

On Being Colorado Centered: Building Statewide Capacity for Human-Centered Digital Services

CATEGORY

Digital Experience:
Enterprise Solutions

START DATE

Sept. 2025

END DATE

Ongoing



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At peak tax season, Colorado's call centers receive roughly 19,000 calls a week but can only answer about 6,000. More than half of callers are asking one question: Where is my refund? One in three calls ends with an agent reading status information that the caller could have found online. This concept is called "failure demand" — a cost created entirely by the system's failure to meet the user's original need.

That problem is solvable. The Colorado Digital Service (CDS) proved it: a user-centered redesign of the Department of Revenue's online refund tool, guided by direct research with Coloradans, returned more than 91 hours of residents' time in its first four weeks — a 20% improvement with no new technology, no new budget, just better design informed by real users.

But this is not a story about one redesign. It is a story about what it takes for any government team to do this kind of work — and what gets in the way. When CDS teams were working with an agency partner to improve a service, the agency partner asked a question that stopped us cold: "Are we allowed to talk to users?"

That question is the problem this nomination seeks to address. Governments invoke the language of user-centered design while making it nearly impossible to put into practice in real-world projects. CDS solved this by building the operational infrastructure first: pre-approved enterprise tools, streamlined procurement, practical guidance, and direct coaching that make the good path the easy path. Starting with a focused MVP at the Behavioral Health Administration and scaling statewide, Colorado has built what peers in other states have called:

"One of the most helpful guides they'd ever seen from a digital government team in the US."

Today, any Colorado agency can begin meaningful user research in days — not months.

This nomination highlights Colorado's effort to move beyond the talking points of user-centered design by building the actual operational infrastructure needed to execute it. By providing pre-approved enterprise tools, streamlined procurement, and practical guidance, the On Being Coloradan-Centered guide and Digital Maturity Professional Services model dismantled bureaucratic barriers, enabling any government team to begin meaningful user research in days rather than months.

What problem does this project address?

The pattern repeats across government: an agency commits to user-centered digital services and hires someone with the skills to deliver. Then they hand that person a mandate — and no operational infrastructure to execute it. The expert, like a UX designer, spends months writing business cases to justify a recruitment tool, waits on procurement to approve software their private-sector counterparts use by default or simply learns the approach isn't permitted.

This example shows a misuse of specialized expertise. User researchers and designers are skilled at understanding people and improving services — not at procuring enterprise software or justifying qualitative research norms to purchasing officers unfamiliar with the field. When user-centered practitioners spend their days negotiating bureaucracy instead of talking to Coloradans, user-centered design becomes a talking point, not a practice.

Critically, this is not just a problem for designers. Adopting a user-centered mindset is work for everyone involved in delivering government services — leadership, program staff, developers, policy teams and procurement officers. When the agency asked, "Are we allowed to talk to users?", that wasn't a legal question. It was a signal that the system had trained people out of the most basic act of public service.

In response to this pattern, CDS asked a different question: What operational blockers prevent capable people from doing this work, and how do we eliminate them?

Why does it matter?

The tax call center is the local proof point. At peak season: 19,000 calls per week, 6,000 answered, more than half asking about refund status, one in three ending with an agent who could only read information already available online. The user-centered redesign that followed — built on direct research with Coloradans — returned 91 hours of residents' time in its first four weeks, a 20% improvement. That is the cost of not doing this work: expensive failure demands a better design.

At scale, the stakes are higher. Large government IT projects succeed only 13% of the time, dropping to 8% for projects over \$10 million¹, largely because user needs surface only after significant investment and sunk costs. Each failure represents Coloradans who didn't receive services they depend on. This initiative directly addresses the NASCIO 2026 Budget/Cost Control

¹ Source: [The Standish Group's "Haze" report](#), based on their CHAOS database; [18F](#)

priority: user-centered design is one of the most cost-effective risk mitigation tactics available to the government, as it ensures that decisions are based on evidence, not guesswork.

What makes it different?

Most capacity-building initiatives invest in training. This one invested in infrastructure — specifically, tools that enable practice operations. Three enterprise tools, each of which removes a concrete blocker:

- User Interviews.com and the Colorado Design Insights Group— either provider will handle participant recruitment and compensation, eliminating the two most common reasons teams skip research entirely. Together, this is a network of ~6,500 Coloradans who are ready to engage
- Reduct Video — records, transcribes and enables synthesis of sessions. Reduct can create a 90-second highlight reel of a Coloradan struggling to navigate a form that is more persuasive than any 50-slide deck — and it moves faster than writing a report nobody reads.
- Figma — enables prototyping and design work without new procurement. Fail fast, learn cheap, before a single line of code is written.

When agencies lack in-house skills to use these tools, the CDS' Digital Maturity Professional Services (DMPS) enterprise agreement provides the answer: pre-vetted, public-sector-experienced vendors, accessible via a purchase order, with work beginning in days. CDS personally reviewed every vendor submission.

"Any agency can issue a purchase order to these pre-vetted vendors and begin work in days, not months... we have seen an average of five days to go from completed Statement of Work to active Purchase Order." — **Sarah Tuneberg**, Deputy Executive Director, Digital & Delivery, CO Innovation Conference

On Being Coloradan-Centered ties it all together — a practical guide to doing this work within the specific constraints of Colorado state government: CORA compliance, consent practices, participant compensation rules and geographic and demographic considerations. The team wrote it for everyone who needs to understand and support user-centered work, not just specialists: agency leadership, individual contributors, contractors and adjacent disciplines, including policy, development, data and procurement teams. They also paired it with a three-part, 90-minute training series on User-Centered Product Mindset for agency staff.

