



Bright Spots in the Federal Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Yes, there are some.

As the COVID-19 pandemic closed workplaces and shattered the plans of millions of people, the urgent need for telework arose practically overnight—as did an enormous opportunity. The entire federal government got the latitude to institute major changes quickly, setting in motion a massive transformation that is still playing out across our government.

Telemedicine expanded to more veterans. Legacy paper processes went digital, giving rise to more effective services. Federal employees got remote access to agency systems to retrieve data and information, even at high-security organizations, opening opportunities for telework few had imagined.

Government adapted and kept delivering, often in new and better ways, whether it was managing loan applications for small businesses, processing veterans' benefits or distributing millions of vaccine doses to the public. People throughout the country are the beneficiaries of a trial by fire, a test that would have been impossible for government to conceive and plan under normal circumstances.

The result? A phoenix emerged from the COVID-19 ashes—a government that is in many ways stronger, smarter and nimbler. The advances must continue. Agencies need to build on improvements they made, to create a more modern and effective government. They must sort through what worked and what did not and set the government on a sustained path to revitalization. They need to envision more possibilities for government and work toward making them a reality.

The road ahead must include increased innovation, technology improvements and dramatic changes in operations. Below are 65 examples the Partnership for Public Service found that demonstrate the ways government has started down this road. The ingenuity, adaptability and responsiveness of our government, much of it occurring under the radar, reveals itself in the bright spots that arose during dark times.

LEADERSHIP AND STEWARDSHIP

1. The head of the Veterans Benefits Administration continued to educate veterans about their benefits, making it his mission to reach more than a million veterans online through virtual town halls and weekly, 10-minute video updates. ([GovExec](#))
 2. The director of the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency helped his agency adjust operations to a remote environment by developing communications toolkits for supervisors and regularly holding virtual town halls to check in with employees and answer their questions. ([Partnership Blog](#))
 3. When COVID-19 hit, the Transportation Department's chief information officer led the transition to 100% telework, expedited acquisitions, distributed 15,000 laptops and tripled bandwidth, attributing department readiness to network modernization efforts over the past two years. ([Federal News Network](#))
 4. The director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases at the National Institutes of Health consistently provided important information and guidance to the public and the administration on dealing with the pandemic. ([Service to America Medals](#))
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TALENT

Recruiting, Hiring and Onboarding

5. Between March and October 2020, the Veterans Health Administration hired about 55,300 new staff, including more than 10,400 registered nurses and nurse practitioners, to care for more than 12,200 COVID-19 patients and other patients in Veterans Affairs Department facilities. ([Rapid Reinforcements Report](#))
6. The Small Business Administration quickly processed loan applications and requests for debt relief for millions of financially distressed Americans eligible under the CARES Act by more than doubling its workforce between March and September of 2020. ([Rapid Reinforcements Report](#))
7. Agencies creatively used government-wide and agency-specific hiring authorities, such as the Reinstatement Authority and the Military Spouse Noncompetitive Appointing Authority, to quickly hire large numbers of people. ([Rapid Reinforcements Report](#))
8. By adding a COVID-19 portal to an HR platform modernized before the pandemic, the Health and Human Services Department identified close to 600 resumes of eligible returned Peace Corps volunteers and quickly hired 70 people through one job announcement. ([Rapid Reinforcements Report](#))
9. HHS recruiters used “resume mining” to search 1.5 million resumes on USAJOBS and identify potential applicants for jobs at the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, helping the department meet increased hiring demands during the pandemic. ([NextGov](#))
10. To keep up with the flood of requests for services the pandemic created, and bring staff on board more quickly, the VHA shortened the time it takes to hire new staff to 10 to 12 days from 94 days. ([Rapid Reinforcements Report](#))
11. The Department of Homeland Security created a credential that new employees and contractors could get virtually, allowing them remote access to DHS networks within 24 hours of being approved when, in the past, credentials had to be issued in person during the onboarding process. ([Federal News Network](#))

Telework

12. When the pandemic began, 44% of the Internal Revenue Service workforce was eligible for telework. By November 2020, that number was 85%. IRS employees kept up with customer demand, processing 146 million individual tax returns by July 24, slightly more than they had by the same date in 2019. ([IRS](#))
 13. The productivity of most federal employees who worked from home stayed steady, according to a Federal News Network survey of 1,200 federal employees conducted in early May—which found 52% of employees were more productive, while the productivity of another 40% remained about the same. ([Federal News Network](#))
 14. The National Archives and Records Administration provided training to remote employees so they could continue to tag, transcribe and annotate digital copies of documents and improve accessibility to the archive’s contents. ([GovExec](#))
 15. The Library of Congress transitioned more than 3,000 employees to telework—six times more than the number of employees who typically had teleworked—and issued 1,000 new laptops to support them. ([Partnership Blog](#))
 16. With the help of strengthened networks and additional laptops at the Environmental Protection Agency, 96% of the agency’s 14,000 employees teleworked full time by late April, up from 58% who had teleworked at least part time previously. ([IBM Center for the Business of Government](#))
 17. Within weeks of stay-at-home orders, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services transitioned about 2,000 of its Medicare contact center agents—government contractors—to full-time telework with minimal impact on customer service, a shift that might have taken six to eight months in “normal” times. ([Government for the People Report](#))
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18. The General Services Administration easily adapted to remote work during the COVID-19 era, having made investments five years ago in tools, policies and practices to support a mobile workforce that was nearly 100% telework-ready when the pandemic struck. ([MeriTalk](#))
 19. The National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency reassessed its classified and unclassified information management and structure, enabling it to make more unclassified work available for employees working remotely. ([C4ISRNET](#))
 20. Supported by an IT modernization strategy begun in 2017, the Education Department moved to 100% telework within days of federal guidelines permitting remote work, and distributed \$31 billion in CARES Act funding within weeks. ([MeriTalk](#))

INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY MODERNIZATION

Technology

21. Within weeks of the pandemic's onset, the Health and Human Services Department launched a central portal through which patients and health care professionals could find and use telehealth resources. ([HHS](#))
22. The Pandemic Response Accountability Committee, created by the CARES Act to help prevent mismanagement of public relief funds, developed a website with detailed data on pandemic stimulus funds, so "citizen watchdogs" could scrutinize the numbers, help track spending and report fraud. ([Federal News Network](#))
23. Despite delays caused by the pandemic and other challenges, the Veterans Affairs Department successfully activated its new Electronic Health Record, part of a decade-long modernization process to improve veterans' care and treatment. ([Federal News Network](#))
24. Employees at the Agriculture Department adopted new digital tools for secure online file sharing, videoconferencing and electronic signatures on select forms and applications, all of it helping with loan application and closing processes. ([Government for the People Report](#))
25. A federal coronavirus task force created a data analytics platform to manage the supply chain for COVID-19-related provisions and provide improved insights on the state of the PPE used for the federal response. ([Federal News Network](#))
26. The Air Force quickly doubled the number of people who could use secure department systems from home with an access management program it developed to add virtual private network capacity. ([Hanscom Air Force Base](#))
27. The urgency of the pandemic led the Transportation Department to modernize quickly. It consolidated eight networks into one and made sure remote employees could securely access data and applications. ([Federal News Network](#))
28. Soon after the pandemic started, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention established a nimble data management team that helped design and maintain the agency's COVID-19 data portal across states and tribal regions. ([CDC](#))

The Customer Experience

29. In just three weeks, the Veterans Affairs Department created a COVID-19 chatbot to handle the rapid increase in call volume from veterans with questions about health care and benefits. ([DigitalVA](#))
 30. For an immediate sense of how veterans were affected by the pandemic, and how the department could help, the VA added virus-related tags and keywords to a robust customer feedback system that instantly pulls information from many sources into one place. ([Government for the People Report](#))
 31. When COVID-19-related rules about online classes put veterans' housing benefits for education at risk, many veterans were going to have to choose between paying rent or funding their education. Veterans Benefits Administration leaders worked with Congress to quickly pass legislation maintaining payment levels for housing. ([Government for the People Report](#))
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32. In mid-December, Veterans Health Administration staff members were conducting more than 206,000 weekly video visits with veterans for both mental health and medical services, a more than 1,700% increase from the beginning of the crisis—enabling veterans to receive critical services during the pandemic. ([VA](#))
 33. Employees at the Agriculture Department, accustomed to face-to-face service delivery, quickly pivoted to assisting customers by phone or appointment, and also reduced paperwork for pandemic-related relief programs. ([Government for the People Report](#))
 34. The Library of Congress established the “Homegrown at Home” Concert Series, a run of shows in which musicians create and share concerts virtually, adapted from the usual in-person series. ([Partnership Blog](#))
 35. The National Book Festival, produced by the Library of Congress, went virtual for the first time in its history, and viewers spent more than 20,000 hours “in attendance” during the first weekend it launched. ([Partnership Blog](#))
 36. The Congressional Research Service produced more than 2,200 reports since the beginning of the pandemic and created a website with more than 1,000 COVID-specific reports. ([Partnership Blog](#))
 37. The Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History launched a series of free virtual colloquiums on pandemic-related topics, including “Pandemic Pursuits: How Your Ancestors Had Fun at Home While Quarantined” and “Racing for Vaccines.” ([Smithsonian](#))
 38. The CRS spent more than 2,000 hours virtually answering questions and providing real-time information on legislation to members of Congress. ([Partnership Blog](#))
 39. The Energy Department built a virtual biotechnology laboratory to connect national laboratories, and enable researchers remote access to the labs’ technical and scientific capabilities, so they could respond to COVID-19. ([Bit by Bit Report](#))
 40. Indian Health Service facilities across the nation extended their Wi-Fi into parking lots and donated tablet devices, so visitors without an internet connection at home and unable to visit in person safely, could park and connect with loved ones inside the facilities. ([Bit by Bit Report](#))
 41. The Social Security Administration reduced a backlog in pending benefits cases by 11% in just six weeks at the beginning of the pandemic, after transitioning the agency’s 53,000 employees to remote work. ([NPR](#))

