Nava Labs

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Beyond Technology

Modernizing through collaboration

Report authors

Alicia Benish, MPH
Jennifer Folliard, MPH
Jessi Bull, MPA
Martelle Esposito, MS, MPH

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About Nava Labs

Nava Labs is the philanthropically-funded division within Nava Public Benefit Corporation focused on prototyping systems changes for government programs. We research and prototype products, practices, and policies within government programs and advocate for the adoption of what works. This interdisciplinary team leverages Nava's deep technology delivery experience to identify critical junctures where philanthropy can help accelerate public interest projects and build more trustworthy public institutions.

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Executive summary

A pivotal moment for modernization

State and federal agencies are navigating a critical turning point. As federal digital initiatives wind down, agencies close, and costs shift to the states, governments are being asked to do more with less — while public demand for accessible, efficient, and equitable services continues to grow.

This report explores how collaboration, across agencies, levels of government, and sectors, can help meet that challenge. Through 28 interviews with federal and state leaders, digital service practitioners, civic technologists, and policy experts, we examined how collaborative approaches can overcome the persistent barriers that stall modernization.

What we set out to learn

Our goal was to understand what enables modernization to succeed — not just as a one-time technical upgrade, but as a sustained practice of improving systems, governance, and capacity over time. We asked: How can governments modernize not just individual tools, but also the structures that sustain them? What would it take to create modernization pathways that are equitable, durable, and adaptable across programs and states?

Challenges

Across programs, four interconnected domains consistently shape whether modernization takes root:

Policy

Progress often depends on political catalysts that create momentum but not stability. Conflicting federal guidance and leadership turnover further disrupt continuity.

Procurement and funding

Short-term funding and lengthy procurement processes are misaligned, fostering vendor dependency and limiting states' ability to iterate or sustain systems over time.

Capacity-building

Limited staffing and outdated systems strain state capacity. Staff often spend more time keeping programs running than improving them, while knowledge remains siloed across states.

Communication

Ambiguous rules and high accountability foster risk aversion. Without trusted relationships and strong communication, even promising initiatives lose momentum.

What successful efforts share

Despite these challenges, our research surfaced a consistent set of "ingredients" that appear across successful modernization efforts:

Shared infrastructure and governance that help states navigate policy and legal barriers together.

Embedded expertise, such as digital service teams, product managers, and advisors who bring modern delivery practices inside agencies.

Candid spaces and shared standards that turn lessons into actionable benchmarks and enable states to measure progress.

Targeted support from trusted intermediaries, technical assistance providers, philanthropic partners, and coalitions that help states translate policy into practice.

Clear federal guidance paired with flexible implementation, allowing states to adapt while maintaining alignment.

These ingredients — people, practices, and governance structures — form the foundation for sustained modernization, regardless of program or context.

Collaboration models in practice

The report highlights several models currently enabling cross-state and cross-sector collaboration:

Consortia that jointly procure and govern shared systems.

Open-source communities that co-develop reusable software components.

Accelerators that help states adopt shared code and build internal capacity through time-limited sprints.

Technical assistance cohorts that bring states together to solve shared challenges with expert support.

Philanthropic funds that provide risk-tolerant capital for pilots and scaling proven solutions.

Embedded digital service teams that strengthen internal delivery capacity while modernizing from within.

There is no one-size-fits-all model. Success depends on context, available resources, urgency of needs, and the political environment. However, the ingredients that increase odds of success remain consistent across many models.

The path forward

Modernization cannot succeed as a one-time project — it requires internal capacity to deliver, adapt, and improve continuously. In an environment of constrained resources and growing demands, collaborative models aren't optional; they're essential.

This requires structures that enable shared investment and distributed decision-making; long-term stewardship and sustainability planning; and reimagining roles: what federal agencies fund and coordinate, what states build and maintain, and how philanthropy fills urgent gaps.

The pressures facing government systems create an opening to rethink how states, federal partners, vendors, and civic organizations work together. By sharing insights from practitioners who've navigated these challenges, this report serves to help leaders navigate uncertainty, align across programs, and modernize with a deeper commitment to effective, resilient service delivery.

Introduction

The term modernization is often framed as a one-time technical upgrade — moving to the cloud, redesigning a website, or replacing outdated software. But real modernization goes deeper. It's a continuous process rooted in an organization's mindset, management structure, and decision-making approach. It means aligning technology investments with measurable outcomes, prioritizing user experiences, and shifting incentives toward performance outcomes and adaptability.

The core challenge isn't just about finding the right technical solution, since many strong solutions and approaches already exist, but rather how those solutions are designed, governed, and adopted. Too often, modernization efforts falter because decision-making processes, accountability structures, and rationales for investment don't support iterative, collaborative, or user-centered ways of working. Successful modernization requires the alignment of values, buy-in from the public and decision makers, and the right blend of technical skills, interpersonal capacity, and collaborative methodologies. As many of the experts we interviewed in our research put it: "It's not a technical problem; it's a people problem."

This report stems from the recognition that this purpose-driven, iterative, and collaborative form of modernization is both urgently needed and structurally difficult to achieve, particularly in federated programs where responsibility is split across federal, state, and local levels. Over the past decade, governments have adopted elements of modern civic tech practice — agile delivery, human-centered design, and open-source solutions — with some notable successes. States also made rapid digital advances during the COVID-19 pandemic, spurred by new funding, flexible policy, and urgency. Yet much of this progress occurred around, rather than within, the legacy systems that still anchor public assistance programs, often resulting in parallel systems that added complexity instead of reducing it.

The result is a mixed picture. Some programs have made visible strides towards modernization, while others remain constrained by the same barriers: fragmented funding, conflicting policy directives, and limited staffing. Modernizing these deeply embedded legacy systems not only requires new technology, but also building the structures, relationships, and governance models that enable states, federal partners, and civic organizations to work collaboratively.

Research goals: Learning from practical experience

Our research is grounded in prior research with the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program. In partnership with the National WIC Association, Nava PBC conducted national landscape assessments that highlighted the limits of existing WIC Management Information Systems (MIS) — the technical backbone of eligibility determination, benefits delivery, and reporting. These systems were rigid, aging, and unable to integrate with modern tools or connect easily to other programs. States told us they were innovating, like building mobile apps or enabling remote certification, but often outside the MIS, creating yet another set of siloed systems. When prototyping ways to address these issues and build a more interoperable WIC program, we discovered technical feasibility but ran into challenges around modernization governance structures and procedures for federal and state agencies.