What makes it universal?

This model requires no large team, no custom technology and no significant new funding. The core principle is simple—stock the toolbox, let experts use the tools to do expert work. This approach is replicable, and we mean that very literally: because Colorado built this on national cooperative purchasing, every tool, agreement, and vendor relationship is available to any state or local government in the country. Future governments inherit Colorado's compliance groundwork.

This work aligns with NASCIO 2026 priorities: Digital Government / Digital Services, Consolidation / Optimization through centralized tool access, Modernization through agile procurement, and Budget / Cost Control through failure prevention.

IMPLEMENTATION

What was the roadmap?

In Fall 2025, CDS built upon a targeted MVP (minimum viable product) from 2024 at the Behavioral Health Administration (BHA). CDS built an MVP research operations practice alongside the BHA team end-to-end: tool access, research engagement, consent and compensation processes and documentation of what worked. Success was measured not by project completion but by adoption — did the tools get used, did they change how the team worked? Both answers were yes. That evidence base continues to drive statewide expansion.

Who was involved?

CDS led the initiative and owns the Digital Maturity Professional Services (DMPS) at the state. Individual contributors are Janell Cody, Ajanae Cannady, Katherine Benjamin (contractor), and Mayo Nissen (contractor). This work spans six agency partners: Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE), Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS), Colorado Department of Health Care Policy and Financing, the Governor's Office of Information Technology (OIT), Colorado Department of Labor and Employment (CDLE) and Colorado Department of Revenue (DOR).

How did you do it?

Four parallel tracks:

- Negotiating enterprise tool access and documenting onboarding for each;
- developing On Being Coloradan-Centered and its companion training series;

- establishing open office hours and a structured "I do, we do, you do" capability transfer model;
- and building DMPS enterprise agreement as the procurement backbone for agencies needing outside expertise.

In its first eight months, the DMPS agreement has executed 20 purchase orders and onboarded nine vendors across the six state agencies. The average time from completed SOW to executed PO is just five days—dramatically faster than the six months typical of traditional procurement.

- [US Digital Response Cross-Jurisdiction Collaboration Award \(2025\)](#)
- [50 States 50 Breakthroughs \(2026\)](#), awarded by Apolitical and Humans of Public Service, recognizing the most significant government innovations across the country

Other states are already working to replicate the approach. The real beneficiaries, however, were Coloradans who found clear, accurate help navigating energy savings — even as the policy ground shifted beneath the product.

IMPACT

What did this project make better?

Government teams often face significant bureaucratic hurdles when trying to conduct user research, from complex procurement justifications for recruitment and compensation to the lack of approved tools for session recording. These obstacles, combined with uncertainty about whether talking to users is even permitted, frequently lead teams to skip research entirely.

This initiative dismantled those barriers. Following MVP pilots and a late 2025 statewide rollout, Colorado established a streamlined ecosystem where participant recruitment, compensation, and session recording are handled through pre-approved enterprise platforms. Combined with the On Being Coloradan-Centered guide and direct CDS coaching, teams can now launch compliant user research in days, moving from procurement hurdles to meaningful evidence-based design.

It also successfully shifted the focus from navigating bureaucracy to performing meaningful work. Instead of asking how to obtain tools or permission, teams now focus on identifying learning objectives and target audiences. To date, five state agencies have adopted this model, with several more currently in the engagement process.

How do we know?

The tools are making an immediate difference to the practitioners using them. As Elizabeth Kosar, Communications Director for the Colorado Department of Revenue, put it: "I love Figma — it makes my job so much easier."

This initiative was designed to produce practical, immediate benefits, as shown by practitioners whose jobs became easier because the necessary tools were readily available.

The BHA partnership, where this model was first proven, tells the larger story. As Janell Schafer, former Acting Director of BHA's Technology and Data Division, reflected:

"Before CDS, being person-centered was a value we held and couldn't operationalize. Every time our team needed to talk to a Coloradan, we hit a wall — the tools didn't exist, the procurement didn't exist, and nobody could tell us if we were even allowed to do it. If the goal is 'build, test, learn,' but it takes three months just to access a testing tool, you've already failed. What started at BHA and scaled statewide in 2025 changed that. Our practitioners stopped writing business cases, asking permission to do user research and started actually doing it."

What now?

[On Being Coloradan-Centered](#) is a living document, updated as practices evolve and each new agency engagement surfaces something worth adding. The model scales without proportionally scaling CDS — each agency that builds internal capability becomes a node in a broader statewide practice network.

The work is also going national. In summer 2026, On Being Coloradan-Centered will be featured in a report co-published by the [IBM Center for the Business of Government](#) and Technologists for the Public Good, highlighting best practices in user experience and reducing administrative burden across government. As part of that publication, Colorado will make the guide openly available — free for any government, at any level, to adopt and adapt.

And ultimately, that is the point. Because Colorado built the Digital Maturity Professional Services on cooperative purchasing, any state or local government in the country can already access all vendor relationships we have established. This means that other governments can procure the tools Colorado procured through these purchasing vehicles, without starting from scratch. No re-justifying the approach. We have done the compliance work, vetted the vendors and written the guide. The long-term goal has always been simple: make user-centered practice the default — not just in Colorado, but wherever the model travels.