

PAyback.pa.gov

*Increasing Accountability & Transparency in Commonwealth
Permitting, Licensing, And Certification Processes*



2024 NASCIO State IT Recognition Awards Government to Business

**Pennsylvania Office of Administration
Commonwealth Office of Digital Experience (CODE PA)**

Protect Started: May 2023

Project Completed: November 2023

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Executive Summary

Like other states, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania issues over 2,400 different licenses, certificates, and permits, from barber and salon licenses to teacher certifications to business permits.

Businesses and residents have complained for decades about how long it takes for state agencies to process applications for licenses, certifications, and permits, as well as an overall lack of transparency. Unpredictability and long wait times can create unnecessary barriers and costs, making it more difficult for businesses to grow and individuals to pursue their career aspirations, among other challenges. Over the years, various administrations have attempted to address this situation with little success.

In 2023, newly elected Governor Josh Shapiro took the bold step to confront this long-standing problem head-on and make it a central priority of his administration. During his first weeks in office, the Governor signed an executive order to create a new Office of Transformation and Opportunity to support businesses looking to grow in Pennsylvania, including assistance to cut through red tape to obtain necessary licenses, certifications, and permits. The Governor issued another executive order a few days later to establish standard timeframes for licenses, certifications, and permits, and to issue refunds if these timeframes are not met. Finally, the Governor issued an April 2023 executive order that established the Commonwealth Office of Digital Experience (CODE PA) to improve online services for Pennsylvania's residents and state employees.

On November 1st, Pennsylvania launched a new digital system called PAYback.pa.gov that allows residents, businesses, charities and schools to check the standard processing time for each type of application and request a refund of their application fee if they believe they are eligible. As of May 2024, a total of three refunds have been issued.

Approximately 70% of Commonwealth-issued permits, licenses, and certifications are eligible for a refund through PAYback. Certain permits, licenses, and certifications that don't charge application fees or are set by legislation will not be eligible for a refund.

In addition to supporting Pennsylvanians who want to start new businesses or renew their existing permits, licenses, and certifications, PAYback will make it easier for companies who are looking to establish operations and expand in Pennsylvania.

Idea

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania issues thousands of different licenses, certificates, and permits, from barber and salon licenses to teacher certifications to business permits. Pennsylvania businesses and workers often must wait months and are forced to navigate inefficient digital systems to receive their professional license, permit, or certification. Unpredictability and long wait times can create unnecessary barriers and costs. For example, an NPR analysis from 2021 found that Pennsylvania had some of the longest wait times in the country for issuing nursing licenses; more than half of the nursing applicants who applied in Pennsylvania that year waited at least three months to hear back.

On the campaign trail and during his first weeks in office, Governor Shapiro made it clear that the status quo was no longer acceptable and that state agencies needed to prioritize customer service and move at the speed of business. In January 2023, the governor signed an executive order that directed all state agencies, boards, and commissions to compile a catalog of the licenses, certificates, and permits they issue – including the statutory authority governing the length of time to process applications and the fees charged. Further, the order directs state agencies to refund fees when an application for a license, certificate, or permit is not processed within specified timeframes.

Within 90 days of signing that Executive Order, every Commonwealth agency under the Governor’s jurisdiction catalogued approximately 2,400 total permits, licenses, and certifications. The Governor’s Office of Transformation and Opportunity (OTO) and the Office of General Counsel immediately mobilized to review, analyze, and establish efficient application processing times based on agency recommendations.

