HELP NEWS

The Monthly Newsletter of Helping Employees Learn Prosperity (HELP)

Job Rights Q&A

General Answers to advise you on your job & workplace

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August 2026

Welcome!

Helping Employees Learn Prosperity

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Medical Insurance Premiums are Increasing in 2027

Inflation has been rising, and medical plan premiums are set to increase again in 2027. Last month, CalPERS – one of the nation's largest medical insurance providers – approved rates for next year's plans. On average, premiums will increase by an average of 5%. These increases are lower than in recent years and are lower than healthcare inflation trends seen outside of CalPERS. For example, recent research from Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC) indicates that premiums are expected to rise an average of 9% in 2027.

According to CalPERS CEO Marcie Frost, the increases for the 2027 premiums "reflect CalPERS' methodical approach to purchasing health coverage and holding plans accountable for cost and performance, rather than simply accepting the rates proposed by carriers." Frost said that CalPERS "pushed to get the most competitive premiums possible for members while advancing better care across the program."

This month, we will examine the CalPERS medical increases and the PWC study more closely to help members better understand the premium increases they are likely to see in this fall's open enrollment. If your agency is not part of the CalPERS medical plans, this information will help you assess any premium increases proposed by your agency's medical plan broker.

CalPERS Premium Increases:

CalPERS provides health insurance for more than 1.5 million people, including about 770,000 public employees and retirees and about 770,000 dependents. CalPERS offers both preferred provider organization (PPO) and health maintenance organization (HMO) plans. CalPERS members can change health plans later this fall during open enrollment (September 14 to October 9). The new premiums will take effect January 1, 2027. Rates vary based on region, plan, and level of coverage (e.g., employee only, employee + 1, and employee + Family). Detailed information on premiums for each region is available on the CalPERS website: CalPERS Premiums by Region

The 2027 CalPERS premiums reflect an average increase of 5% statewide but vary by plan. The monthly price for the most popular plan – an HMO plan administered by Kaiser Permanente – will rise 2.5%. That plan serves about 550,000 people. The two popular PPO plans – PERS Gold and PERS Platinum – are each increasing about 7.5%. The Anthem HMO Traditional plan will also rise about 7.5%. The Blue Shield Access+ HMO and EPO will each rise nearly 11%. These are average amounts statewide. Actual percentages vary based on region.

2027
health premiums
increase 5%

CalPERS also added benefit changes and service area expansions for 2027. This includes a "family-building" benefit that includes coverage for in-vitro fertilization across all Basic HMO and PPO plans effective July 1, 2027. It also includes expansion of Kaiser Permanente's Basic and Medicare plans into six counties in northwestern Nevada, and the expansion of Blue Shield of California's EPO plan into eight counties.

CalPERS did not renew its Basic (non-Medicare) contract with UnitedHealthcare this year. CalPERS said this was due to UnitedHealthcare's high and unjustified 2027 rate increases. UnitedHealthcare's proposed rate increase for their Alliance network, which offers broader coverage to providers, was 23%. UnitedHealthcare's proposed rate increase for their Harmony network, which offers narrower coverage, was 21%. According to CalPERS, the Alliance rates were over three times CalPERS' projection, and CalPERS was projecting no increase for Harmony.

If accepted, CalPERS said UnitedHealthcare's proposed rates would have added $167 million in additional premiums paid by members and employers. About 94,000 members are enrolled in one of the two basic HMO UnitedHealthcare plans. These plans are not available to retired members.

CalPERS added Sutter Health Plan as a new HMO Option in 2027. CalPERS said this integrated health plan offers members coordinated care across providers and hospitals and receives high ratings on quality and service through the National Committee for Quality Assurance. CalPERS chose Sutter Health Plan because it will minimize disruptions to members on the UnitedHealthcare plans and will allow most members to continue seeing their current providers, according to Rob Jarzombek, chief of CalPERS' Health Plan Research and Administration Division.

CalPERS negotiates aggressively with insurers. They understand that many members often must absorb cost increases out of their own pocket. While rates tend to reflect the current state of the health care market, CalPERS expects health insurance companies to take decisive action to keep costs down. CalPERS leverages its large pool of members to try and hold insurance companies accountable and keep costs transparent. Premium increases generally stem from the costs of medical care exceeding premium revenue, rather than from an overall increase in usage. Despite efforts to control costs, however, the cost trend is still affected by general inflation.

CalPERS also uses its purchasing power to help members get better care across its health program. Through its Quality Alignment Measure Set, CalPERS ties financial incentives to evidence-based medical interventions that prevent illness and save lives. Already, 91% of CalPERS members are enrolled in plans showing improving scores across quality measures. Dr. Julia Logan, Chief Medical Officer, said "our goal is to continuously improve the quality of care our members receive. By aligning financial incentives with better outcomes, we're encouraging health plans to focus on the care that makes the greatest

difference for members' health and well-being."
Chief Health Director, Don Moulds, said "our responsibility is to protect affordability and access for the people who depend on our health benefits. We are grateful to work with plans that prioritize affordability and help us deliver value for our members over the long term." Ramon Rubalcava, chair of the Pension and Health Benefits Committee, said "members are feeling the impact of rising healthcare costs, and the national outlook makes clear that pressure isn't going away. That's why CalPERS is focused on providing health benefits that offer affordable options and consistent value for our members in an unpredictable healthcare environment."
For public employees who do not participate in CalPERS medical, the CalPERS medical increases are a good barometer to compare the increases in your medical plan. It is always a good idea to review the plan and premium changes during open enrollment and select the plan that meets your needs at the best possible price. If you have questions about your medical plan increases, contact your Human Resources Department. Given the increasing rise in medical insurance premiums, your employee organization will continue to demand higher contributions from the employer when negotiating the MOU.

Family coverage could top $30,000

Price Waterhouse Cooper (PWC) Study:
The PWC study projects an average of 9% rise in costs in 2027, the highest in 17 years. According to an article published by the LA Times, the increase would push the average cost of family coverage in California to more than $30,000, roughly the price of a new compact car. Many employers require workers to pay part of that cost. The escalating costs on employers can also reduce workers' wages and take-home pay, while at the same time raising the prices of goods and services in California and across the country. A USC professor of healthcare finance was quoted in the LA Times article as warning that "it's going to erode the standard of living for lots of California families." Seventeen million Californians receive health benefits from an employer. Those premiums have been rising faster in California than the national average.

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PWC reports that the increase is largely due to "AI-enabled revenue optimization tools," higher pharmacy spending (including GLP-1s), growing pressure to reimburse providers more, sustained growth in behavioral health utilization, and escalating out-of-network payment disputes under the No Surprises Act. The LA Times article identified prices charged by hospitals as a key driver of rising medical costs. The LA Times reported that, in recent years, some health systems, such as UCLA and Cedars-Sinai, have grown larger by buying nearby hospitals and clinics, becoming more dominant in the community and reducing competition. Another factor is the rising cost of prescription drugs. Spending on cancer drugs, the costliest category, reached $143 billion in 2025. Obesity drugs, including GLP-1 drugs such as Ozempic and Wegovy, soared by 81% last year. A 30-day supply of these drugs lists for more than $1,000. A Gallup poll recently found that 11% of U.S. adults are now taking the GLP-1 drugs for weight loss. The pharmaceutical industry says the medicines reduce expenses by preventing diabetes and heart disease, but the PWC data did not yet show such reductions.