This disconnect raised core questions: How can states modernize not just systems, but the systems and governance structures that sustain them? What would it take to create a modernization pathway that is equitable, sustainable, and adaptable across states?

To answer this, we broadened our research beyond WIC to include other federated public programs such as Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and unemployment insurance, as well as modernization efforts supported by state and federal digital service teams like 18F and the U.S. Digital Service (USDS). These groups have experimented with collaborative models of modernization, including the use of shared tools, open-source development, collaborative governance models, and cross-jurisdictional partnerships. Across 28 interviews with practitioners and technical experts, we heard a consistent refrain: the barriers WIC faces are not unique. Many modernization efforts encounter the same systemic challenges like procurement bottlenecks,vendor lock-in, capacity gaps and conflicting interpretations of the law.

Yet amid those challenges, we also found a set of promising practices — what we've come to think of as the ingredients for collaborative modernization. These include a focus on proactively adapting to evolving political priorities, empowered product leadership, increased knowledge sharing, and building coalitions that can cut through barriers and build momentum. These ingredients also highlight the need for investing in the people who are modernizing technology systems. While there's no one-size-fits-all model, these ingredients appear again and again in successful efforts across programs.

Why it matters: The necessity of collaboration

Our research comes when the federally funded digital infrastructure that supports states is under increasing strain. In 2025, the federal government sunset digital service agencies, clawed back millions in unspent modernization grants, and shifted more administrative costs onto state agencies. As a result, states are being asked to do more with less to meet growing demands for accessible, efficient, and equitable public services.

In this environment, collaborative models to advance modernization isn't optional — it's essential. It requires structures that enable shared investment, distributed decision-making, and support long-term stewardship. It also demands a reimagining of roles: what federal agencies fund and coordinate, what states build and maintain, and how philanthropy can fill urgent gaps in technical assistance and knowledge sharing.

Drawn from people who worked on prior technology implementations, this report offers a set of insights about how modernization can succeed, especially when driven collaboratively, and where efforts have fallen short. It's designed as a field guide to help leaders navigate uncertainty, align across programs, and modernize with a deeper commitment to effective, resilient service delivery.

Modernizing public benefit systems is a multifaceted challenge that spans technical, operational, and political domains. To understand not only what makes modernization succeed but how it can be sustained across jurisdictions, we captured perspectives from those designing, implementing, funding, and governing these efforts. Our approach involved collecting firsthand accounts from practitioners via interviews supplemented with practitioner-recommended readings to understand additional context on governance models, funding mechanisms, and policy interventions that they shared. This mix enabled us to ground our findings in both lived experience and established practices and terminology, producing insights that are relevant, actionable, and adaptable across programs and states.

Research methods

Our research employed a qualitative methodology informed by three primary activities:

1 Interviews with subject matter experts

We completed 28 semi-structured interviews between April and August 2025 with individuals representing federal and state agencies, digital service teams, nonprofit organizations, and policy-focused entities. Interviewees included product managers, engineers, policy advisors, and former public servants with direct experience leading or advising collaborative models to advance modernization efforts. We intentionally selected participants with a range of experiences to reflect the diversity of perspectives, roles, and organizational contexts involved in collaborative modernization, including:

7 federal and state program leaders from unemployment insurance (UI), SNAP, and Medicaid who have participated in cross-jurisdictional modernization efforts. These participants brought direct experience navigating overlapping state and federal requirements, working across agency silos, and managing large-scale technology projects in complex governance environments.

7 practitioners from federal and state digital service teams with backgrounds in engineering, design, product management, procurement, and organizational change. These participants shared insight into how digital service teams can bolster state capacity, introduce modern delivery practices, and translate lessons learned across programs and jurisdictions.

5 civic technology professionals with experience leading agile software development, running software collaboratives, and modernizing legacy systems in the U.S. and internationally. This group included implementers and advisors who have worked to align technology investments with program outcomes while fostering shared ownership of tools and infrastructure.

5 policy, research, and advocacy leaders from national associations, think tanks, and coalitions that convene government, advocacy, and philanthropic stakeholders. These participants offered perspectives on how federal and state policy environments influence modernization efforts, how states share promising practices, and how collective action can address systemic barriers.

4 specialized conveners and technical assistance providers who design and facilitate collaborative spaces for states to solve shared technology and policy challenges. This included individuals who support state-led coalitions, coordinate cross-state knowledge-sharing networks, or broker partnerships between states, federal agencies, and vendors.

By engaging this range of voices, we sought to capture the non-technical dimensions of modernization, including the formal governance and informal collaboration structures and their interplay with policy, agency operations, and technology development that make large-scale change possible.

2 Targeted reading to understand topics and examples from interviews

We consulted the following publications to understand further context of the topicsand examples practitioners shared during the interviews. Publications included government reports, policy briefs, and thought leadership pieces on digital modernization, procurement reform, and governance. These materials provided comparative frameworks, examples of modern governance structures, and case studies of procurement and funding strategies. By gaining a deeper understanding of what practitioners shared with us during interviews, we were able to more adequately code and analyse interview responses.

Architecting effective governance in the public interest. Beeck Center for Social Impact + Innovation. 2023

Building Resilience: A plan to transform unemployment insurance. U.S. Department of Labor. 2024

Day One Project: Responding to the COVID-19 unemployment crisis and meeting the future of work challenge. Marcus Courtney, Adam Bobrow. 2020

Derisking government technology guide. U.S. General Services Administration, 18F. 2024

How to save a billion dollars. Ann Lewis. Niskanen Center, 2025

Human service agencies and the question of impact: Lessons for theory, policy, and practice. Jennifer Mosley, Steven Smith. 2018

Improving state unemployment insurance technology: A guide for advocates. Michele Evermore, Julia Simon-Mishel, Dan Hon, Meghan Binford, Lina Klose. 2024

Implementation practice in human service systems: Understanding the principles and competencies of professionals who support implementation. Allison Metz, et al. 2021

State IT Procurement Negotiations, NASPO. 2023

Policy failure and the policy-implementation gap: Can policy support programs help? Bob Hudson, David Hunter, Stephen Peckham. 2019

Restoring Common Sense to Federal Procurement. The White House. 2025

Sharing Government Software. Beeck Center, 2021

The 2025 State Chief Data Officer Survey. Beeck Center, 2025

The Digital Services Playbook. U.S. Digital Service. 2014

The Product Operating Model: How government should deliver digital services. Ninkasen Center. 2025

Unemployment Insurance IT Modernization Grant Projects: Insights Report. Beeck Center. 2024

3 Thematic analysis

We coded our research findings using a structured tagging system to identify recurring themes across interviews. Rather than beginning with predefined categories, we let patterns emerge from the perspectives of our interviewees. While early tags captured a wide range of issues — like product management, governance, funding, and capacity — these insights coalesced into four interdependent domains that consistently shape the trajectory of modernization: **policy, procurement and funding, capacity building, and advocacy communications**.