Innovation and Emerging Technologies

42. A new, high-pressure ventilator the National Aeronautics and Space Administration engineers created in 37 days, tailored to treat COVID-19 patients, was approved by the Food and Drug Administration under an emergency use authorization specifically for people with the coronavirus. ([NASA](#))
 43. A branch of the National Institute of Mental Health is using artificial intelligence and machine learning to advance research to target COVID-19, shaving years off the front end of therapeutic drug discovery development for the virus. ([NextGov](#))
 44. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission is using predictive analytics to monitor how economic challenges caused by the pandemic might make different populations more vulnerable to employment discrimination. ([NextGov](#))
 45. Coronavirus funds helped the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory upgrade its supercomputer system’s processing speed and capacity, which enhances its ability to research therapeutic drugs that could help combat COVID-19. ([NextGov](#))
 46. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services is working with a private start-up to develop a tool that uses blockchain technology to securely validate and issue credentials and licenses to essential workers while they are teleworking. ([DHS](#))
 47. Artificial intelligence is helping the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research study potential drugs for fighting the coronavirus. ([NextGov](#))
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48. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is partnering with the U.S. Digital Service on public health data, helping to automate agency data feeds that come from hospitals, labs and state health departments. ([FedHealthIT](#))
 49. A CDC initiative on modernizing public health data is using hundreds of millions of dollars of supplemental funding from the CARES Act to advance the public health capabilities of the agency's data and IT infrastructures. ([CDC](#))
 50. Health departments and health care providers nationwide can view resources and watch webinars about COVID-19 and other public health issues through CDC-INFO, a platform the CDC developed and updated throughout the pandemic. A national contact center number for both providers and the public, published on the platform, was receiving more than 1,000 calls a day, as of early January 2021. ([CDC](#))
 51. An institute within the National Institutes of Health launched a database with medical images from tens of thousands of COVID-19 patients, which researchers can use to develop and test AI tools for fighting the virus. ([Bit by Bit Report](#))
 52. When the pandemic hit, the Veterans Health Administration capitalized on its ongoing efforts to foster a culture of innovation, including funding, developing and spreading throughout the VHA solutions to improve health care or lower costs—which employees have used to tackle COVID-19 issues. ([Federal News Network](#))
 53. At the beginning of the pandemic, the State Department deployed and maintained 10 software applications to manage logistics and bring home about 100,000 Americans from across the world. ([Federal News Network](#))
 54. The U.S. Agency for International Development quickly developed new tools to continue to serve at-risk populations around the world, including a virtual monitoring system that geo-tagged photos of shipments so employees could safely manage relief distribution while teleworking. ([USAID](#))

COLLABORATION

Collaboration Within Government

55. To stop the spread of coronavirus disinformation from Russia, China and elsewhere, the departments of Defense and State worked together, and with other agencies and partners, on curbing the fabrications. ([DOD](#))
 56. Within two weeks of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration issuing a challenge to employees to help with the pandemic response, the agency received more than 250 ideas as well as 4,500 votes and 500 comments on the ideas, through a newly designed collaboration website. ([NASA](#))
 57. The Federal Emergency Management Agency secured nearly 100 million cloth masks that were then distributed to air, transit and rail passengers under a partnership with three federal departments. ([Roll Call](#))
 58. The Small Business Administration and the Treasury Department made available a three-page “EZ” loan forgiveness form for certain Paycheck Protection Program borrowers, greatly reducing the paperwork for these small businesses. ([POLITICO](#))
 59. In July, three federal departments formed the COVID-19 Insights Partnership to coordinate and share health data, research and expertise in fighting the pandemic. ([HHS](#))
 60. A 3-D printing network at the Veterans Affairs Department developed a dozen designs for face masks, shields and other personal protective equipment, then worked with other agencies to test for safety and effectiveness and approve the designs for clinical use within weeks, helping ease a critical PPE shortage. ([Service to America Medals](#))
 61. State and local agencies in California, along with federal offices in the state, started the California Federal Partners for COVID-19, and collaborated through webinars, calls and videos to equip communities with pandemic-fighting information. ([Partnership Blog](#))
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Collaboration Across Sectors

62. The White House launched a public-private supercomputer consortium to help fight COVID-19, enabling researchers worldwide to access 16 of America's top computing systems for rapid scientific results. The partnership has advanced more than 90 coronavirus-combating research projects and nearly doubled its available computing capacity. ([NextGov](#))
63. Three organizations, both public and private, launched a pilot program to develop an early warning algorithm for COVID-19 infection in high-risk populations, using behavior patterns and symptoms. ([Evidation](#))
64. The National Institutes of Health and Moderna, Inc., partnered to develop a COVID-19 vaccine, which was advanced more rapidly than expected: In-human trials were completed successfully within just 11 months of receiving the genetic code for the virus. ([The New York Times](#))
65. In a virtual world, the Library of Congress was able to expand a campaign to digitize old documents by crowdsourcing and asking users to collaborate in updating in the library's archives. ([Partnership Blog](#))