PWC said the challenge now is not simply understanding what is driving healthcare costs, but whether health plans can use cost-of-care strategies quickly and effectively to slow the trajectory before affordability, coverage, and access come under greater strain across the healthcare system. PWC said that many of the forces driving the trend, including pharmaceutical innovation, expanded behavioral health access, and improved clinical documentation, can improve patient outcomes, but the challenge remains whether spending growth will be matched by measurable value and affordability. Historical cost-trend deflators – such as use of generic drugs and optimizing where care is provided (e.g., urgent care instead of hospital emergency rooms if appropriate), continue to play a role, but health plans are already incorporating those assumptions into their baseline costs and they are not enough to materially impact the rising cost trend.

The PWC study notes that a growing share of costs is shifting directly to consumers through higher deductibles and co-pays, increased premium cost-sharing, and more limited coverage choices. Left unchecked, healthcare spending will grow to $9 trillion annually by 2035. Researchers at the California Healthcare Foundation say a large part of the problem is that hospital operating costs, prescription drug prices, and doctor fees have been allowed to grow unchecked for decades. In a report last year, the foundation estimated that 25 cents of every dollar spent on healthcare in California – more than $73 billion each year – does nothing to help patients. Instead, it goes to excessive profits for providers, administrative red tape, and other waste.

To review the PWC study in-depth, visit: Price Waterhouse Cooper Study. The PWC study defines the medical cost trend as the projected percentage increase in the cost to treat patients from one year to the next, assuming benefits remain the same. The study estimates the projected increase in per capita costs of medical services and prescription medications that affect both group and individual health plans. Insurance companies use the projection to calculate health plan premiums for the coming year. The growth rate is influenced primarily by changes in the price of medical products and services and prescription medications (unit cost inflation) and changes in the volume of services used (the utilization rate). PWC health researchers surveyed and interviewed actuaries at 27 U.S. health plans to produce their estimate of medical cost trend for 2027. This covers more than 103 million employer-sponsored members and 8 million Affordable Care Act marketplace members. The report does not cover trends in Medicare and Medicaid.

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News Release - CPI Data

The U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, publishes monthly consumer price index figures that look back over a rolling 12-month period to measure inflation.

3.5% - CPI for All Urban Consumers (CPI-U) Nationally (June)

3.2% - CPI-U for the West Region (from June)

3.3% - CPI-U for the Los Angeles Area (from June)

3.8% - CPI-U for San Francisco Bay Area (from June)

3.4% - CPI-U for the Riverside Area (from May)

3.8% - CPI-U for San Diego Area (from May)

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Questions & Answers about Your Job

Each month we receive dozens of questions about your rights on the job.
The following are some GENERAL answers.
If you have a specific problem, talk to your professional staff.

Question: My supervisor is the subject of an HR complaint that was filed by several of us in our workgroup. The employer has not put the supervisor on paid administrative leave but said they are launching an investigation. Does the employer have to place the supervisor on paid leave? We fear retaliation and the ability to speak candidly while the supervisor remains at the worksite. This is causing me distress, and I am wondering if I am eligible to take a medical leave of absence until this is resolved. Please advise.

Answer: The employer is not legally required to place an employee under investigation on administrative leave. In some situations, it may be best practice to do so, but it is not mandated. The employer has wide discretion in deciding who is placed on leave, when, and in what types of investigations. If the HR complaint alleges workplace violence, threats, theft, or sexual harassment, which, if corroborated, will likely lead to termination, the employer is more likely to exercise caution and place the employee on paid administrative leave pending the investigation. If the allegations will not likely result in termination, it is less likely the employer will remove the employee from the workplace

during the investigation.

Keep in mind the employer can place the subject of the investigation on paid administrative leave at any point during the investigation if, for example, the employer discovers information that the potential misconduct is more serious than initially reported or believed.

If there is any retaliation it should be reported to HR immediately. Retaliation is a separate charge and may cause the employer to reconsider keeping the supervisor in the workplace. Retaliation can take many forms and can be verbal or written. Some examples of retaliation may include a change in work assignment, work schedule, or work location. A bad performance review or the denial or cancelation of a leave request can also be retaliatory. If you experience retaliation, report it to HR and to higher level management. Document any incidents of retaliation in writing and keep a record of any communications you provide to HR or to management. You may also request to report to a different supervisor or be re-assigned to another work location.

If the conditions in your workplace cause you physical or emotional distress, you can request medical leave during the investigation. In some cases, removing yourself from a toxic work environment is necessary for your overall health. You may use protected sick leave (one-half of your annual sick leave accrual). However, if you are off work for several days, it is a good idea to get a doctor's note. If you need to be off work for a longer period for medical reasons, you can request medical leave under the Federal Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) or California Family Rights Act (CFRA). Both laws provide up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave for a serious medical condition. Employees can be paid during this time by using their own accumulated leave. You will need to have your medical provider complete a certification form if you want to take job-protected medical leave under the FMLA or CFRA.

Question: Can I bring my pet to work?

Answer: The short answer is no. Unless there is a medical necessity or a workplace policy that allows for it.

While there is no legal right to have pets at work, some employer policies may allow it. However, it is often subject to limitations, such as safety and sanitary considerations of the workplace and your coworkers. Consult Human Resources about whether your employer has a policy, and if so, make a request and secure approval in accordance with the policy prior to bringing your pet to work. Please keep in mind that many people do not love your pet the way you do. Some people are allergic, while some are fearful. It may be best to leave the pet happy at home.

Pets should not be confused with service animals. A medically necessary service animal would trigger an interactive process under the Federal Americans with Disability Act (ADA) and California Fair Employment and Housing Act (FEHA) to determine if allowing the animal in the workplace constitutes a reasonable accommodation.

Only dogs and miniature horses are recognized as service animals under the ADA. The service animal must be individually trained to do work or perform tasks for a person with a disability. This includes guiding people who are blind, alerting people who are deaf, pulling a wheelchair, alerting and protecting a person who is having a seizure, reminding a person with a mental illness to take prescribed medications, or calming a person with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) during an anxiety attack.

The work or task a dog has been trained to provide must be directly related to the person's disability. The dog must be housebroken and under the control of the handler. Dogs whose sole function is to provide comfort or emotional support do not qualify as service animals under the ADA.

This definition does not affect or limit the broader definition of "assistance animal" under the Fair Employment and Housing Act (FEHA). FEHA regulations define assistance animals as either service animals (like the ADA) or support animals. Support animals are not limited to dogs and do not require specialized task training. Support animals may provide emotional, cognitive, or therapeutic comfort that alleviates one or more symptoms of a psychological disability. Support animals may constitute a reasonable accommodation under FEHA, but you would need to request a medical accommodation, and the employer will hold an interactive process to identify the reasonable accommodations that it can provide.

Keep in mind that an employer does not have to provide the specific accommodation requested by the employee, but it must reasonably accommodate an employee's disability when required. An employer may provide some other accommodation – e.g., remote work – if that accommodation is reasonable after going through the interactive process. Whether an accommodation is "reasonable" depends on the specific circumstances. An accommodation may be deemed unreasonable if it places an "undue hardship" on the employer.

