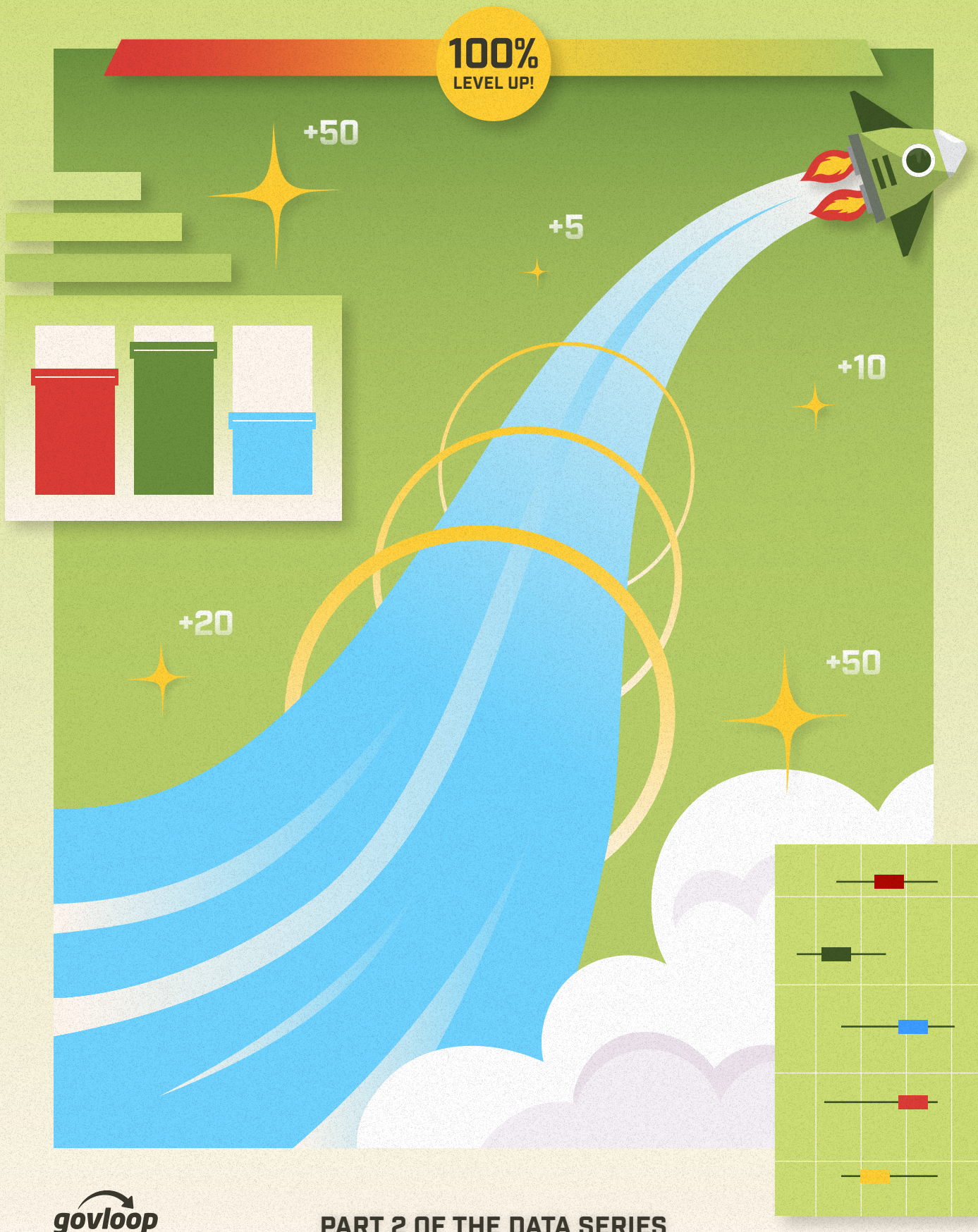
LEVELING UP WITH DATA



govloop

PART 2 OF THE DATA SERIES

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INTRODUCTION

Data influences how we communicate, innovate and deliver services and impacts every government initiative, whether sprawling or local. And although we often overuse phrases such as “vast troves of data,” it is true that society produces an unfathomable amount of information that agencies can harness for good.

By now, government organizations should know that.

So rather than explain the basics of a data dashboard, for example, this guide takes a “Data 202” approach. We highlight examples of agencies going beyond their early forays into data management — those that now use more advanced data tools to address disaster recovery, water shortages, procurement overruns, statewide healthcare access, desperately needed road repairs, and employee performance, among other issues.

You'll also hear from experts about technology that supports data maturity and thoughtful use of AI.

Read on to learn how your agency can take data to the next level.

The **Federal Data Strategy** is based on three core principles — **ethical governance**, **conscious design** and a **learning culture** — that will help government fully leverage data while maintaining security, privacy and confidentiality. If government stops being a preeminent supplier and sophisticated and ethical user of data, it cannot fulfill its civic duty, the strategy says.

A GROWN-UP LOOK AT DATA

Below are defining features of data-mature organizations and tools to evaluate your agency's level of data sophistication.

Data maturity refers to an organization's ability to use data to manage and leverage its objectives and reflects the entire organization's sophistication in terms of data collection, storage, processing and analysis.

Data Maturity Benefits

- **Enhanced decision-making**
- **Improved efficiency**
- **Innovation**
- **Enhanced customer experience**
- **Risk mitigation**

Levels of Data Maturity

The Beeck Center for Social Impact and Innovation has developed a **framework** to gauge a state's data maturity. At the low end, agencies focus largely on compliance, and they hold fast to data silos. At the highest end — data mastery — agencies are proactive, collaborative and data literate.

