

The Disaster Assistance Improvement Program

SHARING CUSTOMER INFORMATION TO STREAMLINE THE DIGITAL EXPERIENCE FOR DISASTER SURVIVORS

This case study was published in a September 2014 report by the Partnership for Public Service and Accenture Federal Services about customer-centered government in the digital age. The results cited below are from 2013, and FEMA has continued to improve data integration and expand resources available through DisasterAssistance.gov. During the first week of September 2017, the site received nearly 3 million visits as citizens worked to recover from Hurricane Harvey and prepare for Hurricane Irma.

The problem

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the need for better integration of federal services to disaster victims was painfully clear. Lack of coordination between programs and services located in different government agencies was identified as a major shortcoming of government's response to the disaster.¹ Survivors of the disaster needed access to benefits and resources as quickly as possible, but the application processes were fragmented and slow. Applicants for one disaster assistance program were often unaware that they also were eligible for assistance provided by another federal agency. Additionally, applicants for multiple programs had to provide the same information numerous times, creating unnecessary burdens and delays for individuals struggling with the loss of their homes, businesses and loved ones.

In response to these issues, the White House issued Executive Order 13411 in August 2006, challenging federal agencies to better coordinate disaster assistance and establish a centralized application process. Officials in the Disaster Assistance Improvement Program (DAIP), a multiagency initiative led by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), spearheaded this effort.

Approach and implementation

In 2008, DisasterAssistance.gov was launched, allowing users to locate information on more than 70 disaster assistance programs from 17 federal agencies, apply for assistance and check the status of their applications.

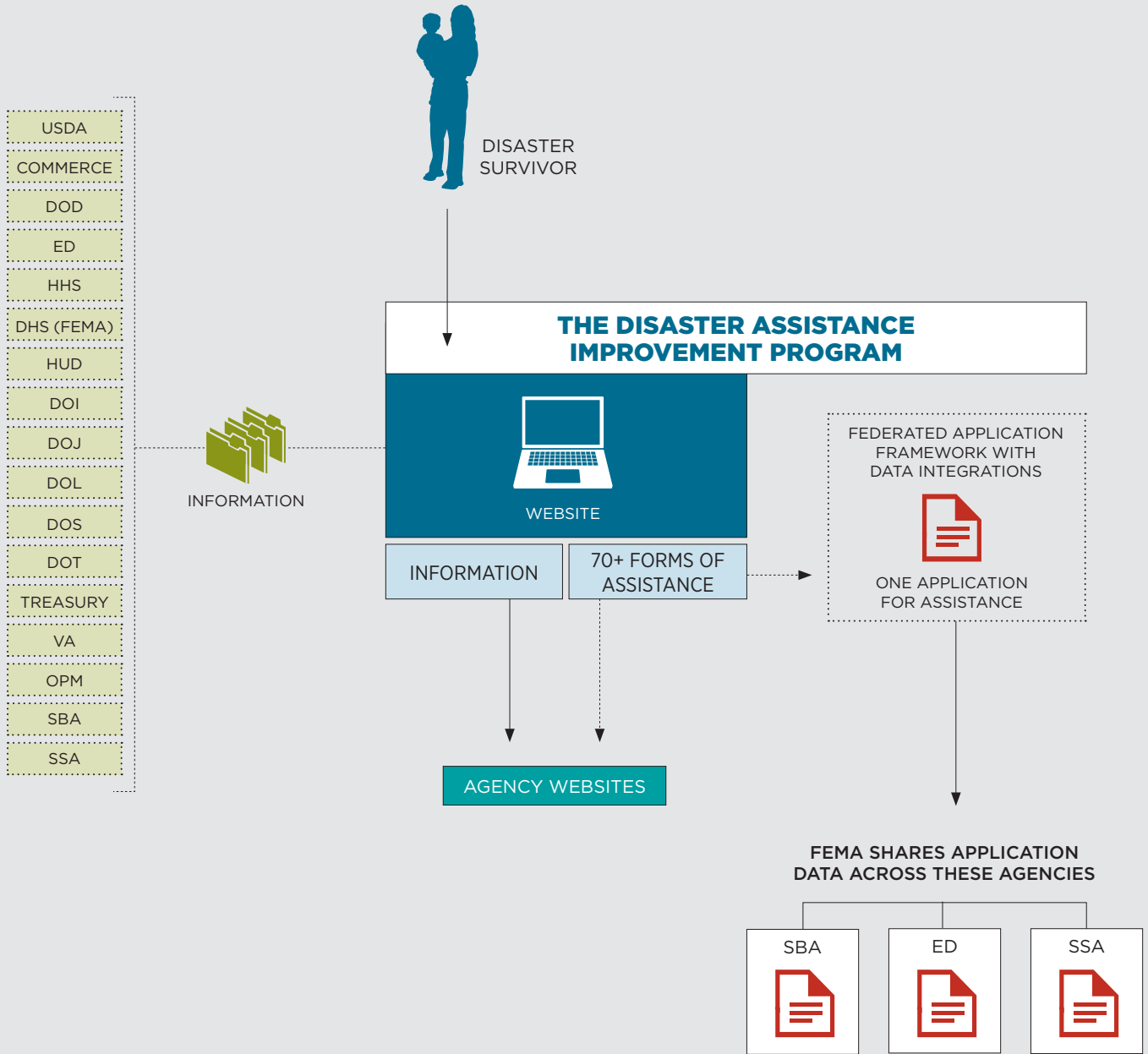
After creating an online hub of information, FEMA focused on further integrating the application processes located in separate agencies.