Question: **A few coworkers are asking about the Department's new policy on Lactation Breaks. One concern is "lactation breaks, if feasible, should be taken at the same time as the member's regularly scheduled rest or meal periods." Some of us interpret that to mean that lactation breaks should be taken in lieu of/during their lunch break, therefore, not getting an hour-long lunch break. Instead, using the 60-minute lunch break to have lunch as well as to express milk. Another concern is the location; some of the rooms that have been mentioned do not have actual locks, just signage "do not disturb" or something similar. So, the potential for someone walking in is present. How should we handle this?**

Answer: The employer can require that the time to express milk run concurrently with the employee's meal or break time. Under Labor Code §1030, every employer – including public agencies – shall provide a reasonable amount of break time to accommodate an employee needing to express breast milk. The break time shall, if possible, run concurrently with any break time already provided to the employee. Break time for an employee that does not run concurrently with the rest time may be unpaid.

This is the legal minimum. The employee may request to use paid leave for any time beyond the normal breaks and meal period. The employee should work with the supervisor to arrange a time in advance, when possible, to express milk. Under Labor Code §1032, an employer is not required to provide break time if it would seriously disrupt the operations of the employer.

The employer is required to provide a secure location to express milk. Under Labor Code §1031, the employer shall provide an employee with the use of a room or other location for the employee to express milk in private. The room or location may include the place where the employee nor-

mally works if it otherwise meets the requirements of this section. A lactation room or location shall not be a bathroom and shall be in close proximity to the employee's work area, shielded from view, and free from intrusion while the employee is expressing milk.

A lactation room or location shall also be: (1) safe, clean, and free of hazardous materials; (2) contain a surface to place a breast pump and personal items; (3) contain a place to sit; and (4) have access to electricity or alternative devices, including, but not limited to, extension cords or charging stations, needed to operate an electric or battery-powered breast pump.

The employer must provide access to a sink with running water and a refrigerator suitable for storing milk in close proximity to the employee's workspace. If a refrigerator cannot be provided, an employer may provide another cooling device suitable for storing milk, such as an employer-provided cooler.

Where a multipurpose room is used for lactation, the use of the room for lactation shall take precedence over the other uses, but only for the time it is in use for lactation purposes.

Under Labor Code §1034, an employer shall develop and implement a lactation accommodation policy that includes specific information. An employer shall include the policy in a handbook or set of policies that the employer makes available to employees. An employer shall distribute the policy to new employees upon hiring and when an employee makes an inquiry about or requests parental leave. If an employer cannot provide break time or a location that complies with the policy, the employer shall provide a written response to the employee.

You indicated that this is a "new" policy. Keep in mind that the employer must provide notice and an opportunity to meet and confer to all affected employee organizations prior to implementing the policy. Contact your employee organization leaders to see if they have been provided notice and the opportunity to negotiate over the policy.

If they have not yet negotiated the policy, let your employee organization leaders know about any desired changes to the policy. This can include using your leave time for any time outside your regular meal and rest breaks, as well as the placement of secure and functioning locks on the lactation room doors to prevent intrusion while someone is expressing milk.

If the policy already has been negotiated, and it does not conform to the minimum requirements set forth in the Labor Code, let your Human Resources Department know. They can revise the policy to comply with the law.

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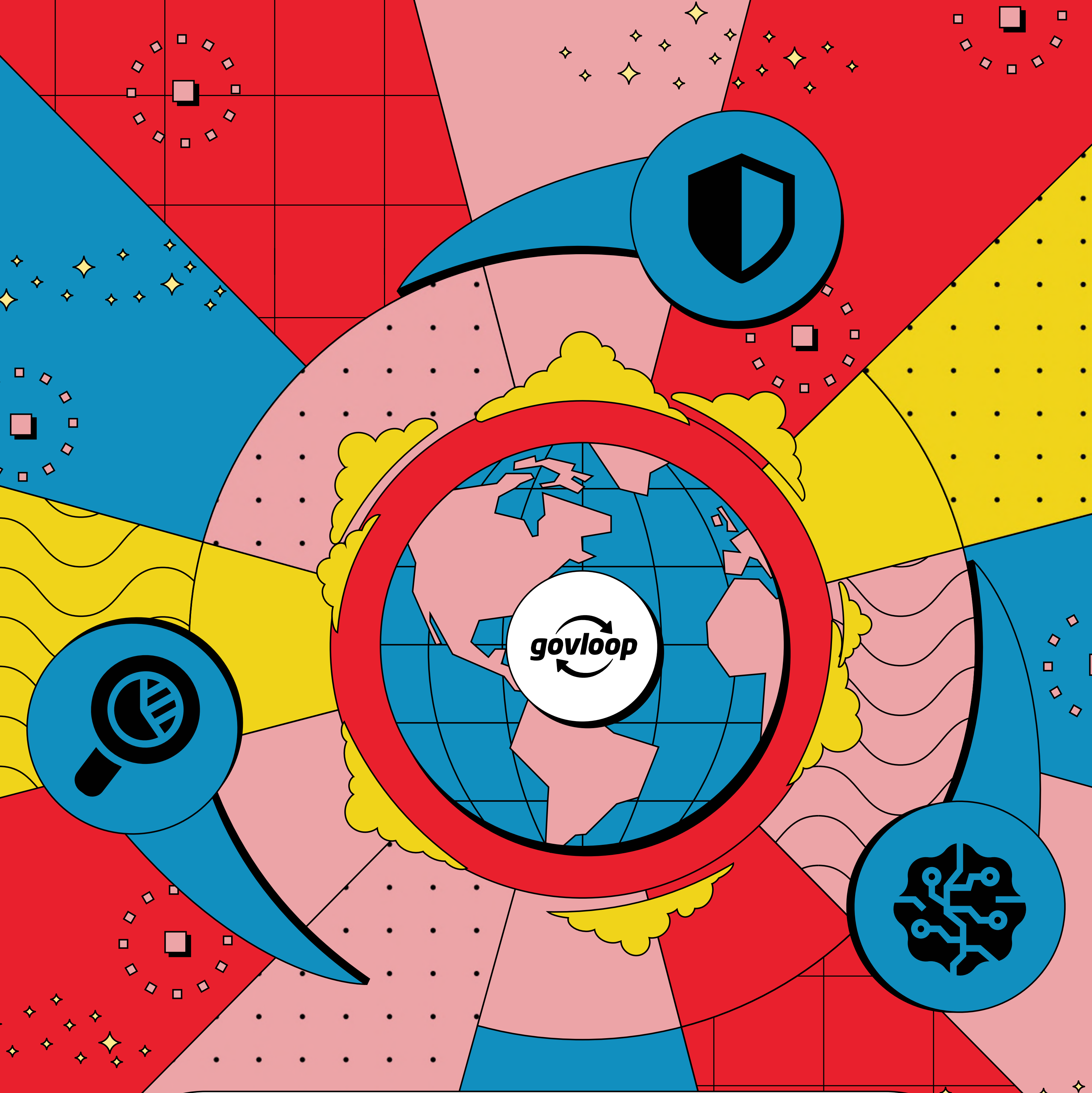

Building Trust With Tech

In State and Local Government

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Introduction

Over the last several years, state and local agencies have made a big push to invest in technology that improves operations and service delivery. However, technology is more than a matter of making operations more cost-effective and services more convenient. It's about building trust with constituents.

Constituents want to live in equitable, functional communities where they can rely on service delivery mechanisms and see that actions and policies are based on real information. To deliver the best possible service and to be trustworthy, state and local agencies need to operate in ways that are secure, data-based and innovative. That work calls for collaboration among agencies — federal, state and local — as well as good use of data to inform initiatives and policymaking.

