



# Time for a Change

How agencies are transforming business practices to meet customer needs

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# INTRODUCTION

With improvements in commercial services setting high expectations from the public, the federal government is in the midst of a major push to improve customer experience.

The administration has made the issue a top priority, and Congress has introduced several pieces of legislation with provisions that include establishing customer experience standards, mandating mobile-friendly government websites and using other ways to enhance customers' interactions with government. In recent budget guidance, the Office of Management and Budget released a framework that establishes a standardized approach for collecting customer feedback and assessing the maturity of customer experience management across government to help agencies improve the customer experience.

The push from the White House and Congress has helped drive attention to the issue, but real progress will require agency leaders to untangle a complicated web of decades-old systems and business processes that underpin how government delivers services to the public. And leaders must shift agency culture so it centers more on the customer—including both customers in the public and employees, who are customers of internal agency services.

For example, although federal agencies collect and report on many performance measures that are aligned with strategic goals, those measures typically focus on agency activities, such as the number of benefit applications processed, rather than customer impact and mission outcomes. And those measures rarely reflect customers' perspectives. Of the 78 performance goals federal departments and agencies list on [performance.gov](https://www.performance.gov), only two are measured based on citizen feedback,

both by the Department of Veterans Affairs. Although not all of government's performance goals should rely on how customers assess their experiences, more agencies should be incorporating feedback when evaluating performance, making decisions about needed improvements or designing new initiatives.

In this whitepaper, the Partnership for Public Service and Accenture Federal Services examine how agencies can transform their business practices to enhance citizen services. We highlight strategies federal departments and agencies are using to rethink traditional ways of doing business, and offer three key practices as models that can be replicated in other agencies.

The first practice, highlighted through work at the Department of Agriculture, is establishing a detailed, department-wide strategy for improving customer experience based on input from staff, front-line employees and customers.

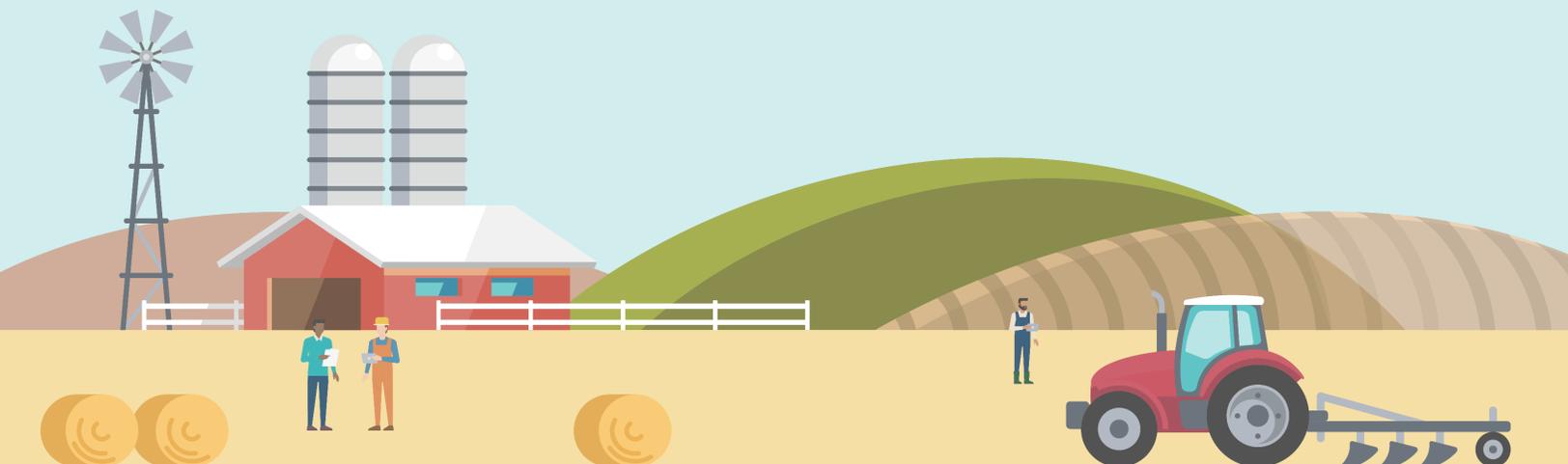
The second practice, from the Federal Insurance and Mitigation Administration, is transforming culture by expanding employees' perceptions of who their customers are and what they expect, and investing in change management activities to help employees adapt to these shifts.

