



Online Appointment Scheduling Dramatically Improves In-Person Citizen Experience of Arkansas Government

Digital Services: Government to Citizen

State of Arkansas

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Project Dates:

January 2020 to present

Executive Summary

Include:

How does the project represent the visionary and transformational use of information technology in state government?

The COVID-19 pandemic and recovery have underscored the importance of improving the quality and efficiency of government services to meet citizens' expectations. It also put Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson's transformation initiative into high gear as state agencies worked to offer online solutions to in-person problems while the crisis unfolded.

Recognizing the urgent need to control foot traffic for in-person visits and dramatically reduce wait times, the Arkansas Department of Public Safety (DPS), the Arkansas Department of Human Services (DHS), and the Arkansas Department of Corrections (DOC) leveraged an online appointment scheduling platform. In 2022 alone, Arkansans have scheduled over 50,000 in-person appointments online, saving tens of thousands of hours they would have otherwise spent waiting in line.

Before the launch of DPS's online appointment scheduling platform, hopeful Arkansas drivers and parents of teenagers wanting to take the driver skills test would have to visit a testing site location and wait up to four hours for an opening. Now applicants can visit <https://telegov.egov.com/aspdlskills> to submit required paperwork ahead of time and make a testing appointment at one of 84 testing locations. Applicants receive appointment confirmations via email or SMS and real-time updates if there is a change or delay in scheduling. Online appointment scheduling saves, on average, two hours of testing time per applicant and eliminates the possibility of being turned away due to missing required documents, unexpected volume at a testing location, or approaching closing hours. This dramatically improves the experience for those wanting to take the exam; now, they are in and out within 30 minutes.

Since DPS launched online appointment scheduling in January 2020, more than 166,822 appointments have been created online, saving applicants a collective 333,644 hours that would have been spent waiting in line to take the driver skills exam.

Likewise, the Arkansas Department of Human Services' online appointment scheduler enables childcare workers and child welfare applicants (foster and adoptive parents) to make an appointment for their fingerprint scan online from their mobile device or computer, eliminating waiting in line. Applicants can visit <https://telegov.egov.com/dhsfingerprint>, select from 60 local county office fingerprinting locations and receive SMS or email appointment confirmations. Since June 1, 2020, more than 36,775 online fingerprinting appointments have been scheduled.

The Arkansas Department of Corrections (DOC) significantly modified in-person visitation rules and procedures during the COVID-19 pandemic to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. In December 2020, DOC launched a pilot program for modified in-person visitation using online

appointment scheduling at four locations. Visitors to DOC facilities can visit <https://telegov.egov.com/docrequest> to request visitation for a specified date and time. DOC staff then review and approve or deny the request, and SMS or email confirmations are sent to approved appointment requesters. DOC expanded its use of the platform to include all 34 units and facilities earlier this year. Online scheduling has proven to be so successful in creating internal efficiencies for DOC and convenience for citizens that on June 1, 2022, DOC will stop accepting phone calls and mail visitation requests and instead require all visitation requests to be made online. To date, over 14,208 online inmate visitations have been scheduled online.

Concept

Include:

Describe the solution architecture of the project: 1) Is the initiative part of a larger project? 2) What project management approach was taken? 3) What are the costs involved? 4) How is it assessed? 5) What efforts are made to ensure accessibility and information security? 6) To what extent is the state responsible for oversight of the initiative? 7) Describe the communications plan to raise awareness.

In October 2018, Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson initiated statewide digital government transformation efforts in Arkansas state government to improve efficiency and facilitate greater use of online services. Developed with this in mind, providing online appointment scheduling for Arkansas state government in-person services began to take shape in November 2019 as DPS looked for ways to improve the existing capabilities of their testing operations and remove the barriers created by manual paper-based processes.

With over 3,400 monthly applicants, DPS contended with fluctuating and often heavy foot traffic to testing site locations. DPS needed a virtual appointment scheduling tool to accommodate citizens for in-person appointments while controlling foot traffic and dramatically reducing wait times.

Over the next few months, DPS worked with NIC Arkansas (NIC AR) to stand up an appointment scheduling service Arkansas State Police branded “In Line Online.” The service launched on January 6, 2020, at no cost to DPS under NIC AR’s self-funded model. An immediate success, the site received nearly 5,000 visitors within the first month alone.

In the summer of 2020, DHS digitized its once paper-based process for childcare workers and child welfare applicants (foster and adoptive parents) undergoing a criminal background check. As part of this larger initiative, DHS launched online scheduling and enabled their clients to make an appointment for their fingerprint scan online at one of the dozens of county DHS offices from their mobile devices, again eliminating the need to stand in line and wait to be fingerprinted.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continued to reshape the citizen experience with the government, other Arkansas state agencies began looking for ways to facilitate in-person services safely.