Highest: Mastering

- ☐ The state is consistently proactive on data projects, policies and strategies.
- ☐ Statewide data strategies are implemented in a timely manner and updated regularly.
- ☐ There is strong engagement across state agencies and with external partners.
- ☐ Needs are clearly understood and responses to emerging priorities are timely.
- ☐ All staff and leaders understand the statewide capability to use data.
- ☐ The state future-proofs data infrastructure and rapidly responds to risk.

High: Managing

- ☐ The state is beginning to embed data policies and practices across its agencies.
- ☐ Program and policy staff have access to data without reliance on specialized support.
- ☐ The state has an established process for regular review of data policies.
- ☐ Data is consistently treated as a priority in strategies and budgets.
- ☐ All staff and leaders engage with data regularly in some form.

continued

Data Assessment Tool

It can be difficult to measure how data-advanced an agency is, so the Beeck Center also developed a **Data Maturity Assessment Tool** to help officials identify strengths, weaknesses and priorities. The assessment can lead to better-informed decision-making.

The tool assesses government competency in five areas:

1. **Commitment:** An ongoing dedication to establishing and empowering data leaders
2. **Data Talent Pipeline:** The public-sector workforce's ability to increasingly use data for decision-making and operational excellence
3. **Data Action Plan:** An active data management strategy, transparent data governance and knowledge of what data is available
4. **Sharing:** An established, clear and predictable process for data collaboration
5. **Analysis:** Whether employees have the skills, knowledge and tools to enable data analysis

Data Literacy Tools

Want to be a sophisticated data user? You'll need these skills.

- **Think Critically** about data results
- **Interpret** data visualizations
- **Know** what data to use
- **Understand** analytics tools
- **Recognize** misleading data
- **Communicate** via storytelling

TechTarget

Medium: Learning

- ☐ Leadership roles value skills and data use.
- ☐ There is discussion of state-level data governance.
- ☐ Staff engagement with data extends beyond IT or administrative roles.
- ☐ Program and policy staff engage with specialized users to share or test data uses.
- ☐ Agencies have a desire to improve data capability.
- ☐ The state has intentional strategies to break down data silos.
- ☐ The state has some external outreach and engagement around data.

Low: Emerging Practice

- ☐ State agencies use data sporatically.
- ☐ Data is seen as an IT, statistics or administrative responsibility.
- ☐ Use of or access to data is limited to specialized staff.
- ☐ There is lack of awareness about the unique value of data held across the state.
- ☐ Stewardship roles around data are not well communicated.
- ☐ There is a disconnect between leadership goals and data activities or strategies.
- ☐ Focus is only on high-profile data output.

Lowest: Initial Awareness

- ☐ The state complies with minimum legal requirements for data sharing, standards and reporting.
- ☐ The state sets limitations and restrictions by default. Siloed, agency-level work only.
- ☐ Leaders assign no explicit value to data.
- ☐ The state has no defined responsiblity and oversight for data.
- ☐ There is no central or standard decentralized knowledge of the state's data.
- ☐ Staff has very limited data literacy.

This framework's principles can apply to agencies at all levels of government.

6 Pillars of Mature AI

AI is critical to data maturity. Just think: How much easier is data integration when Microsoft Excel spreadsheets are relegated to the recycle bin? But agencies embrace AI in different ways and with varying success. So, as you work toward data mastery, here are **six AI pillars** to consider.

Pillar One

Ethical, Equitable and Responsible AI Use

Key Features:

Oversight and governance enforce the regulatory and enterprisewide compliance rules for AI development and outcomes.

AI decisions, outputs and outcomes are explainable, justifiable and transparent to users and those impacted.

AI systems accommodate human rights, diversity and well-being by purposely trying to avoid bias and unfair/unintended discrimination and inequities.

Pillar Two

Strategy and Resources

Key Features:

Formal documents and artifacts support a plan for achieving a defined AI mission and vision and clear policies and standards.

Partnerships with government and outside entities promote collaboration and input from multiple perspectives on behalf of different stakeholder groups.

AI governance structures, processes, policies and audits foster compliance with agency ethics, regulations and policies.

Pillar Three

Organization

Key Features:

The agency's norms and values support an adaptive and risk-tolerant culture that is ready for AI-related change.

The enterprise defines, documents and executes AI structures, roles and processes.

The agency has processes to develop/reshape a diverse AI workforce through training, recruitment and career-impact awareness.

Pillar Four

Technology Enablers

Key Features:

Research, systems engineering and human/machine design principles integrate AI into the agency's business operations.

AI-specific testing and evaluation standards ensure that AI solutions are verified and validated to meet all necessary criteria.

A defined set of enabling architecture, standards, computer networking, hardware and software tools support the development, integration and operation of AI solutions.

Pillar Five

Data

Key Features:

A process exists to ingest, store, organize and maintain the data an agency creates and collects.

People who design, use and oversee AI systems uphold privacy and data security rights related to the exchange of personal digital information.

The agency has AI data management to avoid data bias and ensure data availability, usability and integrity in AI systems.

The organization systemically addresses challenges, legal agreements and other obligations for managing trusted, secure data sharing, internally and externally.

Pillar Six

Performance and Application

Key Features:

Identifying and documenting AI business cases and applying integrated workflow solutions lead to strategic outcomes.

Monitoring tools and processes for deployed AI solutions reveals changes in performance, fairness, security and trust.

AI systems are well-defined, well-designed and continually tested to ensure adherence to their intended purpose, avoid failures and malfunctions, and meet requirements.

Due diligence processes and techniques ensure AI outcomes' repeatability, traceability, transparency and explainability.

Industry Expert

How Data Management Drives AI

An interview with Stephen Moore, Chief Technology Officer, and Chris Steel, AI Practice Lead, AlphaSix

Technology helps agencies work more efficiently and effectively, and AI tools, in particular, are uniquely powerful. Whether generative AI (GenAI), natural language processing, machine learning (ML) or another AI option, these tools can transform how organizations engage with the public.

