

The Impact of the TTS Public Benefits Studio

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A letter from the team

To the supporters of the Public Benefits Studio,

We're excited to share our impact report, which has evolved in meaningful ways over the past few months. What began as an enthusiastic reflection on our team's remarkable achievements has transformed into a testament to the lasting impact of our work.

From the very beginning, our mission was clear: to ease the burden on low-income families and individuals navigating government programs. Over the three years, we did just that. We launched the first new product at TTS in 7 years, prototyped and researched a handful of other services, paved a legal path to working with State/Local/Territorial/and Tribal governments, and enabled text messaging campaigns that helped people keep their health insurance, protect their SNAP benefits, access support for their children, and spend time focusing on what matters most, instead of waiting in line at government offices.

After more than three years of building community and products with you all, the Public Benefits Studio has closed its doors. Although our team won't continue its work in this current form, we take immense pride in what we've accomplished. Our work will serve as a foundation for future efforts. In the ever-evolving landscape of government priorities, we know that the impact of our work will live on and that new initiatives will rise in the years to come.

While this chapter may be closing for our team, we remain hopeful that the positive changes we've made will continue to resonate, and that our impact will inspire future efforts.

With gratitude,

The Public Benefits Studio team

2024 in Review

Nov 2023

Norfolk sent the first messages via Notify.gov

February 2024

Reached the 10,000th text message sent with Notify.gov

March 2024

Washington State DSHS sent in the 10th language to be used in Notify.gov

Spring 2024

Onboarded our new R&D team to explore bets outside the notifications space

May 2024

Notify: Hosted two Notify.gov information sessions attended by 28 people from at least 15 potential partner organizations

July 2024

R&D: Wrapped up a year-long, cross jurisdiction Texting Working Group pilot we participated in as part of the Facing Financial Shock LE work

August 2024

R&D: Selected 6 new product bets to validate for further investment

September 2024

- Notify: Full ATO approved
- R&D: Narrowed new bets to 2 product opportunities: improving document submission and automating enrollment

December 2024

- Notify: Concluded its pilot and entered its beta phase! - announced in a GSA [blog post](#) in collaboration with OES
- Notify: Surpassed 200,000 messages sent by partners due to a new partnership with the Census Bureau

About the Studio

The Studio was founded in 2022 with a mission to simplify the public experience of navigating government programs that help low-income individuals and families. We aimed to collaborate with program users, advocates, and staff to develop technology, improve policies, and promote human-centered practices that make accessing and renewing benefits easier.

Over the last three years, we engaged with over 327 organizations, each dedicated to improving how people access vital government services. Through these conversations, **we uncovered more than 16 product and service ideas** — each with the potential to reduce burdens for both agencies and the public.

But ideas alone weren't enough. To ensure we were making the biggest impact, **we carefully investigated 5 strategic “Bets,”** conducting research and prototyping whether they made sense as TTS shared services and could drive real impact.

Our flagship product was Notify.gov, a text messaging tool for government agencies. In its pilot phase, Notify.gov **successfully supported 6 customers**, marking the beginning of a broader movement to modernize and streamline public service delivery. **Over the course of 2024 and into 2025, Notify grew to 13 customers** across four levels of government.