Seeing a way to streamline inmate visitation to its various prisons and community correction centers, the Arkansas Department of Corrections (DOC) partnered with NIC AR to offer online visitation requests for adult family members of inmates. To expedite registration and approval, DOC needed to include a pre-qualifying form, accomplished through built-in integration with a form development system. NIC AR built the pre-qualifying form, configured the online scheduling tool, and trained DOC staff to use the system in a matter of days. Within one week, DOC launched a pilot program in December 2020 and started taking online visitation requests at four locations. On March 6, 2021, the program was expanded to include six more facilities. Then in January of 2022, the Department further expanded visitation to include visits from people under age 18 and non-immediate family members and allowed online scheduling at all prison units and correctional facilities. Starting June 1, 2022, the Department will require all visitation appointments to be made online at <https://telegov.egov.com/docrequest>.

Other departments are following suit by offering more online appointment scheduling to citizens. DHS will begin Phase II of its criminal background check system integration later in 2022, which will expand the use of the online checks and fingerprinting appointment scheduling to all 10 of its divisions. Due to the success of the online appointment scheduling for the driver skills exam, DPS has grown its use to include seven appointment types, including motorcycle written and skills exams, commercial driver's license knowledge and skills exams, and driver's test for learning differences, and instruction permit tests.

Rather than building and maintaining custom online scheduling solutions for these three separate departments, NIC AR leveraged its Telegov product for rapid deployment and scalability across the state enterprise. Hosted on the Microsoft Azure cloud, TeleGov is a multi-tenant, secure, turnkey platform that can support the creation of thousands of appointments per hour. It is designed for continuous operation, protected from power failure, physical intrusion, and network outages by extensive backup power and cooling systems, multi-layered security, and network redundancy. TeleGov databases are protected using SQL Transparent data encryption. All data is encrypted at rest and in transit to ensure that any PII remains secure. The platform features built-in, secure identity management that is fully integrated with NICi, NIC's enterprise solutions for authentication based on Azure Active Directory B2C, and further enhanced to support OpenID to allow customizable authentication/SSO systems at the tenant level.

Oversight of the state's online appointment scheduling initiative is managed by the twelve member Information Network of Arkansas (INA) Board, which oversees the public-private partnership between the state of Arkansas and NIC Arkansas (NIC AR). Under Arkansas Code §25-27-101, the Board oversees state and local digital government services. The INA Board comprises representatives from user groups (accountants, insurance agents, chambers of commerce, attorneys, and bankers) and state agencies. Governor Hutchinson appoints each member to serve a two-year term.

Significance

INCLUDE:

Define the initiative's scope, beneficiaries, and stakeholder groups, highlight the innovation, outline what successful implementation looks like, describe what changes the initiative will have on the nominating agency, the state, and constituents, and explain how it fits into a larger picture.

For the first time, Arkansas state government agencies have technology that empowers citizens to schedule and reschedule appointments anytime from any device quickly—and receive convenient SMS or email appointment reminders—providing a consistent experience across state government agencies and elevating their experience of government service delivery.

As a platform for development, TeleGov uses Azure DevOps for its ability to quickly and securely share source code on an Enterprise level so that any NIC state enterprise can contribute to the codebase. The system is sharable and available to be entirely developed and improved across all federal, state, and local governments.

In addition to collecting information from a user, the system can receive payment, provide virtual video conferencing, upload documents, create agency approval workflows, send SMS and email appointment confirmations and reminders to citizens, and many other features. Data is linked to individual appointments, making it readily available at the appointment time. All appointment locations are shown on an interactive map through integrations with Google Maps and MapBox with OpenStreetView are configurable by the tenant, which allows each government agency to set up separate configurations.

TeleGov uses NIC's Microservice Platform (MSP) to send email and text messages and perform address verification and geocoding of locations. When a user creates an appointment, the system sends a confirmation email and text message that contains the confirmation number and specific information about the scheduled appointment. TeleGov automatically sends a reminder email or text a day before the appointment, and DHS, DOC, and DPS staff can customize the automated reminders in the admin tool. Because there are no usernames and passwords required to make an appointment, users can enter the email they used to make the appointment to resend an appointment confirmation if they lose the email or text confirmation.

TeleGov's roadmap includes video integrations to replace in-office visits, auto-appointment management to allow admins to enable auto-assigned meetings, tenant management with tabbed interfaces to manage branding, help pages, and custom banner notifications, and virtual waiting rooms to let customers check in and get a notification when it's time to enter the building for their scheduled appointment.

Across the Arkansas state enterprise, more departments have plans to leverage online appointment scheduling to continue transforming the citizen experience. The greatest need for this can be seen at State Revenue Office (SRO) locations in every county, where Arkansans routinely visit in person to register new vehicles and pay sales tax, renew driver's licenses and take care of other motor vehicle and driver needs. Today, citizens show up without appointment scheduling, hoping for short lines and the proper documents in hand. State SROs could become the hub for in-person government

business with all state agencies in the future. Online appointment scheduling will become a critical part of delivering an efficient and high-quality government experience to citizens who interact with their government face-to-face.