Policy reflects the statutory frameworks, regulatory interpretations, and shifting political agendas that enable and constrain modernization.

Procurement and funding covers the dollars and contracts that turn policy into practice. This includes whether funding streams support iterative work, whether procurement can keep pace with evolving needs, and how states mitigate vendor dependency.

Capacity building refers to the people, skills, structures, and governance arrangements that enable modernization to take root. Beyond technical expertise, it's about developing the sustained capacity to lead, adapt, and manage change across projects and vendors.

Advocacy communications encompasses the relational and narrative work that sustains modernization. This includes aligning stakeholders, building coalitions, and shaping narratives that generate momentum, shift mindsets, and build political support over time across the political spectrum.

For each of these domains, we identified insights and opportunities that reconfigure the non-technical side of modernization — the organizational, policy, and governance dynamics that determine whether new technology can take hold. Importantly, we learned states are not navigating these challenges alone.

These domains do not exist in isolation. They overlap and reinforce one another: policy sets foundations for the environment; funding channels it into practice; capacity determines whether results can be sustained; and advocacy turns results into the momentum needed to shape future policy for ongoing support of modernization efforts. This interdependence is one of the reasons modernization is so challenging — if one domain is weak, the others can stall. At the same time, progress in one area can ripple outward, building momentum across the rest.

Strengths and limitations

This research draws on the direct experience of practitioners who have actively participated in modernization work. By drawing on diverse perspectives across professional roles, levels of government, and organizational structures, the investigation captured a wide range of insights, including opportunities and constraints shaping the field. The work was not guided by a predetermined solution; instead, practitioner expertise informed the learning process and the recommendations, leading to a more nuanced view of what worked and what ingredients promote success. The varied vantage points of our interviewees also revealed how deeply interconnected modernization efforts are, and where shifts in policy, funding, capacity, or communication can create ripple effects across the entire system.

At the same time, there are limitations. The research represents a targeted scan rather than a comprehensive review of all modernization efforts. Interviews relied in part on snowball sampling, which may not generalize to a broader population of practitioners and policymakers, and the sample size was designed to identify emerging themes, not provide a representative picture. The landscape is also evolving quickly, with new funding, policy, and technology developments reshaping the field even as we prepared this report. Findings should therefore be read as directional insights that highlight patterns and opportunities, not definitive conclusions.

Insights and opportunities

1 **Policy**

2 **Procurement and funding**

3 **Capacity-building**

4 **Communication**

Federal statutes, regulatory guidance, and political mandates shape whether agencies have the clarity, flexibility, and stability needed to pursue lasting change. Yet policy is rarely static: shifting administrations, competing interpretations, and crisis-driven mandates create an environment where momentum can emerge quickly but sustainability remains uncertain. In this landscape, shared infrastructure and targeted technical assistance are essential tools to navigate legal barriers and translate broad policy directives into practical action.

Insight 1.1:

Reliance on political catalysts creates uncertain paths to sustainability.

Modernization in the public sector often gains momentum via a triggering event, such as a political shift, legislative mandate, or system failure that makes maintaining the status quo untenable. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, both the UI and WIC programs underwent accelerated modernization. Emergency relief funding and waivers enabled WIC to adopt remote certification and service delivery tools that were previously infeasible, dramatically increasing participant access and agency flexibility. Simultaneously, unprecedented unemployment insurance (UI) claim volumes exposed the brittleness of decades-old systems, prompting federal investment and a wave of digital upgrades to expand access, fight fraud, and improve resilience. A decade earlier, the Affordable Care Act served as another major catalyst: its overhaul of Medicaid eligibility rules, paired with a 90% federal match for IT investments, spurred states to launch integrated, data-driven enrollment systems and modern applications.

These catalysts often unlock significant funding and elevate modernization on the policy agenda, but they can also introduce risk. Funding tied to a catalyst often comes with restrictive conditions, short timelines, or clawback provisions that limit flexibility and require agencies to act quickly.

In practice, the urgency of these moments often collides with deep structural misalignments in government timelines:

Project schedules may not align with budget cycles.

Budget timelines rarely match lengthy procurement processes.

Hiring timelines often lag behind both.

These mismatches can stall projects or force rushed decision-making, particularly when lawmakers must allocate or spend funding within a narrow window. Short timelines encourage “big bang” technology investments — large, one-time system overhauls prone to failure — rather than the continuous, iterative improvements that successful modernization requires.

Insight 1.2:

Conflicting legal interpretations slow modernization.

Catalysts can build momentum for disciplines and departments that are traditionally siloed in government to tackle a new challenge. Often, when these groups come together, the challenge of conflicting regulations and requirements comes to the forefront.

Existing data sharing protections and legacy processes reinforce silos, making joint work slow and high-friction. Additionally, agencies may find it difficult to repurpose or expand existing systems since federal statutes often dictate data sharing requirements. For example, the Federal Data Services Hub is a centralized system that enables states to verify essential eligibility criteria (e.g., citizenship status, Social Security benefits, and wage data) by brokering access to data from the U.S. Social Security Administration, the Internal Revenue Service, and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, among other sources. While the Hub simplifies verification processes, its use is constrained by statutes, regulations, and data-use agreements to eligibility verification only, limiting the ability to repurpose it for other programmatic or analytic needs.

As a result, even though these protections are important for privacy and accountability, they can create rigid functional boundaries and slow down cross-program modernization and interoperability.

Alongside real legal constraints, state leaders frequently face ambiguous or conflicting policy guidance across federal agencies, leaving interpretation up to state legal teams without a clear authority to resolve discrepancies. Without aligned guidance, states must reconcile overlapping requirements on their own — slowing modernization efforts and increasing risk of noncompliance.

"You probably have at least 40 or 50 different implementations, if not truly 53 unique implementations across the states and territories that participate in unemployment insurance."
State program leader

Insight 1.3:

Executive champions bridge siloes but are vulnerable to turnover.

Interviewees repeatedly underscored the importance of executive champions. One federal respondent noted that the single most effective way to work across silos is to identify the right level of leadership for each project, secure their engagement, and clearly articulate the actions needed to move forward. This "cover" from leadership can override bureaucratic delays and legal bottlenecks.