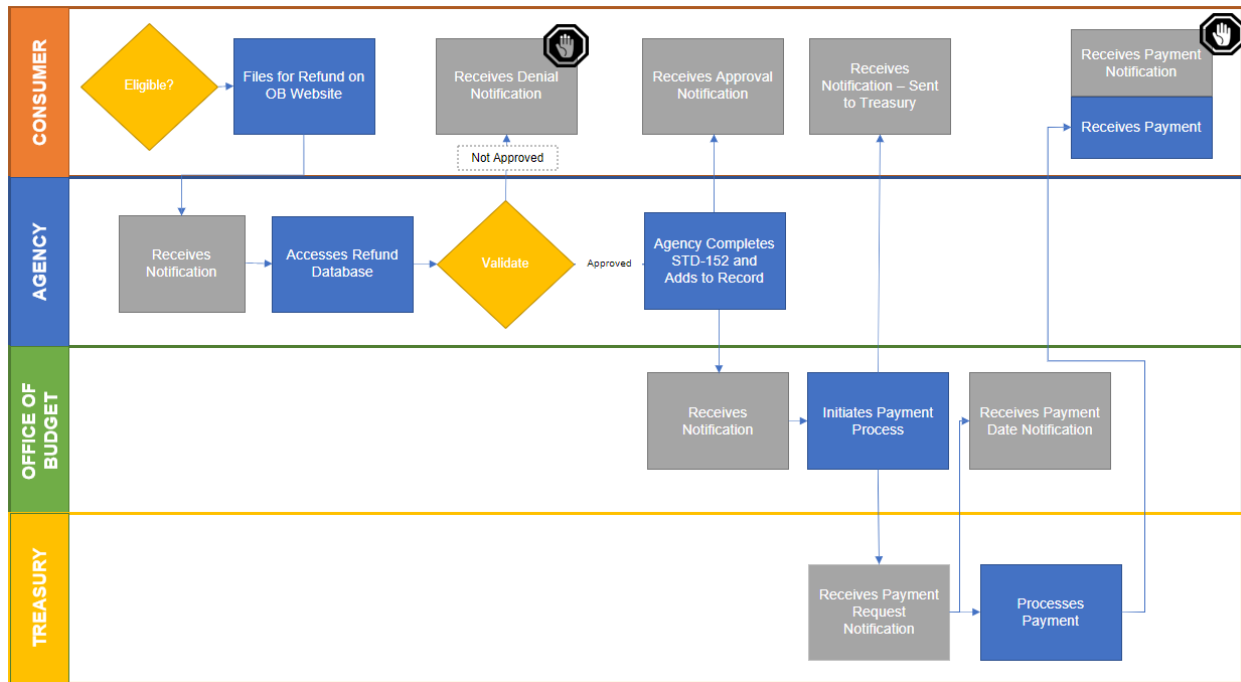
In April 2023, the Governor created the Commonwealth Office of Digital Experience (CODE PA) and announced the appointment of an executive director. CODE PA is an in-house team of digital experience professionals who take a human-centered approach to designing and building products and digital services. In coordination with the OTO, the CODE PA team was tasked with designing and creating an online system for the public to check their eligibility for a refund of their permit, license, or certification application fee and request a refund if they believe they are eligible. The solution envisioned by the Administration would become known as “PAYback.”

Implementation

Executing this effort was a combination of collaborating across all agencies to understand the data for permit processing timelines, while also building two full applications in only 13 weeks.