In this guide, the first of two state and local guides in 2024, we've considered three key areas in which state and local agencies are leveraging technology to instill public confidence:

- Strengthening security through state and local collaboration
- Collecting and analyzing data to ensure equity in their services
- Leveraging AI to improve the constituent experience

We've invited government and subject matter experts to weigh in on how state and local governments can pursue growth in each of these areas, and come out ahead in all three.

What's Going on in State & Local?

Priorities for States

Each year, the National Association of State Chief Information Officers (NASCIO) publishes federal advocacy priorities that represent areas of focus for the upcoming year and how states can collaborate with federal agencies, Congress, the White House and strategic partners. **2024 priorities include:**

AI: States Lead the Way

Continue Adoption of DotGov Domain

Ensure Responsible Implementation of the State and Local Cybersecurity Grant Program

Expand and Strengthen the State Cyber Workforce

Harmonize Disparate Federal Cybersecurity Regulations

The Scoop on AI

AI is already at work in some state and local governments, whereas in others, it's just beginning to take root. Agencies are learning from each other as they create guidelines and explore how AI can help them improve processes. **For instance:**

- States such as Rhode Island, Vermont, Oklahoma, California, Illinois, Florida, Kentucky and Minnesota have created AI task forces, coalitions, and similar entities. They make recommendations for using AI safely and productively.
- Cities such as Boston, Seattle, San Jose and New York have crafted policies and guidance concerning AI.
- NASCIO provided Your AI Blueprint: 12 Key Considerations as States Develop Their Artificial Intelligence Roadmaps.

Grappling With Polarities

We're living in a turbulent, divisive time, and governors are aware of it. At the 2024 National Governors Association Winter Meeting, governors spoke about the Disagree Better Initiative, which seeks to decrease toxic polarization and increase positive, healthy debate in working through policy disagreements.

Disagree Better includes customizable intervention techniques for governors and states, and a variety of ideas and tools for working with the public to manage polarity. **The website offers:**

Video messages from governors

Research and resources

Opportunities to take action

Links to related meetings and events

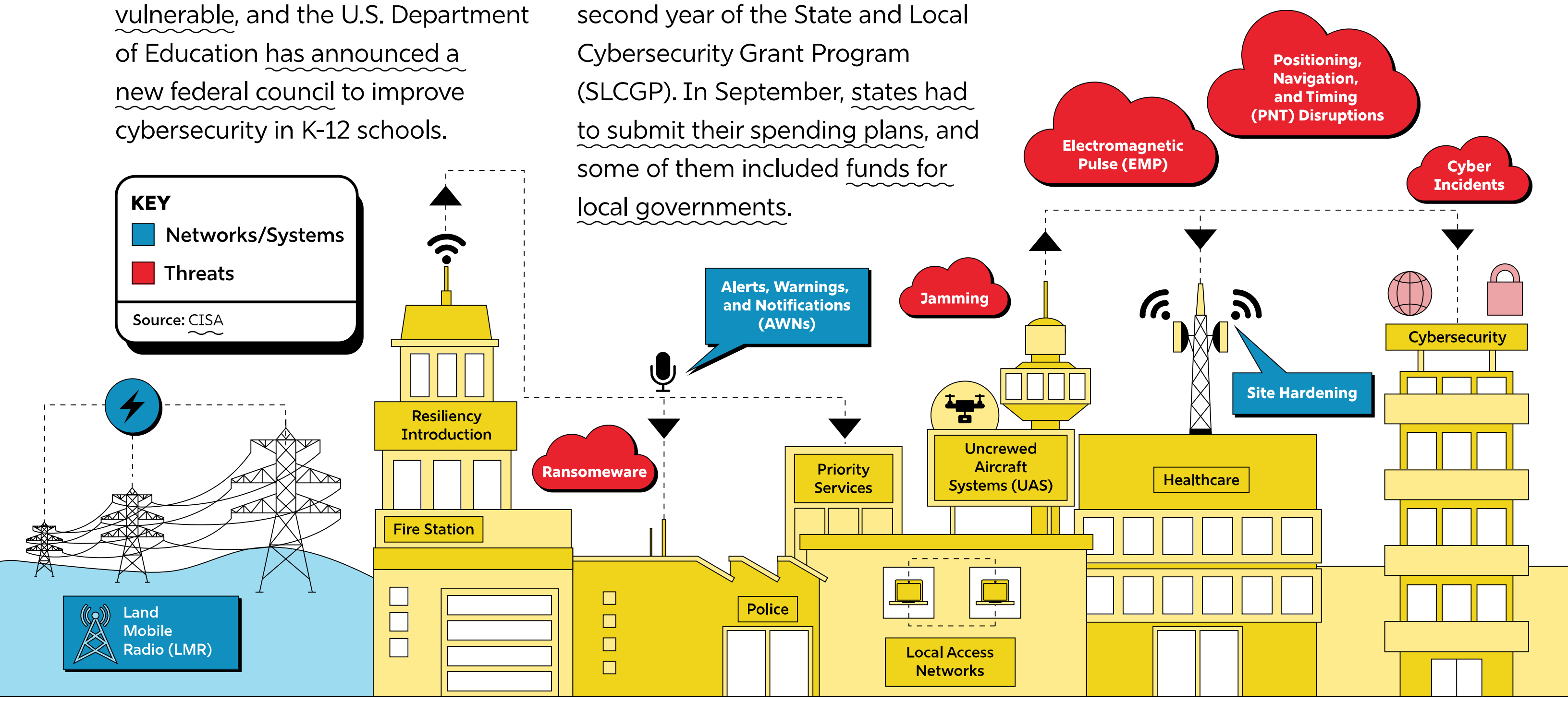
Cyber News Feed

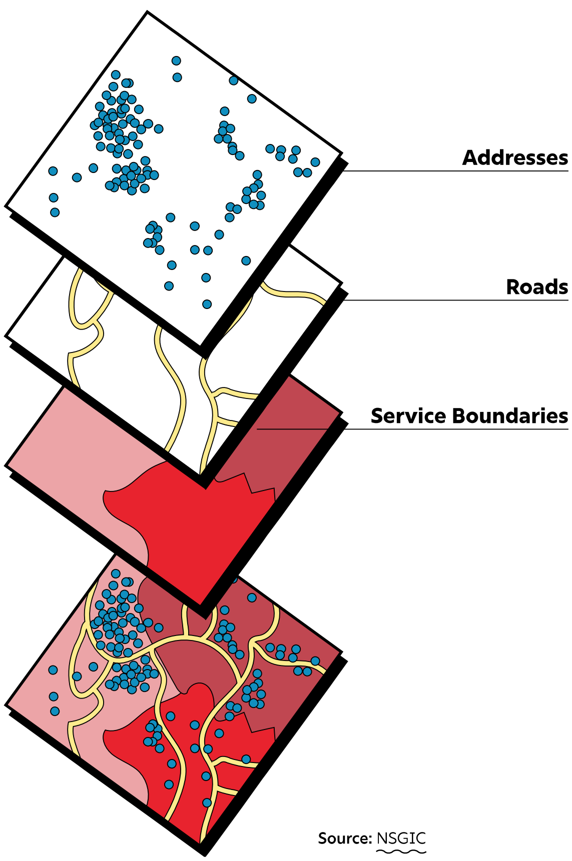
State and local agencies have made cybersecurity a top priority for 2024. Here's a look at recent developments.