This leader does not need to be a technologist but must have the institutional authority to convene departments to navigate legal constraints together, sustain prioritization, and remove obstacles.

"You need leadership who will give you cover, who will say this is a priority — legal, get it out of your queue, let's go."
State program leader.

Yet relying on executive champions has clear limits. These leaders are often drawn to flagship projects, leaving less visible but equally important efforts without the same support. Their influence is also vulnerable to political turnover: a new administration or set of appointments can shift priorities, undermining continuity and sustainability.

Opportunity 1.1: Use shared infrastructure to navigate legal and policy barriers.

Data-sharing collaboratives: While catalysts often expose fragmentation, they can also accelerate the creation of shared infrastructure that helps states navigate legal and policy barriers together. Data-sharing collaboratives are one of the clearest examples. The National Association of State Workforce Agencies (NASWA), in partnership with the U.S. Department of Labor, operates a suite of tools that reduce duplicative efforts and provide secure, standardized channels for agencies to exchange sensitive information. The Integrity Data Hub allows states to match claimant records against federal datasets for fraud prevention; the Interstate Connection Network streamlines cross-state wage verification; and the State Information Data Exchange System provides a uniform format for employers to report separation information. By brokering legal agreements and building technical integration tools, NASWA enables states to access vetted, reusable infrastructure instead of starting from scratch.

Governance frameworks and interoperability standards: The American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) plays a similar role on the human services side, convening states to address both real and perceived barriers to data use. Through initiatives such as ACCESS, the Aligned, Customer-Centered Ecosystem of Supports & Services effort with NASWA, and the National Electronic Interstate Compact Enterprise (NEICE), APHSA has established governance frameworks and interoperability standards that enable agencies to share case information securely across jurisdictions.

Opportunity 1.2: Provide targeted support to help states turn policy into practice.

Turning policy into practice requires more than guidance on paper. States need practical support and tools from trusted sources to translate broad policy requirements into the operational systems that process claims, determine eligibility, and deliver services to residents. The Beeck Center's Digital Benefits Network (DBN) offers a clear example. In 2023, DBN convened agencies, technologists, and advocates to tackle one of the most persistent barriers in benefits delivery: identity verification. DBN published an open dataset to give agencies visibility into cross-state practices, covering 158 online applications across SNAP, WIC, Medicaid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), child care, and UI. Building on this work, DBN partnered with the National Institute of Standards and Technology and the Center for Democracy and Technology to adapt federal digital identity guidelines into a voluntary profile tailored for public benefits — offering agencies clear standards they could implement without starting from scratch.

Federal agencies can play a similar role if they pivot from a strictly compliance oversight role to active technical assistance. The U.S. Department of Labor's creation of the Office of Unemployment Insurance Modernization (OUIM) in 2021 marked such a shift. Unlike traditional oversight offices, OUIM was established specifically to help states modernize their UI systems by offering expertise, tools, and strategic guidance. Working with 18F, USDS, and civic technologists, OUIM championed modular, claimant-centered design and released tangible assets like the Claimant Experience Pilot (an open-source sample application) and plain-language notice guides. These resources gave states practical starting points for modernization while demonstrating how federal partners can act as true collaborators.

Insights and opportunities

1 Policy

2 **Procurement and funding**

3 Capacity-building

4 Communication

Operations translate policy into practice. They encompass the practical realities that determine whether modernization projects succeed or stall. While policy direction and leadership set the stage, the day-to-day execution of modernization hinges on securing resources, managing funding, and overseeing vendors.

Insight 2.1:

Funding and procurement timelines are misaligned.

Procurement and funding emerged as the most consistently cited challenges to modernization. These issues are deeply intertwined, starting with fundamentally misaligned timelines. Modernization dollars typically arrive through a patchwork of short-term grants and administrative funds with strict spend-down rules, while procurement often unfolds over years, from drafting requirements to signing a contract with a technical partner.

These challenges are compounded because administrators must navigate both state procurement requirements and federal funding approval processes. In federated programs like Medicaid, WIC, and SNAP, states must submit Advance Planning Documents (APDs) and gain approval from federal agencies before they can proceed to procure system changes. Because this approval process often takes many months, it adds a structural delay before procurement, when vendor selection can be considered.

Even when funding is available, procurement structures rarely support iterative development. By the time requirements are written, reviewed, and procured, they are often outdated and agencies are locked into rigid contracts that leave little room for iteration.

"The first 90% is generally pretty easy. There's a big push, everyone's excited about it, the thing gets set up. That last 10% and then the ongoing maintenance really becomes a struggle. Which then ties to the second piece, which is sustained financing. Funders love to fund the building of the thing. They don't understand that they need to fund [maintenance]. Software is not like a thing you have on a shelf. It's more like a garden and you have to keep pulling out weeds and trimming things and watering and planting new things otherwise it dies."
Convener & technical assistance provider

Insight 2.2:

Vendor dependency undermines long-term stewardship.

Technical vendors are a critical part of the modernization ecosystem. They bring expertise that capacity-constrained agencies often lack, enabling states to quickly build or update systems to comply with new policy mandates when funding is available. But without technical staff embedded inside agencies, the knowledge required to run and evolve systems stays outside government — and often disappears when contracts end. Over time this creates vendor dependency or lock-in, where agencies are tied to vendor-driven solutions that are costly to replace and difficult to realign with program goals.

"The number one thing that I've seen is that internal capacity for product development and/or developing the technology yourself is the total differentiator in the stability and the ability of systems to be resilient."
Federal program leader

Too often, vendors overstate the cost or time required for system changes, and without in-house expertise, agencies are forced to accept those estimates at face value. When states have technical experts in the room, they can push back and secure better outcomes.

"You don't need all of the development team to be in-house, but you need at least a handful of people to provide technical oversight — someone who can say, 'what you're proposing doesn't make sense, redo it.' Otherwise you just build code debt that can't be maintained."
Federal digital service practitioner

Opportunity 2.1:

Embed digital experts as procurement and delivery advisors.

Interviewees shared that one promising collaborative strategy is embedding digital service teams as in-house advisors to program agencies. These teams bring technical fluency and product management capacity that many programs lack the staff to implement, particularly when launching new projects while having to sustain ongoing operations. Their presence enables agencies to draft stronger requests for proposal (RFPs), oversee vendors more effectively, and push back on inflated estimates. As one federal digital services practitioner noted, these digital service teams bring value not just by "coding and shipping and showing what's possible," but by bringing "a technical expert in the room to push back on the vendor saying 'this will be $100,000 and take six months.'"

