FirstGov.gov: Past, Present, Future

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Good morning. I am happy to be here to give you a status report on FirstGov. I admire and salute you. You are on the front line of information sharing–-to each other and to those you serve.

FirstGov.gov http://www.firstgov.gov is the official portal to almost 35 million Federal and 16 million state government Web pages, with links to government at all levels.

What a Difference a Year Makes

It's been little more than a year since FirstGov was launched, and yet, in that time, many things have happened and many things have changed, including–-on September 11–-the world around us.

Today, I would like to talk with you about three things:

- FirstGov's milestones and enhancements in its first year
- FirstGov's role as the catalyst and official backbone of a rapidly accelerating electronic government
- What we expect the future to bring and what we expect FirstGov to bring to the future

In less than a year, FirstGov.gov rapidly evolved from being a comprehensive portal to government to becoming a major player in the Administration's eGovernment initiative.

The handful of people who developed FirstGov knew from the start that FirstGov was ideally positioned as a catalyst to transform how government at all levels delivers services and how the public interacts with government. Like any high-risk counterpart in the dot-com world,

the FirstGov enterprise could have failed. But it didn't. It has emerged since its launch as a driving force for eGovernment, with many lessons learned for governments in this country and around the world.

Librarians have played a role in FirstGov's evolution, so I will explain a few of those steps as I go.

FirstGov: The First Year

In June 2000, President Clinton accepted the gift of a powerful search engine to the Federal government from a foundation created by Eric Brewer, an Internet entrepreneur who got his start with a government grant from Defense years ago.

The General Services Administration, which already had a government-wide portal under development, became the lead agency.

FirstGov.gov was launched on September 22, 2000–-a fast-moving, 90-day endeavor involving the President's Management Council, the Chief Information Officers Council, a cross-agency board, and 24 agencies that provided the funds to create the website. In addition to a search engine with the capacity to search 500,000 pages in a quarter of a second, FirstGov had, from the start, additional options for visitors to access Federal information and interact with government:

- By topical index
- By organizational hierarchy
- Timely features

The FirstGov gateway also set up the first central location for citizens to offer suggestions, pose questions, and interact directly with their government. Citizens or other customers can e-mail the President, their senator, or governor, or

an agency webmaster. They can comment on rules or report unsafe products.

FirstGov as a Catalyst to Accelerate eGovernment

The offspring of one Administration, FirstGov soon became the protégé of a new Administration.

In the Budget Blueprint released in February 2001, the Bush Administration gave its official endorsement to FirstGov, calling it one of the fundamental building blocks of a citizen-centric government.

In June, Mark A. Forman became Associate Director for Information Technology and E-Government in the Office of Management and Budget. He was charged with fulfilling the President's vision of using the Internet to create a citizen-centric government. He has direct responsibility for the e-government fund described in the President's Budget to generate interagency e-government innovation.

Mr. Forman defines e-government in this way:

- Use of the Internet for online filing of forms and taxes

- A government organization that uses the Internet to connect employees, suppliers, and customers

- Use of digital technologies to transform government operations in order to improve the effectiveness, efficiency, and service delivery.

Mr. Forman has told many audiences that the Administration's vision is to create a convergence of all the ways that government interacts with the citizen.

FirstGov, he says, will be the web storefront to achieve this convergence.

When FirstGov was launched, some agencies worried that FirstGov.gov would take traffic from their sites, or even subsume their sites. Others worried that FirstGov would send too much traffic to their sites. These worries have not materialized.

Most agencies now understand that FirstGov complements their sites. Its goal is to drive traffic to precisely where people can get information and services they need when they need it, without their knowing what agency delivers it. This is happening.

FirstGov also encouraged sponsors of interagency portals such as workers.gov, seniors.gov, business.gov, and others. I am attaching a list of Federal portals by primary audience, including a few under development.

Early on, FirstGov set up a monthly cross-agency group to work across agency lines on topics of interest, including developing new portals to reach customer groups not yet served. Under customer groups, think of volunteers, farmers, parents, mothers, fathers, babies, single adults.

Librarians Played an Important Role

We consider the library community a key component in developing and marketing FirstGov. We appreciate the support of Superintendent of Documents Fran Buckley. We will continue to need your advice on content and your help in reaching the public.

Even before the September 2000 launch, FirstGov staff briefed the Federal Depository Library Council and other groups. Later, several staff attended meetings of the Federal Library and Information Center Committee.
Last February, we also sat down with Mary Alice Baish with the American Association of Law Libraries and Lynn Bradley with the American Library Association to discuss closer involvement with the library community.

This led to the creation of a taxonomy advisory group, made up of librarians and other professionals. This group worked over several months to recommend an improved taxonomy for FirstGov's topical index, as well as a possible government-wide taxonomy. The group came to consensus on the top-level categories for a

FirstGov taxonomy.

Much of that work was guided by Ken Nero, librarian at the National Labor Relations Board, who worked part time at FirstGov until recently when he was called back to his agency.

In June, at the American Library Association conference in San Francisco, Ken briefed members of the Government Information Technology Committee (GITCO) of the Government Documents Roundtable and responded to their concerns.

