



U.S. DIGITAL SERVICE

Impact Report

Spring 2020

Table of contents

A message from our Administrator	3
--	---

PROJECT UPDATES

Department of Veterans Affairs

Simplifying Veteran-facing services through VA.gov	4
Spotlight: VA Medical Center website	5

Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services

Updating Medicare payments for a modern world	6
Spotlight: Data at the Point of Care	7

Department of Homeland Security

Helping asylum seekers get decisions more quickly	8
Spotlight: SchoolSafety.gov	9

Department of Housing and Urban Development

Ensuring fair housing practices	10
---------------------------------------	----

Department of Justice

Putting users first at ADA.gov	11
--------------------------------------	----

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Subject Matter Expert Qualification Assessments (SME-QA)

Changing how the government hires	12
---	----

Digital IT Acquisition Professional Program (DITAP)

Improving how the government buys technology	14
--	----

A lasting impact

Bringing technical leaders into public service	15
USDS accomplishments	16
USDS by the numbers	17

Our mission

To deliver better government services to the American people through technology and design.

WHO WE ARE

USDS is a group of technologists from diverse backgrounds working across the federal government to transform critical services for the people. These specialists join for tours of civic service to create a steady influx of fresh perspectives. We select projects based on what can do the greatest good for the greatest number of people in the greatest need.

WHAT WE DO

USDS deploys small, responsive groups of designers, engineers, product managers, and bureaucracy specialists to work with and empower civil servants. These multi-disciplinary teams bring best practices and new approaches to support government modernization efforts.

OUR VALUES

- 1/ **Hire and empower great people.**
Humans push our mission forward. Empathy and tenacity are just as important as being a great technologist.
- 2/ **Find the truth. Tell the truth.**
We expect everyone to be humble, but question what's presented to them and have the confidence to find a new path forward.
- 3/ **Optimize for results, not optics.**
We work for the people—not attention, status, or headlines. Our projects may be hard, but we know they're worth doing.
- 4/ **Go where the work is.**
Meeting with civil servants where they are means we can partner to create lasting change. Modernizing government is up to all of us, together.
- 5/ **Create momentum.**
People urgently need better digital services from their government. By building velocity, we can deliver more value, faster.
- 6/ **Design with users, not for them.**
The best products aren't created in a vacuum. Using empathy and curiosity, we can effectively address our users' needs.

A message from our Administrator

U.S. Digital Service (USDS) is a group of technologists working across the federal government that uses design and technology to deliver better services to the American people.

Here, you'll find stories of services designed in consultation with users, meaning fewer words and more information, less paperwork and more results. USDS has helped agencies to make better purchases, improve their internal processes, and streamline forms and websites.

We produce results. Working with dedicated civil servants at agencies across the federal government, USDS has helped agencies improve the most critical digital services the government provides. At the Department of Veterans Affairs, USDS works with the department to improve Veterans' ability to find and apply for the benefits they earned. At the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, USDS is helping doctors to see their patients' full medical records, providing more holistic care. USDS continues to provide significant value to these agencies and more, and to the American people who are better served by their government.

We hire and empower great technical talent. The experts who join USDS continue to be our greatest strength. Each year, engineers, designers, product managers, procurement experts, and bureaucracy specialists join us to carry forward the mission of transforming the government's digital services. To sustain our success, we must continue to attract and hire great tech talent for terms of civic service.

We're creating momentum in government.

USDS provides value beyond delivering digital products. We teach procurement professionals across the government how to buy better technology. We also help to improve government hiring in the competitive service, clearing the path for agencies to hire qualified candidates. As time has passed, many USDS employees have chosen to continue their work in the federal government after they leave USDS, raising the level of technical expertise in civil service.

There's more to be done. When USDS prioritizes where to focus our impact, we look for projects where we can do the greatest good for the greatest number of people in the greatest need. We work to understand how effective and cost-efficient our work will be, as well as the potential to scale the solutions across government. We find more of these opportunities every day.

As I write this, a significant portion of USDS has pivoted to assisting agencies and the Coronavirus Task Force with the response to the COVID-19 crisis. USDS has sourced data used to improve policy decisions, assisted CDC and SBA, researched how and when to reopen states, worked with states to make their unemployment insurance programs more robust, and helped VA improve their telehealth initiatives. It is an honor to build products that directly improve the lives of millions of people.