The third practice, demonstrated by the Department of Veterans Affairs, is designating improving customers' trust as the agency's top performance measure to ensure that receiving and acting on customer feedback is central to everything it does.

In all these cases, the organizations aimed to substantially improve how they deliver services by reexamining longstanding approaches and business practices from the customer perspective.



# EMPLOYEE-LED PROCESS IMPROVEMENTS



Leaders at the Department of Agriculture have made customer experience the centerpiece of an organization-wide modernization effort, and are developing detailed plans for improving their services based on ideas from staff, front-line employees and customers.

Established by Abraham Lincoln more than 150 years ago, USDA has a proud history of supporting America's agricultural sector, conserving natural resources and ensuring food is safe and nutritious. But as the needs of ranchers, farmers, food processors and consumers have evolved, the agency still operates with siloed and redundant systems, and paper-based business processes from decades ago. When Secretary Sonny Perdue assumed the department's leadership in 2017, he set out to modernize the organization and bring services into the 21st century, according to the department's strategic plan.<sup>1</sup>

The secretary made it a top priority to put the customer first and established USDA's first centralized Office of Customer Experience with Joe Doyle at the helm. Doyle, the former owner of a successful 240-store retail chain, has decades of experience with private sector customers and also led Georgia's Office of Customer Service when Perdue was governor.

One of leadership's challenges in revamping USDA's programs and services is the size and complexity of the organization. The department is composed of 17 agencies that operate more than 385 very diverse programs, and about 90 percent of employees live and work outside of the Washington, D.C. area.<sup>2</sup> "One of the first things we learned was how much we didn't know," Doyle said. USDA leadership turned to employees to identify challenges and seek recommendations for ways to improve processes and deliver a better customer experience.

While seeking employee feedback on customer experience improvements is a strategy many agencies use, USDA also then developed a detailed system and plan for capturing, organizing and acting on that feedback. Perdue asked each agency in the department to create a customer experience improvement plan (see Appendix A) to identify challenges that could be addressed in fiscal 2019 at little to no cost, and without legislative changes. The plans are employee-led and meant to foster a bottom-up approach for identifying, addressing and improving agencies' customer experience efforts. The focus is on making the department faster, friendlier and easier to interact with, including speeding up service delivery, simplifying access to USDA programs and people, and creating a culture of courteous and helpful employees.

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, "USDA Strategic Plan." Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2Qg8LFD>

<sup>2</sup> Office of Personnel Management, "FedScope." Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2shTfw7>

**“We didn’t take the approach that we had a burning platform or that there was something horrendous that we needed to fix. It is a more holistic, cultural transformation.”**

JOE DOYLE,  
DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE, DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

“In general, we didn’t take the approach that we had a burning platform or that there was something horrendous that we needed to fix,” Doyle said. “It is a more holistic, cultural transformation. We are driving everyone, every day, to improve what they do, making sure the customer is in every conversation. It is something that is going to live beyond just one project.”

Each agency in USDA appointed full-time customer experience champions to create the customer experience improvement plans. Agency leaders appointed these champions based on criteria such as proven leadership ability, problem-solving skills, trusted relationships with senior agency leadership and “a bias for action,” according to Doyle.

The champions represent a wide range of positions and disciplines across USDA, collectively bringing a breadth of experiences and insight to draw on. Of the 40 champions, a third are from outside Washington, D.C., representing USDA offices in places such as Idaho, Hawaii and Alabama. Some are scientists or policy experts, while others have experience in business functions such as communication, finance and human resources. For example, Curtis Elke, Idaho’s state conservationist, is the customer experience champion for USDA’s National Resources Conservation Service. He has been at his agency for almost two decades, in positions in five states and multiple divisions, starting as an entry-level soil conservationist.

In addition to the work being led by the Office of

Customer Experience, the department also is the first agency to partner with the General Services Administration’s Centers of Excellence, an initiative the White House launched in 2017 to develop, test and spread innovative practices in five focus areas, including customer experience.