Impact

INCLUDE:

(Compare the environment before the initiative was implemented, describe how it has improved, detail the immediate and longer-term impact, address the financial and non-financial reasons why this project was worthy of the investment made, and explain the impact of the benefits for both the nominating agency and constituents, note quantitative metrics (cost savings, cost avoidance, ROI, usage, transactions, etc.) and qualitative benefits (citizen, business experience).

Online appointment scheduling has transformed the existing capabilities of the Arkansas Department of Public Safety, the Arkansas Department of Human Services, and the Arkansas Department of Corrections by improving the quality and efficiency of their in-person services and removing the barriers created by manual processes. And it has transformed the citizen experience through proactive digital communication via email and SMS and saving Arkansans countless hours they no longer spend waiting in lines.

Since these departments started taking appointments online in 2020, more than 213,448 Arkansans have created appointments and saved a collective 426,896 hours that would have been spent waiting in a government office to see a loved one in prison get fingerprinted for a background check or take a driver skills exam.

Before the launch of DPS's online appointment scheduler, parents wanting to take their teenagers for a driver skills test would have to visit a test site location and wait in line for up to four hours. With over 3,400 monthly applicants, DPS contended fluctuating and heavy foot traffic to test site locations. State Police would frequently turn away hopeful licensed drivers due to unexpected long lines, understaffing at testing locations, or approaching closing hours. Those parents would be forced to return another day, only to wait again. This led to complaints and dissatisfaction with the way State Police administered exams.

Now, tens of thousands of parents and guardians who take advantage of online scheduling have avoided rearranging their work or personal schedules while accompanying a child to take a driver's test. DPS staff use the online appointment scheduling platform to control the flow of appointments at each location, modify appointments and calendar events, and create and edit testing locations and field office availability. DPS administrators and clerks can also view the daily schedule to see all appointments scheduled within a given time frame.

Before DHS's online fingerprinting appointment scheduling for childcare workers and child welfare applicants, the entire background check and fingerprinting process could take anywhere

from 3-6 months to process. This labor-intensive, manual process required childcare providers to send packets of information to DHS containing written checks to pay for the FBI and state background checks. After DHS submitted payments by mail, staff members would manually enter the applicant's information into the FBI and State Criminal Background Check system and wait for results. DHS would then send the childcare provider a transaction ID to allow the applicant to get fingerprinted at a third-party fingerprint harvester.

The online appointment scheduler and updates to the criminal background check process for childcare providers and child welfare applicants have shortened applicant processing from 3-6 months to two weeks. Since its launch on June 26, 2000, DHS has processed over 52,556 childcare and child welfare background check requests online. Nearly 36,775 applicants for these background checks (in addition to foster care and adoptive parents) have signed up for fingerprinting appointments through the online scheduling tool. In addition to the online scheduler, DHS also purchased fingerprint harvester machines to use in their offices to expedite the process. Now applicants schedule appointments directly with DHS, eliminating the need to visit a third-party fingerprint harvester service.

This digital automation has enabled DHS to avoid spending an estimated \$272,712 in manual labor and paper processing costs. DHS is planning to expand this service to all 10 divisions in late 2022.

To mitigate the COVID-19 transmission risk during in-person visitation to various prisons, work release, supervision sanctions, and community correction centers, DOC outlined guidance and directives for modified in-person visitation during the public health emergency. In addition to eligibility guidance for in-person visitation, DOC launched the online appointment request scheduler for 10 locations. Adult family members submit requests for visitation appointments online from their mobile devices or desktop computer. All submissions are pending review and approval by DOC. Over 14,208 visitations have been scheduled online since the pilot program launched in December 2020, uniting inmates with their families after nearly a year of separation. DOC expanded visitation to all of its facilities and units in 2022 and is now only accepting visitation requests online as of June 1, 2022.

A recent study conducted by the University of Utah found that the average cost per transaction for online government services was \$3.91 versus \$17.11 for the state to provide the service in person or via mail. That's a cost savings of \$13.20 per digital transaction. Using the University of Utah formula to calculate the cost avoidance for online appointment scheduling, the state has avoided spending roughly \$277 million on staff resources by using online appointment scheduling.

In addition to soft cost avoidance, the state has also realized significant hard cost savings using the Telegov platform. Under its enterprise-funding model, NIC AR provides the DOC and DPS online scheduling platforms at no cost to the agencies, saving a conservative \$200,000 in annual platform SaaS and pre-appointment fees. These agencies would otherwise need an appropriation to offer online appointment scheduling.