Sincerely,



Matt Cutts

Administrator, U.S. Digital Service

Department of Veterans Affairs

Simplifying Veteran-facing services through VA.gov

CHALLENGE

Each month, over 10 million people attempt to access the digital tools and content at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and have historically struggled to find what they're looking for. Veterans experienced disjointed navigation between sites and pages, and found that the website was focused more on the structure of the agency than on their needs as Veterans. Digital modernization efforts needed to focus on improving the user experience.

SOLUTION

The USDS team at VA and the Office of the Chief Technology Officer partnered with teams across VA to focus on quickly connecting users to the most commonly needed services and information VA offers. The result was the new VA.gov website, built with the input of over 5,000 Veterans, service members, caregivers, and family members.

IMPACT

Since the website relaunch in November 2018, VA.gov has supported nearly 1.7 million logins each month. Veterans have checked the status of their claims 1.6 million times, submitted more than 50,000 applications for education benefits, and applied for health care more than 9,000 times. In an interview with FedScoop at the time of the launch, VA Secretary Robert Wilkie said, "...my main priority as Secretary is simple—to give our customers the best possible experience the minute they encounter VA. Today, we're doing just that with the new VA.gov—the new online front door of your Department of Veterans Affairs."

30%

increase in the customer satisfaction score for the modernized pages, from an average of 53 to over 69

1.7M

logins every month on VA.gov

UPDATE

USDS has continued to consolidate VA's most crucial tools, sites, and content to VA.gov. There will be many opportunities to come for VA to improve the digital experience for Veterans, including:

- Shifting legacy systems, including eBenefits, to VA.gov
- Giving Veterans access to all of their VA information with a comprehensive authenticated experience
- Building a single user identity for Veterans, their families, and caregivers, removing the need for multiple IDs in different tools
- Making it easier for Veterans to engage with VA Health Care with interactive touchpoints when they separate from the military, apply for health care, search for a facility, research a condition, and more
- Modernizing the websites for all VA Medical Centers and other facilities
- Helping users search for and find the tools and information they need by rewriting, combining, and retiring thousands of pages of duplicative content, then moving what's left into a structured content management system

SPOTLIGHT // VA Medical Center website

Challenge

VA Medical Center (VAMC) websites are confusing for Veterans to navigate. They often contain outdated information or are missing information important to Veterans. The websites typically don't match the Veteran's health care journey.

Solution

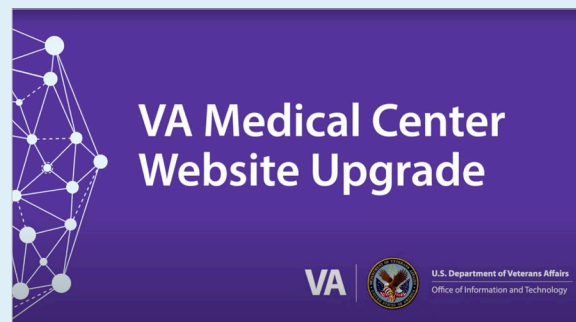
The team put the needs of Veterans first by streamlining VAMC's site from 300 total pages to 40 pages that are more easily searchable and brought the total word count down from 350,000 to 46,000 while modeling plain language best practices. The new mobile-first user experience gets users to all VAMC content and tools in just a couple of clicks. The all-new, user-centered design provides intuitive solutions at key touch points in the end-to-end VA health care journey for Veterans, family members, and caregivers.

New features include:

- One-click access for scheduling appointments, refilling prescriptions, and accessing medical records
- Comprehensive facility pages that tell visitors everything they need to prepare for their visit, like parking, transportation, and hours
- Patient-friendly descriptions of VA's health services
- Pages that describe available social and health programs

Impact

The VAMC Pittsburgh site is the first of the rebuilt hospital sites, and these changes will roll out to other VA facilities in the future. Users say that they “...like that it's very straight to the point—and I like that I can see all health services” and “...I like that it's pretty simple. I can find things by scrolling rather than clicking on a million tabs.”



Want to learn more about VAMC websites? Use your phone's camera app to scan the QR code to the right, or visit youtu.be/H8hndge4wLc.



Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services

Updating Medicare payments for a modern world

CHALLENGE

The Medicare Payment System has singular importance in determining how health care is provided in the United States. Medicare pays for the health care of 53 million Americans, making it the largest health payer in the U.S. The systems that process claims payments were first built in 1966, when Medicare was conceived. Over the five decades that followed, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) made periodic investments in infrastructure, but the systems have struggled to keep pace with Medicare's growth and evolution from a fee-for-service model to a value-based care model. The claims these systems process represent 4.5% of the national GDP, making their continued availability paramount. As a result, the technology limitations have inhibited CMS's ability to change policy to meet the needs of a modern medical system.