"The integration of AI within government operations will redefine our interaction between citizens and government," said Chris Steel with AlphaSix, which provides data management platforms and data analysis tools. "It will make it a lot more personalized, a lot more efficient overall." AI-driven automation and analytics can both streamline processes and make government services more accessible and responsive, he said.

But the foundation of AI is data — high-quality, accessible and secure. Think of a pyramid, Steel said. The top 10% or 20% is AI. Everything below is data and data management.

Fabric, Not Stovepipes

It's tough to manage data across large organizations. "If your data is spread all over the place in a bunch of stovepiped systems, it's going to be hard to really unlock [its] true value ... and then [be] able to deal with the volumes of [it]," said Stephen Moore, also with AlphaSix.

People often summarize data or collect limited datasets because of staff constraints, he said, but then "they're missing the input that you would need to really get the output ... you're looking for."

The solution, Moore offered, is to create a data fabric — a standardized, secure way to integrate various data pipelines so the data can be accessed and analyzed easily. For instance, AlphaSix helped a large federal agency build a centralized, protected system that each day brings in billions of records from security, fraud and other applications. Analysts can access, query and evaluate data they otherwise couldn't, said Moore.

Agencies also can incorporate AI and ML models to identify precursors of negative events based on how prior bad events played out.

Churning Through Data

Analysts say they spend 80% of their time just getting access to the data, preparing it for analysis and configuring the tools, and they spend only 20% of their time actually doing whatever they're supposed to do, Moore noted.

The amount of data they must sort through is probably 1,000 times what a person can handle, he said. But AI not only can process far more data, and faster, it can anticipate issues humans cannot. AI tools "don't need to sleep [and] they don't need to eat," Moore said. "They can just sit there 24 hours a day churning through the data."

Skilled AI professionals are scarce, however, and that makes it more difficult to integrate AI into legacy technology and weed out data biases. That's when a partner such as AlphaSix comes in — as the AI expert when agencies cannot hire their own, said Steel.

The technology can transform government, he explained, "but data management is the biggest part of the AI problem."

CALIFORNIA TAKES HEALTH DATA IN A NEW DIRECTION

Case Study #1

The **California Health and Human Services Agency** (CalHHS) is a sprawling, mission-driven entity — an ecosystem of 12 departments, five offices and 38,000 staff working with networks of partner groups. For years, CalHHS amassed lots of good data in its effort to create a "Healthy California for All," but the agency struggled to turn the data into actionable information.

So in 2021, the state Legislature combined four CalHHS subgroups, including its Office of Health Information Integrity, into an umbrella body called the **Center for Data Insights and Innovation** (CDII). CDII aims to improve internal CalHHS data sharing and analytics efforts by creating products and services — such as a data exchange framework and an agency data hub — for departmental use.

That's a programmatic approach. Today, CalHHS is shifting gears — to focus on people. The idea is to make it easier for constituents to access services, regardless of where they enter the CalHHS system.

"Envision a future where every Californian is proactively made aware of and seamlessly connected to a comprehensive, inclusive, and equitable set of health and human services matched to their holistic needs," posits the agency's March 2024 **IT & Data Strategic Plan**.

The strategy draws a detailed picture of a CalHHS data and technology environment that fully supports the agency's objectives. It highlights the importance of departmental interdependence, and it prioritizes equity and accessibility, results-based measurement, use of innovative technology such as GenAI, and security and privacy.

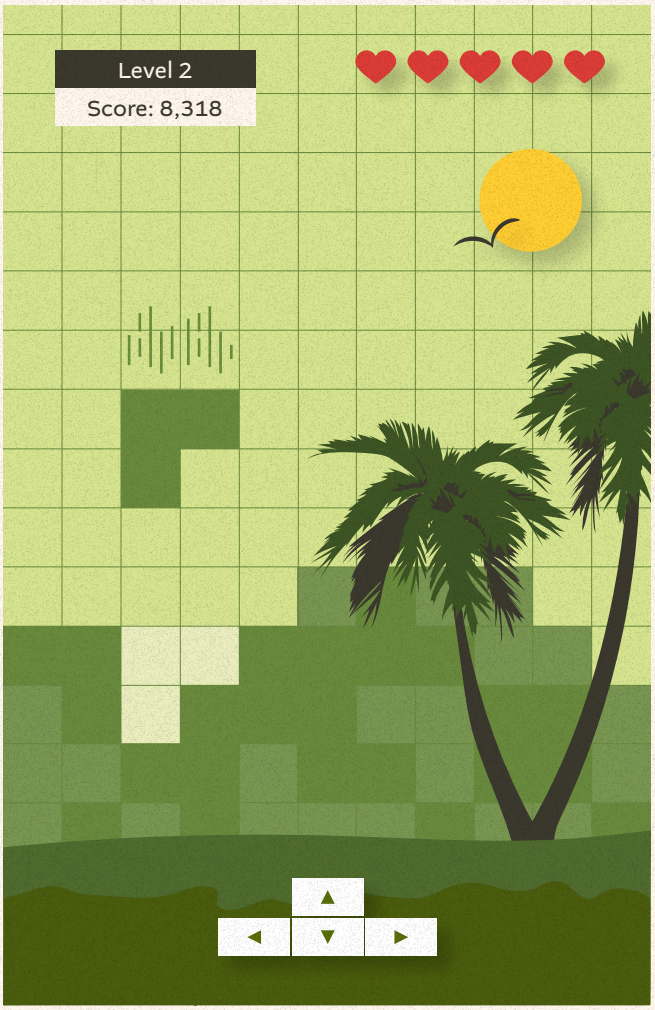
Developed in conjunction with the **California Office of Technology and Solutions Integration** (OTSI), the strategy underscores the need for a collaborative spirit. "The technology itself