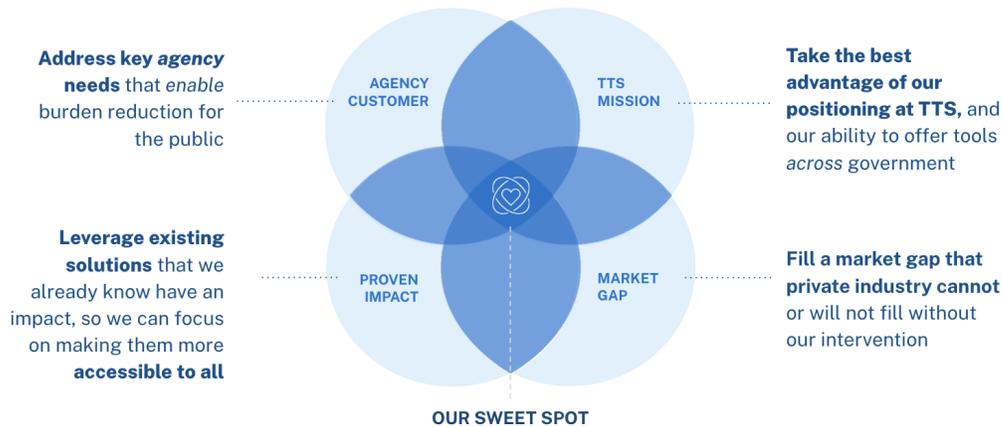
Our driving principles

In order to leverage our unique position within the government, and complement rather than compete with other public and private solution providers, we operationalized these principles in our approach to delivery:

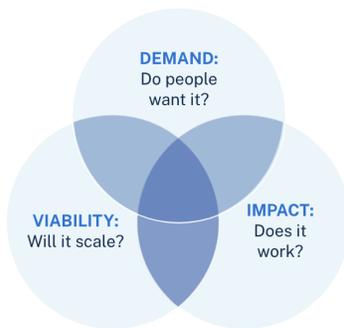
1. *Never start from zero.* The Studio incubated and accelerated adoption of solutions that had already been tested or shown measurable impact in some aspect of the ecosystem, but need government intervention to scale.
2. *Build for reuse and scale.* As a part of TTS and GSA, which exist to provide shared services for the whole of government, all of our tooling and solutions needed to be easily accessible and usable by the widest array of customers possible.
3. *Make incremental, data-based decisions.* We invested in products incrementally, always pressure-testing our riskiest assumptions first, and used real evidence to guide decisions about whether to stop or continue an investment.
4. *Stay laser focused on outcomes and impact.* If an effort isn't generating results, our goal was to cut investment as soon as possible.

Our intake criteria

We prioritized opportunities that...

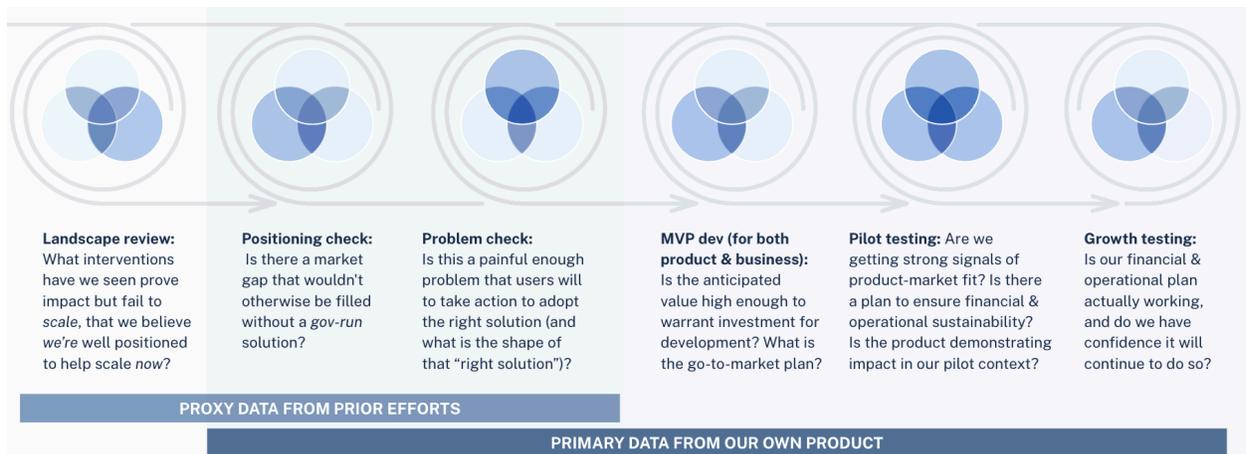


Our overall approach



We followed a lean approach to product/market validation, utilizing viability, demand, and impact as the drivers to form and test hypotheses during the product research and development process. Our strategy centered on prioritizing testing whichever of these hypotheses is the highest risk at any given time.