SOLUTION

USDS has partnered with CMS to stand up a new cloud environment to continue processing claims, which positions Medicare systems to scale and adapt rapidly as CMS changes how they process claims and pay providers. The Medicare Payment System Modernization project is a multi-year effort to rethink both the technology platform for Medicare as well as the design and research processes that place users at the center of improvement efforts going forward. New systems will give CMS the flexibility to adapt to policy changes and support the 10,000 Americans signing up daily for Medicare benefits.

65k

new monthly claims priced in the cloud-based service during the first few months of 2020

>75%

reduction in time needed to deploy new code in the cloud-based system (from four weeks to a few days)

UPDATE

In 2019, USDS and CMS created and executed a Blanket Purchase Agreement (BPA) which is an acquisition vehicle that the government can use to buy multiple smaller services from trusted suppliers. The six vendors participating in this five-year BPA will deliver discrete pieces of software, driving the agile development of new infrastructure and allow CMS to continue to support fee-for-service payments at the same time that new value-based payment services are developed. In fall 2019, the team launched a pricing service for Inpatient Rehabilitation Facility (IRF) claims that facilitates processing claims in a modern, cloud-based environment.

SPOTLIGHT // Data at the Point of Care

Challenge

As patients move through the health care system, providers often struggle to gain and maintain a complete picture of their medical history. Without a unifying system, patients bear the burden of maintaining their medical records and briefing each new provider on their medical history and current care regimen. Doing so wastes time during appointments that could be better spent addressing the patient's current medical issues.

Solution

Building on top of data made available over the past three years by the Blue Button® application programming interface (API), a team of seven USDS members created and launched Data at the Point of Care, making patients' Medicare claims data automatically available to their providers.

Impact

Data at the Point of Care gives providers a 360-degree view of past diagnoses, procedures, and medications. Instead of forcing patients to recall and retell their entire medical history at each visit, providers can use Medicare claims information to confirm a patient's understanding of their medical history, fill in gaps in care, and improve patient safety.



Want to learn more about Data at the Point of Care? Use your phone's camera app to scan the QR code to the right, or visit youtu.be/zlwphPII9RA.



Department of Homeland Security

Helping asylum seekers get decisions more quickly

CHALLENGE

The Refugee, Asylum and International Operations Directorate (RAIO) has struggled to keep pace with the rising number of incoming asylum applications, resulting in over 300,000 cases waiting to be heard. As asylum officers thoroughly vet each unique case, they spend significant time ensuring the right policies are applied to a variety of complex situations. Because much of the process is paper-based, asylum officers lose time mailing physical files and manually entering redundant information. Applicants can sometimes drive long distances, often hundreds of miles, to one of only 10 asylum offices to ask the status of their case. As asylum applications continue to rise, the government needs a way to adjudicate cases more quickly while not compromising the integrity of the process.

SOLUTION

The USDS team at DHS has been working with RAIO to create an end-to-end digital system that significantly reduces the time needed to adjudicate each asylum application. The new system must ensure the highest integrity, both protecting the U.S. from fraud and security concerns as well as providing a just, consistent process for those applying. While RAIO laid the groundwork for the overarching system, USDS kickstarted solutions for critical steps in the process.

In 2019, USDS started to tackle the time and effort required to document each decision and close out each case. The team designed and built the first phase of a digital tool that automates routine tasks for asylum officers and ensures

“This is great. This makes our job so much easier.”

— *Asylum Officer,
New York Asylum Office*

“I wish I had this when I was an asylum officer.”

— *Supervisor,
Miami Asylum Office*

they have the right policies at their fingertips for each applicant’s unique circumstances. The team conducted over 100 usability sessions and traveled to the 10 asylum offices nationwide to train the workforce. USDS also launched a site where applicants can look up the status of their case without visiting an office, available at egov.uscis.gov/casestatus.

IMPACT

After the first phase of the new tool launched, asylum officers reported saving an average of 15 to 28 minutes documenting each case, depending on case complexity. Seventy-six percent of staff agree the tool is easy to use, and over half the staff are opting to use it even though it’s still under development.

Department of Homeland Security

SPOTLIGHT // SchoolSafety.gov**Challenge**

Over the past decade, K–12 schools across the United States have experienced 464 shooting incidents. In 2018, after the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, one of the deadliest school shootings in U.S. history, the Federal Commission on School Safety recommended that the federal government share best practices to advance school safety.

