

1. Delivering World-Class Customer Service

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CAP Goal Statement: *Increase public satisfaction and promote positive experiences with the federal government by making it faster and easier for individuals and businesses to complete transactions and receive quality services.*

Forrester Research [reported](#) in August 2016 that most of the services in 15 federal agencies it surveyed ranked near the bottom of about 300 public and private sector “brands” it reviewed. Even the federal government itself [sees the challenge](#): “Despite some important strides to improve customer service over the past 15 years, many federal government services fail to meet the expectations of the public, creating unnecessary hassle and cost for citizens, businesses, and the government itself.”

Background. Improving customer service has been an off-and-on federal priority over a number of years. In fact, it is now more broadly referred to as “customer experience,” since research shows that “customer service” accounts for only a quarter of a customer’s overall satisfaction with their experience with a company or government agency.

So, what is going on currently?

President Obama revitalized a focus on the government’s customers with [a 2011 Executive Order](#) that requires agencies [to develop](#) customer service plans. In response, some agencies created chief customer service offices, while others wove service initiatives into their regular operations. Agencies pursued a wide range of initiatives, many focusing on internet services. However, when the Government Accountability Office examined selected agencies’ efforts underway in 2014, it [concluded that progress was mixed](#).

By his second term, the Obama Administration doubled down. In 2014, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) designated [customer service](#) as one of the government’s top 15 cross-agency priority goals for the next four years. Lisa Danzig, an OMB official, and Carolyn Colvin, acting Social Security commissioner, were named as co-leads for this governmentwide push.

Efforts shifted into high gear in early 2016 with the creation of the [Core Federal Services Council](#) and the designation of 30 “high touch” customer services in the 16 agencies named to the Council. Since its first meeting in April, the Council has developed a set of strategies and a framework that can serve as a foundation to build upon in coming years.

Four Cross-Agency Strategies. The goal leaders and Council have outlined four overarching strategies and undertaken a series of cross-agency initiatives for each of the strategies:

- **Improve top customer interactions.** Rather than trying to “boil the ocean,” the goal leaders, along with Council members, identified 30 “core federal programs” that provide services that touch a significant number of citizens and businesses. These include, for example, the issuance of passports, IRS on-line tax filing, patent approvals and TSA airport screening programs.
- **Develop standards, practices and tools.** Leaders of the 30 individual programs participating in the initiative will develop their own improvement plans, with the goal of creating transaction-specific indicators to track progress. The Council has also piloted an eight-part

customer experience maturity assessment model—developed by a cross-agency community of practice—that each of the service programs has voluntarily used to self-assessed themselves. Currently, leaders within the 30 programs are sketching out “[journey maps](#)” of the experiences of their services from a customer perspective to identify priorities for improvement and what matters to their customers.

- **Feedback and transparency.** The Council is [piloting](#) the use of [Feedback USA](#), a customer feedback “pulse survey” kiosk, in about a half dozen agencies. These include local Passport, Citizen and Immigration Services, Social Security and Veterans Benefit offices. Based on how useful these real-time responses are to managers, the plan is to expand to additional programs in coming months. The broader goal is to make it a standard practice for services to use feedback data in delivering core services and eventually to have transparency of transaction times and satisfaction measures publicly available.
- **Focus on the front line.** In addition to focusing on customers, the initiative recognizes that you cannot have good customer satisfaction without satisfied employees. OMB created an annual [customer service award](#) program in 2015 to recognize individuals and teams in agencies and at the presidential level. More broadly, there is also a recognition that the trends in annual employee engagement and satisfaction scores of frontline employees for organizations delivering core services relate to data reflecting improved customer experiences for those receiving services. This will be part of a broader focus to determine if special efforts are needed to improve employee engagement, as well.

A Cross-Agency Governance Framework. Danzig and Colvin could do little on their own to move the needle on customer satisfaction. But by creating the Core Federal Services Council and highlighting 30 key service programs, they are now leveraging the efforts of the 16 agencies that have operational responsibility for delivering these services. The Council also serves as a sounding board as well as to identify and resolve policy issues. It is staffed by a [White House Leadership Development Fellow](#), providing a focal point and critical mass to get things done.

In addition to the Council, there is an informal cross-agency Community of Practice. It is comprised of people in these 16 agencies with the knowledge and passion to improve customer experiences. These individuals were originally designated by their deputy secretaries and have the support of internal sponsors. They meet quarterly to identify and develop resources as well as identify common challenges, share best practices and identify practical improvement strategies. For example, they developed a draft maturity model and worked on a Customer Experience Playbook to share more broadly with their peers in other agencies, as well as a cross-agency collaborative platform on the Web.

Finally, for the first time, the governmentwide customer service initiative has access to resources. The fiscal year 2016 budget approved by Congress in March granted OMB funding transfer authority for cross-agency projects and the Council has supported \$2 million in funds designated under the customer service goal.