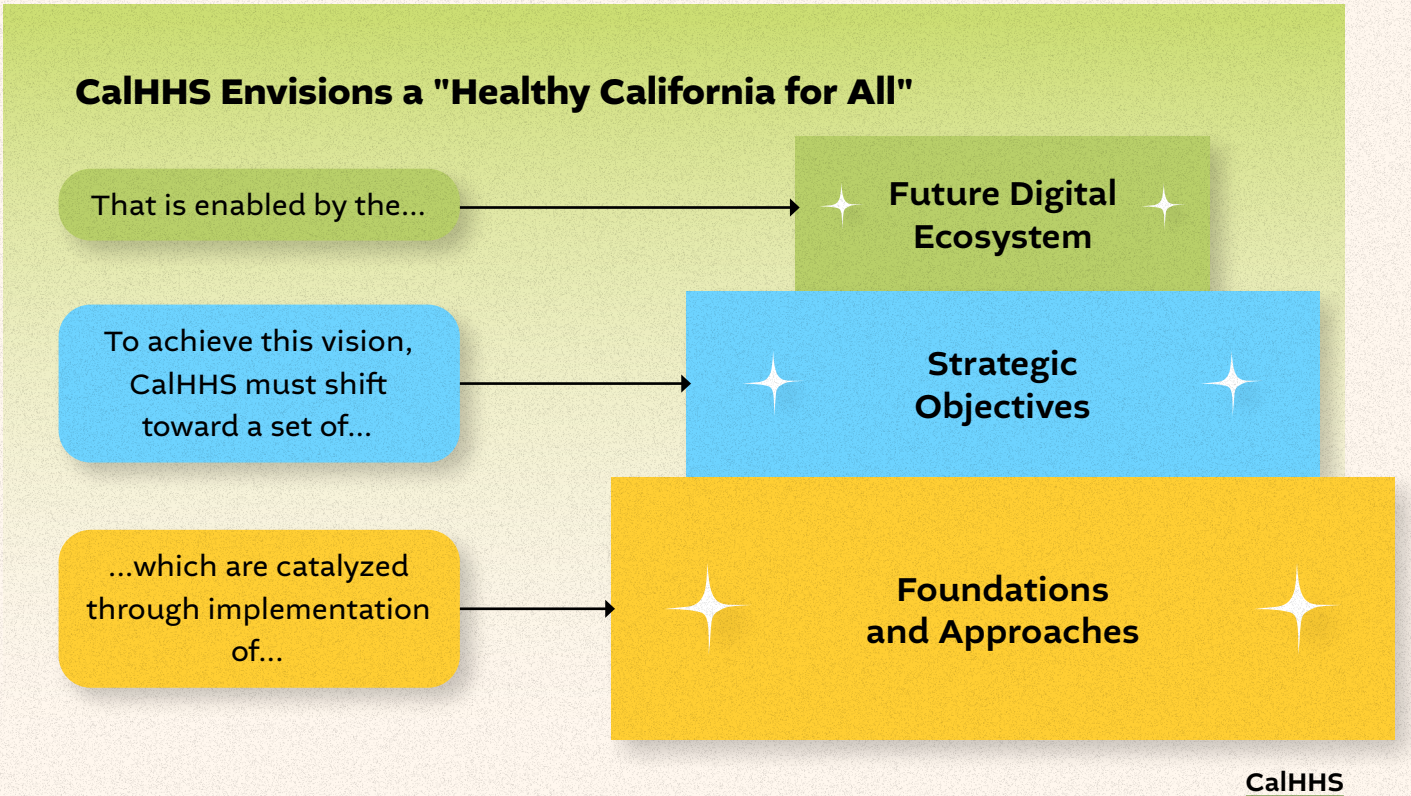
is available and accessible," the plan notes. "The transformation will be in our mindset, our workforce, our partnerships, and our culture."

CalHHS departments will remain autonomous; they'll still devise their own business and technology solutions. But the strategy calls for a new CalHHS Future Digital Ecosystem (FDE) in which secure, advanced data and IT solutions enhance agency efforts related to care management, enrollment, eligibility, referral and outreach, screening, holistic assessment, and services evaluation.

FDE is based on five CalHHS strategic objectives, such as equity through understanding. Underpinning those goals are eight foundations and approaches that include, among other elements, governance, workforce development and support, and optimized resource usage. Details are available **here**.

"With OTSI acting as a technology adviser, we aimed to underscore the role of data in bridging systems," **said Adam Dondro**, OTSI Director and CalHHS Chief Information Officer. "While individual programs within departments remain necessary, our goal is to ensure seamless collaboration across departments, all united in serving the people of California."