By serving as translators between program needs and technical solutions, digital service teams help agencies avoid vendor lock-in and restore control over modernization priorities. They offer a model for sustainable vendor management by helping states negotiate from a position of strength rather than necessity.

Opportunity 2.2:

Pair pooled resources with strong governance.

Several interviewees described efforts to move beyond traditional procurement by pooling resources through consortia, software collaboratives, and interstate compacts. These models can reduce duplication, increase bargaining power, and spread innovation — but only if they are paired with strong governance. When states failed to define ownership, decision rights, or contribution rules up front, collaborations often broke down into conflict over who controlled the codebase and whether it could be reused.

"Almost every one of these [collaboratives] was created in a vacuum. By the time problems emerged, there were no agreements about ownership or decision rights. That's why some of them ended in conflict instead of working systems."
Federal digital services practitioner

Governance also determines whether collective efforts can deliver modular, incremental improvements. When collaboratives set clear rules, empower product owners, and build components incrementally instead of whole systems at once, they can adapt priorities and show results quickly. Without those norms, efforts bogged down in consensus-driven delays often defaulted back to vendor-led contracts.

The Council of State Governments (CSG) confronted these challenges by building shared software for interstate licensure compacts. Early plans to license vendor systems broke down when contracts proved opaque and code inaccessible. Recognizing that the real barrier was governance, not technology, CSG applied its experience in brokering interstate agreements to the software itself — establishing rules for ownership, decision-making, and product management. After taking on the hard governance work first, the CSG is now developing its system as open source, with a dedicated product owner and transparent processes for contribution and reuse.

Insights and opportunities

1 Policy

2 Procurement and funding

3 Capacity-building

4 Communication

Modernization cannot succeed as a one-time product build; it requires the internal capacity to deliver, adapt, and improve continuously. Without this shift, states remain trapped in cycles of crisis-driven funding and reactive outsourcing.

Insight 3.1:

Limited staffing and outdated systems strain state capacity.

States must manage increasingly complex benefit programs with evolving requirements, frequent policy changes, and high levels of federally mandated reporting. Yet staff carry out these responsibilities on outdated, clunky systems that were never designed to keep pace with this level of oversight or adapt quickly to change. It results in staff spending enormous time and effort just keeping programs running — such as pulling required reports, patching old systems, and responding to compliance demands — leaving minimal bandwidth to address technical debt or design new solutions. Hiring and retention challenges deepen the capacity gap. As one state program leader noted, developers working for government agencies sometimes "make 15% of what they could in the private sector," making it hard for agencies to attract and keep talent.

"Even if you had all the [technical] skills, could you allow those skills to be doing something other than direct productivity of your program? And the answer typically is no, because if you have skills you need them focused on paying off a mountain of technical debt — whether that's process or technological."
State program leader

Governance complexity can also overwhelm staff. One example came from a state's integrated eligibility project, which spanned three state agencies and four federal agencies.

"The person who runs that project has so many bosses, so many reporting requirements that [it] basically becomes several full-time jobs."
State program leader

Insight 3.2:

States face shared problems but lack coordinated solutions.

Both federal and state subject matter experts noted that states face strikingly similar challenges but often lack visibility into each other's experiences, even when working with the same vendors and systems. Without mechanisms for structured coordination, bugs and issues are discovered and resolved piecemeal.

"Almost every one of the dozens and dozens of these [systems][...] was created in a vacuum. They had no idea this was a thing. [...] And every other case, we'd reach out [...] they were like, 'Wait, there's more of us?'"
Federal digital services practitioner

In the absence of formal coordination, staff often rely on informal "phone-a-friend" networks across states. While valuable, these ad hoc exchanges depend on already overextended staff and miss the opportunity for systematic collaboration. Formal convenings can fill this gap, but interviewees emphasized they often lack the depth and specificity needed to support real implementation. The most effective forums move beyond sharing surface-level problems to co-developing solutions, sharing reusable tools and playbooks, and creating common requirements that states can adapt quickly.

State-level interviewees pointed to an additional opportunity: federal agencies could act as conduits of cross-state information. Rather than organizing more state-led convenings, state leaders said they want federal partners to use their oversight role to share insights on vendor performance, contract terms, and recurring system issues. Currently, information about pricing, contract structures, and vendor problems is siloed — even though states are often working with the same vendors under the same federal funding streams.

"We've heard that when issues are detected in one state, there's not like an alert that goes out like, 'Check your system. You probably have this error, too. Let's fix it.' It's left to each state to individually find and address. [...] It seems like a real miss to not help states be more savvy in the space."
Policy and research advocacy leader

Together, these gaps highlight that while states share many of the same problems, they need better channels to act collectively on them.

Opportunity 3.1:

Create candid spaces to share what's working and what's not.

Convenings reduce the burden on individual states to solve implementation challenges in isolation, a dynamic that often leads to fragmentation, duplication, and "reinventing the wheel." But the most valuable convenings are those that create a truly candid space: a forum where state leaders can speak openly not only about what worked, but also about what failed, what stalled, and why. In practice, learning about mistakes and missteps often provides the most useful lessons. State leaders can calibrate expectations, avoid repeating others' errors, and draw practical insights without the pressure to replicate another state's exact model.

Neutral, third-parties are especially critical for creating these candid spaces. They can bridge gaps between technical experts and program leaders, manage logistics, and maintain momentum over time. More importantly, they provide a trusted umbrella under which sensitive conversations can take place — whether that means openly discussing vendor underperformance, admitting failed experiments, or surfacing frustrations with federal guidance.

At their best, candid convenings enable three things:

Collective problem-solving instead of fragmented fixes

Reusable playbooks and tools that can be adapted across states

Shared advocacy strategies to push for aligned policy and funding changes

Without these safe and candid spaces, states risk falling back into informal "phone-a-friend" networks that are valuable but unsustainable, depending too heavily on overextended staff. A more systematic approach, backed by trusted conveners and a culture of openness, can make shared learning a durable part of the modernization ecosystem.

Opportunity 3.2:

Define what good looks like with shared benchmarks and standards.

To make convenings more actionable, benchmarks and standards — whether in the form of evaluation frameworks, maturity models, or structured implementation support tools — provide structure to support shared learning. They give agencies a common language and criteria for comparing approaches, highlight where capacity is lagging, and enable jurisdictions to replicate promising practices.