"The vision behind this work is effective data sharing among the federal agencies that provide disaster assistance," said Karole Johns, DAIP's program manager. "We want the disaster survivor to be able to provide all the information in a single online session and have that data distributed to all of the agencies that will potentially touch that person's case file and provide them with assistance."

To realize this vision, DAIP managers are building a federated application framework that allows FEMA to serve as a "data broker," collecting and sharing application data across multiple agencies to reduce the number of forms individuals must complete and to simplify the application process, according to Johns.

DAIP currently has data integrations in place with the Department of Education, the Social Security Administration and Small Business Administration (SBA). The SBA integration, for example, allows individ-

¹ *The Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina: Lessons Learned, Chapter Five: Lessons Learned*, The White House, <http://1.usa.gov/1AQXzRX> (accessed 24 June 2014).



uals who have registered for disaster assistance with FEMA to automatically prepopulate common data into the SBA’s loan application system, eliminating the need for entering the same information more than once. Applicants can then check the status of applications with both FEMA and the SBA on DisasterAssistance.gov rather than visiting separate websites for each application.

In attempting to integrate as many disaster assistance programs as possible, DAIP officials recognized the need for flexibility to handle variations in IT maturity among agency partners. While integrating with technologically advanced partners who already collect application data electronically is comparatively easy, integrating with less advanced partners working with paper-based

forms presents a challenge.

For partners using paper-based applications, FEMA developed the capability to host the forms electronically on DisasterAssistance.gov. FEMA delivers the completed form back to the partner agency as a PDF. According to Johns, this allows FEMA to “meet its partners where they are” while still allowing applicants to complete the form electroni-

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cally if they wish. “We have a lot of different ways to handle integration to play to agencies’ strengths and weaknesses,” said Johns.

Results

DisasterAssistance.gov hosted over 4 million visitors in fiscal 2013 and registered more than 370,000 individuals for assistance, according to the program’s annual report. The year brought a record-high number of site visits from millions of citizens affected by Hurricane Sandy.

Recent increases in the percentage of applicants registering for assistance on web and mobile devices also highlight the demand for the program’s services. According to Johns, about 23 percent of those who apply for disaster assistance traditionally have done so online. As DisasterAssistance.gov has improved its web and mobile sites, the numbers have risen. During Hurricane Sandy, almost 60 percent of applicants registered online, demonstrating the value this site brings to those seeking disaster assistance.

According to program documents, DisasterAssistance.gov received an average satisfaction score of 79 out of 100 on the ForeSee Customer Satisfaction Survey in fiscal 2013, beating the government-wide average of approximately 75. FEMA also conducts an internal cus-

tomers satisfaction survey in which more than 95 percent of DisasterAssistance.gov users routinely give the site ratings of satisfactory or better.

In 2013, the Web Marketing Association honored DisasterAssistance.gov with an Outstanding Achievement in Mobile Website Award for using responsive design technology to ensure that those seeking disaster aid can access the website from their mobile devices or desktops with the same optimized viewing capability.

Continuing challenges

Dealing with outdated technology that serves as the basis for sharing information between agencies is a key challenge for the program. “Our current system is running on technology that is approaching 20 years old, and it’s exorbitantly expensive to maintain or make changes,” said Johns. To address this issue, Johns hopes to move this legacy system into “break and fix” mode, where changes would be made to the system only if something breaks. Johns is confident the money saved by no longer investing in updates will quickly enable construction of a new system.

Complying with the Privacy Act of 1974 complicates the process of sharing information on disaster

KEY INSIGHTS



ESTABLISH THE RIGHT FUNDING MODEL

Originally agency partners contributed funding to DAIP through a model based on web metrics—agencies were charged based on the volume of web traffic hitting their programs or transferring to their agency websites through DisasterAssistance.gov. Partners eventually realized that this model served as a disincentive to collaboration; agencies that better integrated their resources with DisasterAssistance.gov were charged more. In June 2014, the program implemented a new model where partners are charged a flat fee, with additional charges for each form of disaster assistance that an agency has not incorporated into DisasterAssistance.gov.



BUILD IN TIME TO COMPLY WITH PRIVACY CONCERNS

Agencies seeking to share customer information to streamline the user experience must comply with the Privacy Act of 1974. (See page 27 for more information on the Privacy Act.) Leaders of the disaster assistance program noted the importance of building time for a thorough privacy review into their projects to ensure that each agency is operating within its legal boundaries regarding customer information that is collected and stored.



DEMONSTRATE VALUE TO INITIATIVE PARTNERS

Encouraging participation from agency partners whose primary missions are not to provide disaster assistance was tricky at times, according to Johns, especially in the years following Katrina when few disasters occurred. However, when a series of tornadoes hit large college towns in the Midwest, the Department of Education began to see huge value in its participation in DAIP. Current and former students affected by disasters often need assistance with their financial aid packages. For example, they may require more time to make payments or need to transfer to a different school. Because of its participation, the Department of Education was better prepared to assist these students.

Johns encourages agency partners to see their participation as an insurance policy—something they hope they will not need but may be glad they have.

survivors across agencies. Under the Privacy Act, FEMA is allowed to maintain only limited customer information. For example, FEMA cannot maintain business and financial data that its partners in the SBA need and are authorized to collect. FEMA implements a “catch and release” strategy to share data and sensitive information in compliance with the Privacy Act. It collects and transmits

certain financial data to the SBA, but does not store or maintain that data in any of its systems.

The disaster assistance program hopes to continue to streamline and personalize interactions by implementing an upfront needs assessment at the beginning of the application process. As more resources and types of assistance are added to the site, this needs assessment will

be critical to help applicants quickly find the resources most relevant to them. For example, an applicant who is only claiming damages to a car would be asked only data collection questions related to this need, and the information provided would prepopulate in the appropriate forms.

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