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The Future of Government Aid is Human-Centered

BY COREY EIDE AND SAM CAPLAN



Over the past three years, many state and local governments have made herculean efforts to meet the needs of their community members.

Not only have they been facing the large-scale impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, many agencies have also been responding to rapidly evolving natural disasters and supporting [historic levels of federal investment](#).

Though the convergence of all these forces has intensified the pressure on many government teams in the short term, this is not an isolated moment. The future of public sector programs hinges on administrators' ability to keep up the momentum they've already created.

More than anything, recent events have highlighted the reality that social issues overlap and intersect. As government agencies craft programs to address community needs, they must do so with that interconnectedness in mind. And they need to invest in the right technology—technology that centers people and enables transformative change.

Government aid programs must ensure that people are centered throughout the design, build, and implementation

process. Practices must be rooted in real-life experiences—for both the staff and community members. In short, processes and technology should serve people, not the other way around.

Technology is a big piece of this transition to a human-centered approach, and grant management software is an important component. Good grant software allows government teams to meet urgent and long-term community needs by opening lines of communication and lessening the administrative burden for both staff and applicants.

But good grant management software is about more than just the technology itself. With the right software partner, teams can effectively expand by tapping into the expertise of implementation and support professionals who have experience transforming grant and relief programs of all sizes. This increased capacity allows them to be strategic in how they integrate technology, enabling them to keep their focus on the people at the heart of their program.

A necessary balance

For public sector employees, the transformation to a human-centered approach requires flexibility and intention. Teams will have to balance what may seem like opposing priorities.



Evolution & compliance

No matter how ambitious program administrators are about evolving practices, the reality is that this evolution must happen within existing compliance frameworks. It's not about starting from scratch. Government teams must iterate on their processes to better meet community needs while still complying with the rules and regulations that underpin their work.



Speed & equity

Program administrators must move fast, but never at the expense of equity or transparency. Streamlining processes makes it easier for governments to move quickly to address

urgent community needs. But as teams look to simplify the applicant experience, they must preserve levers for equity and accountability.



Innovation & reliability

Government teams must push to develop new ideas without sacrificing reliability. As they look to innovate, they must prioritize providing a consistent and reliable experience for applicants and staff. They must make space to experiment, while embracing proven solutions that they can implement with minimal disruption. They should look for an intuitive, easy-to-use platform that is accessible for everyone.

4 ways to embrace a human-centered approach

No matter how committed a government team is to a human-centered approach, if the technology isn't built on that same ethos, they'll likely struggle to put their ideas into practice. The right technology solutions address the needs of government teams and the realities of community members' real lives while reducing the chances that funds will be abused or misused.

1 Launch and scale quickly

Putting the right systems into place enables governments to stand up future applications or whole programs in hours or days rather than weeks or months. This speed is essential when it comes to responding to sudden crises.

For many governments, crafting a response to the COVID-19 pandemic was a lesson in why it's important to have technology in place before a need arises. Agencies that hadn't yet adopted grantmaking technology found themselves

scrambling. Many were shifting from paper-based or spreadsheet management systems to software solutions at breakneck speeds. It was like trying to build the plane and fly it at the same time.

Ideally, technology should not only speed up the process of delivering aid, it should also support scalability. Many local and state governments were tasked with distributing CARES Act funding, a [\\$2.2 trillion aid package](#). Processes that had worked to deliver support on a small scale suddenly proved to be unsustainable.

The right technology solutions empower government teams to build and run grant and relief programs of any size.

To enable speed and scalability, program administrators should look for technology that incorporates advanced automation and data science. These tools allow small government teams to maximize their efforts, cutting down on the time and energy it takes to launch and manage programs while bolstering security and accessibility.

No matter how fast teams move through the application and review process, if they're still printing and mailing paper checks, they're building an unnecessary delay into their process. Technology should facilitate digital funds distribution in order to simplify the work for the team and expedite payments to those in need.



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2 Bake equity into the process

When it comes to government grant and relief programs, equity must be a foundational design principle. The right technology provides the tools and insight to put intentions around equity into action.

Equity is not a theoretical pursuit. It has real-world impact. And stakes are high. At the federal level, leaders at FEMA have been confronting the reality [that race often skews the help it provides disaster victims](#), with white people consistently receiving more aid than people of color.

Part of embracing an equitable approach is acknowledging the burden an application puts on those applying for funds. Whether a program is directed toward individuals, businesses, or other government agencies, administrators must remember that there are real people on the other side of the application.

Applications should only require information that is absolutely essential, and the platform should make it as easy as possible for people to access and complete the forms. The process of applying for funds should never be so cumbersome that it discourages qualified applicants.