Local governments are a big target for cyberattacks and often don't have the resources of federal agencies. Even schools are vulnerable, and the U.S. Department of Education has announced a new federal council to improve cybersecurity in K-12 schools.

Last year, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) and FEMA announced an additional $375 million for the second year of the State and Local Cybersecurity Grant Program (SLCGP). In September, states had to submit their spending plans, and some of them included funds for local governments.

CISA released updates for its Public Safety Communications and Cyber Resiliency Toolkit and, with DHS, its Resiliency Fact Sheet.





Source: NSGIC

Data and Constituent Interaction

Contact is everything. According to a Civic Plus survey, constituents who access their city's website more than once a month have almost five times the amount of trust in their city than those who access it infrequently.

Data literacy needs work. A NASCIO survey shows a data literacy problem among state workforces. Just 16% of state CIOs say their state has a formal data literacy or proficiency program for state employees.

Geospatial technology is becoming more popular. For example, a report by the National States Geographic Information Council shows states making great progress using the tech for "next-generation 911."

Smart City technology is on the radar again, as communities use data to improve services and the environment. A recent Forbes article described smart city benefits and challenges, and a 2024 podcast featured IT leaders from Normal, Illinois, who discussed how small cities may lead the smart city transformation.

How State and Local Government Can Bolster Election Security

An interview with Jim Richberg, *Head of Cyber Policy/Global Field Chief Information Security Officer, Fortinet*

Officials tasked with securing elections face a complex challenge. They need to build a voter registration database, secure the voting machines, and then tally votes accurately — all in the face of potential disruptions from malicious actors, foreign and domestic.

In an age of mis-, dis-, and mal-information, election officials also need the public to believe they're doing all this securely, because election integrity isn't just about accurately counting votes.

"It's also about perception," said Jim Richberg, with Fortinet. "If enough people think you have a problem, you have a problem."

A Changing Landscape

The threat landscape around elections has evolved in recent years, with increasing risks to security and privacy. "Election officials and poll workers are now facing an unprecedented level of physical threats and intimidation," Richberg said. This comes on top of cyber risks from nation-states and malicious insiders.

Because there's no "do-over" on holding an election, officials need to focus first on avoiding unrecoverable errors, or activities that prevent citizens from voting. For instance, if a ransomware attack locks up the registration database in the months prior to election day, "not being able to get to it because the data's been encrypted will stop local jurisdictions from pulling the data they need to create ballots for the registered voters in each precinct," Richberg said.

Then there's disinformation: Suppose someone accessed a local government's social media account and directed voters to the wrong polling place hours before the polls closed. This risks large-scale disenfranchisement.

"Because so many people use social media in local government, for myriad purposes, those passwords are well-known and often not well-secured. So why don't we have a coordinated change of social media passwords in local government three days before the election?" he said. That would create a potential roadblock to that kind of attack.

Technology to the Fore

In elections today, you must secure everything, from devices to databases, Richberg said. With unprecedented turnover among election officials and cyber teams stretched thin, state and local governments must rely on commercial solutions wherever possible.

"Look for solutions that are automated…that leverage multiple sources of threat intelligence coming from different directions and that are interoperable," Richberg said. Fortinet, for example, produces more than half the firewalls used globally and offers a portfolio of more than 50 products and services. These integrated solutions share threat intelligence and collaborate automatically, he said.

With the right technologies in place, election officials can then lean into proactive messaging.

"It's about saying, 'Here's what are we doing to secure your elections. We have ways of validating signatures on absentee ballots, we have these things called firewalls that will prevent intrusions, and our voting machines are not connected to the internet,'" Richberg said. Those measures and messaging can help preempt mis-, dis-, and mal-information about electoral integrity.

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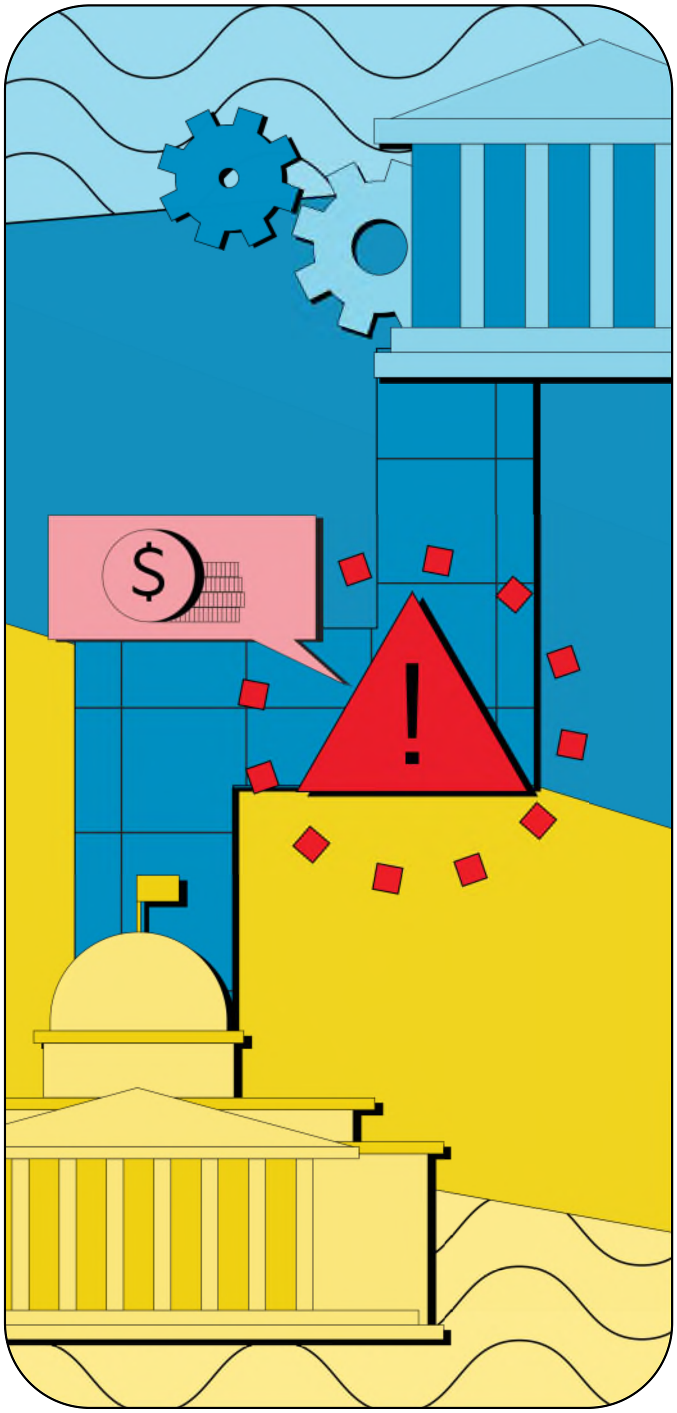
5 Ways to Improve Cross-Government Cyber Collaboration

An interview with Meredith Ward, Deputy Executive Director, National Association of State Chief Information Officers (NASCIO)



Whether they like it or not, state and local governments cannot afford to go it alone on cybersecurity. First, because so many of their systems and services are interconnected, an attack on one agency puts others at risk. Also, they can find strength in numbers, with the opportunity to share insights, information and even resources.

