



North Carolina AI Accelerator: Trustworthy AI from Policy to Prototype

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Executive Summary

The North Carolina AI Accelerator is N.C. Department of Information Technology's enterprise mechanism for turning responsible AI policy into practical public-sector outcomes. Officially launched through Executive Order 24 in September 2025, the Accelerator serves as a centralized hub for AI governance, research, partnership, development, implementation, and training. It gives state agencies and employees a cost-free path to submit real-world business problems, evaluate them against common feasibility and impact criteria, and move qualified use cases into rapid 60-day prototype sprints with support from NCDIT, agency business and technical staff, and external partners such as universities and vendors. What makes the program stand out is that it does not treat innovation and governance as separate tracks: the same enterprise model that accelerates prototyping also requires privacy analysis, low-risk-data constraints in the initial phase, public accountability for high-risk use cases, procurement neutrality, annual reporting, and alignment with statewide responsible-AI principles.

Because the program launched in late 2025, its most important early achievement is institutional, not rhetorical. North Carolina has moved from isolated experimentation to a governed statewide operating model for AI. The state now has an executive-order-backed Accelerator led and staffed by NCDIT, a nearly 30-member AI Leadership Council, mandated cabinet-agency AI oversight teams, a public-facing intake and evaluation process, codified performance measures in the NCDIT strategic plan, and a defined path from pilot to standard procurement if an agency chooses to scale a solution. That combination of speed, trust, competition-neutral vendor engagement, and public accountability is why this initiative is award-worthy now: it creates a repeatable statewide capability that other agencies can use immediately, and other states can adapt without waiting for a single flagship pilot to carry the entire case.

Project Description

Idea

Before the AI Accelerator was launched, North Carolina had already begun building the policy foundation for responsible AI. NCDIT had developed the North Carolina Responsible Use of Artificial Intelligence Framework, created an interagency AI work group, posted public guidance for generative AI use, and started developing standard AI language for RFPs, contract terms and vendor questionnaires. What was missing was a single enterprise mechanism that could help agencies move from curiosity and isolated pilots to governed, scalable, reusable AI solutions. The AI Accelerator solves that gap. It gives the state one front door for agency use cases, one evaluation model, one sprint-based prototype process and one governance structure for responsible experimentation.

This matters because the need is statewide in both scale and consequence. North Carolina's population was estimated at 11,197,968 in July 2025, and the state employs more than 70,000 people across government. At the same time, Executive Order 24 requires each cabinet agency to establish an AI Oversight Team with at least four members and to propose at least three AI use cases to the Accelerator within 180 days, while NCDIT's strategic plan sets enterprise targets for agency submissions, training, successful AI projects and local-government engagement. In other words, the Accelerator is not a niche innovation lab; it is a statewide operating model for how government at scale can evaluate, prioritize and responsibly adopt AI. Without such a model, the likely alternative is fragmented experimentation, inconsistent risk

tolerance, duplicative vendor conversations, uneven workforce readiness and an avoidable loss of public trust.

What makes the project different is the way it combines innovation speed with public-sector guardrails. Agencies and employees can submit any use case, but NCDIT evaluates proposals for feasibility, measurable impact, scalability and ethical fit. Accepted projects then move into rapid 60-day engagements designed to produce minimum viable prototypes rather than premature production commitments. The model is cost-free to agencies, no money changes hands during vendor sprints, participation does not create procurement preference, and agencies that want to operationalize a successful prototype still must follow normal procurement law. The initial phase is deliberately constrained to publicly available, low-risk data, and higher-risk or more sensitive scenarios are deferred until they can be handled with stronger controls such as synthetic data and additional consultation. That is an unusually disciplined public-sector design: it reduces innovation friction without lowering the bar for transparency, privacy, fairness or competition.

What makes the project universal is that it addresses exactly the pressures most state CIOs are facing. NCDIT's approach aligns directly to NASCIO's published priorities around artificial intelligence, digital government and digital services, data management and analytics, cybersecurity and workforce readiness. Just as important, the NASCIO awards materials explicitly recognize AI policies, frameworks and proof-of-concept initiatives as valid content for the Artificial Intelligence category. Other states do not need North Carolina's exact statutes, agencies or vendors to adapt this model. They need the same building blocks North Carolina has assembled here: common intake, common evaluation, common safeguards, prototype-first delivery, neutral procurement rules, workforce training, public reporting and enterprise governance.

Implementation

The implementation roadmap is clearly embedded in NCDIT's enterprise strategy. Goal 2 of the department's 2025–2029 strategic plan is to build “a future-ready state” through AI and emerging technologies, with objectives that sequence the work logically: scale infrastructure, establish statewide data and AI governance, make agencies AI-ready, stand up and implement the AI Accelerator, and foster collaboration and trust. The strategic plan specifies three categories of AI training by January 1, 2026, calls for the AI Accelerator to be stood up by January 1, 2026, sets a target for 80% of cabinet agencies to submit at least three projects by May 31, 2026, and aims for 100% of cabinet agencies to have a successful AI project by the end of FY 2026. That enterprise framing matters because it positions the Accelerator not as a side project, but as a core instrument for delivering statewide modernization.