Instead of following strict phases, we believed there was not one set path to follow because the risks and assumptions — as well as the level of information needed and amount of time it takes to sufficiently test each hypothesis — is different for every product at every stage.



Our investments

Notify.gov

Notify.gov enabled federal and federally-funded programs to send customized, bulk text messages that reach people where they are, saving administrative costs, improving customer experience, and helping agencies comply with public experience directives, including:

- [EO 14058 Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government](#)
- [OMB Memorandum M-23-22: Delivering a Digital-First Public Experience](#)
- [Government Service Delivery Improvement Act](#)

13 partners: 6 SLTT, 7 federal

370,000+ messages sent

Texts sent in 20 languages

Approval from +5 federal benefits programs to provide Notify.gov to SLTTs that administer their programs.

Programs used Notify.gov to improve outcomes for the public, federal agencies, and local agencies administering federal programs. In 2024, Notify.gov benefits included:

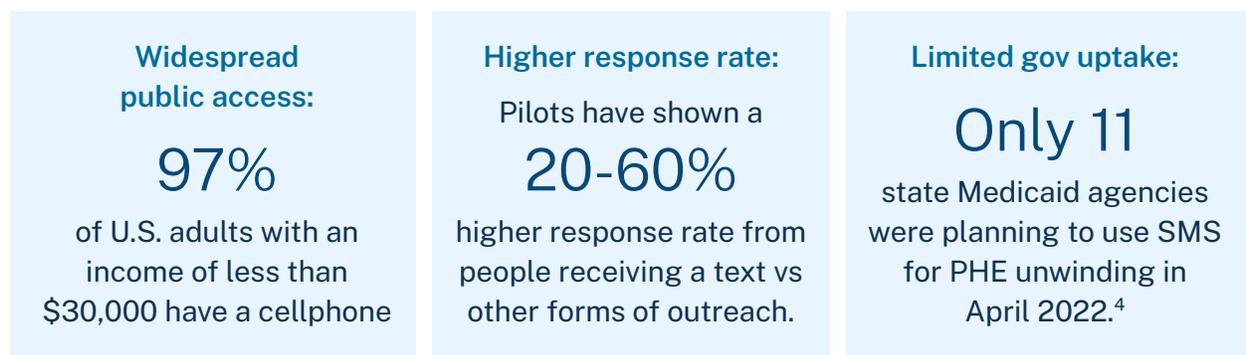
- **The public got the information they need when they need it, to maintain benefits access;** reducing benefits churn, improving efficiencies, and ultimately decreasing costs for federal and local agencies.
- **Federal agencies had access to a low-cost, “in-house,” trusted tool,** saving agencies time and taxpayers money.
- **Local federal program administrators had access to a federally-approved communications tool,** simplifying adoption, maximizing their resources, and meeting the public where they are.

Why we took this on

With any type of government service, timely and clear communications are critical. Without reliable forms of communication, someone may miss a renewal notice for health insurance coverage, or details about EBT cards.

Many government agencies still rely on paper mail as the primary, if not only, means to communicate with the public, despite missed paper notifications being cited as one of the primary reasons people lose access to their eligible benefits.

Our initial research in FY23 showed text notifications can significantly reduce re-enrollment churn¹ and increase cross-program eligibility awareness and enrollment.² Given that 97% of U.S. adults with an income of less than \$30,000 have a cellphone,³ offering text and email options in addition to postal mail could increase delivery and follow through rates among this group as well.



While commercial texting tools already existed, a huge gap in uptake still remained. Our research found that high procurement costs and limited in-house technical capabilities were the leading barriers preventing agencies from adopting existing texting tools.

So, in FY23, the Benefits Studio team began work on Notify.gov, based on a texting tool originally developed in the UK, and in active use by UK and Canadian agencies. This simple, web-based application allows government agencies to send one-way text notifications, with no procurement or technical integration required.