FirstGov had a booth at that conference in the huge conference center. Ken and I were thrilled with the steady stream of librarians to FirstGov's booth. We got more volunteers than we could actually use and plenty of expert, on-the-spot advice about how to tweak FirstGov's look and feel.

With Mary Alice's assistance, I had the opportunity of conducting a FirstGov discussion group at the annual meeting of the American Association of Law Libraries in Minneapolis in July. To our delight, the insights and suggestions of that group confirmed many of the recommendations of the taxonomy advisory group and other librarians.

FirstGov has implemented some of the recommendations and others will appear soon in a new design.

To give you a couple of examples, one of our 16 main categories, "Library and Reference," will be deleted. We will have a new category, "Public Safety," which is not adequately covered in our headings. This advice, given well before September 11, now appears almost prophetic.

We invited law and document librarians to help us celebrate in New Orleans on June 26 when we announced the addition of 16 million state Web pages to FirstGov. The announcement was made at a conference of the Federation of Government Information Processing Council in that city.

This new milestone was made possible with the assistance of the National Association of State

Chief Information Officers. FirstGov staff contacted officials in each state and the District of Columbia, one by one, to get permission to add their Web pages to FirstGov's powerful search engine.

FirstGov: the Future

Here are some of the enhancements we are considering in the near or long term:

1. Separate channels for citizens, business, and government.

2. Free subscription service to alert customers of new features and additions.

3. E-mail routing system that automatically redistributes e-mail coming into FirstGov to the appropriate authorized contacts in Federal and state agencies and Congress for response to the public.

4. Personalization so that customer segments can have a tailored FirstGov site that recognizes their locality and online preferences. This personalization will take into account the public concern over privacy and security.

5. Authentication to protect the security of all information and the privacy of all users.

6. Multi-lingual translations to serve our foreign language populations.

7. Platform for online transactions that cross agency and intergovernmental boundaries.

8. Addition of local government Web pages to the search index.

9. Capacity to search every page within every online government database and every online government pdf document and other file formats.

10. A fuller taxonomy and directory to our topical index, and automated tools to integrate a taxonomy into our search

engine index.

September 11 Changed Our Nation's Future

Whatever the future brings, FirstGov will be there for the American people and the world, just as we responded to the terrible tragedy on September 11.

FirstGov is not just about technology. Our staff was evacuated and sent home at 10 a.m. on September 11, but we worked from home and kept the site up-to-date 24 hours a day. By September 12, we had posted a long list of government and nonprofit links, critical guidance for citizens still reeling from the attacks:

- How to Find Missing Persons
- Victims Benefits and Assistance, government-wide and nation-wide
- How to Provide Clues to the FBI
- Travel Updates and Advisories
- What Each Person Could Do – for themselves, for victims, and for their country

The list of resources is very long, and it continues to grow and change as needs change.

We were the first to add the numbers of telephone devices for the hearing-impaired to this list. Because we did, other agencies followed.

More than 500 people e-mailed FirstGov in the week after the attacks and since then we have sustained a volume of two or three times our normal rate. There are many stories to share. Most moving, perhaps, was an email from a woman who turned to FirstGov in an effort to find her brother, missing in the wake of the attack on the World Trade Center. In this case, the links and telephone numbers we provided paid off.

> *"I got word today," she wrote, "that my brother is fine. Words can't express the deep appreciation for the help that you have given me..."*

Hits on our site quadrupled as Americans turned to FirstGov for official information they could rely on – and everything located in one place.

We are very grateful that a member of the GovDoc listserv found the FirstGov response to September 11 and circulated it to your members. That act, no doubt, helped us reach many more Americans through your outreach.

In recent weeks, polls show that people's trust in their government to do the right thing is greater than it has been in 35 years.

FirstGov has the power, the capacity, and the commitment of its leaders and staff to keep this trust and to build on it as we face the future and whatever it may bring.

FirstGov appreciates and needs the library community. We look forward to working with you.

Thank you.

References and Resources

Free Subscription
Firstgov's eGovernment Newsletter
Write to:
listserv@listserv.gsa.gov
In the body of the message (not the subject line), write:
SUBSCRIBE EXPRESS-L YOUR NAME
Example:
SUBSCRIBE EXPRESS-L JOHN DOE

FirstGov.gov http://www.firstgov.gov
Official, comprehensive portal to all levels of government
Write to the Office of FirstGov at
firstgov@firstgov.gov

Federal Chief Information Officers Council
http://www.cio.gov/

FirstGov: Bringing Order to the Wild, Wild Web, May 2001
http://www.gsa.gov/attachments/GSA_PUBLICA
TIONS/extpub/10-PBWood_4.htm

Budget Blueprint (Part IX: Government Reform), February 2001
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Mark Forman Named Associate Director for Information Technology and E-Government
Office of Management and Budget News Release,
June 14, 2001
DisplayText cannot span more than one line!

Citizen-Centered E-Government: Developing the Action Plan
Office of Management and Budget Memorandum
to Agencies
June 18, 2001
DisplayText cannot span more than one line!

CIO Council funds eight new portals, seeks e-gov ideas
GovExec.com, August 13, 2001
http://www.govexec.com/dailyfed/0801/081301h
1.htm

FirstGov.gov is proud to be a finalist in this year's Innovations in American Government

Award. Winners will be announced soon.
http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/innovations/2001/ind
ex.html