Solution

Working with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), USDS employed a human-centered design approach to understand the needs of schools and how best to share school safety information with them. With this research, USDS partnered with DHS to launch SchoolSafety.gov in February 2020, a website that empowers emergency managers and K–12 administrators with the information they need to improve school safety. “Because every school community has its own unique needs, SchoolSafety.gov equips decision makers with resources for developing, customizing, and implementing actionable school safety plans,” said U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos.

SchoolSafety.gov includes:

- An assessment tool that assists users in evaluating their school’s safety posture across 10 foundational elements of school safety. After completing the assessment, the tool provides users with an action plan that includes task

prioritization, options for consideration, aligned resources, and grant opportunities specific to individual needs

- A secure information sharing platform for designated school personnel to share school safety ideas, practices, plans, and tactics in a protected environment
- A wide array of resources on key school safety best practices to help build awareness within the school community, promote vigilance, and build capacity to respond to incidents

Impact

In the first month after SchoolSafety.gov was released, educators used the site to create 411 action plans to improve the safety of students, staff, and administrators.



Want to learn more about school safety? Use your phone's camera app to scan the QR code to the right, or visit schoolsafety.gov.



Department of Housing and Urban Development

Ensuring fair housing practices

CHALLENGE

HUD's Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity (FHEO) is responsible for investigating complaints of housing discrimination as required by the Fair Housing Act. Equal Opportunity Specialists within FHEO, along with their Office of the General Counsel (OGC), process these fair housing discrimination cases in a legacy application called the HUD Enforcement Management System (HEMS). As with all federal IT applications, HEMS is required to be secure and stable, but the system has not been supported by a dedicated technical team since 2017. Users have experienced frustrating technical issues that led to homegrown systems and workarounds, which compromised HUD's ability to process complaints.

SOLUTION

In 2019, a team from USDS spent three weeks conducting over 30 user interviews at HUD field offices, partner agencies, and HUD headquarters. The team took what they learned to advise HUD on drafting updated acquisition requirements and conducting market research, allowing the agency to select a technology vendor in less than three months. USDS also provided plain language and user experience input for the redesign of Form 903, the agency's online discrimination complaint form. Form 903 is HUD's largest method of intake for housing discrimination complaints, comprising 52 percent of all cases filed and 73 percent of all fair housing inquiries received.



"Opening Doors," an art installation by V.L. Cox on display at HUD, involves seven weathered monochrome wooden doors unhinged and freestanding, each representing the seven protected classes covered by the Fair Housing Act: race, color, religion, national origin, sex, disability, and familial status. Learn more at hud.gov/fairhousingis50/openingdoors.

IMPACT

USDS's acquisition strategy helped to infuse product management and user-centered design best practices into the fair housing case process workflow. The acquisition improvements also helped the agency to adopt more innovative contracting methods.

Department of Justice

Putting users first at ADA.gov

CHALLENGE

In late 2019, the team that manages ADA.gov within the DOJ's Civil Rights Division began working with a vendor to migrate the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) website to a content management system. As part of this effort, the team wanted to understand how people interact with ADA.gov and to improve the website.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in 2018 that one in four adults in the U.S. has some type of disability. As the seventh most-visited Department of Justice website, ADA.gov plays a vital role for people with disabilities, who are often excluded from places and activities when businesses and organizations don't follow the law.

SOLUTION

Based on conclusions from research, USDS recommended that the ADA.gov team prioritize who ADA.gov will serve and how it will serve them. Next, the team should continue research to understand user needs and create content that supports them. Because the ADA.gov team did not have a product owner, user researcher, designer, or content expert, the USDS team recommended that the Civil Rights Division modify and extend the migration contract to include these experts.

IMPACT

USDS helped the ADA.gov team make a strong case for funding to continue redesigning ADA.gov after the migration contract. The ADA.gov team told USDS, "We have learned a lot from you all, not only substantive information but also how to think about or tackle a problem... We cannot overstate the impact that your work had on this project."

FINDINGS // ADA.gov

Using research done by USDS, the ADA.gov team learned more about their audience and plan on using these findings when they design their new site.