1

<https://s3-us-west-1.amazonaws.com/codeforamerica-cms1/documents/LAMESSAGE-Final-Report.pdf>

2

<https://www.nyc.gov/assets/opportunity/pdf/specialinitiatives/local-law/LL60-benefits-access-report-final.pdf>

³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/mobile/>

⁴ <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2022/04/13/1092401294/state-texting-medicaid>

Who we worked with

Over the course of the Notify.gov pilot and beta periods, the Studio worked with federal and federally funded programs across multiple levels of government.

In all, Notify.gov partnered with

- One city (The [City of Norfolk, Virginia](#))
- Two counties
- Four states
- Six offices in five federal agencies

Partners used Notify.gov for:

- Medicaid renewal reminders
- EBT card skimming alerts
- Quality control interview reminders
- Requests for missing information
- Notifications when documents are ready for pickup
- Following up after loss of contact
- Building tenant notices
- Survey invitations

What we learned

From the beginning, Notify.gov prioritized partner success, providing resources and seeking input to ensure successful adoption. Early pilots were very hands-on, with active coaching from Studio staff. We gathered feedback about Notify.gov and leaned into the barriers agencies face when trying to improve notifications, implement texting, and streamline benefits delivery. These early pioneers helped pave the way for future users, **providing valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities involved in texting the public:**

- **Sending text messages is the easy part.** Planning, executing, implementing, assessing, and operationalizing a texting program requires collaboration across program, compliance, security, communications, and technical teams, as well as process development and documentation. Getting ready to send text messages does and should take more time than sending them.
- **Building trust is essential.** Spam, scam, and “smishing” texts are a real threat, and recipients are rightly wary of text messages from unknown numbers. Communicating with potential recipients about a texting campaign before it starts, and providing clear and easily accessible information about it while it is in progress, are essential to promote trust in the messaging.
- **Text messaging may be the best way to reach people right away.** In a scenario where a quick response is needed from an applicant to an application question from an agency, a call from an unknown number may go ignored, but a follow-up text message could be noticed, helping agencies reach the applicant faster and prevent delays in processing.

- **Creating templates and documenting processes lowers the barrier to entry.** We developed onboarding tools that make Notify.gov easy to use and implement, enabling future partners to start sending text messages mostly on their own.
- **A government-backed tool may be the *only* option in some cases.** Private sector texting services operate with internal limitations that sometimes prevent working with government agencies.



[Before texting], we mailed the applicant and they would have to respond to that letter. [We're now] seeing some texting experiments getting responses back within the hour; in a paper world, it could take up to 6 weeks to see the response.

— *Notify.gov partner*

Notify.gov's impact for our pilot partners

Preventing EBT fraud in WA

- In response to alerts from Notify.gov, over 300 EBT card holders in the state of Washington took safeguard actions on their accounts, preventing the loss of over \$100,000 in benefits. This also helped the USDA Food and Nutrition Service avoid paying for these benefits twice via reimbursements to the WA Department of Social and Health Services.
- Informing cardholders of account safeguards via text, rather than making multiple phone calls, has saved the State of Washington's Department of Employment and Economic Security at least 50 hours of staff time.

Streamlining passport application processes

- The State Department used Notify.gov to give more than 4,000 passport applicants the opportunity to provide missing information instantly online instead of requesting and submitting corrections via regular mail. In many cases, reducing application processing time to days rather than weeks.
- Issuing offices have been able to inform over 27,000 applicants when their passports are ready on a rolling basis, reducing in-office wait times, avoiding overcrowding, and providing a better public experience.

Connecting with disaster survivors

- The US Census Bureau turned to Notify.gov to help reach victims of natural disasters, to learn about their experiences with recovery and rebuilding. Texting enabled the Bureau to reach people without relying on mailing addresses impacted by disasters.