In 2018, the customer experience center of excellence partnered with USDA’s Farm Production and Conservation mission area to improve the farm loan experience for producers. The center of excellence is co-led by a USDA and GSA representative to ensure each organization’s perspectives are represented. “For me, that is the unique piece the COEs [Centers of Excellence] offer,” said Simchah Suveyke-Bogin, the team lead for the customer experience center of excellence for GSA. “We are not doing work for USDA, we are partnering and doing the work with them.”

Agriculture and GSA are partnering on a plan to improve the direct farm loan program, administered through the Farm Service Agency. USDA provides loans to farmers and ranchers on family-run farms and ranches who cannot obtain commercial credit from a bank or other lender. In partnership with the center of excellence team, USDA gathered information to understand the experience from the perspective of the farmers and ranchers who apply for loans.

Over three months, the team conducted more than 100 interviews at USDA offices across six states. First, they conducted interactive workshops with headquarters’ employees to get their

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SIMCHAH SUVEYKE-BOGIN,  
CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE CENTER OF EXCELLENCE LEAD, GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION

perspectives on the direct loan process. The team then went into the field to compare headquarters' perspectives with those of field office employees and farmers, ranchers and producers. Team members interviewed loan officers and observed their process for receiving and processing loan applications, and interviewed farmers to understand their point of view. “It was a great learning experience to see how people in D.C. felt about what was happening in the field and then bringing what employees in the field experienced back to D.C.” Suveyke-Bogin said.

Through this endeavor, both the center of excellence team and USDA tested employees' long-held assumptions about the loan process and potential improvements. They had hypothesized that the biggest improvement would come from moving paper-based application forms and processes online. However, the team's research showed that for both the loan officers and farmers, the in-person meetings provided benefits that went beyond filling out forms. In many cases, loan officers would go to applicants' farms and provide business consulting, connect farmers to conservationists and recommend other USDA services.

Producers would say, “I love when they came onto my farm. These people are more than just loan officers. They understand farming,” Suveyke-Bogin said.

The center of excellence team is working with Farm Service Agency leaders to incorporate findings from the team's research into the agency's customer experience improvement plans, Suveyke-Bogin

added. The team is also working with the farmers.gov website development team to build digital tools that allow for valuable interactions between farmers and loan officers. One option the agency may explore in the future is to develop an online tool enabling loan officers and farmers to collaborate on loan applications. This would allow both the producer and loan officers to view, edit and update the document simultaneously until it is ready to be submitted by the producer.

Across the department, customer experience improvement plans will be required annually, with the aim of bolstering employees' ability to serve customers better, according to Doyle. “The big winners are not only the customers, but also our own employees,” he said. “When energy, appreciation and respect come together, the employees become heroes in the eyes of their customers.”

# CREATING A CUSTOMER-CENTRIC CULTURE



At the Federal Insurance and Mitigation Administration, leaders helped expand employees' perceptions of who their customers are, and have implemented plans for improving experiences in ways that matter most to those customers.

Floods are the costliest and most frequently occurring natural disaster in the United States.<sup>3</sup> The National Flood Insurance Program, administered through FEMA's Federal Insurance and Mitigation Administration, is designed to reduce the personal hardships and economic distress associated with flood-related disasters, and reduce the burden from floods on the nation's finances. The program partners with private insurance companies to provide federally subsidized flood insurance to more than five million people, and creates and updates maps of flood-prone areas. Program staff have historically focused on the needs of insurers, whom they saw as their core customer.

Over the past several years, the organization, known as FIMA, has transformed by reorienting employees' perceptions to view insurance policyholders as their primary customers, and focusing on improving those customers' interactions.

After Hurricane Sandy flooded the Northeast in 2012, staff needed to better understand the needs of policyholders rather than concentrating mainly on relationships with insurance companies and other flood insurance program partners, according to Chelsea D'Angona, former deputy director of FIMA's customer experience office.

"At that time, the program staff and leadership, like many in government, felt their primary duty

was to act as good stewards of taxpayers' money. Their mentality was to protect the National Flood Insurance Fund first, not the policyholder," D'Angona said.

Over the past two and a half years, however, FIMA has implemented several major initiatives to transform the flood insurance program to provide simple, easy customer experiences that policyholders value and trust.