Importantly, these frameworks work best when flexible: recognizing different starting points and enabling agencies to advance in stages, rather than imposing one-size-fits-all mandates. An example comes from Public Digital's Data Strategy Playbook, which provides governments with a self-assessment framework to gauge their data maturity across eight foundational conditions, from leadership and funding to technology and capacity. The tool outlines what low, medium, and high maturity look like for each domain, helping agencies diagnose strengths and weaknesses, align stakeholders around a shared vision, and chart realistic next steps. By making the path to improvement explicit, the model helps agencies not only benchmark their current systems but also identify practical next steps.

This type of structured framework could be applied more broadly across programs. Convenings could be organized not only by geography, as is the default in many federated programs, but by maturity level or shared challenges. A state struggling with data quality might benefit most from convening with peers at the same stage, while another ready to pilot modular components could learn from others further along the path.

By showing agencies where they stand and offering a roadmap for progress, shared benchmarks and standards turn abstract lessons into actionable next steps. They make it possible for states to move from inspiration to implementation in ways that are both concrete and context-sensitive.

Insights and opportunities

1 Policy

2 Procurement and funding

3 Capacity-building

4 Communication

While technology and funding are critical, practitioners consistently emphasized "the tech is the easy part." The most complex aspects of modernization are about people: navigating competing priorities, reconciling directives across agencies, and aligning diverse stakeholders around shared goals.

Insight 4.1:

When rules are vague and accountability is high, states become risk-averse.

Modernization in public benefits happens under a "zero-downtime" mandate, meaning agencies must ensure people don't lose access to critical services while systems change. Vague or conflicting federal directives, with no clear precedence, force states to translate policy into implementation on their own. In that environment, risk aversion takes hold and decisions default to what can get approved rather than what solves the problem best. At the same time, IT, program, and policy teams operate under different incentives: IT manages enterprise processes, program leads meeting outcomes under deadlines, and policy staff focus on compliance and risk. Without a shared vision, clear authority, and a common language, projects often skip the hard work of aligning teams and persuading each group to work together.

"Projects that I saw fail were 'you don't know what you're doing, move over.' Building rapport and relationships is key."
Federal digital services practitioner

Practitioners stressed that progress depends on employing staff with strong technical skills and relational skills, such as high emotional intelligence, empathy, and the ability to translate technical needs into language that resonates across disciplines. Without those skills, even well-designed projects stall, leaving agencies locked into outdated tools and slow, cautious progress.

Insight 4.2:

Communication is undervalued, making it hard to sustain support.

Large modernization efforts bring together new coalitions of stakeholders. To keep these groups aligned, teams must communicate decisions and visible wins early and often. Teams can use a "start somewhere" approach, starting with improvements that are highly visible and easy to measure can be especially effective. In several state UI modernization projects, stakeholders chose to redesign claimant intake portals first. These efforts produced clear, tangible results — shorter application times, faster approvals, and fewer calls to contact centers — that built confidence and momentum for tackling more complex legacy systems on the back end.

The project team must also communicate progress to external stakeholders. Sharing progress with external influencers, such as oversight bodies, budget offices, and legislators, can bolster sustained investments for system enhancements which are vulnerable to political shifts. Without narratives tailored to this audience, like showing cost savings, efficiency gains, and improved user outcomes, projects risk losing support. Crafting such narratives requires staff time and dedicated effort, which many agencies lack. When teams did invest in communications capacity, they were able to make progress more visible, reduce political risk, and build momentum for long-term investment.

Opportunity 4.1: Build product management capacity to drive alignment and momentum.

States are beginning to experiment with strategies that stretch limited resources and counter skepticism about the modernization risks. A critical shift is embracing a product management mindset, which means treating modernization as an iterative discipline rather than a one-time project. This approach grounds efforts in a clear vision, measurable outcomes, and roadmaps that align investments with the highest-value work, while delivering early wins that build confidence and momentum.

"People have experience with vendors who overpromise and underdeliver. The best antidote is to deliver early and often. Deliver a win, parlay that into doing more — it becomes a cycle that wins people over and builds support."
Civic technologist

Most agencies lack dedicated product managers who can translate policy into technical requirements, weigh trade-offs, and hold vendors accountable. Modernization efforts can stall without people in these roles.

Our interviews highlighted that hiring product managers and giving them authority is a key differentiator for projects that deliver usable software. When states have this capacity, the benefits are clear. After receiving product and design support, a deputy commissioner working on a state's integrated eligibility project was empowered to lead a roadmap grounded in user research and service design. This roadmap sequenced work realistically and gave state leadership confidence to make the case for sustained investment. Modularity is central to this approach. Rather than attempting monolithic overhauls, states are dividing systems into interoperable components that can be adopted incrementally.

"We looked at how systems could work together and if there could be one system for every state. It wasn't possible. So we broke off components some states could use and made them extremely configurable, like Airtable or a utility-based software."
Digital federal services practitioner

By investing in product management capacity and modular delivery, states can better match fragmented funding sources to discrete improvements, advancing modernization step-by-step instead of waiting for a one-time windfall.

Opportunity 4.2:

Pair clear federal guidance with flexible state implementation.

One consistent theme from our research was that states often struggle with ambiguous or conflicting directives from federal agencies. Without clarity, state legal teams default to risk-averse interpretations that slow modernization. As one interviewee noted, projects stall not because states lack ideas, but because they lack a clear authority to resolve contradictory guidance.

What states need is not more prescriptive mandates, but clearer answers to their questions — paired with flexibility on implementation. Federal agencies can help accelerate implementation by clarifying policy boundaries while giving states room to adapt solutions to their context.

The unwinding of COVID-19 pandemic-era Medicaid policies illustrates this balance. As states resumed checking eligibility, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) issued detailed guidance on how automatic ("ex parte") renewals should work, but also paired it with direct technical assistance from the U.S. Digital Service. Rather than simply telling states what compliance required, CMS deployed experts to work side-by-side with agency staff and vendors to help interpret rules, diagnose errors, and co-design fixes under urgent timelines. As one participant recalled:

> **"For the first time CMS didn't just say 'here are the regs.' They issued very detailed guidance, supported states in figuring out where they were, and deployed USDS to sit in the room with the vendor and say, 'These are the changes that need to be made not in six months but in six weeks.'"**
> Policy, research, and advocacy leader

The lesson learned is that guidance should be clear upfront about the "what" while leaving space for states to determine the "how." Federal partners can reduce delays by resolving regulatory uncertainty up front, while still giving states discretion to design processes and systems in ways that fit their operational reality.

Opportunity 4.3:

Build coalitions to advocate for shared reforms.

Even the most capable states cannot solve systemic modernization barriers alone. Issues like vendor dependency, fragmented funding, or conflicting federal rules are deeply entrenched and lie beyond the authority of any single state to change. Coalitions provide a collective voice that can surface shared challenges and push for reforms across the system.