The program management approach is practical and disciplined. It begins with a structured intake form that asks agencies to define the problem, current impact, affected users, success measures, expected value and data readiness. The AI Accelerator Steering Team reviews requests against published feasibility and impact criteria; if the use case is accepted, the agency CIO gives final approval. The agency then participates in a design session, assigns at least one business point of contact and one technical point of contact, and joins weekly status meetings throughout the sprint. The engagement itself averages 60 days and is intended to move quickly from concept to prototype. If the prototype succeeds, the team develops a case story and can help the agency carry requirements and findings into the standard procurement process. If it does not, the agency still leaves with documented findings rather than a dead-end experiment.

The stakeholder model is another implementation strength. Executive Order 24 established the Accelerator, required cabinet-agency oversight teams and assigned NCDIT to lead and staff the effort. The AI Leadership Council then added a second governance layer by bringing together nearly 30 leaders from government, academia, industry, workforce development and local government. Public-facing pages invite all state agencies and employees to submit ideas, while the vendor-participation model creates a structured way for private and university partners to collaborate on prototype work. NCDIT also built awareness and buy-in through public guidance pages, FAQs, training resources, symposiums and leadership forums that continually reinforce the central message that trustworthy AI is a shared enterprise capability, not a one-off technical experiment.

From a resources and architecture standpoint, the program is intentionally lean and replicable. Financially, it lowers the barrier to entry by making accepted agency participation free and by keeping sprint engagements non-commercial. Human resources come from a cross-functional model: NCDIT staff, agency leaders, business and technical subject-matter experts, and approved external participants. Technically, the state has prioritized why the architecture matters instead of over specifying tools. Phase 1 uses publicly available or low-risk data; privacy and security are reviewed through a Privacy Threshold Analysis; agencies must maintain AI inventories; and the state's seven responsible-AI principles require human oversight, transparency, security, privacy, fairness, accountability and workforce empowerment. For higher-risk scenarios, the Accelerator's FAQs already point to synthetic-data approaches and deeper consultation, which shows the architecture is designed to mature responsibly over time rather than overpromise on day one.

Impact

The most compelling impact story is the change in North Carolina's operating environment before and after launch. Before 2025, the state had guidance, an AI framework and an interagency work group, but agencies still lacked a centralized, repeatable path from use-case idea to governed prototype. After the Accelerator's launch, the state had an executive-order-backed hub for AI governance and prototyping, mandatory cabinet-agency AI Oversight Teams, published evaluation criteria, a public intake process, 60-day sprint cycles, procurement-neutral vendor participation rules, a public-facing AI inventory and risk-assessment structure, and a requirement that high-risk use cases be made available for public review. That is not incremental improvement. It is a shift from distributed experimentation to enterprise execution.

North Carolina can already demonstrate measurable early impact, even though the first annual public results report is not due until June 30, 2026. As of May 2026, the program has created a 60-day average delivery model for prototypes; removed direct entry cost for participating agencies; preserved open competition by prohibiting payment and special vendor status during sprints; created a leadership council with nearly 30 experts; required cabinet agencies to form AI oversight teams with at least four members each; and established explicit statewide performance targets for use-case submissions, successful projects, published success stories, local-government outreach, tool standardization and training. Those are not vague aspirations. They are concrete institutional metrics that make progress visible and management accountable.

The qualitative evidence points in the same direction. Agency leaders already describe statewide AI efforts in terms of better service delivery and easier public access. When the state unemployment agency launched its AI assistant Felix in early 2025, one business-area leader said the goal was to create "a more efficient and accessible system" and help people "get

answers quickly.” That is precisely the operating problem the AI Accelerator is designed to solve across agencies: take a public-service friction point, evaluate it responsibly, prototype it rapidly, and produce a reusable path toward better outcomes. The demand signal is real because business units are not asking for AI as a novelty; they are asking for faster processing, more consistent decisions, less staff burden and better constituent experience—the same success metrics built directly into the Accelerator intake process. citeturn30view0turn22view1

The long-term case for investment is strong. Executive Order 24 requires annual public reporting, public review of high-risk use cases, AI literacy training for both the workforce and the public, and continued agency use-case development. The order remains in effect through December 31, 2028, and explicitly allows the Accelerator to continue operating even after expiration or repeal. Meanwhile, NCDIT’s strategic plan extends the program’s maintenance path through broader standardization of AI tools, data-use standards, local-government engagement, training, a Data and AI Center of Excellence, and statewide success-story publication. This is why the initial and ongoing investment is justified: the state is not buying a single tool or isolated pilot. It is building durable public-sector capacity to govern AI, prototype safely, protect privacy, preserve procurement integrity, strengthen workforce fluency and scale what works. For North Carolina, that means better odds of delivering smarter, faster and more human-centered services. For other states, it offers a practical model of how to institutionalize trustworthy AI without waiting for perfect conditions.