

GOVERNMENT TECHNOLOGY

SOLUTIONS FOR STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN THE INFORMATION AGE



Oakland County, Mich., Shares Notification Service With Local Cities

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When the H1N1 “swine” flu epidemic broke loose in late April 2009, Americans clamored for information about the disease and its potential impact in their communities. Many local governments turned to their own Web sites and other means of digital communication to disseminate information.

But simply placing a notice on a Web page or sending an e-mail isn't always sufficient. How can local governments be sure to provide the information citizens want and need in a timely fashion? And more importantly, as there may be overlap among different government departments and agencies, how can local governments be sure their citizenry can find the information they seek without difficulty?

Oakland County, Mich., a community of 1.2 million residents in the state's southeastern corner, confronted these challenges head-on by implementing a new digital communication platform. The county is going even further by letting its municipalities use the service for free.

The Platform

The county uses a digital subscription service provided by GovDelivery. It plugs directly into an existing Web site and lets citizens sign up to receive notification via e-mail, RSS feed or text message when Web pages in specific categories are updated.

For example, if a citizen were interested in being notified about swine flu, he could go to a general subscription sign-up page on a county's or municipality's Web site. There he can select from more than 40 categories, including a high-level category called Health Division, or underlying categories like Flu Information, Flu Shots or Pandemic Flu Preparedness. Whenever a Web page tagged with that category is updated — no matter what department, agency or level of government is providing that revised information — the citizen is immediately notified by e-mail with a link to the updated page.

“Before, one might have to sign up for a general or marketing e-mail alert that may not provide information they are really interested in seeing,” said Zach Stabenow, executive vice president and co-founder of GovDelivery. “But GovDelivery allows a county or city to be very specific. As a citizen, maybe I just want to sign up and receive an e-mail alert when the county commissioner's meeting minutes are posted. And now I can do that — get real-time information from my local government straight to my e-mail box and choose what that information is.”

Phil Bertolini, deputy county executive and CIO of Oakland County, said allowing citizens to choose the information they want to follow is critical when dealing with a large government Web site.

“We have 25,000 pages of content on our site with 170 different content managers managing data on a daily basis,” Bertolini said. “We work hard to remain up-to-date and dynamic.” Because of those active, often daily content updates, the county appreciates an automatic process that does not burden its information managers with more work

than they already have.

The new technology also helps save taxpayers some money.

“The communication benefit is invaluable. But the other benefit of using this kind of communication platform is that it reduces costs for the local governments,” Stabenow said. “The printing and postage involved with delivering information through traditional channels can really add up.”

Including Municipalities

Oakland County started using the platform in June 2008. The county decided to offer GovDelivery to its municipalities this year. In his state of the county address in February, Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson discussed the benefits of GovDelivery and offered the service to all municipalities free of charge. Although some might find the announcement surprising, Bertolini said the county's leadership is committed to helping its communities obtain the right technologies.

“We've often provided new technologies to our communities at no extra cost,” Bertolini said. “After all, why build something for our treasurer that only he can use? All of our local governments have treasurers that could benefit. Our taxpayers may live in a particular city, but they also pay county taxes. Why not use GovDelivery to satisfy the information needs of all of our citizens while working cooperatively with our local governments? It helps cement our relationship with our local communities even more.”

Oakland County's agreement with GovDelivery lets the county share the platform with its 61 local governments. At the cost of approximately \$8,000 per month Oakland County provides all its communities the ability to use the GovDelivery subscription service, and the municipalities aren't responsible for a dime.

When Dave Ax, treasurer of Groveland Township, heard Patterson's speech, he jumped at the opportunity to pilot the system in the small, rural community of about 6,000 residents.

“We're not techno-geeks in this office, so we rely on experts to do most of our technical stuff,” Ax said. “But when I heard about GovDelivery, I thought, in this day and age, it would be very beneficial for our township residents to be reminded by e-mail that something new is happening.”

Working closely with the vendor and a part-time contract webmaster, Groveland Township got the platform running with minimal glitches in just under four weeks. Ax already considers it a success — not only because residents can pick and choose what information they want to be notified about, but also because the notifications occur automatically at both the township and county levels. It creates greater efficiencies for all parties.

“The word ‘transparency’ gets overused,” Ax said. “But GovDelivery is helping us to be more transparent to our residents so they can see right away what we're doing as officials to better the community and make their lives easier. It not only helps the local municipalities in this time of tough cutbacks, but it allows us the opportunity to help our citi-

zens stay current on the latest happenings across the township and county, and do it in a really easy way. And most importantly, it does not cost us a penny.”

Measure of Success

George Graunke, a 72-year-old retired resident who is a regular at Groveland Township board meetings, uses the service and is very pleased with the results. An active member of the community, as well as a new member of Oakland County's Senior Advisory Committee, Graunke has subscribed to receive notifications when the agendas and minutes of board meetings are posted on the Groveland Township Web site, as well as for updated county information.

“I like to stay informed and be involved in the community,” he said, “and the subscription service is very easy to use and gets me the information I need as soon as it's available.”

Graunke is actively involved with the township and county, so he appreciates that the service allows him to get the information he needs from both governments without having to spend too much time digging around different Web sites. “If it wasn't so easy, I wouldn't use it,” he said. “I just don't have the patience.”

Jim Taylor, Oakland County's chief of e-government, said the ability to share subscription lists is a huge benefit.

“I live in a city and in the county. With shared lists, I can go to one Web site and sign up for the information I'm interested in instead of having to visit several different Web sites and poke around,” he said. “After all, the official government boundaries and limits don't necessarily mean anything to the citizen. That person has an issue, needs a service or wants information and just wants to go do that.”

The county is getting positive feedback about the service from its citizens. Taylor said subscriptions increased during the H1N1 scare — and because of the interest, the county was able to quickly and easily add a new subscription category specifically for information about the disease outbreak.

“I was driving to lunch one afternoon and got a message on my cell phone that some swine flu information had been updated,” Taylor said. “I was able to go to the mobile site on my phone and read the new content right away. That's very valuable to citizens who want to get that new information right away.”

The point that Bertolini, Taylor, Stabenow and Ax return to is that this kind of service can help the different levels of government work together more easily.

“Oakland County's leadership has said, ‘Let's look forward and work with our municipalities — we can collaborate together,’” Stabenow said. “Within local government, it's not always easy to get separate groups of government, at different levels, working together. But Oakland County is doing it and doing it well.”

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GovDelivery

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