To start, FIMA leaders identified a small group of change agents who were willing to shake things up and drive improvements. The team included employees at all levels, and they began their work by framing an approach for gathering feedback on the current state of policyholders' experiences.

The team then created customer journey maps to identify and visualize the steps policyholders go through when interacting with the organization, from shopping for flood insurance to applying for a policy to submitting an insurance claim after flooding.

Next, the team surveyed policyholders and conducted focus groups, interviews, and workshops with policyholders as well as with other employees and program partners to get feedback on how they experience the steps along their customer journeys. They summarized their findings and presented initial recommendations to the entire organization.

Finally, the team developed a list of customer experience improvements based on the analysis and feedback. They narrowed and prioritized the suggested improvements, using a set of criteria that included potential impact, viability and required resources, to create a list of more than 30 initiatives.

Shortly after achieving consensus on the list of initiatives, FIMA established a customer experience

<sup>3</sup> Federal Emergency Management Agency, "The National Flood Insurance Program." Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2qXDXi2>

## “Instead of primarily focusing on the fund, we focused on people.”

CHELSEA D'ANGONA,  
FORMER DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF THE OFFICE OF CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE,  
FEDERAL INSURANCE AND MITIGATION ADMINISTRATION,  
FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY, DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

office to catalyze the transformation, coordinate the projects and drive performance. All of this work led to a strong foundation for improving how FIMA aided policyholders in subsequent flooding disasters.

During hurricanes Harvey and Maria in 2017, FIMA launched several teams to address needs of policyholders during major floods based on the initiatives on the list. One team's mission was to combat rumors and misinformation circulating on social media so policyholders had the best, most current information. Another team was established to monitor and manage customer-related strategic risks, for example analyzing how potential changes to the program's authorizing legislation might affect policyholders.

With substantial changes happening quickly across the organization—FIMA was also relocating its offices and making changes to its organizational structure—FIMA's customer experience office began to recognize the importance of change management to drive adoption and sustain the new customer-centered mindset. Through feedback sessions with staff, the customer experience team realized that leaders were asking employees to adjust too quickly without providing the support and engagement they needed to adapt and thrive in this new environment. So D'Angona's team shifted its attention from driving rapid improvement to assessing employees' experiences and their readiness to make changes.

“I would not overlook the importance of change management, which takes considerable resources and time. It paid dividends as we ramped up and reinvested time back into finding solutions that addressed customer concerns,” D'Angona said.

To help staff understand changes and why they were happening, leadership and the customer

experience office developed a staff communication plan and a “call to action” to ensure staff at all levels understood the customer experience initiatives and the overall transformation.

Email updates sent from senior leaders every Monday highlighted new customer experience efforts and why they were important, as did segments of the monthly newsletter sent to FIMA's workforce. Leaders conducted sessions with FIMA staff and external stakeholders to get their input and buy-in on significant changes, such as the claims journey redesign effort and a redesign of the program's risk rating process.

D'Angona's team also helped employees understand how their work is critical to the mission and directly supports disaster survivors. “It becomes hard for employees to be engaged if they don't see tangible results,” she said.

FIMA leaders took an important step that is sometimes skipped in change management efforts—measuring how well the culture change sticks. They use an annual organizational health survey to assess how well staff are adapting to changes. In just one year, the organization had a seven-point increase in the “customer focus” score on this staff survey, from 53 out of 100 in 2016 to 60 in 2017. Leaders also saw increases in the percentage of staff saying they “were actively engaged in the customer-focused reset” and “understood the role they play in transforming [the program] into a simple and easy experience that customers value and trust.”

D'Angona summarized FIMA's transformation with a simple principle. “Instead of primarily focusing on the fund, we focused on people,” she said.

# MEASURING PERFORMANCE THROUGH CUSTOMER FEEDBACK



At the Department of Veterans Affairs, leaders designated winning veterans' trust as the most important performance measure, making them the only federal department to base one of their top performance measures on customer feedback, according to our analysis of agency performance goals.

