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2003

Digital Legislatures Survey

BEST OF BREED REPORT

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BEST OF BREED

**TOP PERFORMING LEGISLATIVE
INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY PROGRAMS**

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Introduction

Presidential election years are often seen as referendums on the performance of incumbents – in the White House, Congress and significantly state houses across the country. Voters are now part of a digital majority who bring with them the expectation that their elected officials will use digital technologies in doing the public’s business.

The Center for Digital Government has monitored the transition to this new platform of governing since 1996. In the last 12 months, the Center broke out a separate survey of state legislatures to better understand how the legislative branch was using contemporary technologies to manage its own work and to give real-time access to their deliberations to a watching public.

Results of the Center’s inaugural *Digital Legislatures Survey* were reported in the January 2004 issue of *Government Technology* magazine. In summary, fully 86 percent of state legislatures provide their members with networked laptops to manage their calendars and constituent contacts while on the capital campus – that number drops to 69 percent when it comes to the equipped, networked district offices.

All responding states reported that the status of bills and amendments from the current session are available and searchable online – for citizens and legislators alike, with lawmakers having the added ability to submit bills and amendments in real time. Three quarters of responding states make bill status tracking and session voting records available to citizens online (but, notably, only six percent say that citizens can search and sort the voting records). Real-time alerts to citizens on changes to state law or administrative code may be nearing the tipping point, with electronic notices now available in approximately a third of states.

While not quite ubiquitous, the numbers suggest that legislatures are serious about outfitting their members with contemporary tools and using digital technologies to get out from under the crushing volume of paper required to document and vet both good and bad ideas as they wind their way through the process.

This Best of Breed report goes beyond the numbers to the details of the IT programs that lead the nation in bringing deliberative bodies to a digital-networked world. To that end, we asked chief information officers, IT directors and Web managers to discuss their entire line of IT

programs and applications, and then we delved into their management style, collaborative efforts and strategic partnerships. The results of those questions are the five profiles featured in this report.

As you would expect, each has its unique attributes owing to regional differences and historical accidents. But there are common threads: The modernization of bill tracking systems, the introduction of wireless networks on capitol campuses, the un-tethering of legislators and their staffs with laptop computers, and an orientation toward the Internet in all their development efforts. All of this is the service of public accountability – with unprecedented visibility into the process by which bills become law, and with increased discipline in how scarce public resources are used to modernize a most traditional public institution.

Cathilea Robinett

Executive Director, Center for Digital Government

Executive Vice President, e.Republic

Legislature: Nevada State Legislature

Digital Legislatures Survey Ranking: 1st Place Winner

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PROGRAM FACTS

- *The program operates off of a \$3 million budget and receives additional funding through one-time appropriations.*
- *Legislature has standardized project tracking, team coordination and reporting functions.*
- *They also recently launched a closed-caption service for video broadcasts.*

The application of technology to make legislative programs more efficient is nothing new to the Nevada State Legislature. The Nevada State Legislature has progressively pursued the use of information technology since the 1980s; and its early commitment to technology has helped the state earn its first-place ranking in the 2003 Digital Legislatures Survey.

The Legislative Counsel Bureau Information Systems (LCBIS) unit, the group responsible for IT applications in the legislative branch, was formed in 1985. Among its early deployments was a VAX-based bill-drafting application, which has matured from a fee-based, dial-in service to a public online service on the Internet.

“It was pre-Web technology, and anyone who had an account (except for schools and libraries) pretty much paid for access to the information,” said Allan Smith, manager of Information Systems. “We started with one account and by the time we migrated to the Web, we had 100-150 folks signed up for the service.”

After the Legislature migrated from VAX into a PC-based environment, LCBIS continued the build out of Web properties and a suite of interactive, customizable services. Users can log on and create their own bill-tracking accounts, and add or remove bills from their own lists. Each user receives two daily e-mails – one is a list of all legislative bills introduced that day, and the other is a status report of each bill on the user’s list.

“It is still a fee-based online service,” said Smith. “It provides select reports and information based on people’s selection of bills,” including importantly the ability to link bills to their respective fiscal notes which, together, provides a platform for consistent, electronic reporting.

“We were receiving a lot of hard copy and forms that didn’t necessarily coordinate well with everything we were doing,” said Smith. “We wanted to put everything in a standardized format. We now have a better capability of putting those reports online.”