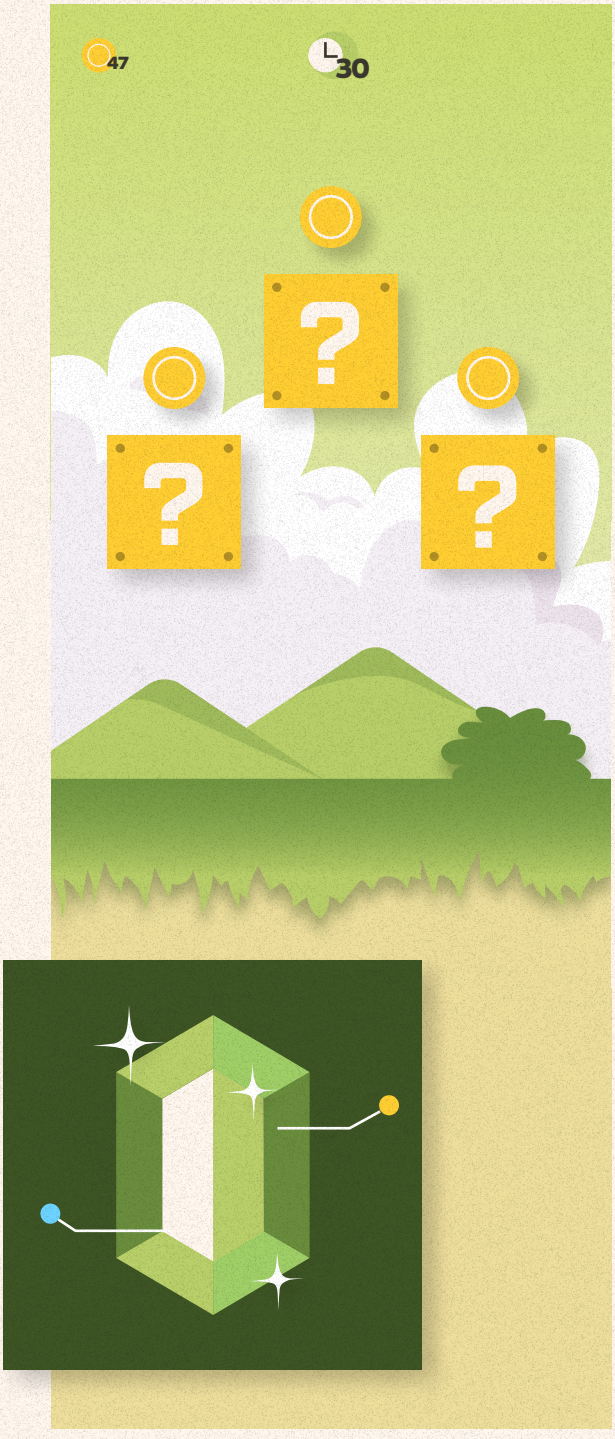




CalHHS

GSA TOOL COULD HELP FEDS BECOME SMARTER BUYERS

Case Study #2



Many of the rules and regulations that federal procurement professionals must navigate come down to answering one simple question before signing a contract: Are we getting a fair price? Specifically, how does the proposed price compare to what other agencies have paid?

Unfortunately, there's not a single source of truth for pricing data. Federal buyers do the best they can to find the answers the same way we all do when making major purchases: old-fashioned research.

But that is changing. In June 2024, the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) launched the **Procurement Co-Pilot**, an online tool to conduct research more quickly and effectively. It is designed to help buyers tap into various governmentwide resources on market and pricing data.

According to GSA, this tool helps buyers quickly find:

- Prices that agencies governmentwide paid for products
- Vendors that work with government, broken down by product categories and company size
- Contracts through which the desired product is available

With such data, buyers can do more than simply evaluate price fairness. They can use their research to negotiate a better one.

"The Procurement Co-Pilot increases visibility into the data provided by our partners, which helps federal agencies make better decisions about how they spend taxpayer money," Charlotte Phelan, Assistant Commissioner in the Federal Acquisition Service's Office of Strategy and Innovation, wrote in a **recent blog post**.

The tool is available to federal agencies and contractors through the Acquisition Gateway, an online platform for governmentwide acquisition programs.

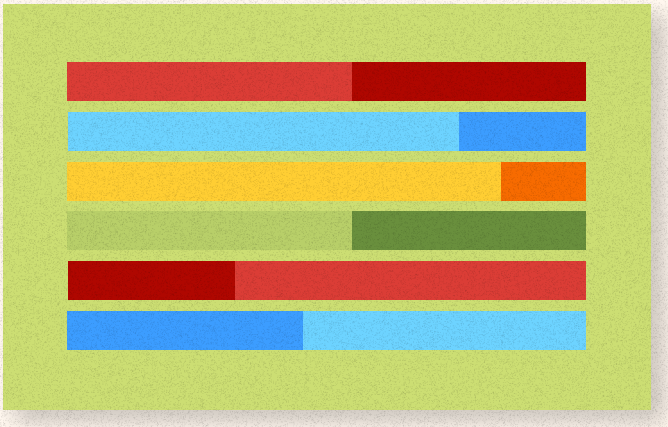
AFTER TORNADO, NEW GIS DATA GUIDED EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Case Study #3

When an EF3 tornado with winds clocking more than 150 miles per hour hit Clarksville-Montgomery County, Tennessee, in December 2023, the **assessor of property's office** found a new use for its geographic information systems (GIS) technology. Officials added a layer to the county's GIS property map that **showed the tornado's path** — some 600 yards wide and 11.33 miles long — based on National Weather Service data.

The tornado-specific information allowed for more targeted emergency response, including placement of food trucks and bus drop-off points for volunteers, and helped insurance and home repair companies, engineers, surveyors and appraisers with recovery efforts. The Montgomery County Assessor of Property posted a link on Facebook to make the enhanced GIS map widely available.

The office has been using GIS **mapping** to record and organize property information since the late 1990s. Boundaries, assessments, zoning, ownership, roads and other information are stored as computer databases presented in map form. Each map is a layer that either can stand on its own or merge with other layers, allowing officials to analyze relationships among different attributes. For instance, a layer that shows parcel boundaries might merge with a zoning layer. The GIS maps are available to the public on the county's website.



Industry Expert

How to Manage Distributed Data Securely, Effectively

An interview with Dave Hoon, CTO, Norseman Defense Technologies

To maintain its competitive advantage, the Defense Department must utilize data at the tactical edge. Processing data locally "speeds up the time for decision making, for example when you can run analytics or even AI solutions against the data," said Dave Hoon, with Norseman Defense Technologies. "Edge data can better support mission context and relevance."

But distributed data brings with it new challenges. Data security may look a little different in a distributed environment, Hoon said, "and there are also scalability and storage challenges to deal with."