VA leadership has spent the past several years transforming the organization to better serve veterans. The department established a Veterans Experience Office in 2015, led by a chief veterans experience officer reporting directly to the secretary, to provide central leadership on initiatives to improve veterans' interactions with VA healthcare, benefits and memorial services. Department leaders recognized the agency was collecting a multitude of performance measures that most often centered on internal operations such as how long a process takes to complete. Few were based on feedback from veterans on how they viewed their experience with the department.

To gain a deeper understanding of the veterans' experience and inform the improvements needed, the department developed a comprehensive customer experience data framework to identify, collect and analyze data on how veterans experienced their services. "All of our projects and enterprise-wide initiatives start with the premise that we listen to the voice of our customer," said Lynda Davis, the VA's chief veterans experience officer.

The framework uses five components to assess the veterans' experiences from multiple perspectives, which together provide robust information that staff analyze to identify trends, gaps and insights. The first component measures how veterans feel about the VA at an enterprise-wide level and involves surveying veterans every quarter about whether they received the care or services they needed; if it was easy to receive care; if veterans felt like valued customers; and whether veterans trust the VA to fulfill its mission.

The second component measures how veterans feel about specific services. This involves surveying veterans twice a week at the point of service, using the same measures as above, but asking about specific interactions such as receiving a prescription through a VA facility. The third component involves monitoring and capturing what veterans are saying about VA services on social media. The fourth and fifth involve collecting open-ended feedback through the VA's website and its digital services. The VA complements this data with interviews and focus groups with veterans to further understand their perceptions of the VA and the moments that matter most when they seek services.

The data framework has enabled the VA to understand that a key driver of veterans' satisfaction with department services is trust. Leadership set a goal of increasing the number of veterans who say

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CHIEF VETERANS EXPERIENCE OFFICER  
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

they “trust the VA to fulfill its mission.” That number is one of the department’s most important performance measures.

By analyzing and distributing the results of this data collection to staff, VA leaders are acting to improve critical services. For example, any responses from veterans that mention homelessness or thoughts of suicide immediately trigger alerts for relevant staff to launch interventions, a capability that has potentially saved hundreds of lives.

The department also uses this information to create tools, initiatives and training sessions, according to Davis. For example, the VA’s Patient Experience Directorate within the Veterans Experience Office uses the feedback to build tools and training for staff at Veterans Health Administration facilities across the country to address identified needs. The directorate created an “Own the Moment,” training session that helps empower employees to take responsibility for how veterans experience VHA’s services. The training encourages employees to take action if they see something that is creating a poor experience. From ensuring that veterans can get where they need to go within medical facilities to making sure facilities are clean and welcoming, the training is designed to instill in employees a proactive customer service mindset, so they do not simply adhere to written rules.

Another training session that is based on veterans’ input teaches employees to use plain language, instead of hard-to-understand medical jargon, so they are clear, consistent and concise when communicating with veterans or their family members. According to Davis, 70 percent of VHA facilities have completed this training. In addition, more than 30,000 VHA staff are being trained on customer experience best practices using a train the trainer model.

With a better understanding of how well VHA facilities are performing from the customer’s point of view, the department can pinpoint specific issues that need attention, identify struggling facilities, tailor program improvements, and replicate successful practices.

The changes being made in response to feedback from veterans are getting results. The percentage of veterans who say they trust the VA to fulfill its mission increased by 11 percentage points in the past two years—from 59 percent in the third quarter of 2016 to 70 percent in the third quarter of 2018, according to Davis.

# KEY INSIGHTS

Federal leaders striving to make their programs more citizen-focused can draw lessons from the strategies leaders used to transform the customer experience at the Federal Insurance and Mitigation Administration, the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Veterans Affairs.



**Measure what matters to the customer.** Leaders need the right information and feedback from the customers they serve to make effective process improvements. Agencies tend to favor operational metrics such as how fast a contact center answers the phone, but those type of metrics are not always what the customer cares about most. Instead, leaders should conduct research to understand which aspects of a service matter most to their customers and should set performance measures accordingly.

**Test long-held assumptions.** Agency leaders and employees often create, change or implement new business practices based on what they presume they know about their customers. But sometimes customer research proves longstanding assumptions to be incorrect. Leaders should collect and analyze feedback from their customers, through both surveys and in-depth conversations, and then ground improvements in what they hear. And they should continue to revisit assumptions and update their understanding as customers' expectations change.