The Nevada Legislature is also part of the critical mass of states that provide audio and video streaming of floor sessions and committee meetings both during session and out-of session. They also recently launched a closed-caption service for video broadcasts, and they are working with the hearing-impaired community to develop methodologies and funding sources for it. “We also do e-commerce by selling our publications online and through our online gift shop,” says Smith.

Operating from a \$3 million biennial budget, the 19-member Information Systems team is tightly managed by Smith who keeps things organized through weekly meetings with project leads to ensure coordination among formerly discrete application development efforts within the unit.

“We’re trying to keep each group aware of what the other is doing, and if in fact, their involvement is required to complete another group’s project,” explained Smith. “One thing we also do regularly is have our development group use our customer service group for testing. They then work closely together to develop user documentation. Working on the documentation also gives them the immediate knowledge of how an application works so that when support is necessary they can go out and handle it.”

Smith’s team practices what it preaches, by using technology to track projects and measure their own progress. “We use a lot of project management tools,” said Smith. “Our groups track things and create to-do lists and check-offs as we go. It’s also a matter of working with the groups when they set a date to keep them responsible for deadlines.”

The unit is also careful to collaborate with legislators to ensure an environment of mutual support – the elected officials receive technical support and the IT unit maintains its political support for its work.

“Each of our customer support and operations personnel are responsible for what we call liaison duties,” said Smith. “They meet with a member of one of the other divisions or units to review specifics. During this meeting, they are brought up to date on what is happening with the technology and application development. They also work together to head-off any potential problems.”

The development group has adopted a disciplined approach to defining requirements, starting with a meeting with representatives of the group that made the request and creating a letter of understanding that addresses the project’s specifics. “Everyone must sign off on the development criteria and then on phases of the project as it moves ahead,” added Smith.

Smith noted that their ultimate success comes from the Legislature that provides aggressive support on new initiatives and programs. “As the leadership and members change expectations grow, because they are becoming more computer-savvy and literate,” added Smith. “We’re finding there is more pressure from them to keep us up and going. Now we get requests to look at new applications and other technologies. They just want to know if we can do it – and that keeps us going.”

Legislature: South Dakota State Legislature

Digital Legislatures Survey Ranking: 2nd Place Tie

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PROGRAM FACTS

- *The IT program operates on an estimated \$500,000 budget.*
- *The Web site provides the capability to listen to Web-casts supported by South Dakota Public Broadcasting and listen to the debate in committee or on the floor.*
- *A unique application, called MyLRC assists all parties by alerting them to changes affecting measures they have selected as important to them.*

With a modest staff of three, the South Dakota State Legislature Legislative Research Council provides IT support to a small 22-member council staff and the 105 members of the legislative assembly – the leadership of which has championed the automation of paper-intensive legislative processes.

James Fry, director of the Legislative Research Council, and two IT staff members – a webmaster responsible for the Web site and a programmer – have leveraged a \$500,000 annual budget to automate the entire lawmaking process from the initial draft all the way through enrollment and submission to the governor for signature through to submission for codification.

The Council has put laptop computers into the hands of each legislator, who have become un-tethered through the wireless network that covers the Capitol – providing information for legislators where, when and how it is needed.

The Council pays equal attention to external constituents who want to see into the inner workings of the Legislature. “We try to put information on the Web site that is integrated with the ... process of taking a bill from idea to codification,” said Fry. “And the two areas fit together

so that a person in the state, no matter where he or she might be, can find out what bills are before the Legislature, ready the text for the bills in original form, or prepare amendments in their final form.”

Additionally, the Web site provides the capability to listen to Web-casts provided through the South Dakota Public Broadcasting and listen to the debate in committee or on the floor. Each bill is live as it’s happening or in archived form where users can go back and devise the intent of some piece of legislation at some other date.

The site is rounded out with information about the legislators; how to contact legislators; what position they hold; or the names of presiding officers. The application highlights when a bill is going to be heard so if a person wants to be present to testify, he or she can find out when. “The only thing they can’t do is testify remotely; but we’ll be able to do that someday as well,” noted Fry.

Another unique application, called MyLRC assists all users – whether they are professionals familiar with the legislative process or individual citizens who have only one or two concerns – by alerting them to changes affecting measures they have selected as important to them. They can sign up for notification of bill hearings, committee hearings, floor consideration of bills, rules changes, and interim committee activities. Even people located far from the Capitol can access their representatives via e-mail to ensure he or she understands the constituent’s views on a particular issue or bill.