The Unemployment Insurance Technology Coordinating Coalition (UITCC) demonstrates how this works in practice. UITCC brings together policy experts, labor advocates, technologists, and vendors to exchange lessons, debate standards, and assess policy implications for UI modernization. By creating a shared space for cross-sector dialogue, the coalition has helped spotlight systemic challenges and elevate ideas that can shape federal priorities and guide state action.

Coalitions are especially powerful in three ways:

Elevating shared needs
Unified messages from trusted coalitions carry more weight with federal partners than isolated calls for change.

Shaping standards
Cross-sector forums can highlight common approaches (e.g., modular architecture, identity verification) that reduce fragmentation.

Advocating for resources
Coalitions frame modernization as a shared investment, making the case for sustained or flexible support.

In this way, coalition-building is not just about peer learning or dialogue — it's a strategy for overcoming the systemic barriers identified throughout this report and accelerating progress toward durable modernization.

Recap

1	**Policy**	**Insights**	**Opportunity**
		1.1: Reliance on political catalysts creates uncertain paths to sustainability.	1.1: Use shared infrastructure to navigate legal and policy barriers.
		1.2: Conflicting legal interpretations slow modernization.	1.2: Provide targeted support to help states turn policy into practice.
		1.3: Executive champions bridge siloes but are vulnerable to turnover.	
2	**Procurement and funding**	**Insights**	**Opportunity**
		2.1: Funding and procurement timelines are misaligned.	2.1: Embed digital experts as procurement and delivery advisors.
		2.2: Vendor dependency undermines long-term stewardship.	2.2: Pair pooled resources with strong governance.
3	**Capacity-building**	**Insights**	**Opportunity**
		3.1: Limited staffing and outdated systems strain state capacity.	3.1: Create candid spaces to share what's working and what's not.
		3.2: States face shared problems but lack coordinated solutions	3.2: Define what good looks like with shared benchmarks and standards.
4	**Communication**	**Insights**	**Opportunity**
		4.1: When rules are vague and accountability is high, states become risk-averse.	4.1: Build product management capacity to drive alignment and momentum.
		4.2: Communication is undervalued, making it hard to sustain support.	4.2: Pair clear federal guidance with flexible state implementation.
			4.3: Build coalitions to advocate for shared reforms.

Modernizing Together: Collaboration models in practice

Modernizing benefit systems requires both strong technical solutions and effective methods for multiple groups to work together. Collaboration models are one way agencies are doing this — formal and informal structures that allow states, federal partners, and other organizations to share knowledge, pool resources, and build solutions collectively.

Across our research, we heard that there is no single recipe for success. Each model depends on context: what resources states can bring, the urgency of their needs, and the political and policy environment they operate in. What is consistent, however, are the ingredients that increase the odds of success, such as governance that enables nimble decision-making, product leadership to manage priorities, and modular approaches that allow for incremental progress.

In the pages that follow, we outline several collaboration models in use today, along with the key "ingredients" that make each work. Rather than a prescriptive recipe, consider this a menu of options: Which models best fit your context? What do you already have on hand? Where will you need new investment?

Consortia

Consortia involve two or more jurisdictions jointly procuring, developing, or governing a shared system. A well-established example is the WIC State Agency Model (SAM), where multiple states share a Management Information System (MIS).

The value is clear: rather than 53 separate systems, states can maintain one high-quality platform together. Pooling resources increases bargaining power with vendors, reduces duplication, and fosters candid knowledge-sharing among participants. But consortia are vulnerable to slow decision-making due to differing state priorities and complex joint governance that must account for allocating decision-making authority among members who bring variable levels of expertise and resources to the group. In some cases, the complexity of managing contracts between a technical vendor and several agencies can limit members' ability to pivot and iterate on products.

Ingredients for success

Clear governance structures to define ownership and decision authority, reducing the risk of collaboration breakdowns.

Dedicated product leadership to ensure shared priorities translate into steady progress.

Shared product roadmaps create transparency and a common reference point across states.

Modular contracting preserves flexibility, allowing members to pivot without being trapped in rigid contracts.

Open-source communities

Open-source communities extend the principles of shared ownership and collaboration beyond formal consortia. Instead of jointly procuring a single vendor-built system, these communities co-develop and maintain reusable, open-source software components that agencies can use, adapt, and improve. This approach treats code as a public good — a shared asset that reduces duplication and vendor lock-in across jurisdictions. When states contribute back improvements, documentation, or new modules, they collectively strengthen the ecosystem and reduce costs for everyone.

The Open UI initiative, led by the National Association of State Workforce Agencies (NASWA), is a current example. Instead of each state buying a monolithic proprietary UI system, Open UI provides reusable, modular components, such as claimant portals, identity verification, status trackers, that states can adopt and adapt. Open-source approaches reduce vendor dependency and lock-in by giving states direct access to the code and the ability to modify it without vendor mediation. Open-source modules also prevent duplication: for instance, if one state builds a high-quality solution for a document upload service or fraud analytics, other states can adopt that instead of reinventing the wheel. The community model further creates visibility into fixes and improvements made anywhere in the network, so states can learn from each other continuously.

However, maintenance risks loom large. Without dedicated funding and clear ownership, shared code can become "abandonware" that no one updates as policies or security needs evolve. Contributions can be uneven, with a few well-resourced states carrying most of the weight, and governance disputes can stall progress.

Ingredients for success

Governance frameworks to set clear expectations on how to use code and contribute to the group.

Facilitate candid spaces for peer learning to equip states to adopt and maintain shared code.

Invest in coalition building to help normalize the use of open-source sharing in government.

Invest in communication design, Incorporating targeted service design efforts to create easy onramps for open source tools through documentation, sandboxes and active support from the development team.

Accelerators with shared code

While open-source communities emphasize long-term stewardship of shared codebases, there are other ways that reusable, foundational software can move across agencies. Accelerators and similar initiatives play an important role in this ecosystem by helping governments adopt shared components quickly, often through structured, time-limited programs that combine technical expertise, coaching, and pre-built code.

In these models, code sharing happens through several pathways: state-to-state reuse, cohort-based accelerators where groups of states work in parallel using shared templates, and vendor-led models that distribute configurable, reusable modules across clients. These approaches make the idea of "shared code" tangible — enabling agencies to start from a working foundation, test new approaches, and adapt tools to their needs while building internal capacity and confidence.