Agency-Specific Initiatives. Many agency plans call for improvements in on-line experiences. But these tend to be longer-term efforts that cost money and action on them is largely in the hands of agency CIOs who are already overwhelmed with demands to address cybersecurity, data center consolidation, replacing legacy systems and other urgent priorities. Yet, there are concrete short-term initiatives underway. Following are examples.

Federal Student Aid (FSA): organizing around the student. FSA provides about \$150 billion a year in grants, loans and work study. It is a pioneer in improving customer experience. In 2010, FSA's then-new Chief Operating Officer (COO), Bill Taggart, established a Customer

Experience Office to improve the end user experience. As part of Executive Order 13571, FSA worked on a one-stop mobile-responsive site internally called the “Integrated Student Experience.” In the team’s initial review of the FSA’s customer facing experience, they found FSA did not have a one-to-one relationship with its customers—the students—but rather it worked with an ecosystem of providers, such as servicers and universities. Different divisions within FSA managed different parts of the ecosystem (financial literacy, marketing, applications for aid, repayments, defaults) and these different divisions had created separate processes that did not connect with each other from an end user perspective. As a result, students, borrowers and parents had to deal with separate bureaucracies within FSA throughout the student aid lifecycle.

The Customer Experience Officer reports directly to the COO and has a staff of about 105 FTEs drawn from different divisions within FSA to reflect the entire student aid lifecycle. The Office was treated as a “new startup” that brought together not only staff from different divisions but also a team of statisticians who created actionable insights. The new Office started by consolidating five different websites customers had to deal with and in July 2012 FSA launched the one-stop [StudentAid.gov](#).

Social Security Administration (SSA): A Lifecycle Approach. SSA serves the entire US population, from birth to death and beyond (e.g., survivor’s benefits). SSA’s strategic [Vision 2025](#) sets out a long-term, omni-channel view of SSA’s changing customer expectations. The goal is to foster an internal culture shift among SSA’s employees to focus on customer experience, not the business processes that have been put in place.

More than half of SSA’s claims are already being filed online. To further encourage the use of online services, they are creating new Customer Engagement Tools that looks across the lifecycle of how citizens interact with SSA, from birth to death.

The system will ultimately have the ability to forecast potential needs of customers in advance and proactively provide information (e.g., applying for a Social Security number at birth or approaching retirement age). This is done by mining various databases (e.g., new birth records) and use analytics to mine information in an enterprise data warehouse. To do this, SSA has created an Analytics Center of Excellence to develop this functionality and it has developed cross-agency relationships to collect or use the data.

Social Security recently introduced the [mySocialSecurity](#) portal which currently provides its customers with access various services online- proof of benefits, change of address, replacement Medicare cards and [more](#).

The Passport Service’s Feedback Button. The last time Passport Services was in the news was its 2007 backlog crisis of thousands of pending applications, when customers missed vacation and business travel as a result. Congress even passed [emergency legislation](#) to bridge a staffing gap.

Today, improving customer service is “part of our culture to help people make their trips,” according to Barry Conway, Managing Director of Passport Support Operations in the Bureau of Consular Affairs at the State Department. In fact, the headquarters office has a dedicated customer service division and there is a network of customer service managers in each of the 29 agencies and centers around the country.

The Passport Services' customer satisfaction scores have been rising steadily—77% in 2013 and 81% in 2015—according to the American Customer Satisfaction Index. The [recent Forrester](#) survey also shows a sharp jump in satisfaction over the past year—an increase of 10 points on a 100 point scale.

The Service's long-term initiative is to move from a paper-driven to an electronic process wherever possible. For example, they hope to move to electronic renewals of passports by the end of 2017 and to allow on-line appointment-setting for in-person visits to one of the 28 passport offices around the country.

Some of its near-term initiatives include piloting [Feedback USA](#) via “feedback button” kiosks in each of the offices with a public counter. Customers exiting the offices can push one of five buttons to reflect their level of satisfaction with services received. The kiosks produce weekly summary reports for managers. Initially the reports were met with skepticism, but they eventually did focus management attention and created some competition between the offices. While it doesn't provide insights as to why customers respond the way they do, the buttons do serve as a good motivator and alert managers when something seems to be seriously awry. Recent results show that 92 percent of customers were satisfied.

What's Next? The four-year cycle for cross-agency priority goals ends in September 2017, nine months after President Trump took office. However, it is not unrealistic to think that the new Administration would also care about improving the delivery of government services! Over a dozen agencies have developed concrete, realistic strategies for their operations—a good foundation to build upon. Furthermore, a 2016 report by the Partnership for Public Service [offer several](#) recommendations for action. Interestingly, their recommendations largely mirror much of what is already underway. So, what else should the Trump Administration do?

Postscript (July 2017): The Office of Management and Budget [disbanded](#) the Federal Core Services Council in June and suspended the Customer Service Award Program for 2017.