Notify.gov's sunset

The decision to sunset

As new leadership priorities and staffing reductions took shape in early 2025, the Public Benefits Studio and Notify.gov team made the case for sustaining the investment in Notify.gov and continuing to move forward with a tiered partnerships model, with ambitious partnership and revenue goals for FY26 and beyond. Unfortunately, since Notify.gov was not congressionally mandated and didn't align with leadership's new priorities, the team faced an unfortunate prospect: try to continue supporting the product and our partners with insufficient staff and resources, or shut down what we'd worked so hard to build.

After carefully reviewing possible outcomes and options, **the team agreed that we no longer had the federal staff to sustainably and securely operate the product long term**, and did not expect this to change. After several weeks (and really several years) of advocacy for the product's potential, the team made the recommendation to sunset and leadership agreed.

The fact that we are closing this chapter doesn't change the amazing things we were able to accomplish with our partners and collaborators - many of the examples of this are above.

On top of the impact for the public and our partners, Notify.gov was the first new shared service launched by TTS in seven years. Despite having demonstrated impact, establishing a healthy partnership pipeline, receiving a full ATO, and being on the cusp of making its first dollar, Notify.gov now also has the honor of being the first (that we know of) shared service to be sunset by TTS in even longer.

Considerations for the future

Notify.gov was the third or fourth attempt at launching such a service for U.S. agencies. We have full confidence that it will not be the last.

While this version is sunsetting, something like Notify.gov could be an essential communication tool for a smaller government. With less federal staff, Notify.gov's agility and efficiency could help improve:

- Lines at government offices (e.g., passport, National Parks, courts)
- Backlogs at call centers (e.g., IRS)
- The ability to respond to fraud and disasters
- Applications and verifications for complex cases that can't be easily automated
- Programs' ability to meet established benchmarks for acceptable response times

In comparison to the cost of each agency creating their own individual version of Notify.gov, operating this product as a single shared service reaps a potential government-wide cost savings could be more than \$350 million per year, nearly 100 times the cost of Notify.gov's \$4 Million per year operating costs.

Other bets the Studio made

In addition to Notify.gov, the Studio explored multiple opportunities to improve the experience of government. Here are a few of the areas we explored in 2024.

Bet 2: Texting working group

Why we took this on

Our research, in addition to research done by the OMB Life Experiences team, showed that texting-related challenges remained around navigating policy, crafting message content, and conducting outreach.

To address these barriers, we explored assembling texting practitioners across agencies & levels of government to share resources & best practices with one another.

What we did & what we learned

We collaborated with the OMB Life Experience team and the Aspen Institute to help stand up and facilitate a cross-agency texting working group. The group focused on identifying and demystifying policy guidance, and facilitating the exchange of best practices across federal, state, local governments, as well as non-profit organizations operating in the texting ecosystem.

This working group met monthly for 9 months, with participants collaborating on shared resources in between sessions as well.



The group focused on the most pressing challenges for governments starting a texting program:

1. Obtaining phone numbers and consent for the first time
2. Varied interpretation and enforcement of the Telephone Consumer Protection Act (TCPA)
3. Understanding what content was legally permissible to include in a text message
4. The “why” and “how” of measuring the performance of texting campaigns
5. Establishing legitimacy and trust in message content
6. Compelling and plain language in notices and texts
7. Communicating effectively with non-English speakers via text message

In response, we organized sessions around:

- An [FCC training](#) on the do’s and don’ts of navigating texting consent.
- [Crowd-sourced best practices](#) on navigating opt-outs and validating phone numbers
- Facilitated sessions on [setting goals and measuring impact](#) of texting programs
- Developed a [checklist for sending compelling and legitimate messages](#)

We also crowd-sourced a list of common texting scenarios from government texters to help clarify what content is permissible within text messages related to HIPAA. We hoped to get guidance from HHS OGC, but unfortunately we were not able to get answers from legal counsel.

Decision to sunset

As a small team with finite resources, we decided, along with our collaborators who were similarly stretched, to wind down in July 2024. There were a few reasons why further investment didn’t make sense:

- While the working group had a positive impact on individual participants, broadening that impact would have required significant investment into documenting and publishing best practice resources and policy interpretations for wider use across government.
- Many of the challenges participating programs were having were outside of the authority of GSA to fix. For example, questions about how HIPAA covered entities handled texting were the domain of HHS to decide and the FCC is the entity with the authority to put forward policy on text messaging.