- 1 **Non-experts, such as small business owners or people with disabilities, do not always have a firm grasp of the law.**
- 2 **ADA experts consider ADA.gov usable, while non-experts do not.**
- 3 **Non-experts struggle when they use ADA.gov to answer questions or solve problems.**

Subject Matter Expert Qualification Assessments (SME-QA)

Changing how the government hires

CHALLENGE

Many federal agencies hiring people into civil service positions struggle to determine who has the required expertise. HR specialists often determine whether applicants are qualified based on self-assessments and federal-style resumes that are regularly longer than five pages. When hiring managers receive lists of candidates they don't consider qualified for the open positions, they often cancel the entire hiring effort, wasting time and resources for the government and the public. Hiring managers with negative experiences sometimes avoid competitive hiring, which may limit how both public- and private-sector applicants are able to find positions in the federal government.

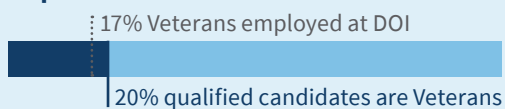
“It could be game-changing. Hiring scientists, any specialized skill...I would absolutely recommend my office use it.”

— Subject Matter Expert,
Dept. of Health & Human Services

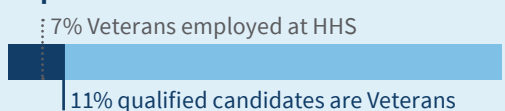
FINDINGS // Veterans' preference

With the SME-QA process, Veterans' preference is applied after candidates are qualified through multiple assessments. In both pilots, Veterans and non-Veterans were found qualified and hired.

Department of Interior



Department of Health & Human Services



SOLUTION

The USDS team hypothesized that having subject matter experts (SMEs) assess qualification early in the process would help hiring managers receive higher quality candidate lists and hire qualified applicants more quickly. In January 2019, USDS and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) partnered to test Subject Matter Expert Qualification Assessments (SME-QA), a process where SMEs develop the required qualifications for the position alongside HR specialists. The SMEs then use their expertise to review applicant resumes and phone interview transcripts to determine whether the applicant meets the qualifications.

Only the applicants who pass these assessment hurdles are considered qualified and eligible for preference according to OPM delegated examining rules.

Subject Matter Expert Qualification Assessments (SME-QA)