But historically, cross-government collaboration has been the exception, not the rule. Although most CIOs and chief information security officers (CISOs) see the value of collaboration, it can still feel awkward.

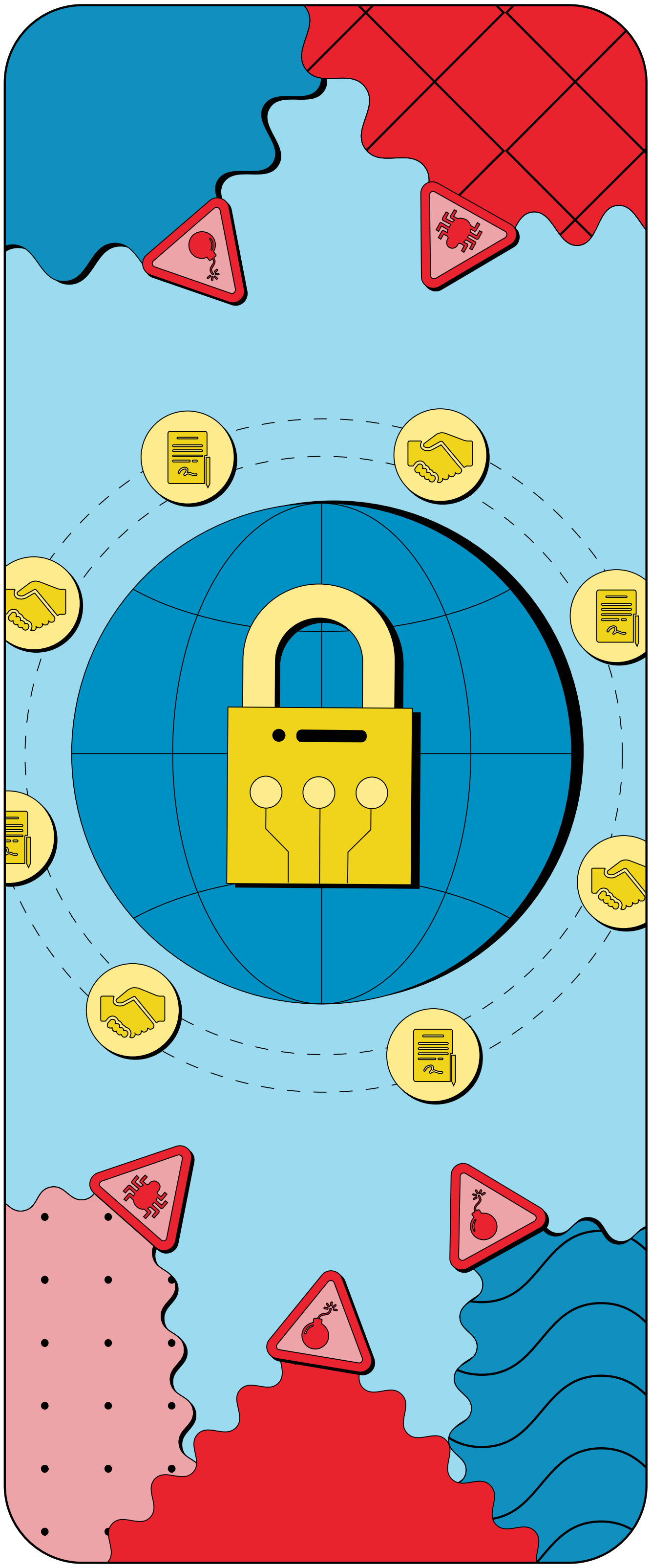
With that in mind, we asked Meredith Ward with NASCIO to share some best practices for building trust and working across boundaries. Here's what she said.

Know who's who. Cyber officials at the state and local level should build relationships before an incident occurs. It's just human nature, Ward said. "In the event of a crisis, if you know someone already, it makes it a little bit easier to work together and deal with that crisis."

For local government, there's a more tactical benefit to making those connections: intelligence gathering. A lot of cyber-related intelligence flows from the federal government and state fusion centers to state cyber offices. An open line of communication can keep that information flowing.

Don't let lack of funding be a roadblock.
Collaboration does not necessarily require a formal program with a dedicated budget. For example, state CISOs often connect with their local counterparts by speaking at conferences put on by universities or municipal associations. In short, they just make themselves visible and available.

At the very least, those kinds of gatherings make it easy for local officials to grab a business card, so they have contact information when they need it. "Because one of the biggest things that I've heard from local government is that the state's huge, I have no idea who to call, I don't even know where to start," Ward said.



States, market your services to local governments. In some states, local government has access to statewide contracts that cover many common products and services, including around cybersecurity. By using these contracts, they can avoid the time and money needed to run their own procurements.

States can negotiate better pricing because of the anticipated higher volume of business when they open these contracts to local government. That works in everyone's favor. "Nine times out of 10, you're going to see a huge cost savings," said Ward. But it works only if local agencies know such contracts exist and understand the value, she said.

Local government, don't see the state as Big Brother. All governments value their autonomy, so they often approach intergovernmental collaboration with some trepidation or even suspicion. But such concerns should not get in the way of collaboration, Ward said.

"I know it doesn't work perfectly in every state," she said, "but, bottom line, there is no CISO who has the time or money to try and control anything on the local government level. They just don't."

Meanwhile, there's no doubt about the upside of collaboration, especially for those smaller counties and towns that lack a cyber expert, she said.

Remember, bad guys don't care about jurisdictional borders. Historically, state and local governments have tended to be insular, Ward said, dealing with their own problems in their own way. But that mindset puts them at a disadvantage when it comes to dealing with cyber threats, she said.

Cyber criminals often will launch serial attacks, first against one state or city, then another and another. By sharing information, states and localities can help each other prepare for and respond to those attacks, and not be blindsided. The same rationale applies to public-private collaboration.

"Everyone is a target," Ward said. "We are all in this together, and cyber is everyone's responsibility."

An Engaging Strategy for Audience Outreach

An interview with Carolina Prieto,

Solution Advisor for Digital Communications, Granicus

Improving public trust and engagement doesn't happen by chance. It requires a strategy, a clear metric for success — more than click and open rates — and data to benchmark against. And agencies should realize that their audiences are ever-changing, said Carolina Prieto with Granicus, a company that provides digital experiences to help agencies better serve their constituents.

"When people say, 'Oh, we just want to do better engagement and reach our audience,' there is no fixed 'audience,'" she explained. "It's an influx of people going in and out."

With a continuous flow of data, agencies can fine-tune outreach to their constituents and set realistic definitions of success, she said. If there are 200,000 people in your jurisdiction, should a 10% response rate be your goal? That means hearing from 20,000 people — but do you have resources for that?

Data Delivers

One way to collect data that leads to effective programming, Prieto said, is through always-on engagement, in which you ask someone a real-time question relevant to a stage in their online user journey. For example, asking a website visitor, "How often do you text different providers in your area?" can provide vital information about constituent texting frequency that the agency can use when creating bulletin campaigns.

A/B testing and similar mechanisms also are critical because they help agencies adjust their messaging, she said. "We don't want to be guessing. We want to be collecting information and being super-strategic about what it means," Prieto said. "If an audience member doesn't feel like you are talking to them ... they're less likely to engage with you."