Bet 3: Expanding language access

Why we took this on

Government notifications that do not account for language barriers can result in missing crucial deadlines, voter information, or vital benefits. **Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 guarantees that people who receive government services receive them in a language they can understand**, and many agencies struggle to provide messaging that meet the needs of all the people they serve.

As part of this effort, we sought to understand what barriers exist to providing key communications from the government in a broader array of languages, and surface any available opportunities for Benefits Studio to broaden language access across government.

What we did & what we learned

The team conducted interviews with Community Based Organizations (CBOs) exploring the current process for notification translation, characteristics of effective multilingual communications, and what barriers exist to effective translation.

Our full research summary can be found in [this report](#). Some of the top insights coming out of this research included:

- CBOs play a vital translation role, but face resource constraints that can limit effective delivery.
- Trust and cultural context are crucial: many non-English speakers rely on WhatsApp rather than SMS, and are wary of unexpected government communications. Outreach and pre-notifying communities that the government will be communicating with them is crucial.
- Effective translation is nuanced: literal translation and Google translate loses context and meaning, and what constitutes “plain” language depends on country of origin, dialect, and even age of recipient.

The team also considered running a Challenge.gov competition to gather innovative solutions from CBOs, but learned that while this approach had potential benefits like surfacing new ideas, it would require significant time investment and could burden already-stretched organizations.

Decision to sunset

Our findings surfaced issues requiring significant effort and resources to address in a systemic way. Lacking a clear path to providing the necessary resources efficiently ourselves, we decided to support the other organizations exploring solutions and amplify their work as it evolve

Inspired by this research, the Benefits Studio made improvements to the Notify.gov product, including adding the ability to send text messages in over 20 languages.

Bet 4: Automating Enrollment

Why we took this on

A majority of public benefits programs use the same or similar information to prove eligibility for enrollment. However, instances of these eligibility proof points being *automatically* shared across programs is limited. This lack of automated proofing results in redundant paperwork for applicants and eligibility workers, high application processing delays, high administrative costs due to duplicative and largely manual eligibility verification efforts, and continued data-sharing silos between administering agencies.

What we did and learned

Our team sought to better understand how proof-of-eligibility information is shared across benefit programs, specifically for programs that:

- Are linked by adjunctive and categorical eligibility policy
- Often fall outside the scope of Integrated Enrollment and Eligibility (IE&E) efforts
- Lack automation or practical implementation of technology, leading to manual and duplicative processes

We approached this investigation by conducting 20 research interviews with federal and SLTT government agencies, policy experts, and technical stakeholders, as well as evaluating existing eligibility verification tools like [National Verifier](#) to assess the feasibility of a federally-supported, cross-program enrollment “look-up” solution.

Our full research summary can be found [here](#), but a summary of the key insights we uncovered includes:

- Most states & territories are already moving towards Integrated Eligibility & Enrollment (IE&E) systems that consolidate state-level data from some of the largest

safety net programs (e.g. Medicaid, SNAP, TANF, etc.), reducing the need for a federal lookup tool for these programs.

- Safety net programs that exist outside of IE&E systems often lack robust data-sharing infrastructure, making them strong candidates for automation, but a single, federal solution was not institutionally viable due to implementation and policy constraints and concerns around data sharing and ownership.
- Programs want support from federal leadership such as implementation guidance, standards, and examples around data automation, but not a mandated system.
- Automating enrollment requires flexible and scalable frameworks that respect state autonomy and individual privacy.