There are issues, too, around data integration and interoperability. Decisionmakers need the ability to integrate locally processed data into centralized data stores, either for future uses or for compliance purposes. All this requires strong data management, he said.

How to Manage Data

"First, [agencies] need to implement a very robust data governance framework, maintaining a data catalog that provides metadata and lineage tracking, to ensure data's being used properly," explained Hoon.

Even as they leverage distributed data to accelerate mission operators' time-to-decision, organizations "need to be implementing APIs and data services to integrate data access across the enterprise to support event-drive and data-driven applications," he said.

In terms of data security, "it's always best practice to encrypt data at rest and in transit, and to implement good identity access-control solutions, with role-based and attribute-based access controls," Hoon said. "Implement zero-trust capabilities to verify and authenticate every request for data access."

The Norseman Advantage

As a small business supporting the federal government for more than 30 years, Norseman helps DoD agencies to make optimal use of their distributed data resources.

"We help our customers manage data through a comprehensive approach that we call data intelligence. We unify data security and data management — the collection, storage and processing of data — against our customer's mission needs," Hoon said.

In support of distributed-data uses, "we have a team focused on designing edge architectures," he said. "We have solutions to manage latency, and we specialize in transitioning from legacy systems to more modernized data architectures."

When edge data has served its purpose, but still must be retained for compliance or future use, "we can also develop a hybrid or commercial cloud capability for centralizing that critical data," Hoon added. And, working with a range of technology providers, Norseman can develop and integrate scalable edge-compute solutions.

Eyes on Data

Suppose an agency wanted to leverage vision-aware AI capabilities at the edge: cameras in the hallways of a forward operating base, for example. "Our solution would help them to achieve quicker decisions through localized processing of video-detection data, with the ability to send event metadata back to a centralized location," he said.

With the right data management tools, DoD and others can make the most of their distributed data in support of real-time decision making, said Hoon, and that empowers edge AI solutions while ensuring robust security and compliance.

STATE DEPARTMENT BETS BIG ON DATA-DRIVEN DIPLOMACY

Case Study #4

In 2022, the State Department updated its criteria for evaluating U.S. Foreign Service employees' performance to reflect data's growing usefulness — in all aspects of department work.

The Core Precepts outline five competencies that selection boards consider when reviewing employees and making decisions about tenure or promotions.

As part of the "substantive and technical expertise" competency, Foreign Service employees must develop "the ability to read, understand, create, and communicate data as information" and to identify "the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches based on data-driven analysis, as appropriate."

In **introducing the change**, Lisa Vickers, then-Director of the Office of Performance Evaluation in the Global Talent Management Bureau, wrote, "The way we do work has changed; today our employees need to make data-driven decisions and policies, so they need to know how to interpret data."

The change came shortly after State released its enterprise data strategy, titled "**Empowering Data-Informed Policy**."

In it, State officials said the department would take a mission-driven approach to implementing the strategy, focusing on **key mission areas**, such as global operations, cybersecurity and multilateralism.

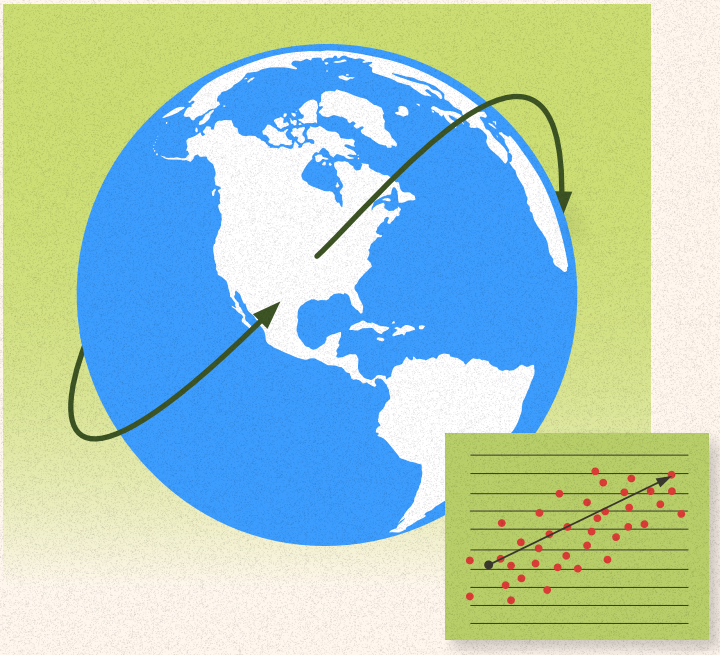
For example, in the area of multilateralism, the Bureau of International Organization Affairs has created dashboards to give State employees insights into the diplomatic landscape, according to the **June 2024 issue** of the Foreign Service Journal. "Data on how a particular country voted on U.S.-sponsored U.N. resolutions over time may help inform our decision to support a future resolution sponsored by that country," writes Paula Osborn, the department's Deputy Chief Data and AI Officer.

Increasingly, State's data initiatives involve AI. For example, its Bureau of Global Public Affairs now uses an AI-based program called **Northstar** to continuously assess the department's social media footprint.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed Northstar as part of a presentation at a **June 2024 event**, where he talked about AI with Chief Data and AI Officer Matthew Graviss.

The tool "is able to basically ingest a million articles every day from around the world, to be able to do that in a couple hundred countries in over 100 languages and then immediately translate, synthesize, and give you a clear picture of what's happening in the information space immediately," Blinken said.

While acknowledging AI can be disruptive, Blinken sees it "as a way to strengthen what we're doing, to strengthen our diplomacy, to better serve our country, to better serve our people, to better advance our interests in what is an increasingly complex world."



GETTING DATA ON SYRACUSE STREETS

Case Study #5

The weather in Syracuse, New York, makes road maintenance a challenge, but until five years ago the city had little insight into what streets needed repair and when. The Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC) did compile data on local roads eligible for federal aid, but that didn't help officials prioritize repavement projects.