Best Practices

Agencies can scale up slowly; baby steps are OK. "Give somebody a very specific project ... for one or two months and have it be really tight," she said. Be clear about your benchmarks — the metrics you're focusing on — and your rationale for doing so. And use multiple channels to reach your audience, advised Prieto.

That includes newsletters, an accessible website, online and in-person events, and SMS/text messaging — "we know that 80% of folks are on their phones," she noted. "We should be thinking about creative multimedia approaches," Prieto said, "especially with complex information the government needs to send."

An Engagement Cloud

State and local agencies often lack the tools to build and implement an effective communications strategy. But the Granicus engagement cloud, Prieto said, helps organizations understand their audience, create an outreach plan, and then activate those campaigns. Through automation, data insights, and dashboarding, "you can create an ecosystem of engagement in your agency [and] have it run in a way that continues to feed itself," she said.

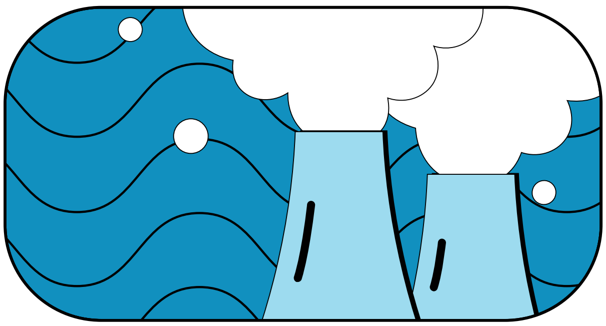
For example, the City of Bellevue, Washington, used Granicus digital solutions to connect with residents in new ways, including SMS messaging and an "Engaging Bellevue" website that encourages people to submit feedback on various local projects. The city now enjoys a 58% engagement rate.

GRANICUS

How Communities Are Using Data to Address Inequities

The concept of evidence-based policymaking — the idea that policies should be developed and refined based on hard data, not just hunches — can play a critical role in helping state and local agencies identify and mitigate systemic issues that undermine government's ability to serve all constituents.

As agencies become more adept at collecting, managing and analyzing data, they are able to answer critical questions that previously proved elusive. Here are some examples of what can be done in key policy areas.



Environmental

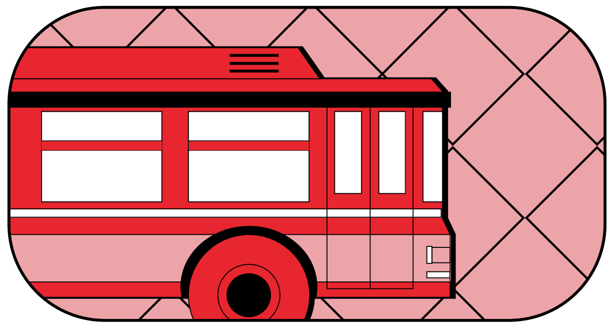
Where do environmental hazards put public health at risk?

The Equity Issue

Air pollution, dirty waterways, industrial waste and other environmental concerns do not align neatly with any jurisdictional boundaries. Still, public policies around zoning, environmental cleanup and other community planning issues often lead to increased risks in communities where constituents lack a say in policy decisions. The result? Higher risk for disadvantaged communities.

A Data Solution

Colorado has developed an online mapping program called Colorado EnviroScreen that combines population and environmental factors, so state and local policymakers can see where communities have been disproportionately impacted by environmental hazards. In addition to highlighting areas in need of assistance, the tool is intended to provide guidance about future decisions with public health consequences, such as permitting fracking and mining.



Transportation

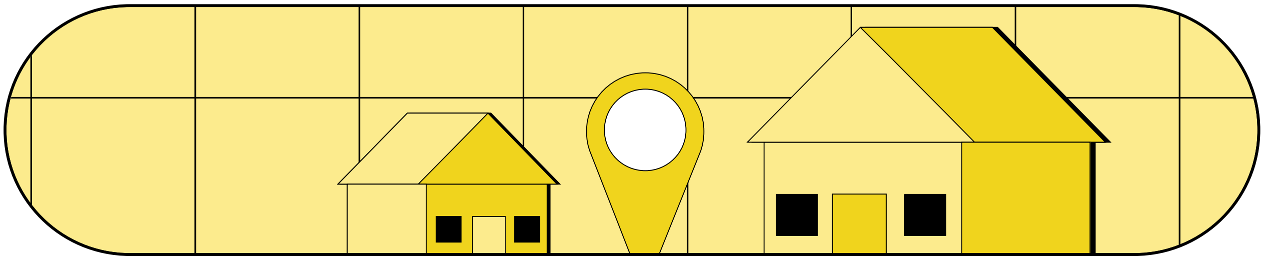
Does public transit support parents seeking assistance?

The Equity Issue

Head Start centers provide federally funded services to parents with children ages five and under. In addition to daycare, the centers offer services and activities to support school readiness, child health and wellness, and family well-being. The challenge is that many parents or caregivers can't get to those centers. A recent study by the Civic Mapping Initiative found that only about 42% of the 164,000 centers are within 0.2 miles of public transit.

A Data Solution

The National Head Start Association has teamed with the Civic Mapping Initiative to make transit agencies aware of these gaps. Initially, they are focused on centers that have a bus stop within a mile of their location. A mile is too long for an adult to walk with a toddler, but close enough that a stop can be added without a lot of fuss.



Economics

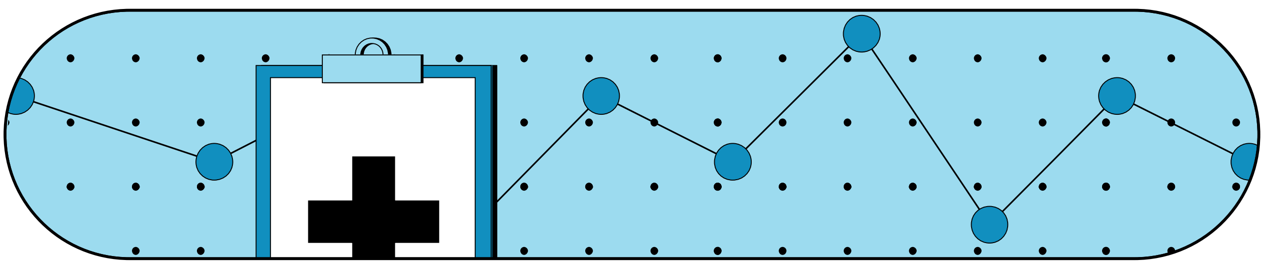
Do zoning rules create unfair barriers to home ownership?

The Equity Issue

For local government, zoning regulations are one of the most powerful ways to give shape to a community — to spur growth in some areas and limit it in others. But such rules have the potential to harden divides along demographic and economic lines. That has become a concern with zoning rules that put hard limits on multifamily homes, which can serve as an entry point to home ownership for people with lower household incomes.

A Data Solution

The Urban Institute, a nonprofit research organization, delved into this issue using the Connecticut Zoning Atlas, a data set that aligns zoning texts with digital maps across the state. By overlaying those maps with demographic and economic indicators at the neighborhood level, researchers found that people who lived in areas zoned primarily for single-family housing were more likely to be white, highly educated — and much more likely to own their homes than people living in areas permitting multifamily homes, according to its report.



Public Health

Are communities collecting the data needed to highlight public-health equity concerns?

