The State of Rhode Island
Statewide ePermitting Initiative

Executive Summary

Rhode Island's ePermitting initiative is the nation's first statewide online permitting project connecting state and municipal governments with one cohesive software platform. The project is leading 21st century government by exemplifying a model for regional IT procurement that saves money, streamlines implementation, increases collaboration, and improves citizen service.

Several years ago, state officials began the process of overhauling citizen services, spurred by a national reputation for a poor business climate. At the heart of this effort was improving permitting operations—a traditional pain point for members of the business community and beyond. Partnering with the private vendor, ViewPoint Government Solutions, the state launched the Rhode Island Statewide ePermitting Initiative (RISEI) in 2012, in an effort to fundamentally transform the permitting process.

Utilizing both modern, cloud-based software and an agile implementation method, RISEI launched ViewPoint's software across eleven municipalities and three state agencies in less than a year. Instead of handling paper applications and processing permits on local hard drives, this software brings all processes to the cloud. Government employees can now record digital data in the field, and create automated workflows drastically improving internal operations. For citizens, this initiative means they can now apply, track, pay for, and receive permits online, in one system, across all participating municipalities and state agencies.

Bundled procurement, centralized project management, and the ability to share form and workflow templates across the software platform have allowed for an implementation timeline unparalleled by most government IT projects. Due to the nature of agile implementation, the implementation process only improves as trainers become more skilled and the software is further developed.

The new ePermitting system has already reduced processing times, minimized room for error, and eliminated antiquated systems, saving hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars. State officials such as those in the State Fire Marshal Division are now able to more efficiently carry out daily tasks, and were even able to support the Department of Children, Youth and Families by utilizing the software to nimbly respond to a crisis situation concerning foster children. Overall, RISEI has facilitated new collaboration between state and local government, while also increasing transparency between departments and citizens.

While phase one is complete, other communities have been eager to join the initiative, which will ultimately encompass every Rhode Island town and city. This project represents the potential to streamline more than just permits—state agencies and municipalities have the ability to reimagine all licensing and application processes in the coming years.

Concept

The Rhode Island Statewide ePermitting Initiative (RISEI) was first conceptualized after residents and business leaders repeatedly expressed frustration working with inefficient and disparate permitting systems. In 2012, the Rhode Island General Assembly tasked the State Building Commissioner with developing a statewide electronic permitting system.

RISEI was created to assist local permitting departments in confronting challenges related to overextended staff, increased demands, and pressure to improve the taxpayer experience. Working with stakeholder groups to craft effective policy, the General Assembly created the Municipal Advisory Council on Statewide Permitting to provide guiding recommendations.

The Advisory Council connected state agencies and municipalities, asking them to envision the future of permitting. With representation from 13 percent of Rhode Island municipalities and four different state agencies, this council developed a strategy for implementing ePermitting across the state. Stakeholder concerns were the driving focus for the initiative.

After approving funding in the same year, nine vendors were evaluated as partners for the initiative. Following a rigorous vetting process, the state determined ViewPoint Government Solutions to be the best fit for Rhode Island's needs. Their cloud-based platform with single authentication, ViewPoint Cloud, allows constituents to seamlessly apply, pay for, and receive permits online, 24/7, across multiple communities and state agencies. Security and reliability were also taken into account. Built and hosted on Microsoft's Azure Cloud, ViewPoint Cloud leverages all of Microsoft's security features, making it an incredibly robust and secure system.

In June 2016, ViewPoint Cloud was successfully launched in RISEI's first pilot agencies and departments. Throughout this crucial period, the company and it's software were nimble enough to accommodate the project's evolving needs. According to ViewPoint's Chief Technology Officer, Alex Pajusi, "A lot of thought and effort went into building statewide templates and gaining consensus among community leaders." This effort to consider the individual needs of communities was a crucial aspect in selecting ViewPoint, and in creating a platform that would work for Rhode Island as a whole.

From the beginning, this has been an interdepartmental effort to improve both operational efficiency and the customer service experience in Rhode Island. The Rhode Island Commerce Corporation and Division of Informational Technology under the Department of Administration are working together in conjunction with the State Fire Marshal, the Building Code Commissioner, and the Office of Regulatory Reform to launch and maintain the ePermitting initiative.

Ten communities initially signed up to be part of the pilot launch. Each community was carefully adapted to the platform, and the state has since allowed them to dictate how they use the

software. The state handles municipalities' training and support needs, including a biweekly user group meeting and an open support line email address and feedback forum. Both state officials and ViewPoint use this feedback to continuously improve the product and implementation process for future launches.

Following RISEI's implementation in the first pilot communities, it became clear that full-time project management support was needed to maintain the long-term success of this initiative. Project management switched from part-time staff to two dedicated full-time state employees from the Rhode Island Commerce Corporation and the Department of Administration's Division of Information Technology. Simultaneously, Rhode Island and ViewPoint partnered to hire two full-time project consultants. This effective and adaptive collaboration has been key to the project's continuing success, and serves as a model for public-private technology partnerships across the nation.

The state has already seen cost savings at the municipal level, in both time spent and through the elimination of higher cost software products. In cases where municipalities have staff shortages, the state has been able to step in to assist immediately. In the future, RISEI plans to incorporate additional state agencies on the platform. Emphasizing the value of customer service, there are also plans to streamline entire permitting and licensing processes from the citizen's perspective —for example, for a new restaurant owner. Not only has RISEI successfully alleviated frustrations with the permitting process, but it has also fundamentally shifted the paradigm around government service in Rhode Island, propelling the state into the digital age.

