

2008 NASCIO Recognition Awards

Category: Digital Government

Government to Citizen (G to C)

**SC State Ethics Commission Public Disclosure and
Accountability Reporting System**

State of South Carolina



Executive Summary

In South Carolina, as in other areas throughout the country, dramatic changes in technology are taking place on a seemingly daily basis. These advances have had the effect of ushering in a new age of governmental services, many of which have become an integral part of today's government-to-citizen interaction.

The South Carolina State Ethics Commission's Public Disclosure and Accountability Reporting System is one such service, providing the citizens of the Palmetto State with unparalleled access to campaign disclosure information for officers and candidates at both the Constitutional and local levels, non-candidate committees, political parties, caucuses and statement of economic interest forms for all elected officials.

Through this innovative system, the state's first-ever campaign finance reporting Web site, candidates, elected officials, committees, political parties and legislative caucuses can now file their campaign and operating disclosure forms online thereby allowing citizens immediate viewing capability. All persons responsible for filing a Statement of Economic Interest form can also do so online.

The system can be accessed 24/7 and information is available to the public as soon as individuals file their reports with the governing body. Individual financial reports can be searched by name or office and election year. Contributions and expenditures are also searchable by contributor, candidate or committee.

For those that need to file reports, the system can replace campaign finance reporting software that is currently being used. The Public Disclosure and Accountability Reporting System maintains a record of past contributors and contributions to date. The internet based system allows filers to work on their reports at their convenience without having access to the paper forms.

The Public Disclosure and Accountability Reporting System was built, in compliance with Section 508 directives, at no cost to taxpayers through a partnership between the South Carolina State Ethics Commission and SC.gov, the State of South Carolina's official Web site. The House of Representatives and Senate Ethics Committees also collaborated on the project.

The system was implemented in October 2007 and contains more than 6,000 reports to date. The system is valued at more than \$1 Million Dollars and did not require any state appropriated or non-appropriated funds, only the time invested by the State Ethics Commission and the House of Representatives and Senate Ethics Committees in partnership with SC.gov.

C. Description of the Business Problem and Solution

Business Problem

The Constitutional Office candidates input campaign finance information into a standard Excel template and upload the spreadsheet through the introductory temporary application designed to satisfy the state mandate set forth in Section 8-13-365 for constitutional office candidates and elected officials. The campaign finance information is also available online for public viewing through this application and provides limited search capability.

Candidates for other political races file paper forms directly with the Ethics Commission, the House of Representatives Ethics Committee or the Senate Ethics Committee. Candidates, elected officials, state employees and appointed officials file paper Statements of Economic Interests by mail or in person. This information is available to the public by requesting the information at the appropriate office and obtaining copies of the paper forms.

Section 8-13-365 of the Ethics, Government Accountability and Campaign Reform Act of 1991 as Amended and 1997 Regulations became effective January 1, 2006. This section called for an electronic filing system for all disclosures and reports from all candidates and entities. Reports and disclosures filed with the Ethics Committees of the Senate and House of Representatives must be in a format that can be forwarded to the State Ethics Commission using an Internet-based system. The information reported must be publicly accessible, searchable and transferable. The SC legislature appropriated \$300,000 for the development of this application.

Description of Solution

The Public Disclosure and Accountability Reporting System was implemented in October 2007, and was built at no cost to taxpayers through a partnership between the South Carolina State Ethics Commission and SC.gov. SC.gov is the state's official Web site that was built and is managed by South Carolina Interactive, the Columbia-based subsidiary of the eGovernment firm NIC that has partnered with the South Carolina Budget and Control Board's Division of the Chief Information Officer (CIO).

The SC State Ethics Commission collaborated with representatives from the S.C. legislative staff and SC.gov to review systems offered by other states and to define the requirements for the system to be used in South Carolina.

The electronic filing system provides the ability for state and local candidates and elected officials, all committees, political parties and legislative caucuses to register an account online and file required disclosures and reports online. The information is immediately available to the public to query, view and print. The

information is displayed in compliance with Section 508 directives. Individual reports can be searched by candidate, committee or Statements of Economic Interest. Contributions can be searched by contributor, candidate or committee and expenditures can also be searched by candidate or committee.

The electronic filing system allows users to enter information and save their work without the information being published. The filing application maintains demographic data and calculates contributions to date for repeat contributors, and election cycle aggregate amounts. The electronic filing system can reduce data entry and replace individual accounting software maintained by candidates and committees. The internet based system allows filers to work on their reports at their convenience without having access to the paper forms.

The Public Disclosure and Accountability Reporting System provides the State Ethics Commission the ability to lookup user account information, file the reports mailed or faxed to their office, and manage filing options selected by users, including election dates and position titles. The administrative reporting section provides the State Ethics Commission with multiple reports including but not limited to late filers, non-filers, final reports, flagged items, outstanding loan values, report volumes, and other reports related to Statement of Economic Interests.