The Equity Issue

During the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, public health officials wanted to understand how the pandemic and response efforts were playing out among different demographics, such as race, ethnicity, age and gender. The problem was that in the early going, many communities were not consistently collecting demographic data, making it difficult to identify and address inequities.

A Data Solution

Based on lessons learned from the pandemic, the CDC Foundation, a nonprofit that supports the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, developed some guiding principles that local communities can use to ensure they bring an equity lens to their data initiatives, from data collection and analysis to dissemination and decision-making. The principles draw on a report by the National Commission to Transform Public Health Data Systems.

A New Type of Agency: Agile and Anticipatory

***An interview with Chris Dilley,** CTO State and Local Government, ServiceNow*

When constituents receive the same level of service and convenience from government as the private sector offers — whether dealing with garbage collection, fishing licenses or social services benefits — people tend to think well of government. It matters whether someone has a positive or negative experience transitioning from traditional, face-to-face interactions with agencies to more digital outreach, said ServiceNow's Chris Dilley, who helps organizations deliver experiences that constituents expect.

He observed that the more critical a service is to someone's life, the more anxious that person will feel, and choosing technology to facilitate smooth experiences is important.

"Technology has become oxygen," explained Dilley. "For every organization, it's just absolutely necessary. It's no longer optional."

Planning Ahead

Agencies must anticipate what constituents may need next week or year, and how services provided today will influence lives in 10 to 15 years, he said. Looking forward means gauging impacts not only on individuals, Dilley said, but also on their communities and the agencies serving them. Technology that uses both real-time and historical data helps agencies act at the right moments.

"Through utilizing data, and now with the use of AI, we're going to be able to support governments … to drive a better experience, be more engaging and have more insights … before the need becomes really critical," Dilley said.

An Agile Workforce

Staffing also plays a part, since employees must be able to weather change as their agencies work to improve constituent experiences, he said. Program areas that typically include generalist employees should anticipate when experts are needed, so there's a way to balance staffing, for instance.

"As we think about the specific needs that people have, especially from a digital interface perspective, we [must] look at our staffing levels," he explained.

By improving workforce balance, agencies build public trust, so when people seek assistance, they know that agencies have employees, as well as new technologies, to handle their needs.

Service, Not Stampede

In recent years, Dilley has helped the State of Tennessee's Health and Human Services Department enhance its service delivery. Waiting-room space had been limited, but why should constituents have to wait for hours in a physical location, he asked. ServiceNow helped establish a registration and user-preferred communication system that alerted constituents 15 minutes before they would be served, Dilley said. The system also prioritized urgent needs, such as food and financial assistance for children and families.

"Tennessee worked to change that citizen experience to keep those constituents engaged and make that [experience] more digital, leveraging the ServiceNow platform," he said.

Dilley also shared how ServiceNow helped the State of Montana create a system to facilitate the licensing and permitting processes, specifically around ranching and branding processes. The solution provides more visibility and efficiency, helping Montana ranchers and one of the state's biggest industries, he said.

It's the kind of government service that makes a real-world difference, here and now.

servicenow

AI Practices for Better CX

When AI implementation focuses on users, whether consumers or employees, it promotes trust and facilitates better agency services. In Vermont, the first state to establish a division dedicated to artificial intelligence ethics and implementation, Josiah Raiche, Chief Data and AI Officer, has been working to incorporate AI into both internal and external-facing processes. The goals are, through ethical practices, to improve services for citizens and help employees work with greater ease and efficiency. Raiche shared some tips from his experience using AI to ultimately improve customer experience, or CX.

Lead With Honest, User-Centric Principles

Raiche said you can reduce friction surrounding the technology by building trust with constituents.

In his work, that means being honest and straightforward when his agency uses AI. Last year, Vermont released its Artificial Intelligence Code of Ethics, which provides operational guidance, standards for data-labeling in automated systems and citation standards when generative AI is used. One ethical practice: Let a user know when material has been created with more than 20% AI assistance.

"I think that people who are kind of just starting this journey should really think about the underlying principles, their values and how they're going to express the culture of their organization through the use of AI," said Raiche.

Vermont's Guidelines for Use of Content Generating AI includes an easy-to-read chart about how much and when to use AI in content generation and editing. Raiche said the chart (excerpted below) has been useful for Vermont agencies, and for agencies in other states.

Breadth of Distribution	Proofreading, Grammar	Brainstorming, First Draft, <25% AI	Collaborative Writing, About 50% AI	Human Edited, >75% AI	100% AI Content
Press release, prepared remarks	✓	cite	X	X	X
Replies to public inquiry	✓	cite	X	X	X
Public facing web content	✓	cite	cite	X	X
Memos, broad internal communications	✓	cite	cite	X	X
Internal process docs	✓	✓	cite	X	X
Source code	✓	✓	cite	X	X

Give Employees Agency

"We need to use AI to make work better, not worse," said Raiche.

AI and automation should not control what we're doing. It should help us do it better.

"If you're using AI in ways that take away the creativity and the agency of the employees, you're really kind of turning them into kind of the living appendages of the machine in some way," Raiche said. "But we also have the opportunity to use AI to give people superpowers," he added.

Raiche advocates for developing AI so that it gives employees newfound abilities and expression — "so that the people are the boss, not the servants," he said.

Teach Users to Use Context

AI technology is learning contexts, the many facts and circumstances that surround our data. Everyone who uses or designs AI should remember that we have spent our lives perceiving and applying contexts, and that some are unique. So, when AI answers questions, it may be unable to recognize the correct context if a user isn't explicit.

Raiche said that in Vermont, one big focus is developing context awareness among AI users. If they get in the habit of stating contexts, that could be a critical way to make AI processes more functional.

Ways AI Has Been Helpful in Vermont

1. **Sorting through or translating "legalese"**
2. **Streamlining automated approval processes for renewals**
3. **Prefilling enrollment forms based on a previous year**
4. **Assembling information for long, routine reports**
5. **Writing job postings**

You Can Catch Up

If you haven't been working with AI yet, you may feel that your AI education and adoption is lagging. But Raiche said you're not behind, and there is still time to build AI into your work.

"This is a thing that you can figure out. You don't have to be a super nerd to figure this out. And your employees are already using this," he said. "So, tap into that."

Raiche suggested crowdsourcing among employees for ideas about incorporating AI, because many will be familiar with it, even if it's outside their agency work.

As Raiche has talked with other states, he's found that more experience with AI means less fear and a greater sense of control and competency. Where there is fear, he suggests putting risk mitigation strategies in place and then experimenting with AI.

Vermont's Phases of AI Adoption

1. Groundwork
- Foundational elements
- Build internal experience
- Build user experience

2. Trust and Experience
- Pilot programs
- Small-scale use cases
- Evaluation and learning

3. CX Transformation
- Easier-to-use services
- Constituents navigate with less friction
- Agencies build confidence

Conclusion

State and local agencies impact residents in so many ways, and by taking advantage of new opportunities related to data, cybersecurity and the constituent experience, these organizations can make profound improvements in people's lives. This guide is the first of two 2024 guides devoted to state and local initiatives. Pre-register for the September installment here.

About GovLoop

GovLoop's mission is to inspire public-sector professionals by serving as the knowledge network for government. GovLoop connects more than 300,000 members, fostering cross-government collaboration, solving common problems and advancing government careers. GovLoop is headquartered in Washington, D.C., with a team of dedicated professionals who share a commitment to the public sector.

For more information about this report, please reach out to info@govloop.com.

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