Digital Services: Government to Business
PA Preferred Program Solution

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Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
Department of Agriculture
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Executive Summary

As part of its mission to ensure a successful future for agriculture in Pennsylvania, the Department of Agriculture created the PA Preferred Program in 2004 to promote food and agricultural products grown, produced, and processed within the state. Products with the PA Preferred designation must contain 75 percent or more of Pennsylvania grown agricultural commodities. Since its inception, the program has been enacted into law as the official brand for PA food and farms. Additionally, it has expanded to include two additional agricultural marketing initiatives – Homegrown by Heroes, focused on veteran farmers, and PA Preferred Organic, focused on organic agriculture.

Despite all this growth and added complexity, the PA Preferred program was still being managed through an Access database, Excel files, paper applications, and a website with limited capabilities. As a result, the integrity of the membership suffered, as did customer service and engagement.

In 2022, the department launched the PA Preferred solution, an integrated data management system with a public-facing website (PA Preferred.com) to support and administer the PA Preferred Program. The solution enables staff to ensure the program is managed legally, efficiently, and successfully; uphold outstanding customer service standards; and promote accessibility and ease of use for a variety of users. Benefits include:

- Nearly eliminated a backlog of nearly 350 PA Preferred applications.
- Integration points with state and federal systems to simplify and streamline the application process.
- Workflows to eliminate manual data entry and routing of applications.
- Automated updates to the PA Preferred member database.
- An online system for managing both digital and physical trademark brand assets.
- Greater visibility for PA Preferred members on the new PA Preferred website with new opportunities to tell their stories to consumers.
- An enhanced user experience based on browsing through a real store, with useful information to help customers find and purchase PA Preferred products.

Since the creation of the PA Preferred solution, the impact on members, consumers, and program staff has been remarkable. This project designed and built a software system to support the workflows needed for the program's current needs and anticipated growth, particularly to handle growth because of the increased investment in Pennsylvania agriculture through the PA Farm Bill.

The PA Preferred website and database solution has given the Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Market Development a way to deliver the benefits of the PA Preferred program to qualified entities through a streamlined, customer-focused, efficient system. For the first time in its 20-year history, there is a fully integrated public and program dual-facing interface, which allows for significant growth, relationship building, and better outcomes for all users as we support and grow Pennsylvania's agriculture industry.

IDEA

Agriculture is one of Pennsylvania primary industries, creating early $132.5 billion in economic impact and supporting nearly 600,000 jobs. Pennsylvania is home to 57,900 farms on 7.7 million acres of farmland, 97 percent of which are family owned. These farms are essential to the economy, environment, and quality of life of millions of Pennsylvanians.

In 2004, the PA Department of Agriculture launched the PA Preferred® program to help Pennsylvania farms and their products stand out in the marketplace for consumers. In 2011, the PA Preferred Act became law, and officially named PA Preferred® as the official statewide branding program for local foods and farms, led by the Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Market Development.

Products with the PA Preferred designation must contain 75 percent or more of Pennsylvania grown agricultural commodities. When consumers purchase products with the PA Preferred logo, they know they are directly supporting Pennsylvania farmers.

The membership base for the program is complex and includes other entities beyond farmers, such as retailers who carry, organizations that promote, processors who source, and restaurants who serve PA Preferred products. Additionally, since its inception, two more programs have been incorporated in tandem with PA Preferred – Homegrown by Heroes, focused on veteran farmers, and PA Preferred Organic, focused on organic agriculture.

The department supports the members of these programs through various marketing and business development efforts, including a statewide marketing campaign, educational programming, trade shows and conferences, and additional resources and services to bolster the vitality of their businesses.

Despite all this growth and added complexity, and its nearly 20 years of existence, the program never had a robust, fully integrated data management system with a public-facing website. Instead, the program was managed through an Access database, Excel, paper applications, and a website with limited capabilities. Over time, the integrity of the membership suffered, as did customer service and member engagement.

Staff in the Bureau of Market Development needed an innovative technical infrastructure and processes to perform several job functions to ensure the programs are managed legally, efficiently, and successfully, uphold outstanding customer service standards, and promote accessibility and ease of use for the variety of users. The job functions include:
- Managing the program in compliance with the legislation, such as meeting the threshold to carry the trademark agreement, processing applications, and communicating internally and externally with applicants.
- Providing consumers with an easy-to-use website to search for PA Preferred products.
- Developing the market, including all participants in the supply chain, to increase production capacity and the number of business relationships.
- Marketing programs, brands, and products to the public to stimulate commerce and increase revenue.
- Providing educational and technical resources to support specific business activities, such as transitioning to USDA Certified Organic and selling to schools and institutions.

IMPLEMENTATION

The PA Preferred project was executed using a hybrid scrum/agile framework. The framework included a formal planning phase and an iterative process to ensure the quality of the solution. Project, Scrum, and Governance teams were implemented to complete work and drive the project to reach its intended goals. Project duration encompassed 19 months.