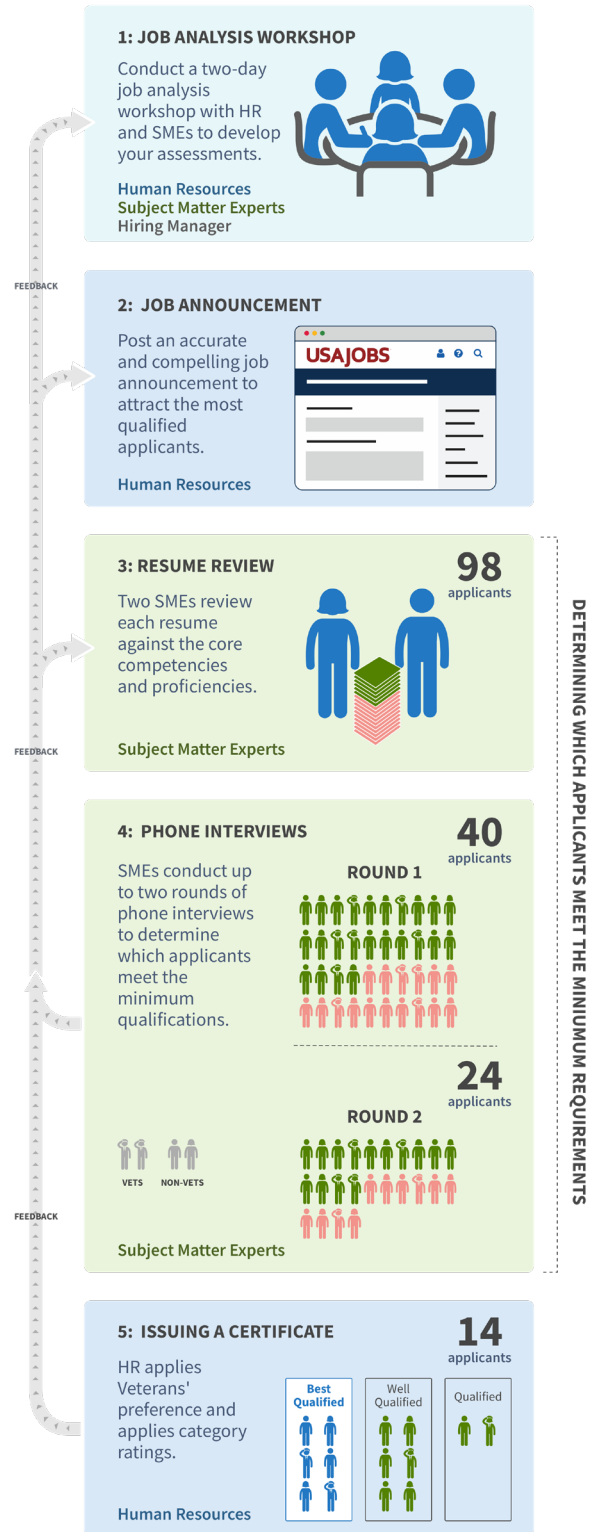
IMPACT

Starting in early 2019, USDS tested the SME-QA process with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the National Park Service at the Department of the Interior (DOI). The agencies selected eight SMEs to work with HR specialists to establish the required competencies and proficiency levels for their open positions, then create structured interviews. The SMEs worked with HR to identify the required competencies in applicant resumes, and then interviewed remaining applicants in two rounds of interviews. HR reps didn't apply Veteran status until agencies determined who passed both interviews. Compared with data from previous hiring events at the agencies, SMEs participating in both SME-QA pilots found fewer applicants qualified (11% at DOI and 22% at HHS), but ultimately selected more applicants to be hired (13 at DOI and 7 at HHS). The applicants hired through the pilots included Veterans and represented diversity in race, age, and gender.

UPDATE

The OPM Director issued a memo in September 2019¹ informing agencies that SMEs can partner with HR specialists to review resumes and assess applicants using structured interviews before they're determined to be qualified and receive Veterans' preference. USDS has continued to pilot the SME-QA process with several large federal agencies and is working to build and test tools to ease the assessment process for SMEs.

¹ [chcoc.gov/content/improving-federal-hiring-through-use-effective-assessment-strategies-advance-mission](https://www.chcoc.gov/content/improving-federal-hiring-through-use-effective-assessment-strategies-advance-mission)



Digital IT Acquisition Professional Program (DITAP)

Improving how the government buys technology

CHALLENGE

Current federal procurement practices rarely provide the flexibility required to buy and deliver modern digital services. Government's use of digital solutions has not kept pace with peoples' expectations. As the pace of innovation has accelerated, the government's ability to meet people's expectations of functional digital solutions has not kept pace. To meet this demand, the Office of Federal Procurement Policy (OFPP) and USDS needed an immersive development and training program to improve digital services acquisition expertise across government agencies.

SOLUTION

In 2016, USDS and OFPP created the Digital IT Acquisition Professional Program (DITAP), a Federal Acquisition Certification in Contracting (FAC-C) certification program that trains contracting professionals to execute digital service procurements by acting as business advisors to agencies seeking to buy better digital services. DITAP leverages flexibilities in the Federal Acquisition Regulation to better acquire today's technology and works seamlessly with digital service teams or acquisition innovation labs. Graduates of the DITAP program can also lead agency training workshops and provide consultations, expanding digital service procurement expertise across the government. In a May 2018 memo², OMB determined that beginning in FY 2022, contracting professionals assigned to digital services acquisitions above \$7 million will be required to have FAC-C-DS certification.

² [whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/fac_c_digital_services_05_12_18.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/fac_c_digital_services_05_12_18.pdf)

UPDATE

Since the original 54 graduates of DITAP in 2016, an additional 185 contracting professionals have completed the program. Out of those 239 people, the 229 who are federal contracting officers received their FAC-C-DS certification. As of February 2020, there are seven active cohorts with 168 students, with plans for at least another two cohorts with 60 students in FY 2020. This will increase the total number of participants by the end of 2020 to 467. The Digital Acquisition community has quadrupled in size since 2016, demonstrating the scale that USDS and OFPP envisioned when the program was created.

USDS is currently running a product owner training pilot that addresses the problem that government teams and IT offices lack a holistic approach to product thinking. As a result, they are experiencing problems executing digital services contracts to meet citizens' needs and expectations. To maximize the business value of digital projects, the pilot seeks to establish a dynamic and powerful network of exceptional digital service practitioners who have the knowledge and ability to deliver world-class digital products. With 30 people participating in a trial of a new training program concept, a digital skills lab is being designed and tested that would recognize, connect, and develop government product owners.

A lasting impact

Bringing technical leaders into public service

USDS scales technical expertise across government even beyond their term-limited tours of civic service. While these technical experts begin their tenure drawn to the organization by the huge opportunity to serve, many find the ability to make real impact on the lives of Americans so fulfilling that they continue in government service after their time at USDS has ended.

