CiviForm: Streamlining Access to Affordable Seattle

"When trying to get help, how frustrating would it be to have to confirm, over and over again, that you're poor?"

Georgetown University master's students interviewed more than 10 stakeholders about the development and rollout of CiviForm for the City of Seattle. This summary describes how CiviForm can serve as a model for innovation in the City and how, with continued investment, it will connect Seattle residents to essential services.

BACKGROUND

In November 2017, Mayor Durkan issued an executive order to create an "affordability portal" for City benefit programs. These programs had strong track records, but there was no "one-stop shop" for residents to learn about and apply to programs. Each and every program required residents to report their identities, incomes, and other personal information. However, they lacked a cohesive system that automatically shares this information, so residents had to seek out and apply for programs multiple times over.

Affordable Seattle serves as a common place for residents to learn about programs and whether they qualify. **CiviForm has gone further by bringing the applications into one place** – saving time for both residents and City staff. Although the idea is simple, the tool is technically challenging and the first of its kind nationally. CiviForm has been successful because staff have collaborated closely with residents, community-based organizations (CBOs), and philanthropic partners to develop it.

DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

In 2018, Innovation & Performance (IP) engaged with City staff, CBOs, and residents of Seattle to understand the issue and co-create solutions, resulting in a product roadmap.

In 2019, ten Expedia engineers developed the Affordable Seattle platform and benefits calculator.

In 2020, research was done by Tableau and F5 and the Human Services Department, Department of Education and Early Learning, Seattle Department of Transportation, and Seattle Parks and Recreation to test the feasibility of cross-enrollment across programs. This work was then pulled together into a visual demonstration by U.S. Digital Response.

In 2021, through a Google.org Fellowship, the City of Seattle welcomed 13 full-time Fellows to work pro-bono on CiviForm. After building CiviForm from January to June, the team pilot tested CiviForm July 2021 through August 2022 with four programs: (1) Child Care Assistance Program, (2) ORCA Opportunity Youth Program, (3) Seattle Preschool Program, and (4) Utility Discount Program. CiviForm will continue to add more programs to the platform, with priority given to programs with high impacts on residents' basic needs.

RESULTS

CiviForm has met or exceeded expectations across several dimensions. First, it has successfully streamlined the application process for residents and CBOs by providing them with a menu of eligible programs and facilitating auto-filling of their basic details. CBOs have their own accounts, making it easier to serve clients by storing data securely and reducing time filling out multiple applications. Second, it is a replicable model for expediting program delivery and administration. The tool assists City programs to easily harmonize application data requirements. Universal questions enable program administrators to incorporate commonly used questions and leverage data across applications with the same information. Third, the platform helps program evaluators by tracking key metrics around enrollment and demographics.

LOOKING BACK: LESSONS LEARNED

1) Strong public-private partnerships provided critical technical knowledge and a low-risk testing ground before scaling CiviForm city-wide.

Stakeholders agreed that, without partnering with philanthropic partners and CBOs, the City would not have had the capacity and technical knowledge to develop CiviForm. Because Google.org developed CiviForm pro bono, the City was able to pursue a challenging, innovative solution with low upfront investment. Especially since much of the project took place during the pandemic, the

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City may not have been able to commit the necessary financial and human resources to develop CiviForm on its own. Interviewees noted that despite some initial hesitancy about a "big tech firm telling the City what to do," collaboration was collegial and partners committed to the City having ownership of CiviForm's development and future. Going forward, Seattle should pursue similar partnerships that can de-risk innovative projects before scaling them across the City. In particular, the CiviForm process should be a model for future tech transformation projects that help Seattle lead nationally on digital governance.

2) Project partners employed user-centered design to make CiviForm accessible and efficient for all user groups.

Early on, project partners had a shared understanding of CiviForm's user groups: residents, CBOs, City program staff, and CiviForm administrators. They especially focused on the essential role that "trusted intermediaries" (CBOs) play in linking residents to City services. Initial research included interviews and observation sessions where the project team learned about City and CBO staff members' challenges with the existing application systems. As the team built CiviForm, they regularly held demos and feedback sessions with user groups. In interviews, program staff reported that they pointed out functionality challenges and the development team would incorporate their feedback into updated versions of CiviForm within a few weeks. The project team also focused on exceeding standards for accessibility for people with disabilities and applicants who speak a language other than English. Overall, the design process for CiviForm reflected its core philosophy – making the user experience as easy as possible.

LOOKING AHEAD: SCALABILITY IN SEATTLE AND BEYOND

Support for CiviForm is currently allocated through 2024 with four full-time employees – one product manager, two software developers, and one business systems analyst. This level of support is required to manage and continuously improve the platform. With dozens more programs within the City beyond the four pilot programs, staff plan to add one new program per month to the platform during the next couple years to scale it up quickly but sustainably. **The City should ensure CiviForm has sufficient financial and human resources in the long-term to multiply its early impacts and scale it to support the full range of the City's services.** This is imperative to ensure widespread and equitable access to public programs for the residents of Seattle.

Google.org's fellowship team is also working with other cities across the U.S. to provide the open source code from CiviForm to support affordability initiatives, such as in Rochester, NY. One of the benefits of the software being open source is that, unlike traditional software the City would buy, the code can be improved by Seattle staff on an ongoing basis. **As more cities adopt CiviForm, they can identify and share best practices with each other, enhancing the platform for Seattle.**

Although CiviForm has the primary goal of serving Seattle residents by creating a one-stop shop for finding and applying for affordability programs, it also has the potential for much more. CiviForm can help inform the City's program development and funding decisions by providing rich data on program enrollment and resident needs. Stronger data on applicant demographics could likewise help the City improve its outreach to different communities within Seattle. Lastly, CiviForm could go beyond City benefits by integrating across county, state, and federal programs.

Overall, our research found that CiviForm is a strong model for the future of how Seattle serves its residents. If CiviForm had been in place at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, residents could have rapidly connected to services they urgently needed. We are encouraged by the future possibilities of CiviForm and the developmental lessons that can be passed on to other cities facing similar issues. We believe in the efficacy, accessibility, and scalability of CiviForm and hope that other localities will join in the mission of bringing affordability to their residents.

READ MORE
To learn more about CiviForm, visit:
https://civiform.us/

To learn more about public interest technology research at Georgetown University, visit:
https://beeckcenter.georgetown.edu/data-digital/

BY THE NUMBERS

1 Time applicants are asked for their income

3 Average minutes it takes to complete an application

2,000 Residents connected to 2+ programs since launch

$17,200 Annual savings available in 6 pilot programs

10,068 Applicants since launch

(data collected between July 1, 2021 and August 31, 2022)

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