Core Team Roles

- **Product Owner:** Serves as the primary business representative on the team and is responsible for making sure that the work performed is aligned with the business objectives and optimizes the value to the business.
- **Scrum Master:** Responsible for promoting and supporting hybrid scrum/agile framework used for the project by helping everyone understand Scrum theory, practices, rules, and values.
- **Microsoft Developer:** Responsible for creating the user-facing web application and the infrastructure needed to support the database.
- **UI/UX Developer:** Responsible for planning, designing, and developing web applications and web pages using code and visual design tools based upon the practical intent and creative vision of the solution.
- **Business Analyst:** Responsible for bridging the gap between IT and the product owner, determining requirements, delivering data-driven recommendations and reports, and testing the application.
- **Stakeholders:** Any person or role who engages with the program or benefits from the program's activities. PA Preferred stakeholders include:

Stakeholder	Definition
Members	Farms, restaurants, and supporting organizations located in PA
Manufacturer Member	A manufacturer or processor located in PA who sources raw and/or processed materials from PA farmers for further processing. A processor may sell the manufactured product under the trademark or provide processing services to another farmer, processor, or retailer to sell under the trademark.
Retail Member	Retail entity selling products in PA either through a physical location or online.
Consumer/Public	A person buying food for his or her personal consumption
Program Administrators	Employees or team of the PA Department of Agriculture that manages the administration of the PA Preferred Program.
PA IT Administrator	Employee or team of the Delivery Center that technically supports and maintains the systems for the PA Preferred Program.
Elected Officials	Includes the Governor, Secretary of Agriculture, and General Assembly for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

Given the diverse group of stakeholders and their varying needs and interests, it was critical to understand each of their roles and perspectives in engaging with the PA Preferred Program. Through the administration of this program over the course of 20 years, round table events, and other interactions, bureau staff had gained a deep appreciation for the pain points encountered by the various stakeholder groups.

Upon the completion of the database and website, the bureau collaborated with partners to publicly promote it. Following a soft launch online, the Secretary of Agriculture, Chair of the House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee, legislators, stakeholders, and PA Preferred members joined program staff at a PA Preferred member's farm to officially promote the new and improved resource. This momentum has continued, with program administrators managing a multi-faceted marketing program targeted at the public to establish brand recognition for Pennsylvania brands and products and stimulate commerce for member businesses by touting the new website and ease of application for members.

The marketing activities included:
- Creating and maintaining a public-facing website to provide information about the benefits of local foods and supporting the local food supply chain and how to access brands and products through several market channels, including directly buying from farms, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, retail stores, and farmer's markets, to highlight a few.
- Planning, attending, and hosting public events, trade shows, conferences, and appearances.
- Creating, managing, and executing marketing campaigns throughout the year on the public website, social media platforms, print, and other media channels.

Program administrators also host educational programs and provide technical support for farmers and manufacturers to participate in key emerging markets, such as Farm to School or other institutions, that requires vendors to operate at scale and with specific certifications to participate in the market. Leveraging resources and relationships through adjacent initiatives like the Ag Business Development Center, administrators collaborate with others to host educational events and make technical documents available to participants. This work is also aimed at engaging new and existing members in the program and its resources.

The PA Preferred program developed the following functionality aligned to Commonwealth customer experience goals.

Goal	Additional Information
Create a single ONLINE DESTINATION for services.	The program previously lacked an online application with trademark agreement combined. Program Administrators are now able to administer program more effectively and efficiently.
Enable secure access through a SINGLE LOGIN	The PA Preferred application uses Keystone Login, the Commonwealth's enterprise single sign on solution for secure access to online services across state agencies.
Deliver a consistent and user-friendly ONLINE EXPERIENCE	The PA preferred solution provides integration points with a variety of other systems to leverage existing data, reducing operational overhead, e.g., Bureau of Food Safety for License Validation, USDA Organic Integrity for USDA National ID, etc.
Deliver a consistent and user-friendly ONLINE EXPERIENCE	The PA Preferred program was developed in alignment with W3C accessibility standards; validation tools were implemented as a part of the process and are now being integrated into all application development work going forward.
Consolidate and streamline our DIGITAL FOOTPRINT	Eliminated a proprietary online forms solution and replaced PDA site functionality. Replaced PHP based site.