“The opportunity to use my technical skills in a public service role opened my eyes to a level of impact I hadn’t imagined before. Many of us will be very lucky if our careers give us another chance as big as this to make a positive impact on the world, and for me it hasn’t yet felt like the right time to step back from public service,” says Charles Worthington, a USDS alum now serving as Chief Technology Officer at VA.

SPOTLIGHT // Technical leaders across the government

USDS alumni serve in positions of technical leadership at these federal agencies:



Chief Information Officer (OPM)



Chief Information Officer (CMS)



Dep. Chief Information Officer (OPM)



Chief Technology Officer (VA)



Chief Technology Officer (CMMI)



Chief Technology Officer (CMS CCIIO)



Dep. Chief Technology Officer (NGA)



Technical Advisor (FTC)



D/A Admin. for STEM Engagement (NASA)



Innovation & Design Chief (RAIO)



Director of UX Design (USCIS)



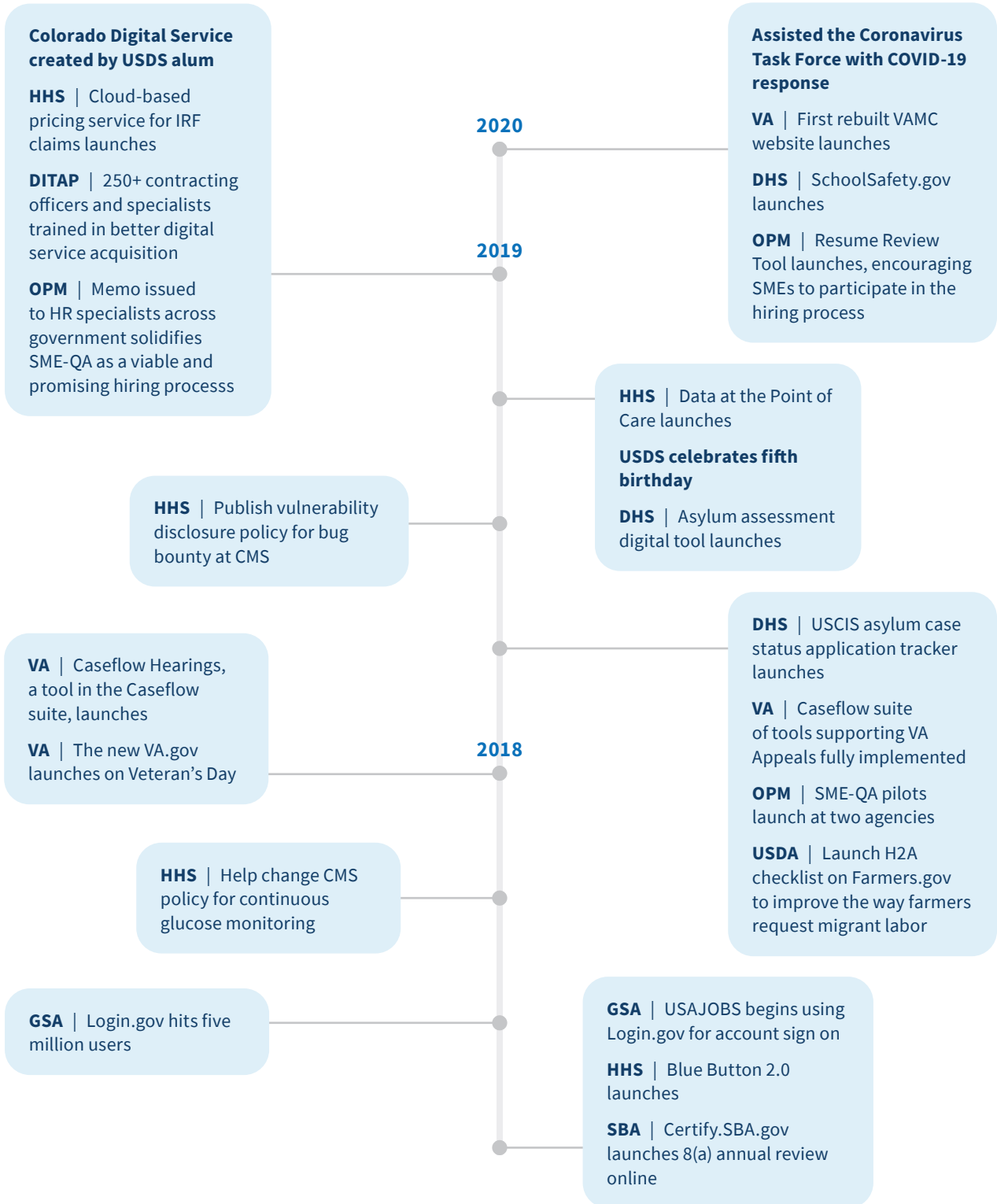
Human-Centered Design Specialist (CMS)