For instance, Code for America's Safety Net Innovation Lab partners with states to prototype and implement digital tools — like text reminders for benefit renewals — using open-source components and shared design patterns. By embedding product teams within agencies, the Lab helps states launch visible improvements quickly while learning the practices to sustain and scale them after the accelerator ends. Similarly, Microsoft's Dynamics 365 Government Accelerator provides prebuilt data models, workflows, and sample applications that agencies can configure and extend, offering another pathway for foundational code reuse through vendor-supported, modular frameworks.

The risk of these accelerator models comes after the sprint ends. Without continued funding or integration planning, pilots may remain disconnected from core systems, and states may lack the staff to maintain them. Policy barriers can also emerge when prototype functionality conflicts with existing regulations or legacy processes.

Ingredients for success

Shared, modular codebases that can be configured and reused across jurisdictions, not just replicated as isolated pilots.

Embedded technical assistance to help agencies adapt shared code to their environments and integrate it into core systems.

Clear ownership and governance to sustain tools after accelerators end and ensure continued maintenance and iteration.

Peer networks that enable ongoing knowledge-sharing and incremental improvements beyond the initial accelerator cohort.

Technical assistance cohorts

Technical assistance (TA) cohorts bring states together to work in parallel on a shared challenge, supported by experts, convenings, and toolkits. The goal is to break silos and accelerate learning. These cohorts directly address capacity gaps: small states gain access to a broader braintrust, participants can harmonize interpretations of complex federal rules, and shared standards reduce the burden of each state solving the same problem in isolation.

Cohorts are most effective when they move beyond discussion to provide implementation support such as frameworks, coaching, and practical tools that help states apply lessons consistently. For example, the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) hosts peer learning collaboratives like the Advancing Family Economic Mobility (AFEM) community and the newer Data SAIL initiative. Data SAIL convenes state teams working across health, human services, and workforce programs, pairing peer learning with targeted technical assistance and innovation funding to help agencies co-design and implement data-enabled solutions. By combining trusted convening spaces with shared infrastructure, APHSA's cohorts help states navigate the policy, technical, and organizational complexities of modernization in ways no single agency could accomplish alone.

Another benefit is peer motivation: modernization can be daunting, but seeing another state succeed with, for example, a new online claimant portal can spur others to follow suit. When done right, TA cohorts produce a community of practice that outlasts the formal program — states continue to collaborate informally, having built trust during the cohort.

A noted challenge is that progress in cohort models can be uneven, not all states move at the same pace or have the same baseline capabilities. The scope of the cohort is also critical: focusing on a narrow, shared challenge (like identity verification step in benefits enrollment) tends to yield more actionable outcomes than a broad modernization mandate.

Ingredients for success

Candid spaces for sharing wins and failures to build trust and avoid each state needing to reinvent the wheel.

Create shared benchmarks and standards to provide a structured path forward, allowing states to measure progress.

Targeted policy support ensures lessons can be operationalized within legal frameworks.

Collective advocacy to support programs in elevating systemic challenges to policymakers and funders.

Philanthropic funds for pilots and scaling

Philanthropic funds provide risk-tolerant capital that government budgets often can't. These funds invest in pilots or help scale proven approaches, filling critical gaps between crises or major funding cycles. Recent examples include the Public Benefit Innovation Fund (PBIF), which supports open-source tools for benefits access; NextLadder Ventures, which backs scalable technology for frontline workers and low-income communities; and the Recoding America Fund, which focuses on strengthening capacity and systems change. Together, these efforts illustrate how philanthropy can finance experimentation, generate evidence, and lower the risk for governments to adopt and sustain new solutions.

The risk is that philanthropy funds too many isolated pilots, resulting in fragmentation rather than systemic change. Pilots without a clear pathway into government programs can stall once philanthropic dollars run out. To counter this risk, philanthropic organizations can look beyond pilots to support integration and scaling — funding the work of embedding successful tools into government operations, modernizing the infrastructure of our safety net, underwriting the technical assistance needed for adoption, and aligning efforts across states to avoid duplication. By pairing early experimentation with investment in the capacity to carry solutions forward, philanthropy can help ensure its funding produces durable change rather than isolated successes.

Ingredients for success

Executive champions help enable agencies to adopt vetted pilots into their programs.

Candid convenings ensure pilots aren't siloed but shared for collective learning.

Benchmarks and standards to help states gauge their readiness before launching a pilot and map out what scaling would require.

Communicate wins and value to helping to de-risk political support for continued investment.

Targeted policy support to help agencies address regulatory blockers uncovered during pilots.

Embedded capacity via digital service teams

Digital service teams embed technologists, designers, and product managers inside agencies to modernize from within. At the federal level, USDS, 18F, and DOL have "tiger teams" to play this role; while states like Colorado, Massachusetts, California, and New Jersey have invested in their own teams to embed technologists inside departments to work on projects like benefit delivery, licensing systems, and unemployment.

These teams can bring much needed capacity when programs need a surge of support to launch new digital efforts. They can also add a layer of technical expertise to help vet external technical vendors' proposed solutions. These teams play a critical role in bridging communication gaps: they speak the language of both technology and policy teams and can translate needs between program officials and IT staff. What makes embedded teams promising is their ability to build capacity while delivering — they not only solve the immediate problem (e.g., build the website, fix the form, streamline the process) but also enhance agency staff through collaboration and by modeling modern practices.

In practice, these teams often parachute into a legacy project that's in trouble or kick-start a new initiative that needs modern skills. This means that their support is interim and may not address long term staffing shortages that inhibit sustained modernization. Political turnover is another threat, a new administration might not value the digital service approach and could disband or marginalize these teams.

Ingredients for success

Executive champions to approve modern development practices that may conflict with status-quo processes.

Candid spaces to share progress to help digital teams integration with program staff and build in-house capacity.

Product mindset and practice help quickly demonstrate value to build confidence and momentum.

Advocating for the value of digital service teams across stakeholders and the political spectrum.

Conclusion

Modernizing public benefit systems is undeniably hard, and the challenges ahead are significant. But these pressures also create an opening: to rethink how states, federal partners, vendors, and civic organizations work together. The collaboration models described here show that modernization doesn't need to be a solitary or one-time effort, but researchers have not thoroughly tested them yet. We hope that by sharing this research with agencies we can help inform the path forward as agencies chart a different course — one that is more collaborative, resilient, and ultimately more effective for the people these systems serve.

Nava Labs

Nava
Public Benefit Corporation

601 13th St NW, Floor 12
Washington, DC 20005

Phone:
(240) 487 9945

Email:
hello@navapbc.com

Web:
navapbc.com