2015 NASCIO AWARDS

Title: New Jersey Online Notary Public Application Filing System

Category: Cross-Boundary Collaboration and Partnerships

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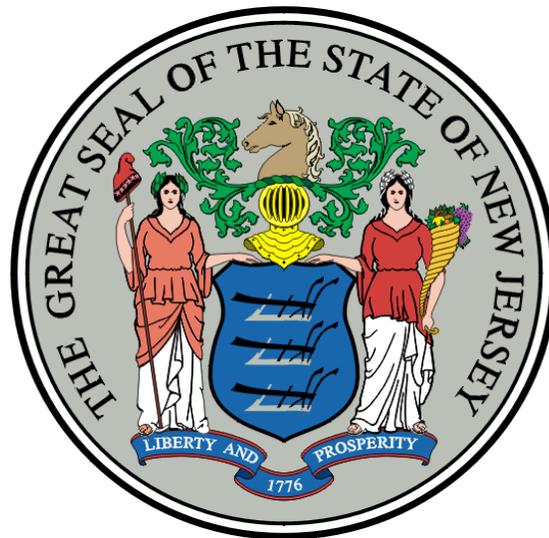
Executive Summary

New Jersey had an expensive, paper-based, and error-prone process for handling notaries' applications and renewals. State and local government officials handle more than 30,000 of these applications and renewals each year. A cumbersome and antiquated set of procedures took too long and wasted resources, frustrating both applicants and government processers of applications.

The Department of Revenue and Enterprise Services (DORES), a unit of Treasury, came up with a system that cut the time for getting a notary commission, which used to take as long as three months, to an average of one week.

The online system that now serves more than 123,000 notaries, greatly simplified the process for users and eased workloads for State legislative workers and 21 county clerk offices, as well as for DORES. At the same time, the applicants paid fees for the service that covered the cost of improvements without adding to the tax burden.

The Division estimates that it has been able to cut mailing costs by approximately 50 percent, or close to $10,000 annually, and reduce the number of workers required to administer the service. Resources equal to two full time employees were reassigned to more critical work.

Business Problem and Solution

New Jersey's system for obtaining a Notary Commission was well past obsolescence. The paper-based process resulted in typos and illegible entries on forms that caused record-keeping errors and processing delays, and it required multiple mailings of paper documents from one government office to the other, resulting in lost forms, needless expenditure of resources, and frustrating delays. Notaries weren't the only stakeholders affected. State legislators and county clerks were part of a process that allowed for multiple points of potential error and delay along the way.

The old system required that a prospect download a paper form from a State website, complete it, and then mail it to the appropriate legislator. The legislator had to endorse the form or reject it, and then mail it back to the applicant. The applicant then had to mail a packet of information with the application to DORES for processing. Once applicants received approval from DORES, they had to take the completed application package to their local county clerk offices to take an oath of office. The county clerk then mailed the completed application packet back to DORES, which then would have workers key the information into its database of notaries.

Obviously, this process was wasteful compared to any modern system. The paper form could be filled out improperly. It could take weeks before the applicant learned, via letter, that a form sent to a legislator or to DORES had been filled out incorrectly and needed to be resubmitted. Errors – whether by the applicant or the government workers involved – might not be discovered until late in the process.

In addition to the delays and possibility for errors built into the process, the applicant had no way of tracking the progress of an application, other than calling up the various government entities involved in the approval process. Workers at those agencies were often unable to track applications quickly or efficiently because of the logistics of working with paper forms, protocols at different units of government, and the vagaries of mail delivery.

One of the most frustrating elements came near the very end of the process. If a prospective notary didn't get to the county clerk's office within 90 days after the applications was approved by a legislator and by DORES, the applicant had to go through the entire process again. No one had the capability to remind applicants as these deadlines came near.

The more than 30,000 new applicants each year weren't the only ones facing delays. There are more than 123,000 notaries in New Jersey, and they have to renew their commissions every five years.