Decision to sunset

Given the above insights and finite investigation resources, the Studio decided to pause the auto-enrollment exploration, in favor of the more opportune document submission bet (below). To close out this work, the team proposed four alternative pathways forward for TTS to assess against wider priorities:

- Developing a “state of SLTT modernization” systems dashboard and template hub to tell the story of how different governments are approaching modernization and automation will increase information sharing pathways and reduce redundancy by allowing governments to share templates, codebases, and best practices.
- Data matching algorithms and sandboxes for agencies without robust systems can provide episodic value to using agencies while providing incentive for standardization across government.
- A federal data-sharing initiative that provides technical assistance, standardized legal agreements and community of practice models to share knowledge and build capacity could lower the barrier of starting to automate data sharing for the first time.
- Expanding Login.gov’s current identity verification work to other automated verification spaces (for example: enrollment or income proof) grounded in user consent models for data sharing.

Bet 5: Improving Document Submission

Why we took this on

A critical component of every benefits application is the submission and processing of documents. Many benefits systems across states rely on paper and fax-based document submissions – a time-consuming and costly process for beneficiaries and administrators alike.

We were looking for opportunities to support benefits agencies to enable applicants to share necessary documents digitally with administrators.

What we did and learned

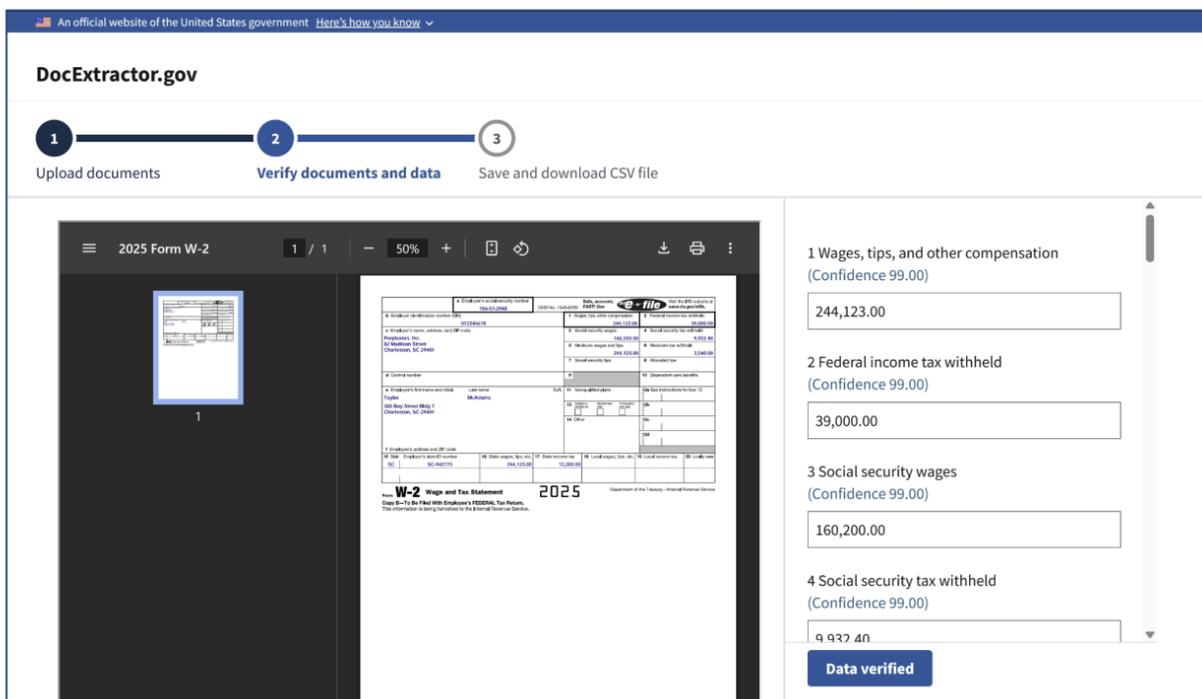
We approached this investigation via research interviews and rapid prototyping.