So, SMTC **began ranking the entire Syracuse street system**, block-by-block, on a scale of 1 to 10, considering variables such as pavement condition, proximity to major institutions, history of water main breaks and emergency snow-route locations, among other factors. Some of the datasets lived in-house at SMTC and others were obtained through partnerships with the city and outside entities.

SMTC then shared its rankings with the Syracuse Office of Analytics, Performance and Innovation. That agency developed a pavement prioritization model by combining the rankings with information from field operators, spatial data and data obtained through **SYRCityline**, an online portal where constituents can request non-emergency services.

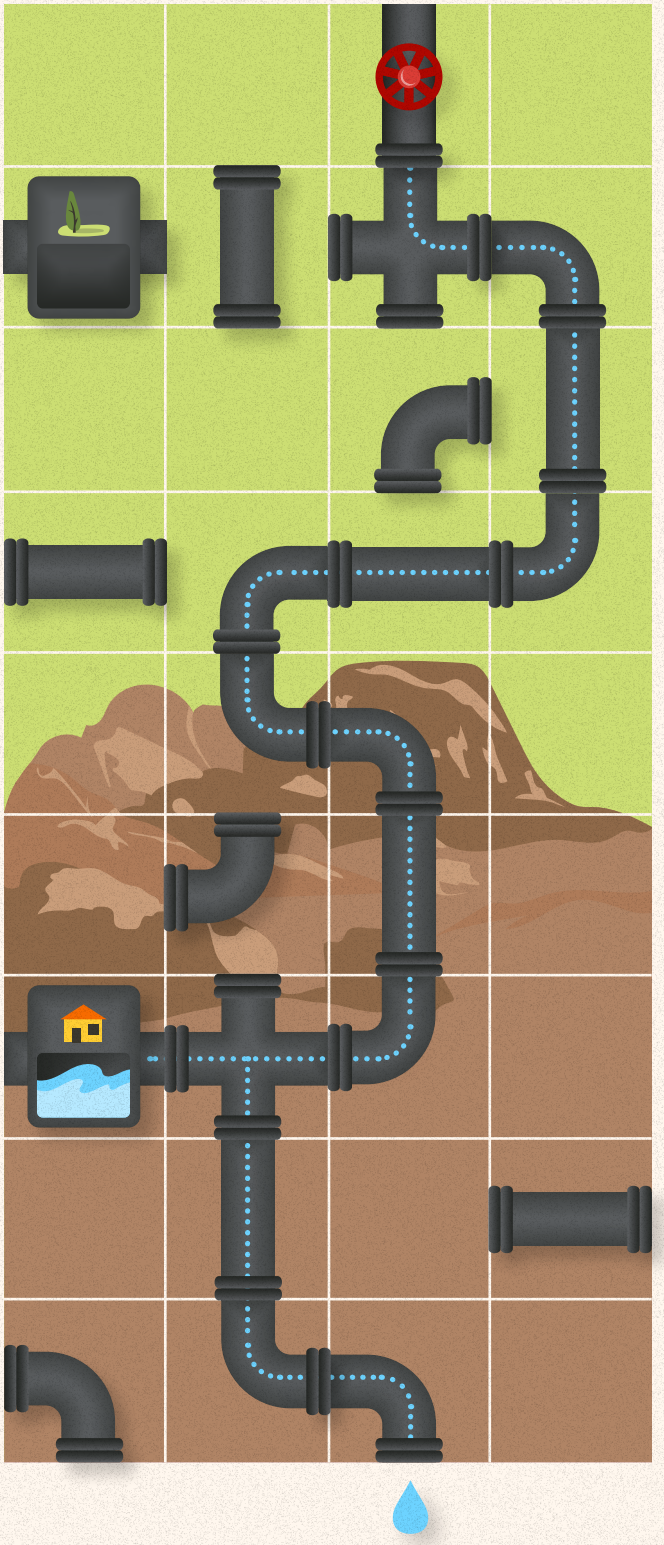
Three years ago, the office added more data to its model to help ensure that Syracuse does not overlook historically underserved communities. The model now includes an equity score that reflects age, income and other demographic information.

"It's this iterative process where five years ago, we didn't have any data on it, then four years ago, we created this data-driven model and a year ago, we created this model that now includes equity," **said Jason Thomas**, an innovation office data analyst.

Syracuse **plans** to reconstruct nearly 23 miles of roads, in every quadrant of the city, and to seal and resurface an additional 40 miles.

SAVING WATER IN A NEVADA CITY

Case Study #6



With the Colorado River Basin facing its **worst-ever** drought and Lake Mead only 30% full, Henderson, Nevada is facing a historic water shortage. For help protecting its water supply, the city is using data.

Henderson recently mandated the removal of decorative-only grass from certain properties — an initiative that can save roughly 10% of available water — and all city parks must convert from non-recreational to drought-tolerant grass. That will save about 150 million more gallons of water annually.

To ensure those efforts' success, Henderson collects and analyzes data regarding community sentiment, efficiency of water use at city facilities, and regulatory enforcement. The data-driven approach **earned the city a Gold Certification** from Bloomberg Philanthropies' What Works Cities Certification program in 2023.

Henderson's use of water data also moves the city closer to its goal of achieving net-zero water consumption by 2035, and it expands on other data decisions supported by Henderson's **Department of Performance and Innovation**. For instance, during the pandemic, the city suspended water shutoffs and waived late fees based on department data showing that 12% of residents were past due on their water and sewer bills. Residents were eased off the program when data showed they could afford their bills again.

The city also uses call volume and population data when choosing locations of new fire stations and monitoring cardiac survivability rates to improve wellness, among other initiatives.

Each of the city's 17 departments has a data analyst, and a "data academy" helps city employees learn about data analysis and visualization.

