

**A. Cover page**

**Title:** Mass.Gov:  
Achieving a True “Single Face of Government”  
Through Continuous, Sustainable Improvement

**Category:** Digital Government: Government to Citizen (G to C)

**State:** Commonwealth of Massachusetts

## B. Executive summary

In 2001, Massachusetts was a leader in making content and transactions (such as driver's license renewal) available online. However, citizens had to understand the structure and functions of 100s of agencies in order to access these online services.

Since 2002, Massachusetts, like most states, has had a top-level state portal ([www.mass.gov](http://www.mass.gov)) that organizes information and transactions according to user needs, not government structure.

However, what sets Massachusetts apart is that we have carried the idea of "a single face of government" far beyond having just a top level portal that continues to link off to hundreds of disparate websites, or simply establishing guidelines on consistent look and feel.

In Massachusetts, we are:

- Consolidating over 100 websites into a handful of topic-based sub-portals and using a consistent, controlled page layout throughout
- Using a single, distributed content publishing toolset that does not require coding expertise to use
- Enforcing a single brand identity for all\* of state government
- Establishing strong governance and user communities
- Using visual design and navigation based on professional, third-party usability findings
- Complying with open standards and building universal access into the content publishing process.
- Continuously making enhancements to improve the user experience and promote civic engagement and public safety.

\* In Massachusetts, the Information Technology Division is part of the Executive Department, a subset of the Executive Branch that consists of the Governor, Lieutenant Governor and secretariats and independent agencies that report to the Governor. Our authority to require agencies to consolidate websites and adopt Mass.Gov's branding and web publishing platform is limited to Executive Department agencies. Nevertheless, the platform and the brand are available to the other two branches and the independently elected constitutional officers making up the remainder of the Executive Branch, who have been increasingly adopting them voluntarily. The Attorney General has had a Mass.Gov subportal for nearly a year; the Treasurer will be launching its subportal this June. District Attorneys and Sheriffs are now beginning to use Mass.Gov as well. The Legislature and the Courts have expressed interest.

## **C. Description of business problem and solution**

### **Business problem**

In 2001, although Massachusetts was a leader in making services available online, government was growing increasingly inaccessible to citizens, due to hundreds of siloed websites with inconsistent branding and navigation.

In addition, agencies had no common web publishing platform and varying budgets and staffing to support their sites. Larger agencies delegated the job to technologists. Smaller agencies (if they even had a web presence) assigned the job to administrative staff and others lacking technical expertise. As a consequence, websites were poorly designed and maintained, or relied on expensive coders and designers. Content was often outdated, difficult to find or use and inaccessible to the disabled.

The initial solution was a top-level portal that would link off to existing websites until they could be converted to the Mass.Gov platform. However, we soon learned that with hundreds of state agencies, and a staff of only 15, converting one agency at a time to Mass.Gov's templates wasn't feasible or sustainable, and also would not really address the challenge of making government more accessible.

### **Solution**

Our solution to this problem was to build upon the top-level portal by consolidating over 100 websites into a handful of topic-based "sub-portals." These sub-portals use the same controlled page layout and user-centered information architecture throughout.

A case in point is Health & Human Services. Prior to consolidation, there were 17 separate websites with stovepiped content and varying design quality. As someone from Health & Human Services remarked, "it was like arts and crafts time." Today, there is one Health & Human Services site. Its content is organized by constituency and topic (not by agency) and related content from multiple agencies is integrated (e.g., under the "Consumer" constituency, in the Family Services topic, content from multiple agencies is provided (adoption, caregiver support, childcare, child welfare and more). Context-sensitive side modules, such as news, online services, and publications, provide easy access to additional related content.

To date we have consolidated 52 standalone agency websites into 5 topic-based subportals -- Health & Human Services; Public Safety & Security (formerly 15 sites); Labor & Workforce Development (formerly 8 sites); Housing & Economic Development (formerly 5 sites); and Consumer Affairs (formerly 7 sites). Combined, these sites represent over 50% of Executive Department content. We are in the process of developing two additional sites, Education (currently 4 sites) and Energy & Environment (currently 17 sites) and scheduled to complete Transportation & Public Works (currently 5 sites) and Administration & Finance (currently 18 sites) by June 2009.

**When the consolidations are completed, we will have reduced the number of standalone Executive Department websites by 87%.**

## **Length of time in operation**

Key milestones along the road toward establishing the consolidation strategy have been:

- 2003: Overhauled front-end user interface and simplified back-end content management system.
- 2004: Piloted consolidation with Health & Human Services.
- 2005: Established Portal User Group and Portal Advisory Board. Struggled to attract and retain appropriate senior-level business representatives.
- 2006: Implemented code and design changes to further separate content from presentation and improve usability, accessibility and flexibility.
- 2007: New Governor, formalized and mandated the consolidation and branding strategy. Reconstituted Portal Advisory Board with more appropriate representation.
- 2008: Achieved over 50% of consolidation goal; strategy and methods proven repeatable and successful.