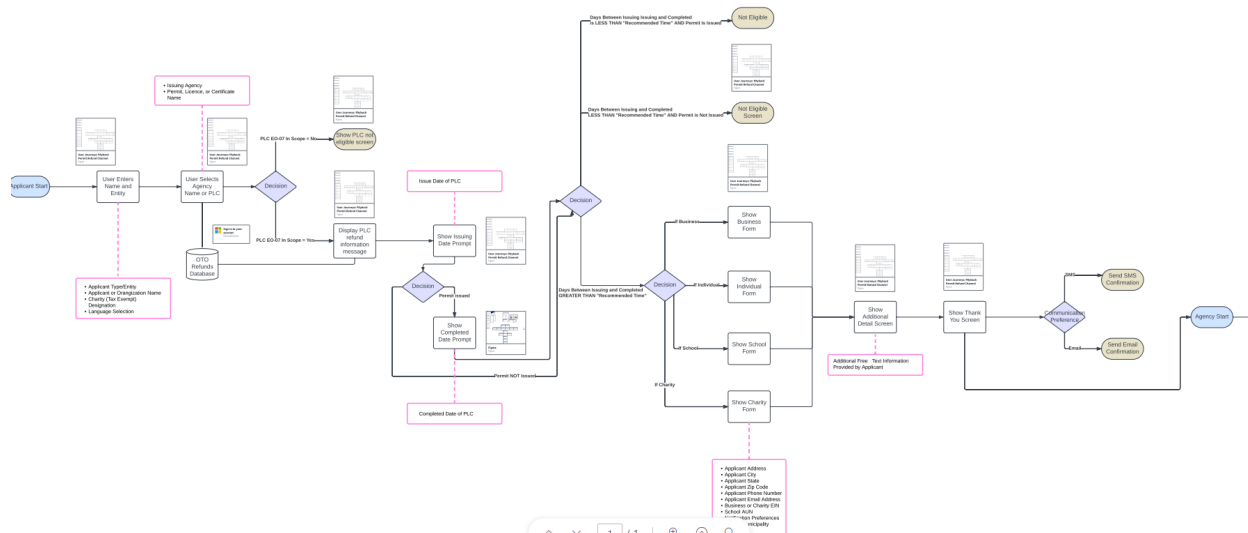
For data capture, the OTO met with every agency several times to understand not only the processing time, but also the constraints that exist across their operations that inform the timing. This data capture not only required agencies to determine delivery time, but also for their legal counsel to understand what was legally eligible for a refund. To account for the amount of investigation required for over 1,300 permits, we had to build a technical system that could adapt to new information capture right up to go-live on November 1st.

When preparing for implementation, the team took a product-centric approach to developing the applications with the knowledge that the timeframe for execution was incredibly tight. CODE PA took the lead on documenting requirements across agencies, the Office of Budget, Office of General Counsel, State Treasury, and IT infrastructure teams.



Visual flow diagrams helped all partners easily understand the different components of the build that would be needed. It also helped the team articulate that we would not only need a consumer-facing application, but a back-end system to help support agencies as they manage the several steps of the workflow.

This was translated to a more technical diagram for the developers to make decisions about the coding framework and infrastructure that would be required to support the needs of the consumer.



Once the framework was locked down, the team proceeded to set non-negotiable standards for the product to live up to modern consumer expectations. These included the fact that the design

would need to be mobile optimized, fully accessible meeting WCAG 2.1 requirements, and take less than 10 minutes for the consumer to complete. We also wanted to make sure that the application performance could be measured so that we could set an enhancement roadmap after go-live.

The first step was creating design mock-ups for the consumer experience that were user tested across 25 independent users. We also hosted a focus group to solicit feedback from a broad scope of potential users. We then created design mock-ups for the agency experience and did in-depth interviews with over 30 agency representatives to make sure the design would meet their needs in supporting the review of potential refund claims.

The design ended up needing minor updates to the requirements before being passed off to development, where the team chose to host the application in Azure and built both consumer and agency applications using a .NET framework.

Since go-live, the team has continued to make ongoing enhancements to the application based on feedback from users captured within a Qualtrics survey that is embedded in the site, along with agency feedback on their interface.

Impact

This application helps build trust with our constituents by being fully transparent about processing times for licenses, permits, and certifications across the enterprise. This is the first step; as we move forward with modernizing systems across the state we'll continue to drive processing times down and reflect that in the application.

We continue to observe an average user visit rate of ~300 per day; this rate is down from the highs we noted in November and December coinciding with both press coverage and user eligibility expansion.

Our goal was to make it very simple for users to understand whether or not they should submit an application as quickly as possible in their experience. Most visits do not end in a claim submission – most users choose not to complete the application or are told immediately that their claim does not meet eligibility requirements. This drives us to a level of awareness that consumers are much more interested in tracking where their permit application is within the process, and that they are less concerned with submitting a request for a refund. That insight will help inform the way we modernize our permitting systems enterprise-wide, with a focus on transparency for constituents.