DATA GOVERNANCE: HOW TO USE DATA EFFECTIVELY

An interview with Todd Coleman, Director, Office of Evidence and Analysis, Office of Government-wide Policy, General Services Administration (GSA)

Like many things in life, not all data is created equal. Some data is more reliable than others, some is easier to collect and analyze, some is more vulnerable to a cyberattack. But with strong data governance, agencies can make safe and effective use of what's available to them.

That is, they need an **organization-wide process** in which decision-makers and data practitioners and owners jointly decide how the agency can strategically work with, manage and improve its data assets.

"It takes the right data, the right tools, and a lot of hard work to get data into the shape it needs to be in to provide reliable evidence and information … and a lot of coordination throughout the organization to make sure we're using resources efficiently," said Todd Coleman, who leads the GSA Office of Evidence Analysis and chairs the **Office of Government-wide Policy**'s Data Governance Board.

The Challenges

There are many reasons for unusable or inconsistent data. And usually, answering a leader's question means generating and integrating information from different sources, said Coleman — so "you take all the issues and the challenges in one data source and combine them with [those] of other … sources, and now you're multiplying [those problems] together."

Leadership sees the 10% of data work that happens above the surface, he said, but what's needed to provide really useful information is the 90% that goes unnoticed.

Not surprisingly, one particularly difficult aspect of data governance is getting leadership support. Data issues are complex and can be hard for executives to grasp in the limited time you have with them, Coleman noted. You must find a way to make engaging in data governance a leadership priority and help executives understand how governance impacts the agency at large.

At GSA, Coleman and his team began developing a data governance structure — establishing roles and responsibilities for data stewards, creating a data inventory, etc. — and hit a roadblock. "The problems that we had in the organization and the solution [we] needed to get done, we didn't have the power to implement," he explained. "We needed buy-in from our leaders."

Best Practices

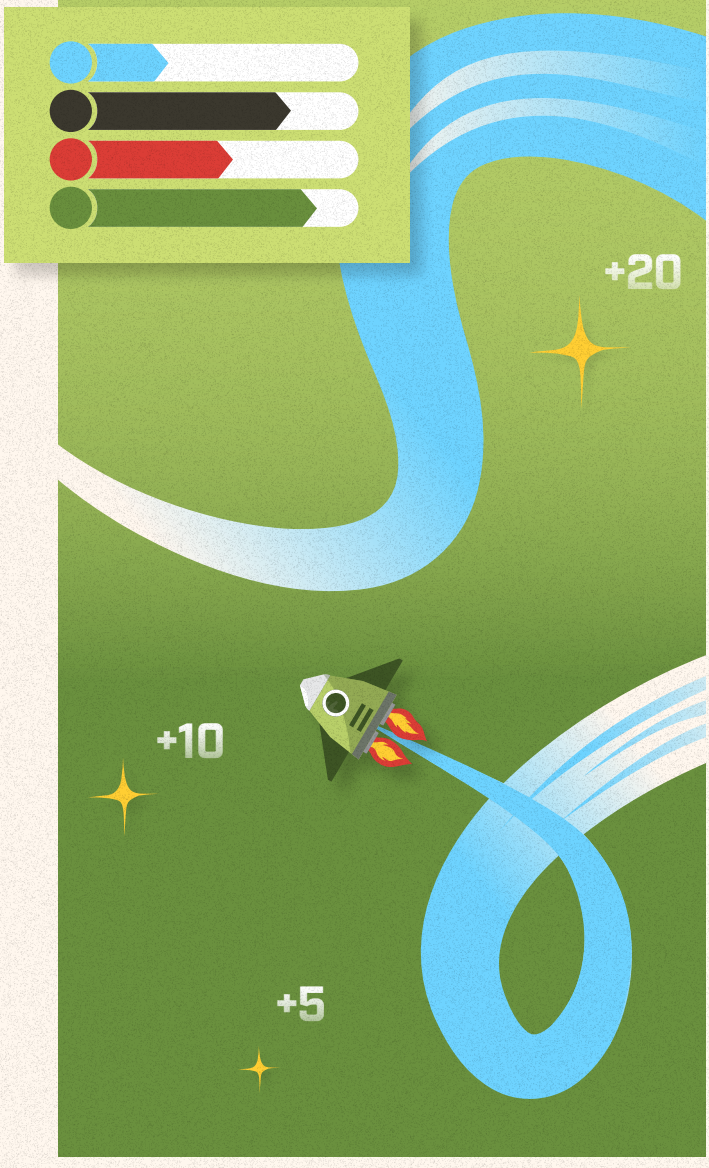
Coleman offered three tips for building and maintaining strong data governance. First, **involve the right people**. Get support from executive leadership in addition to data experts, stewards and other data-related roles.

Second, **have a strategy with clear objectives**. In other words, prioritize projects. Start small, measure progress and create momentum that cascades through the organization. And finally, **make data a critical priority**. That includes holding employees and leaders accountable for creating a truly data-driven agency.

"The purpose of data governance is really just to make meaningful change in the organization around data," he said. "And that … doesn't really happen unless you have the whole organization involved."

WHAT'S AHEAD?

Data is a critical — yet often underused — agency resource. In this second installment of our 2024 data guide series, we look at how organizations can use data in mature, effective ways, and we explore real-world examples that demonstrate what's possible. To read our first guide, "A Fresh Look at Data," click here. Pre-register for our upcoming data guide here.



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GovLoop's mission is to inspire public-sector professionals by serving as the knowledge network for government. Govloop connects more than 300,000 members, fostering cross-government collaboration, solving common problems and advancing government careers. GovLoop is headquartered in Washington, D.C., with a team of dedicated professionals who share a commitment to the public sector.

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Click here to pre-register for the next installment in the data guide series.