

Missouri: A Case Study in How to Get Smart About CX

Across the public sector, government agencies recognize the importance of improving the customer experience (CX). The reasoning goes that constituents have gotten used to the digital services provided by the public sector and are looking for a similar experience when interacting with the government.

But there's more to it than that. The solutions and strategies that improve CX also have the potential to improve the employee experience and the efficiency of government operations.

That is the case with Missouri's Department of Services, which determines eligibility for some of the state's public assistance programs. In a recent GovLoop online training, Missouri, as well as its two key business partners, Genesys and Google Cloud, discussed its CX initiative.

Challenge: Making a Tough Situation Worse

During the pandemic, Missouri, like most states, saw a surge in applications for public assistance programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid and temporary assistance. For many applicants, this was a new process, and they likely found it bewildering.

For example, in addition to pulling together the application information, some SNAP applicants must go through an interview, either over the phone or at a local resource center, and they must recertify either 12 or 24 months later, depending on their situation.

To make matters worse, the increased volume of applications led to longer wait times for people calling the department with information or questions.

All of this happens when people are already dealing with financial stress, said Nichole Conway, Program Manager for the Missouri Department of Social Services.

New applicants "never had to navigate a government process like this before," she said. "So, they don't need a difficult government process to frustrate them at their lowest economic point."

GENESYS govloop Google Cloud

Solution: AI-Powered Constituent Engagement

But state officials knew they needed to improve the quality of CX even before the pandemic. In 2018, the governor's office created a task force to review call center operations, identifying key pain points and looking at potential solutions.

The goal was to adopt a solution that addressed two primary areas: the management of call center operations (e.g., better scheduling and reporting) and engagement with constituents (e.g., managing communications across different channels and providing self-service options).

Missouri adopted the Genesys Cloud CX platform, which is designed to improve agent and customer experiences, whether those engagements happen on the phone or through email, chat, text or social media.

"We try to create a new world of efficiency and empathy, where contact centers anticipate needs and respond so fully that customers feel pleased with every interaction," said Scott Dunn, a Senior Account Executive at Genesys, which partnered with Google Cloud on the project.

During the first phase of the program, Genesys and Google Cloud focused on introducing intelligent chatbots, using Google Cloud Contact Center AI, said Jeremy Dautenhahn, a member of the Public Sector Account Team at Google Cloud. In the second phase of the program, Genesys focused on integrating the platform with other call center systems, making it possible to introduce more automation behind the scenes.

AI-based chatbots can improve call center efficiency by offloading many simple, repetitive tasks. The program's goals were twofold:

- → Enabling constituents to get information or services without waiting for a human agent
- → Offloading mundane work from human agents, allowing them to focus on more complex issues

The pandemic drove many states to improve automation as a way to handle increased workloads, Dautenhahn said. "What we're seeing now is states trying to further deploy AI to allow for more self-service capabilities within their contact center," he said.



Outcome: A Better Experience for Everyone

Here's how the new environment unfolded:

September 2021: Text messaging

Before going live with chatbots, Missouri launched an SMS-based messaging service that allows individuals to interact with a human agent and ask general questions about application processes and policies.

"We get about 550 hits a month on that text line, and it doesn't take more than a couple of people a day to man it," said Conway. "And, it gives the staff a break from back-to-back phone calls every day, and it provides another way for our clients to reach us in a timely fashion."

March 2022: Chatbot and live chat

New chatbot and live chat options were launched, with seamless integration between the two.

Whenever someone comes into chat, they hit the chatbot first. But if they have questions the chatbot can't answer, they can ask to chat with a live agent. Together, the chatbot and live chat can handle any interaction that once required a phone call, except for the first SNAP interviews, Conway said.

The chat is far more popular than text messaging, getting about 32,000 hits on the chat a month, with only about half of those engagements going to a live agent. Beyond boosting call center efficiency, the chat option has improved staff retention, Conway said.

"We have many offices that are on the phones every day, all day and implementing this, we were able to put them on a rotation where they take weekly turns doing the chat and then weekly on the phones, which has helped with burnout," she said.

March 2023: Virtual agent scheduling app

Scheduling in-person or phone appointments for constituents is no small task. Missouri runs approximately 125 local resource centers around the state, and awvailability varies from center to center based on staffing.

When call center agents had to sort out the logistics manually, it was a time-consuming process with opportunity for errors. The virtual agent now handles the full process, much to the relief of call center agents and constituents.

"Users can schedule or reschedule an appointment through that virtual agent without ever having to speak to anybody over the phone or through chat," Conway said.

The state has seen clear signs that these changes are having a material impact on operations. Here are two key metrics:

- → The call deflection rate, which refers to the number of callers who receive a message saying no one can answer their call at the moment, dropped from about 60% to 10% between 2019 and 2021.
- → The average speed to answer, that is, how long someone is on hold before talking with an agent, dropped from 1 hour, 33 minutes in 2022 to 42 minutes in March 2023, a 55% reduction.

Other states should be encouraged by Missouri's experience, she said. It's easy to assume that such modern solutions are out of reach for government agencies, but that's just not the case.

"If you had asked me, even five years ago, when our agency would be utilizing AI or SMS or even working from home, I would have said maybe in 20 years," Conway said. "But we're doing all of it, and it's way easier than you think."

To learn more, watch the virtual event on demand here.