DORES realized it needed to:
1. Drastically reduce the time needed to process an application
2. Greatly minimize data entry to reduce errors
3. Simplify the process to reduce costs and eliminate unnecessary hassles for applicants
4. Provide government workers with a unified, transparent process for management of applications
5. Give users a method for tracking their applications
6. Provide reminders for applicants and government workers at critical points in the process
7. Find a way to finance the needed improvements

Meeting these goals would be possible only by working across jurisdictional lines and getting buy-in from all agencies and officials involved. The new system would need to provide benefits to everyone involved.

DORES partnered with the NICUSA-New Jersey, a private sector firm with a proven track record in helping government create internet-based services. Applicants would pay a small additional fee to support the online service platform.

Results: The electronic service revolutionized the notary commissioning process for both new as well as existing notaries. Today, the applicant completes an electronic form that guides him/her through the application questions. The online form has features that help to reduce errors and allows for rapid completion. One example, the application includes a dropdown of legislators that are in the notary's district. This allows the applicant to route the application electronically to the right official, eliminating the need for mailing. The applicant pays with credit card or eCheck. A message indicates when the application is completed, and then the system routes the application automatically to the selected legislator. The legislator receives an alert that an application was sent.

Legislators use a secure login to view pending applications and electronically approve them. This action automatically sends a status report to the applicant and updates DORES' database.

The system then automatically mails a package to the applicant so he or she can go to the county clerk's office where she/he lives and take the oath of office. Each county clerk has a secure login to a database that displays the queue of applicants who are ready to take the notary oath in the clerk's county. The clerk logs in after an oath is administered, checks off the appropriate applicant, and an automatic entry is made in DORES' database, completing the process.

In addition to receiving email notifications with every update of application status, applicants now have access to a 24/7 website where they can check the status of an application. They are also sent emails reminding them to take the oath within 90 days of receiving the commission packet, greatly reducing instances of lapsed applications.

The service went live in July 2014 after meeting its timeline of six to eight months from project initiation to completion. Since then, the error rate from manually keyed data has been virtually eliminated. With the exception of the commission package, a helpful and educational set of documents for a new notary, mailings have been eliminated. Finally, the commissioning process, which had taken up to three months to complete, now takes on average of one week.

It was reasonably simple to educate notaries about the new process. DORES removed the paper form from its website and replaced it with a link to the online service. Additionally, active notaries up for renewal now receive a simple letter directing them to the online service. Today more than 90 percent of all applications are submitted online.

To win buy-in, DORES developed handout materials and presentations for legislators and county clerks. It held small-group meetings with these stakeholders. DORES, with NICUSA-NJ, held meetings at convenient locations. For the legislators, meetings took place at the Statehouse. For the county clerks, meetings were scheduled at the clerks' annual meeting, as well as in county offices. At these meetings, the stakeholders were assigned secure logins, were asked to provide feedback on how to make the service as customer-friendly as possible.

The service leverages the State's robust login service called MyNewJersey. There is no login required for prospective notaries, but it is required for legislators and county clerks. This login mechanism was selected for two key reasons. First, NICUSA-NJ has used the mechanism in the past and therefore was able to reduce time-to-completion by reusing code. Second, many of the stakeholders using the service already had MyNewJersey logins.

Significance to the Improvements of the Operation of Government and Benefits

In the first three months of 2015, there were approximately 8,000 online notary applications processed.

The cross-boundary aspects of the project were unique. Different branches and levels of government participated for the first time in an integrated workflow system. The administrative branch through DORES, the Legislative branch, and county government (represented by the county clerks) all participated in the development project in cooperative and constructive ways. All remain vital to the on-going success of the service.

The notary commissioning service incorporates a survey at the end of the application. Since launch, the survey has generated over 4,000 responses with 97% of the respondents indicating they are quite or extremely satisfied. It is clear that the service benefits are reaching the customer bases, and that the customers are overwhelmingly pleased with the service, especially its simplicity, transparency and availability. The online service is fully compliant with Section 508 of the Americans with Disabilities Act. The service provides data encryption for sensitive data as well as a PCI compliant payment-processing engine.

The notary process is used by a multitude of industries in the State. Streamlining it didn't just reduce costs for applicants and governments, it made it easier for all private sector stakeholders to do business in the State.