All of these projects are centrally managed through the oversight of Fry who has learned that projects – big or small – are best broken down into small do-able segments. “We do things in time slices,” he said. “We decide what things we want to do and then we break them down into smaller segments in a sequence – and then we put them in that sequence. This action has made our programs successful, because we’re dealing with a scope that we can handle in a reasonable amount of time, and it’s not so complex that we’re able to work out the bug quickly and get things done on time.”

In all of the Council’s work, Fry works from the philosophy that, “We won’t give to one what we can’t give to them all,” he said. “From that point, we’re able to work with both of the leaderships from the House and Senate and the technology committee that drives some of the things we do – especially those things that I’ve outreached to legislators. We have open access to these folks and they’re always quite open to working with us.”

In 2004, Fry intends to focus his attention on a number projects he says will move the Legislature further towards a completely paperless, electronic process:

Internal Cross Reference System: If a bill affects a statute then the system will cross reference it with any other statute to the main subject and tell it where it cross-references. The system would reduce unintended consequences, because people won't affect things they didn't intend to affect.

Web-Site Development: The Council wants to make the existing Web site more user friendly by providing more tools and moving the process to an entirely electronic system.

Tablet PCs: The Council is reviewing tablet computers from Compaq and Gateway. The idea is to make it possible for legislators to write notes and keep track of them in comparison with bills or documents. They could use the tablet to bring up a bill on one half of the screen and pull up a notepad on the other part of the screen. They could handwrite notes or cut and paste bill references for use at a later date.

Legislature: Minnesota State Legislature

Digital Legislatures Survey Ranking: 2nd Place Tie

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PROGRAM FACTS

- *Decentralized IT responsibilities are shared among the Legislative Reference Library, House of Representatives, State Senate, Legislative Commissions, Legislative Auditor's Office, and the Office of the Revisor Statutes.*
- *As 2004 moves along, a MyBill project similar to South Dakota and New Jersey's system is under way.*

The Minnesota State Legislature has resisted the drumbeat of centralization in favor of a tested and trusted decentralized model in the management and administration of IT. The result is a cooperative team successfully functioning as a single-minded unit geared towards delivering IT to legislators and their constituents.

Decentralized IT responsibilities are shared among the Legislative Reference Library, House of Representatives, State Senate, Legislative Commissions, Legislative Auditor's Office, and the Office of the Revisor Statutes. Each section's manager brings equal weight (and the authority to commit resources) to the table when it comes to the decision-making process about projects, such as Web-site design.

"We all work together and understand each other's specialties and who to go to for help," said Randi Madisen, Web services manager for the Legislative Reference Library. "Each part of the Legislature has its own IT people – and they all work together to coordinate projects."

The success of the team approach is best seen in the streamlining of business processes using IT. Case in point: the creation of a SuperDatabase that simplifies the process for posting committee schedules to the Web site in the House.

Previously, the committee legislative assistants and administrators e-mailed their committee schedule meeting notices to House Information. They pasted everything into a PageMaker document for publication in a paper format, and then converted that text into HTML to post on the Web. Yet another person would then post HTML to each individual committee's Web page.

Now the entire process has been converted to an online service driven by an Access database. Each committee staff member has access to their own file where they submit records to the database. The system automatically updates the combined schedule page and the individual committee pages. House information can correct typos, remove extra spaces, and ensure that style guidelines are followed in the agenda section.

Another popular project is the video and audio streaming provided for committee hearings. While the video streaming is limited to certain rooms where cameras are available, the House intends to provide the audio streaming for every room.

"The library has a strong interest in keeping that data," said Madisen. "We keep an archive that allows people to listen to the audio and use the bill status system from the Office of the Revisor Statutes to find out when people talked about a subject on the floor – and they can also use the video. The House has also connected the video to documents. They've really done a nice job with that project."

Other miscellaneous projects include: attendance and voting records that are part of the House and Senate journals, which link from a FAQ on these topics; committee meeting minutes online; Web logs compiling e-mail updates for members; and an archive of electronic copies of documents and more.

A MyBill project, similar to systems in South Dakota and New Jersey is under way. "You'll be able to sign up for MyBill and create a list of bills and see what your list is doing," said Madisen. "You'll be able to do it by author, topic or bill number – and providing those capabilities takes a lot of coordination – the House and Senate index bills differently. The Library and the Office of the Revisor Statutes played a coordinating role in getting them to use our index terms so that we can leverage it into the system and people can read the bills by topic."

Keeping all of these system functioning requires a commitment to project management strategies – the biggest one being a regular meeting schedule among the various working groups. These meetings create a collaborative and cooperative atmosphere by those involved in the management process.