## **Challenges**

A key challenge early on was the need to preserve individual agency identity, for both practical and political reasons. We were asking agencies to give up autonomy and control over look and feel for the sake of consolidation. Also, just because it made more sense to organize content by topic and not by agency, it didn't mean that information about agencies no longer mattered. In order to overcome agency resistance to consolidation, and to meet citizens' needs for information about individual agencies, Mass.Gov, working with its agency customers, devised the "agency landing page."

The agency landing page is a page within the consolidated subportal that provides basic information, such as what the agency does; who the agency head is; where the agency is located; and how to get in touch with the agency. While rest of the agency's content lives within topics elsewhere on the subportal, that content links back to the agency landing page, so that citizens know who is responsible for specific content.

Another challenge was balancing the need for consistent look and feel from site to site, with the need for some differentiation between sites. Although the banners for Mass.Gov and its subportals are consistent, we instituted a new banner that gives subportals some branding flexibility via color schemes and the use of meaningful, rotating images (which also lend a more dynamic appearance to Mass.Gov as a whole).

## **D. Significance of the Project**

*The public's perception of the competence of an administration is increasingly being shaped by the ease of access/response through 24/7 call centers and websites.*

*-Gino Menchini, former CIO for New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg*

## **Policy, strategy & goal alignment**

We would not be where we are today without the support of the Patrick Administration, which quickly grasped that Mass.Gov was key to achieving its goals: improving service to citizens; increasing civic engagement; and reducing the cost of government.

We could have chosen to focus instead on implementing the latest web technologies *du jour* (many of which have popped up on award-winning state websites, then disappeared, in cycles of hype followed by disappointment). We chose instead to focus on the less sexy, but much harder task of transforming how content gets published, because content never goes away, and is always, in the end, what citizens are looking for on websites. Complete, easy-to-use content is also the foundation for substantive civic engagement and involvement.

Mass.Gov is a mission-critical, 24-7 operation serving all of the Commonwealth's key constituencies (citizens, businesses, municipalities, employees and visitors), and hosting 260,000 web pages belonging to about 100 agencies. Combined, Mass.Gov's sites receive 5 million visitors and have 25 million pageviews per month. (Massachusetts' population is approximately 6 million.) To our knowledge, we are the only state in the U.S. that has undertaken such a deeply penetrating website consolidation, focused on content quality, accessibility and ease of use. The only comparable effort we are aware of is the British government's<sup>1</sup>.

### **Impact on agency nominating the project, state agencies and citizens**

*Sustainability and manageability* - Mass.Gov has a staff of just 15. "One agency, one website" (in some cases more) was no longer sustainable. We simply could not succeed in establishing a true single face of government, one agency at a time. To accomplish the consolidations, we developed a repeatable process and reusable presentations and reference materials. Joint teams made up of Mass.Gov and agency staff inventory and analyze agency content, identify gaps, eliminate ROT (redundant, outdated or trivial content), and develop a user-focused information architecture. After Mass.Gov trains agency staff in the publishing toolset and best practices (writing for the web, usability testing, accessibility compliance, etc.), they build their own sites. We mentor them through establishing governance and business processes for ongoing maintenance.

#### *Increased ease-of-use*

Mass.Gov's current colors, fonts, tabs and arrangement of page elements are based on the findings of a third-party usability study, which involved observing actual citizens and business users complete a battery of tasks on Mass.Gov's websites. The study also affirmed the importance of consistent look and feel. When users navigated away from a Mass.Gov web page to another agency's different-looking standalone site, the experience was jarring and undermined their trust and confidence.

#### *Continuous enhancement to improve user experience, promote civic engagement, public safety*

A "Citizen Alert" module, managed by public safety staff, provides real-time Amber Alerts and other emergency notifications. We have begun rolling out a module for

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<sup>1</sup> *Government to close 551 websites* - [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/politics/6247703.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/6247703.stm)  
"Hundreds of government websites are to be shut down 'to make access to information easier' for people."

citizens to provide targeted feedback, which we will use to drive site improvements. The Governor's office is using its Mass.Gov site to promote civic engagement, and publishes videos, podcasts, photo galleries and extensive content concerning its policy priorities. Many other agencies are posting instructional videos with either closed captioning or accessible alternative formats. On June 3 we will launch RSS feeds for all of Mass.Gov's news & updates modules; this will enable citizens to subscribe to feeds on dozens of topics. In the past, when agencies implemented such enhancements, they were "one-offs" which benefited only that agency and its customers. Today, when Mass.Gov implements an enhancement, it benefits everyone.