Our initial research summary can be found [here](#), but a summary of the key insights includes:

- Applications and document collection methods are increasingly becoming mobile friendly for members of the public, allowing more flexibility in submitting necessary documentation digitally.
- Back-end processing of documents remains largely manual, with costly staff hours spent coding static files (images, PDFs) into agency data systems.
- Reducing manual administrative burden is essential for agencies operating with tight budgets and limited staff. Business departments are willing to invest in tools that enhance efficiency and historically have trusted federal solutions.
- While Optical Character Recognition (OCR) and similar technologies are not new, recent advancements make them a strong foundation for testing and future growth.
- Similar to the hurdles to utilizing text messaging, agencies seemed hesitant to adopt new technology and were running into challenges with heavy customization requirements with legacy vendors and procurement hurdles. We believed that there was room for TTS to show what was possible and help move adoption forward.

Prototyping efforts

Building on the initial validation research we scoped a rapid prototyping effort focused on automating the intake of documents. The Document Extractor streamlines the processing of documents by leveraging automation to extract key information efficiently. This proof-of-concept allows users to upload preexisting documents, where the system extracts relevant data and metadata.



DocExtractor.gov prototype interface showing the simple three-step process for document upload, data verification, and CSV export, designed for ease of use and fast integration into agency workflows.

The prototype uses optical character recognition (OCR) and natural language processing (NLP) techniques to parse text from structured and semi-structured documents. The extracted data is then formatted for validation and further processing, ensuring compatibility with downstream workflows.

The Studio team was able to stand up a prototype that could ingest paper forms that had been filled in by hand and turn the data into machine-readable information. We tested this on W-2s, 1099s, and DD214s (Military discharge papers), documents that were cited in research as key to unemployment applications.

The work was done in an open source way and the code can be found [here](#) along with [case studies and other documentation](#).

Decision to sunset

Although we saw high potential for this work in terms of both impact and scalability, the Studio was never able to move beyond the initial prototype due to staffing reductions following the administration change. We encourage others to carry this work forward!

Thank you and see you later

The Public Benefits Studio is winding down in response to shifting administrative priorities and changes in staffing. We know that the work the team was able to do built on the efforts of many dedicated civil servants and collaborators before us, and we hope that our work provides a spring board for more teams to come. We also know that this work doesn't stop – it just changes. This report and the links within it are our efforts to leave as many breadcrumbs as we can for the next iteration.

Thank you to all of the people who participated in Public Benefits Studio research, prototypes, pilots, and activities. This truly was and will continue to be a community effort.

Until the next time around,
The Public Benefits Studio team

Appendix

Breadth of potential Notify.gov use cases

- Recruitment, hiring, and onboarding
- Employee communications
- Internal and public survey distribution
 - Potential Agencies:
 - U.S. Census Bureau – Population surveys, American Community Survey (ACS).
 - Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) – Public health feedback, vaccination surveys.
 - Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) – Economic data collection.
 - Federal Reserve System – Financial behavior and policy feedback.
 - Benefits of One-Way Texting:
 - Instant delivery of survey links and reminders.
 - Higher response rates due to mobile convenience.
 - Automated follow-up messages to boost participation.
- Updates regarding services or applications
 - Potential Agencies include:
 - Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) – Appointment reminders, benefits updates.
 - Social Security Administration (SSA) – Benefits notifications and policy changes.
 - Internal Revenue Service (IRS) – Tax season updates and filing reminders.
 - U.S. Postal Service (USPS) – Service disruptions, package delivery updates.
 - Benefits of One-Way Texting:
 - Reduce call volumes by proactively answering common questions.
 - Provide automated status updates and appointment confirmations.
 - Send notifications about outages or policy changes.
- Application reminders or questions (benefits, small business services, regulatory processes, etc.)
- Public-facing sales and promotions
 - Potential Agencies:
 - U.S. Mint – Commemorative coins and collectibles.

- General Services Administration (GSA) – Surplus auctions and property sales.
- National Park Service (NPS) – Annual park pass sales and promotions.
- Treasury Department (TreasuryDirect) – Savings bonds and securities.
- Benefits of One-Way Texting:
 - Announce limited-time offers and product releases.
 - Send reminders for auctions or deadlines.
 - Share links to product pages for immediate purchases.