PA Preferred Program High Level Architecture
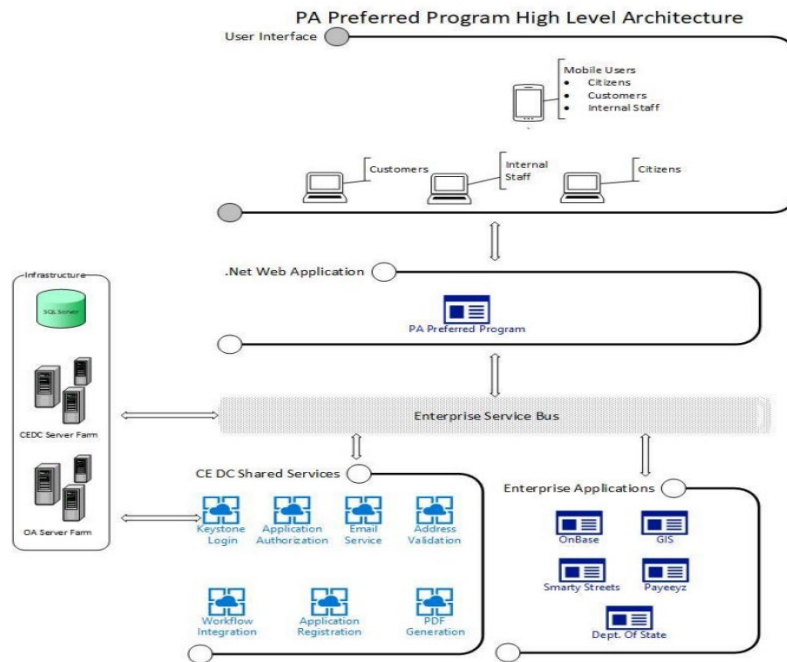
- This Application will be developed using the Microsoft .Net Core Architecture
- The Application will interface with the CE DC shared services
- The Application will use OnBase for all document related services
- Any variation from the use of CE DC Shared Services must be approved by the Enterprise Architect and the Tech Lead team

IMPACT

Since the creation of the PA Preferred solution, the impact on members, consumers, and program staff has been remarkable. This project designed and built a software system to support the workflows needed for the program's current needs and anticipated growth, particularly to handle growth because of the increased investment in Pennsylvania agriculture through the PA Farm Bill. The software system was designed with the diverse stakeholders' needs at the forefront to provide an excellent customer experience, regardless of who, where, or why that customer is interfacing with the website.

The application process for the trademark was a mix of manual and digital processes that suffered due to siloed, limited capacity technology that relied heavily on staff doing repetitive data input, complicated email workflows, and no centralized repository of information for reporting capabilities. It took program administrators two hours, on average, to manage every application. At this pace, it would have taken staff 18 months to register only the current organic farms listed in the Organic Integrity Database for the PA Preferred program, which represents only a small subsector of potential applicants.

The new application process also includes a collaboration with the Department of State and Department of Agriculture's Legal Office and Bureau of Food Safety. Applicants are now able to include critical identifying information like their Department of State business entity number and Bureau of Food Safety Facility ID Number through links on the website, which again leads to a smoother, more efficient process in the workflow.

Renewal and compliance processes for applications were manual and required involvement from the IT department to update the database that stored information about PA Preferred members. This caused delays in having updated information, which has now been automated within the system. Additionally, when a member business was no longer active, their information was deleted from the database, losing all historical context about their membership. This left gaps of information in data collection and reporting, curbing the program's ability to track trends in program engagement.

Program administrators did not have an online system for managing both digital and physical trademark brand assets. Now, once an application is approved, members can now download these documents themselves.

Beyond the internal process improvements, there are many improvements being experienced by PA Preferred members and potential members as they interact with the PA Preferred Program. These enhancements include:

- Members are now visible to the public on the new PA Preferred website, and now have a mechanism to tell their stories to the consumers. Customers can learn about PA Preferred products and brands, learn about farms and manufacturers, and discover where to buy their products. Customers now can find a product, find a store, find a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, learn about seasonality, and more through the new, robust website.
- The search and discovery functions mirror how web users are accustomed to finding information online. The user experience is based on browsing through a with a real store and includes useful information to help customers find and purchase the products.
- As the program continues to execute marketing campaigns, we will begin using the website and social media platforms to feature certain agriculture sectors, products, and businesses, and announce upcoming public events. This capability was not previously available to the program managers.

As a state government run program with a diverse set of members, stakeholders, and outcomes, and a critical mission to support farmers and agriculture, the PA Preferred program has a complex charge. The food system and consumer trends are increasingly more dynamic, and the time of farmers, small business owners, and customers is of the utmost value. The support, resources, and investments that PA Preferred can offer to farmers and related businesses have the potential to benefit those entities, but only if those entities have confidence in the program, accessible and easy to use tools, and measurable positive benefits for being a member. The PA Preferred website and database solution has given the Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Market Development a way to deliver the benefits of the PA Preferred program to qualified entities through a streamlined, customer-focused, efficient system. For the first time in its 20-year history, there is a fully integrated public and program dual-facing interface, which allows for significant growth, relationship building, and better outcomes for all users as we support and grow Pennsylvania's agriculture industry.