The SC State Ethics Commission, legislative ethics committees and SC.gov collaborated to provide interactive and demonstrative computer based training for candidates and elected officials. User Guides for all forms are available online and can be used to review the electronic registration and filing process screen by screen and provide directions to assist users in navigating the system.

D. Significance to the improvement of the operation of government

Benefit to Citizens, Lobbyists and Decision Makers

The application improves government transparency by making the information immediately available to the public to query, view, download or print. The cost of this service is free; therefore, improving the value to citizens who previously had to pay for the paper copies of reports. The information is displayed in compliance with Section 508 directives.

Individual reports can be searched by candidate, committee or Statements of Economic Interest. Contributions can be searched by contributor, candidate or committee and expenditures can also be searched by candidate or committee.

Legislation mandates that only persons holding or running for constitutional office and legislative office must file disclosure forms and reports online. The electronic filing system provides the State Ethics Commission the ability to file all reports

received on paper, thus increasing the amount of information available online to citizens.

Benefit to Candidates, Elected Officials and Political Organizations (committees, caucuses and parties)

The electronic filing application is a process improvement in that data entry screens mirror state campaign disclosure forms and regulations in a user-friendly style. The process of filing is broken into sections and steps in order to simplify the filing process.

The electronic filing system allows users to enter information and save their work without the information being published. The filing application maintains demographic data and calculates contributions to date for repeat contributors, and election cycle aggregate amounts. The electronic filing system can reduce data entry and replace individual accounting software maintained by candidates and committees.

Information filed by others is immediately available and accessible when filed; enabling political organizations to perform more timely research and adjust strategy accordingly. Disclosure forms and reports can be filed electronically thus allowing filers to file up to 11:59 PM of the filing deadline when previously reports needed to be filed by 5:00 PM on the filing deadline.

Benefit to the State Ethics Commission, Senate Ethics Committee and House of Representatives Ethics Committee

The electronic filing system reduces the physical storage space needed to store paper disclosures and reports and the archival effort of those reports. The public reporting component of the application reduces the manual effort of copying forms for those requesting access to the information. State employee and legislative staff time can be spent performing other tasks and responsibilities.

The electronic filing system also encrypts sensitive data entered by registrants that is not available to the public. The data encryption is more secure and private than retaining the physical reports, including the social security numbers of all filers, in locked cabinets in the State Ethics Commission or legislative ethics committee's offices.

The application's administrative tool improves management of filings and reports. The State Ethics Commission has the ability to lookup user account information, file the reports mailed or faxed to its office, and manage filing options selected by users, including election dates and position titles. The administrative reporting section provides the State Ethics Commission with multiple reports including but not limited to late filers, non-filers, final reports, flagged items, outstanding loan values, report volumes, and other reports related to Statement of Economic Interests.

The Public Disclosure and Accountability Reporting System is contained in SC.gov's hardware located at the State Data Center. SC.gov provides ongoing support and maintenance of the application at no cost to the State Ethics Commission or the State of South Carolina.

E. Benefits realized by Service Recipients, Taxpayers, Agency or State

The Public Disclosure and Accountability Reporting System did not require any state appropriated funds, only an investment of time from the State Ethics Commission and the legislative ethics committee staff throughout the software development lifecycle. The parties assisted in defining the application requirements and functional and quality assurance testing. The legislature had appropriated \$300,000 for the system so this can be considered added value in cost avoidance. The comprehensive system implemented to satisfy legislation and increase political transparency can be valued at more than \$1 Million Dollars.

The intangible benefits of the Public Disclosure and Accountability Reporting System include:

- Interagency collaboration for state IT initiatives - Members of the State Ethics Commission and legislative ethics committees collaborated to outline system requirements.
- Compliance with state legislation.
- Improved system availability and content - Information is available online 24/7 immediately after it's filed at no cost. Reports filed by paper forms will be added to the online reports so that citizens have access to all campaign disclosure reports.
- Time efficiencies and reduction of physical space needed resulting from electronic filing rather than forms submitted by mail or fax.
- Increased security for personal information.
- Reduction of duplicative efforts for data entry - the system has the potential to replace the various campaign finance reporting software and accounting systems to maintain records.
- Online service adoption and national recognition for state eGovernment efforts and government transparency.

State Investment: Zero Dollars

Results:

The Public Disclosure and Accountability Reporting System was implemented in October 2007 following the 3rd quarter campaign disclosure filing deadline. As of May 15, 2008, 6,204 reports have been filed using the system. This includes 1,992 reports that have been filed by the State Ethics Commission through the administrative tool after having received the paper reports submitted to its office.