At every level, governments are taking action to support equity. With the [Justice40 Initiative](#), the federal government has set a goal to direct 40% of climate investments to disadvantaged communities. To help teams engage with goals like this, technology must capture the data needed to evaluate and improve programs, while facilitating all required reporting and auditing.



3 Integrate new solutions with existing and familiar technology

In the public sector, it's important for technology to simplify the experience for everyone—both the people running the programs and the community members benefiting from them. For many government teams, this means that any new solution must integrate well with existing systems.

Teams should seek to create a seamless experience for applicants, staff, and other stakeholders by using software that is intuitive and easy to use. The technology's interface needs to be modern and familiar. The small stuff matters here. Tools should be drag-and-drop, and applicants need to be able to

start, save, and return to an application without losing their work. If images or documents are part of the application, applicants should be able to use their phone to capture an image, and review teams should be able to view files without downloading them.

Technology also needs to enable real-time collaboration—both for the applicants, who may be working with colleagues or peers, and for the government team, who need to coordinate efforts throughout the review process.



4 Reduce fraud and human error without burdening applicants

Fraud siphons essential resources away from the people who need them, undercutting efforts to uplift communities. The right software gives government teams the ability to address fraud without pulling them away from the important work of building and managing their programs.

Not only can fraud skew outcomes, it also erodes public trust in processes and institutions, putting future programs in jeopardy. Take the recent scandals around the PPP loans, which accounted for **\$80 billion in theft of COVID relief funds**. When constituents and elected officials see this kind of misappropriation, they are much more hesitant to support large-scale relief spending in the future.

To effectively address fraud, governments should seek out technology and consulting partners who take an informed and human-centered approach to understanding the core intent of the programs. If partners don't make an effort to understand the broader context of why a program exists, they'll struggle to eliminate fraud without burdening applicants.

Again, we return to the idea of balance. Rooting out fraud and human error is essential, but if the safeguards in place make it harder for qualified applicants to apply, it's like cutting down an apple tree to save the fruit.





Government teams must look for technology that can help [address fraud without adding cumbersome steps to the application process](#). Simple but effective security checks can be incredibly useful here. For instance, knowledge-based authentication quizzes verify applicants' identities by having them answer a few multiple-choice questions such as which addresses or vehicles they've been associated with. Another option is instant photo identity verification, in which a tool confirms that an applicant's government-issued ID matches a selfie taken in real time.

Though it gets less attention than fraud, human error can be a big issue, especially for teams who handle high volumes of applications. It's easy to make mistakes when you have thousands or tens of thousands of forms to review. Automation takes the pressure off. The right technology can eliminate busywork by automating tasks such as verifying data from tax forms or analyzing images. Automated scoring can save government teams from having to perform complex calculations as they review applications.

With the right technology, there's no need to compromise. The experience can be easy and straightforward for everyone, while ensuring the right checks and controls are in place to prevent fraud and human error.

The future is built on partnerships

Government agencies across the country are at a pivotal moment. They have momentum—now it's just about channeling that momentum into long-term, transformative change. It's time to embrace a human-centered approach and invest in technology and resources that support this pursuit.

Partnerships are key. Across the private sector, philanthropy, and government entities, strategic coalitions are what enable teams to serve individuals and communities.

That's why we're excited about the [new collaboration](#) between [Submittable](#) and [BDO](#). Submittable, the social impact software company, helps thousands of organizations worldwide launch, manage, and measure community investment programs. BDO USA, LLP is one of the nation's leading assurance, tax, and advisory firms. Together, we have created a comprehensive grants management service tailored to public sector organizations.

This new joint service provides the robust software and experienced implementation support needed to help safeguard grants programs against clawbacks, streamline government audit readiness, and uphold ongoing documentation. With user-friendly tools, powerful automations, and comprehensive services, BDO and Submittable help make grants administration easier, scalable, and more effective for government agencies.

With a joint vision of a human-centered future, Submittable and BDO are positioned to support governments of all sizes as they look to evolve.

About the authors



Corey Eide supports government agencies and nonprofits investing in resilience. Corey has served in a variety of leadership roles for nonprofit organizations and government operations where he has led strategic planning initiatives, change management, and enterprise program design and delivery. Corey is the Managing Director of BDO USA's Community Resilience practice and is a Senior Fellow at Tulane University's Disaster Resilience Leadership Academy.



Sam Caplan is the Vice President of Social Impact at Submittable. He has served as founder of New Spark Strategy, Chief Information Officer at the Walton Family Foundation, and director of technology at the Walmart Foundation. Driven by an interest in the intersection of technology and philanthropy, he consults and writes prolifically, recently publishing a series of whitepapers titled "The Strategic Role of Technology in Philanthropy."



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