“Even if we don’t have anything to say, we still regularly meet,” explained Madisen. “Our staff members are good about ... working together to solve problems. Everyone has learned to work with everyone else.”

The high-touch team is not above using low tech when it’s the right thing to do. Madisen says their favorite low-tech project tracking method relies on Post-It notes. “When we were coordinating the revamp of our Web site, we got out our little Post-It notes, wrote out each task, and rearranged it on paper to ensure that everything happened in the right order. We’re trying to figure out what has to happen before other things occur.”

This community of collaborators is pursuing a mainframe upgrade to help ready its mission critical systems for an XML future, which is the subject of a major initiative this year.

All of this coordinated work revolves around a singular public mission. Says Madisen, “Our philosophy is that if we do it in print, we might as well provide it to a wider audience on the Web and not make people have to come to the Capitol or Saint Paul to find out what is going on in the Legislature.”

Legislature: Louisiana State Legislature

Digital Legislatures Survey Ranking: 3rd Place

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PROGRAM FACTS

- *The Legislature doesn't directly manage its IT application, but contracts it to private supplier Public System Associates.*
- *Your Louisiana Legislators, a feature that allows users to find legislators by ZIP Code or click on the district map link to see maps by member name or district.*

The Louisiana State Legislature's wide array of digital services made it a natural to take the third-place ranking in the Digital Legislature Survey. From being able to find a legislator online to the ability to use the campus-wide plasma LCD display system to view current and scheduled committee and floor activities, IT services provide robust capabilities for citizens and staff alike to find the latest information on legislation for the state.

The Web site is the starting the point for many of its capabilities. During session, users have the option to either listen (with a microphone graphic) or view (with a television graphic) the chamber proceedings and committee meetings through streaming media.

Additionally, a color-coded calendar available on the homepage provides information on the proceeding's status. In real time, it displays bills that have been discussed, are currently being discussed, or have yet to be discussed. Citizens are also able to keep tabs on both the attendance and voting records of their members.

Other notable features include:

- Lobbyist information and reports;
- A program, called Committee Manager that allows the committee secretaries to oversee the entirety of their legislative meetings, from roll calls to votes, and from highlighting current items on their agenda to adjournment. This information is intertwined with the Web site to show real-time information; and

- Your Louisiana Legislators, a feature that allows users to find legislators by ZIP Code or click on the district map link to see maps by member name or district.

Other important projects include:

- Implementation of laptops and chamber automation in the Senate and House chambers;
- Joint legislative Web site with real-time and near-time information;
- Campus-wide plasma LCD display system to show current and scheduled committee and floor activity;
- A committee management application to capture committee activity and incorporate information into above projects; and
- Integration of various applications, video streaming and captioning.

The Legislature doesn't directly manage its IT applications or infrastructure, preferring instead to contract technical operations to a private-sector software development and facilities management company.

The partnership between the Legislature and the private vendor has increased the capacity to pursue new projects, including provision of laptops for all legislators; deployment of a campus-wide wireless network; the development and implementation of an automated system to better integrate task management, drafting, document management, bill tracking and scheduling; a complete network infrastructure upgrade; and migration to a new version of a committee digital recording and annotation software.

Legislature: Iowa State Legislature

Digital Legislatures Survey Ranking: 4th Place

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Division: Computer Services

Agency: Legislative Services Agency

Web Site: <http://www.legis.state.ia.us>

PROGRAM FACTS

- *Computer Services Division operates off of an annual \$2.1 million budget to centrally develop many of the IT applications.*
- *Billbook is used on the floor during debate by legislators.*
- *Work began on a wireless system for legislators and staff.*

The Iowa State Legislature continues to build on an IT strategy and infrastructure first developed in the 1980s. Its original bill tracking system was the base for migrating its systems for tracking bills to real-time information delivery via dynamic Web pages.

Today the Computer Services Division of the state's Legislative Services Agency operates on an annual \$3 million budget to centrally develop many of the IT applications used by both the House and the Senate. The creation of centrally controlled systems allows IT team members to avoid redundancy and stay away from developing disparate systems that might later have to be integrated. Instead, the House and Senate have reached an agreement to use common hardware, software, equipment and system configurations – and even acquire them through a shared set of lease contracts.