Significance

RISEI is the only permitting system in the nation connecting state agencies with municipalities, and the project now serves as an important test case for interconnected, cloud-based permitting in states across the country. Through this project "Rhode Island is pioneering civic engagement for the digital age," said ViewPoint CEO Nasser Hajo.

This innovative initiative represents a fundamental shift in governance, both in leveraging economies of scale for IT procurement and implementation, as well as emphasizing excellency in customer service.

In an era when several large cities have gone millions of dollars and years over budget while implementing permitting software, RISEI serves as a counterexample and replicable model. The project has proven the importance of state and local collaboration by successfully implementing a cohesive software platform across eleven municipalities and three state agencies in less than one year. It also shows that this type of resource-sharing helps smaller municipalities gain access to modern technology much earlier than they would be able to otherwise.

By having one uniform system, state employees also have the ability to better support the municipalities and streamline their own processes. When one municipal building official abruptly left, for example, the State Building Commissioner was able to manage and approve the municipality's permits remotely. The town could continue conducting business and serve their constituents without interruption. This seamless transition of authority is particularly poignant when assessing the success of the project and aspects that can be modeled in other service areas.

However, while state officials can step in to help in case of emergency, municipalities maintain full control over their own platforms. Town and cities have completely customized processes, fees, and forms that allow them to conduct their business without state interference.

From a software perspective, ViewPoint Cloud's ePermitting features are leading the industry. A cloud-hosted, design-centered platform, ViewPoint Cloud was once described by a municipal building official as the 'Amazon' of permitting. This level of customer service supports better communication between municipalities and their citizens. Instead of numerous phone calls or frustrating trips to city hall, applicants can now track their applications online, see who's working on them, and communicate directly with staff members from within the platform. These features, along with auto-validated contractor credentials, are examples of how technology can increase transparency and promote greater trust in government.

RISEI has also benefited from a robust relationship with ViewPoint, taking advantage of the company's nimble framework to influence the actual development of the platform. ViewPoint's Chief Technology Officer, Alex Pajusi reflected, "ViewPoint Cloud is a young and growing platform, and it really benefits from a close collaboration with civic employees and agencies, who are working with us to develop new features."

Overall, RISEI is part of the current administration's larger goal of making it easier, faster, and cheaper to do business in Rhode Island. The state has implemented a cohesive, cloud-based platform across state and municipal levels to optimize resources, save taxpayer dollars, and improve customer service at all levels of government. For Rhode Island, this means a more business-friendly climate, happier citizens, and more productive departments. For the rest of the country, RISEI is a model for effective public-private partnerships, state and local collaboration, and a commitment to modernizing government services.

Impact

Simplifying the permitting process has allowed for increased efficiency and uniformity throughout Rhode Island. Implementing ePermitting has transformed 'business as usual' for all stakeholders—from state divisions (State Fire Inspectors, State Building Commission, State Fire Marshal), to municipalities (clerks, officials, and inspectors), to end users (builders, general contractors, tradesmen, architects, homeowners, business owners, etc.). One municipality even capitalized on the accessibility aspect of the platform by installing ADA kiosks.

Throughout the eleven communities who've already successfully launched ViewPoint Cloud, staff have reported less frustration and more efficient processes. One community saved 250,000 dollars by replacing their antiquated permitting system. A community finance director remarked, "Ultimately the value of [ViewPoint Cloud] is in the accuracy of recording, and the timeliness of being able to identify what information we have or we don't have."

Stakeholders recognize the impact that ePermitting has made on their daily lives. It's the first time having digital records on the cloud for many of these agencies and departments, the first time not entering data manually. Previous systems were so antiquated and piecemeal, it's impossible to calculate the productivity gains from switching to this cohesive, modern product. It's simple, accessible technology, and it has transformed how we think about the permitting process.

As listed on Rhode Island's permitting website, some of the most transformative aspects of the project are:

- **Convenience of self-service:** Applications and payments may be submitted online at any time of the day, and permits may be received electronically and printed out as soon as they are approved.
- **Transparency:** Processing status can be tracked step by step, giving applicants visibility into not only where their application is in the process, but the name of the actual employee working on it.
- **Contractor validation:** Applicants and government officials won't need to question the validity of licensed/registered professional credentials. The system will validate against databases at the Contractors Registration Board (general contractors), Department of Labor and Training (mechanical, electrical, plumbing), Department of Business Regulation (architects, engineers) and Department of Health (asbestos, lead, radon). Only valid and current credentials can be submitted on a permit application.
- **Management:** Governmental bodies are able to collect information related to a permit application in one place, track progress across multiple applications simultaneously, and assign tasks to achieve higher levels of efficiency and service for the public.
- **Collaboration and Consistency:** The State has partnered with Rhode Island municipalities to design and implement the same platform for online permitting, providing a more comprehensive solution and allowing both levels of government to benefit from economies of scale both in system cost and implementation time lines.

Source: http://permits.ri.gov

The Rhode Island Statewide ePermitting Initiative is still in its infancy, and only the first of many efforts to transform how Rhode Island governments do business and conceptualize citizen services. Yet it serves as a nationwide model for how state and local governments can work

together to effectively manage large-scale technology improvements. Building off of the success of this project, the state has committed to continuously improving processes, focusing on modernizing services and operations through technology. With the rapid development of government software, this leadership will only become increasingly important for all states who want to compete in the 21st century.