting Fellow at the Georgetown Center on Poverty & Inequality (GCPI). This is the first in a series of case studies within GCPI's People-Centered Digital Benefits Project. This case study is grounded in interviews between the author and senior officials from Massachusetts state agencies conducted between June and October 2025.

Endnotes

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