As a result of this streamlined approach, the Iowa State Legislature has built out a suite of online services and knowledge management tools:

- **Bill Analysis:** The system provides an analysis of appropriations and ways and means bills. Bills are searched by session, number or title.
- **Salary Book:** A database of state employees salaries that can be searched by name, city or agency.
- **Tracking:** Current and historical tracking of appropriations throughout the legislative process.
- **Billbook:** A system that provides real-time access to bill and amendments facilitated through this application.

- Daily Receipts: Daily deposit and withdrawal activity for all Iowa General Fund accounts is reflected in the charts and data. Charts can be generated for aggregate receipt or for the specific tax and revenue streams that comprise the State General Fund.

A particular application that stands out from this group is called Billbook, an electronic distribution engine for bills and amendments, which is used on the floor during debate by legislators. It has replaced the hours of filing and paper handling by legislators and in the House.

Billbook also allows the user to see the bill and amendments on the same screen. The action of the amendments are linked to the appropriate locations in the bill. It also allows the display and scrolling through second-level amendments.

Billbook is the state's new platform for governing, requiring always-on availability and reliability to support the long hours and protracted processes of public deliberations. "If that goes down during floor debate, it's unacceptable," said Glen Dickinson, division director of Computer Services. "They actually passed rules in the House that allow them to debate amendments when they're available electronically as opposed to being available in paper version."

Legislators and staff have been un-tethered from their desks thanks to a wireless network, which has also been opened to public use (by subscription) on the capitol campus. "The project involved working with Cisco and the new G standard of wireless with 50 access points throughout our Capitol and one other point where our Legislature is located," said Dickinson. "We provided cards for laptops, and about two-thirds of the legislators are participating in the project. Not all legislators have an office that is separate from offices on the floor. The wireless network opens new areas for them to work."

Helping to manage these systems is a Web development team that receives collaborative input from the legislators. "This model has been very successful in helping us manage our projects," said Dickinson. "Support from our leadership is another critical factor. Thankfully we receive this kind of support all of the time."

Legislature: Illinois General Assembly

Digital Legislatures Survey Ranking: 5th Place

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PROGRAM FACTS

- *The IT program has an annual budget of \$3.5 million.*
- *MyLegislation is a system that allows users to build a query, add and edit bills, view bills and reports, and have customized information e-mailed right their desktops.*

For the last four years, the Illinois General Assembly Legislative Information System group devoted itself almost exclusively to one project – a complete rewrite of its Web site. IT leaders pursued the new Web site to provide as many services as possible to staff and constituents.

Working over a four-year period with a \$7.5 million project budget (in addition the group's regular \$3.5 million annual appropriation), the Legislative Information System team overhauled an early Web site that offered rudimentary information at best.

“At the time, I had no idea what an HTML document was,” explained Executive Director Tim Rice. “It was a real manual process, and there wasn’t a lot we could do with it to move ahead to the next phase. So, we decided a complete upgrade would solve the problem.”

The team’s holistic approach was the basis for defining requirements for the effort as one big project. They began working with a local consultant to manage the project – and tight management paid off in that they stayed on budget and schedule over the next four years.

It was careful to solicit user feedback to ensure requirements were unearthed up front. “We have worked hard to keep users involved and walk them through everything we did along the way,” said Rice. “We wanted them to be as prepared as possible for what the Web site could offer them.”


As a result of this feedback, the Web site was built to offer a wide variety of services including: MyLegislation, a system that allows users to build a query, add and edit bills, view bills and reports, and have customized information e-mailed right to their desktops; and a Legislation and Laws section that provides information on bills and resolutions, public acts, legislative reports, a legislative guide and glossary, and the Illinois Constitution; and Senate and House member sections with information on committees, schedules, journals, transcripts, rules, and live audio and video streaming from House and Senate sessions.

While the Web site has dominated the Legislative Information System group's attention, they are also responsible for the support of the legislators' technology programs.

"We have a very visible presence with the members of the Legislature," said Rice. "We have a laptop program, and we assist them with anything on the laptops. We go as far as we can to help them, but also avoid getting into forbidden territory like campaigns."

They also provide support and education opportunities for district staff members to show them how to use the available resources on the job once the legislators return to their district offices. "They can then turn around and provide support to the legislators when we can't," noted Rice.

As things unfold into 2004, the team is looking at several new projects, including a complete software update, a move from Visual Basic to VPNet, the creation of a new voting system for one of the chambers, and continued enhancements to the Web site.



The Center for Digital Government is a national research and advisory institute on information technology in state and local government. The Center specializes in custom research, reports and white papers, online resources and publications, surveying, and advisory services.

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