**Empower the workforce in the field.** The customer experience initiatives highlighted in this whitepaper started with support from senior leadership in D.C., but relied on staff in the field, front-line employees and customers for specific insights into process improvements. Leaders sought to empower employees in the field to take actions that would improve the customer experience and helped them by removing roadblocks, providing tools and data they need to understand and serve their customers, ensuring coordination across the organization and setting ambitious performance goals based on customer feedback.

**Set aside time and resources for change management from the start.** Agencies should invest time and use resources to help employees and leaders adjust to significant changes and to drive adoption of new ways of delivering services. Each of the agencies highlighted established an organization-wide customer experience office that prioritized change management and employee engagement, provided training and helped employees understand the importance of the customer experience. Leaders should measure the progress of their change management efforts through surveys and conversations with staff to understand if the culture change they seek is sticking.

# CONCLUSION

With agency senior leaders, White House staff and members of Congress making improved customer experience in government a top priority, federal customer experience professionals have a unique opportunity to transform how their agencies deliver services. Although there are opportunities for quick improvements, such as revamping citizen-facing websites, those enhancements will have limited long-term impact if not designed and implemented as part of a more comprehensive customer experience strategy. Leaders should take a strategic approach to changing their agencies' culture and business processes, with the long-term goal of creating customer-focused organizations.

Agencies seeking to improve their approach to serving customers can apply the strategies highlighted in this whitepaper such as creating customer experience champions throughout the agency, measuring performance from the customers' perspective and developing a change management strategy to help change an agency's culture. These actions will prepare agencies to deliver a better experience now, and also will help ensure that they can adapt to the changing needs of their customers in the future.

### USDA Customer Experience Improvement Plan—Template

**Name of Customer Experience Champion:**

**Agency:**

**Date:**

Our goal is to inspire and empower all 100,000 teammates to provide a *Faster.Friendlier.Easier* customer experience. We will Be the Best and Lead the Rest.

1. **Who:** Our agency wants to improve service to:
  - List one or more customer groups.
  - Personalize this by inserting a picture of a typical customer of this type.
2. **What:** These customers want us to improve.
  - List one or more meaningful things we'd like to do better.
3. **Result:** How will doing this make our services *Faster.Friendlier.Easier*, i.e., speed up the time it takes to get things done, simplify access to our programs and people and/or create a culture where employees are accessible, responsive, courteous, helpful and knowledgeable?
4. **Recap:** Provide a clear, succinct statement about the problem we're trying to solve and the approach we'll take.
5. **Confirm:** Describe how we'll validate this is what customers and customer-facing employees would like us to do.
6. **Track and measure results:** Describe how we'll measure progress/results from the customer's perspective.
7. **Barriers:** Identify barriers we'll have to overcome to be successful.
8. **Support:** List who we'll need on our team to ensure success.
9. **Identify quick wins** where we can demonstrate success and build momentum.
10. **How and when will we get feedback** from these customers initially about what we're doing, and then in successive months, how we are doing?
11. **Communicate internally and externally:** Describe how we'll communicate this customer experience improvement plan. What's being done, for whom and how?
12. **Establish milestones** to be managed throughout the year.
13. **How will we recognize people and success** along the way?
14. **Describe the way you will report on your progress** in your agency, how frequently, to whom and how.
  - Make sure your report is a part of your agency's existing monthly and quarterly updates to senior leadership, including but not limited to your agency head and his or her chief of staff.
  - Plan for your progress report to be included in your mission area's quarterly strategic update to the deputy secretary.
  - Report your progress, challenges and next steps to the Office of Customer Experience at the end of each quarter.
15. **Agency administrators will sign:**

"I proudly submit this customer experience improvement plan on behalf of my agency. These plans were developed including input from the front-line employees who serve our customers on a daily basis. These plans can be achieved during fiscal 2019 using existing resources. I look forward to sharing the positive feedback we receive from our customers as a result of this work."

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Chelsea D'Angona, former Deputy Director of the Office of Customer Experience  
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Lynda Davis, Chief Veterans Experience Officer, Veterans Experience Office, Department of Veteran Affairs  
Joe Doyle, Director, Office of Customer Experience, Department of Agriculture  
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