## **E. Benefit of the Project:**

### *Reduced completion or resolution time*

At the time we solidified our consolidation strategy in 2006-07, we estimated that without consolidation, migration of all Executive Department sites on an agency-by-agency basis would take over 10 years.

### *Increased efficiency and reducing the total cost of government*

- Increased citizen "self service." When information and transactions are easier to find, there are fewer calls, office visits and paper forms to process and voluntary compliance with laws and regulations increases. Anecdotally, agencies have reported that their Mass.Gov sites enable them to maintain or improve service levels, despite budgetary cutbacks.
- More rational, efficient allocation of staff to publishing function. Through consolidation, agencies can pool their resources more efficiently. Health & Human Services agencies used to have 17 content management systems and 24 FTEs maintaining their sites (with wide disparities in staffing and skills). Following consolidation, they use 1 content management system (Mass.Gov's) and maintain their site with a centralized team of 7 FTEs. Results are similar with other consolidated sites.
- Decreased reliance on vendors, and in-house technologists freed up to focus on applications
- Shared infrastructure, economies of scale. Our content community has an active voice in determining enhancements and additions to the Mass.Gov tool set and publishing features to ensure the greatest value for the our efforts and investments.

*Consistency, consolidation and common branding* - Citizens and businesses should not have to know which agency provides a service, or wrestle with hundreds of different web interfaces and brand identities to access state services. In addition to consistent information architecture and navigation, banners, headers and footers are consistent on every page, giving customers confidence that they are on an official Commonwealth site. Whether or not their sites are part of Mass.Gov yet (about 50 remain to be converted), all Executive Department agencies are required to use a Mass.Gov web address (mass.gov/XYZ) in all announcements or materials promoting their sites. Massachusetts' increasingly consolidated, consistent, web presence, and single brand identity:

- *Streamlines citizens' interaction with government, and decreases the clutter of hundreds of unique URLs they are expected to remember*
- *Improves findability in external search engines such as Google*
- *Supports civic engagement* - Many agencies previously promoted their sites with unique URLs, often using .com or .org addresses, instead of a mass.gov address. Agencies using these domains argued that "my customers don't trust government." Yet use of them perpetuated that problem. To increase civic engagement and public trust, it is important for citizens to recognize all the work that state government is doing, which is obscured when agencies fail to use a mass.gov address.
- *Maximizes the Commonwealth's limited marketing dollars.* - Graphic designers are expensive, and unique URLs are hard to remember, especially after a marketing campaign ends. The Mass.Gov URL is well established and trusted and easy to remember. It is referenced again and again in the news media and agency print and ad materials, including bus and subway ads, billboards, tax forms, car registration renewals and flashing highway signs.

### **Nonfinancial ROI**

*Strong governance and user communities* - Mass.Gov is more than a web publishing platform, it is a community. We would not be where we are today without strong buy-in and participation from our customers. A Portal Advisory Board decides strategy and sets priorities. A Portal User Group meets to exchange ideas, discuss best practices and upcoming enhancements. An Emergency Web Communications group meets to ensure we are prepared to communicate in a coordinated manner in the event of a disaster or emergency. A key benefit of these groups is the opportunities they create for agencies to interact, discover mutual interests and identify resources they can share.

*Using a single, distributed publishing toolset that doesn't require coding expertise* - Mass.Gov's publishing toolset consists of Interwoven's Teamsite for file and content management (intuitive "what you see is what you get" content editing interface) and a custom-coded point-and-click tool for constructing and maintaining all navigation. There are approximately 200 content authors publishing hundreds of changes per day directly to the web. Our templates and tools free agencies from focusing on coding, design and layout so they can focus on content. The tools enable organizations to centralize or distribute publishing responsibilities according to their needs and business processes.

*Adopting open standards and building universal accessibility into the content publishing process* - In November 2006, we overhauled our HTML and CSS (Cascading Style Sheet) code, further separating portal content from presentation. The underlying code is W3C-compliant, which allows for more consistent branding and layout, greater compliance with web accessibility standards, and serving content on mobile devices, without having to maintain separate "text only" sites. We can make 98% of future design changes by deploying a single file - the CSS file - for an immediate change to all portalized sites. We make agency content authors' job much easier by ensuring that Mass.Gov's templates and display code fully comply with our web accessibility standards. We also provide accessibility audit toolkits and a wealth of other resources to aid agencies in producing quality content.