Human-Centered Design Specialist (CMS)

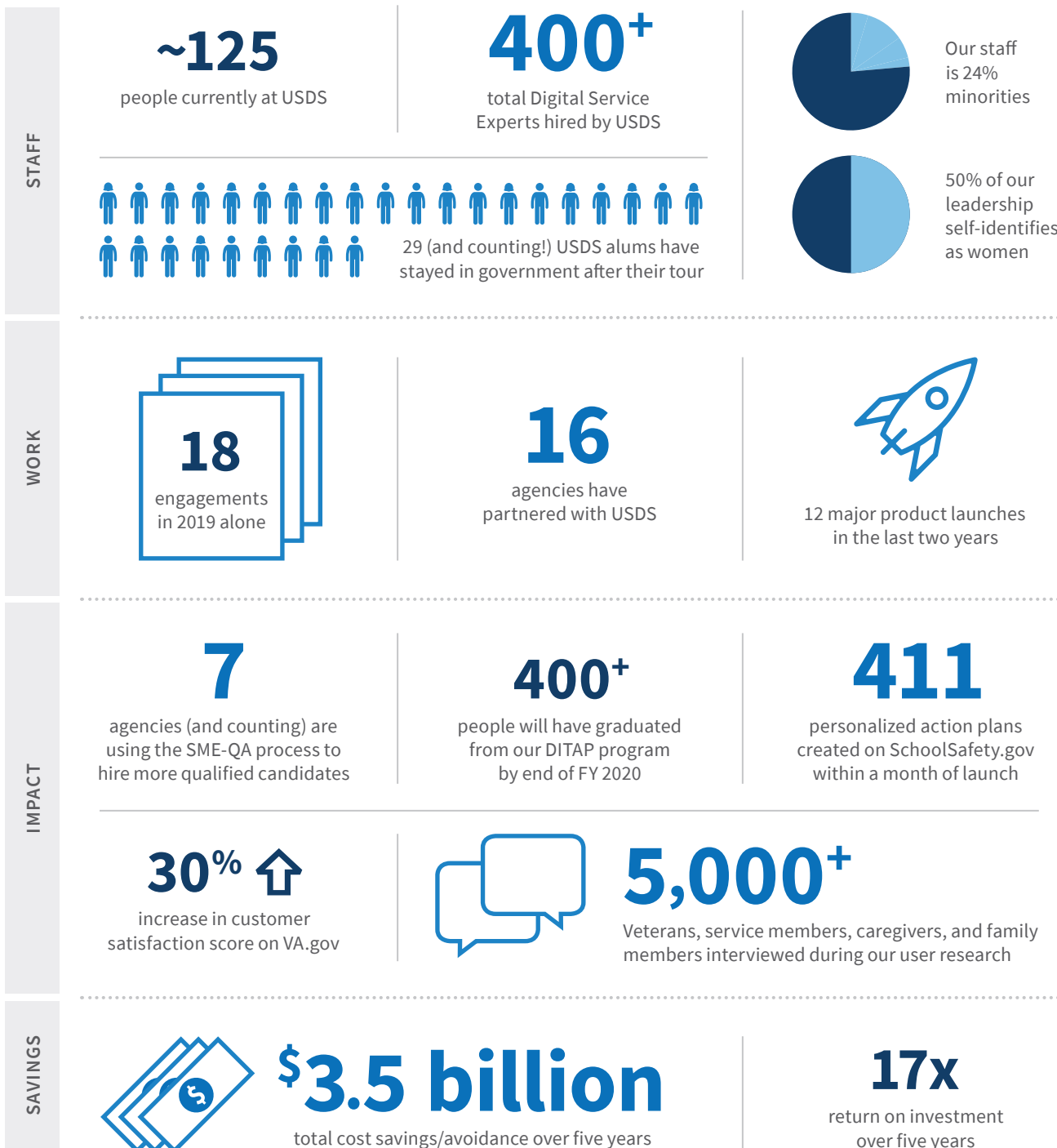
A lasting impact

USDS accomplishments



A lasting impact

USDS by the numbers



usds.gov