



## BACKGROUND

# Adopting Modern Equity-Centered Digital Services in Oakland

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The City of Oakland would better serve its residents by adopting 21st-century digital services. Around the world, countries like the [United Kingdom](#) and [Estonia](#), states like [Colorado](#) and [New Jersey](#), and cities like [New York City](#) and [San Francisco](#) are all embracing and implementing a state- or city-wide digital strategy. Further, organizations like [Code for America](#) are leading the charge outside of the public sector with the vision that governments “work for the people, by the people, in the digital age. It would be the biggest source of societal good for a generation.”

At the federal level, the United States has created the [Presidential Innovation Fellows](#) program to support entrepreneurs-in-residence to help rethink government; [18F](#), a technology company within the government that builds and sets standards for digital products in government; and the [United States Digital Service \(USDS\)](#), which deploys small teams to improve the most critical infrastructure across the federal government. USDS in particular has devised a series of twelve plays in a [playbook](#) that outline the processes for deploying digital services within the federal government. They state that “too many of our digital services projects do not work well, are delivered late, or are over budget. To increase the success rate of these projects, the U.S. Government needs a new approach.” The same principles listed in the Digital Services Playbook and other digital strategies show that a comprehensive digital strategy and structure at the local level are not just possible, but necessary.

*Thank you to our project mentor: Mai-Ling Garcia, Current Head of Digital Strategy & Engagement, City of San Francisco; Former Digital Engagement Officer, City of Oakland, CA*

This backgrounder reviews key principles for deploying digital services, provides perspectives on how those needs relate to the experiences of real people in Oakland, and describes case studies that the City of Oakland might look to as it contemplates next steps in its digital strategy. This document should be read in conjunction with the Policy Brief, which makes specific recommendations for the City to pursue.

## Deploying Digital Services

Improving digital services is not just about fixing a website—it’s about creating a digital infrastructure and a citywide engagement strategy focused on residents. Modern digital services span [six overall themes](#):

### One: Service Design

The government should rethink how current government services might be delivered in the 21st century, and work toward achieving that vision. At the heart of this theme is making sure you understand your residents, also known as “users” of the government services. User-centered design is achieved through user research, the creation of prototypes that meet user needs, and the testing of prototypes to confirm if the assumptions made about users were correct. Service design also pays attention to the underlying systems at play that impede the service from making the most impact on target populations.

### Two: Workplace

The government’s internal workforce should be digitally literate, have modern tools, and be trained and proficient in 21st-century mindsets and skills, such as Lean Startup,<sup>1</sup> Agile,<sup>2</sup> and Human-Centered

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1 Lean Startup is a methodology focused on an audience called a “user,” where the person deploying the method lists assumptions about the user and tests those assumptions through small, short experiments. Over time, a product is built through a cycle called “build, measure, learn: build something that meets the needs of your users; measure how well it performs through feedback; and apply what you learn to improve the product over time.

2 Agile methods involve caring about people over process and incorporating short periods of working that incrementally build a project/product over time (called “sprints”). The Agile process is coordinated through regular check-ins (“scrums”) and involves continuous learning through “retrospectives.”

Design.<sup>3</sup> A digital workforce requires the right hardware tools and devices such as laptops, phones, desktops, and software, including shared interactive workspaces (e.g. Google G-Suite: Docs, Sheets, Slack, etc.); video collaboration (Zoom, GoToMeeting, Microsoft Teams, Skype, etc.); and places to create and collaborate with other people (e.g. Mural.ly, Calend.ly, etc.). Investing in the digital workplace empowers city staff who are often on the front lines of getting the critical work done.

### Three: Intelligence

The government should use shared services to break down silos between departments and deliver the same experience and standards across the board. This includes creating standards around data sharing and protection, ensuring information and cybersecurity mechanisms are in place to protect data.

### Four: Inclusion

The government should seek to close the “digital divide” by bringing internet access to those who do not have it and teaching them new digital literacy skills. It additionally includes expanding broadband use to vulnerable populations who may not have high-speed internet access.

### Five: Economy

The government should seek to support and be responsive to modern, local businesses. Beyond delivering broadband internet access, this requires equipping businesses with the right equipment (hardware/software), systems, and skills to support their daily work. Because developing the digital economy requires going outside the walls of city hall, the City Council and other public servants should work to identify the needs of business owners and establish policies and programs that deliver what they need.

### Six: Civic Engagement

Finally, the government should engage in a collaborative strategy with residents and community and advocacy organizations to design digital services that meet all their needs. This theme also involves creating rules and policies that can create cities where users thrive in the 21st century by enabling access and two-way dialogue through a shared digital commons.

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<sup>3</sup> Human-centered design is a process focused on designing experiences, programs, and services with those who need them in mind, as popularized by the design firm IDEO. This process starts with getting inspiration from users, thinking about possible approaches to solve problems that are observed, and then implementing the solution.

The City of Oakland should work to adopt these six principles into its digital service delivery, thus enabling residents to become more engaged.

### Equitable Digital Services

A city like Oakland, with its proud history of activism, should be a leader in creating *equitable* digital services that serve the most vulnerable populations, including the residents of underserved neighborhoods like East and West Oakland. This concept, known as [Equity-Centered Community Design](#) part of the human-centered design methodology, and a “unique creative problem solving process based on equity, humility-building, integrating history and healing practices, addressing power dynamics, and co-creating with the community.” The goal is to share equity-centered design to “achieve sustained community health, economic opportunities, and social and cultural solidarity for all.”

To take an example, consider potholes in Oakland last year. Potholes might seem like an unlikely marker of inequity, but they indicate where city budgets flow and where public services are unequally directed. Typically, poor neighborhoods like East and West Oakland, [have greater problems with potholes](#) than do more affluent neighborhoods like Piedmont and Rockridge. This is mostly because the City Council “needed to be responsive to people who are writing the letters and making the phone calls,” [says Ryan Russo](#), Oakland’s former transportation director. Those who have the privilege to write letters and make phone calls tend to be better off financially.

Recognizing this, the City of Oakland’s Office of Race and Equity used a simple solution to create empathy and improve design. When more affluent neighborhoods complained about potholes on their streets, instead of fixing the problem, the Office showed those residents photos of the terrible potholes in East Oakland. This approach helped residents in the more affluent areas realize that a flat or damaged rim from the potholes in East Oakland will have a bigger impact on households on a tighter budget. This resulted in fewer complaints and a larger percentage of funds being directed to fix the more pressing potholes.

There was another byproduct of this experience: it helped those in the less affluent neighborhoods believe that the city would be responsive to their needs. This in turn builds trust. “If streets like this get fixed, people in the neighborhood will say, ‘Oh we’re not forgotten,’” [said Itzel Diaz-Romo](#), a Fruitvale resident. “‘We’re not ignored.’” This example shows how designing with the people affected can be a powerful way to increase trust and accountability, and build empathy and equity into conversations that may not have existed before.

As a digital strategy is created, it is also important to build space for equitable design practices and to create a racial equity theory of change. To assist in appropriate civic engagement, the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at the Ohio State University outlines six [Principles of Equitable Civic Engagement](#):

- ▶ **Embracing the Gifts of Diversity:** “A healthy and equitable civic engagement environment is one that is built around the creative gifts of community members — all community members.”
- ▶ **Hospitality: Invitation & Listening:** “Welcoming diverse voices into our community conversations requires more than a cursory invitation to join a meeting or event. The invitation must reflect the needs and concerns of the community member – they must see the issues important to them on the agenda.”
- ▶ **Realizing the Role of Race, Power, and Injustice:** “Acknowledging the life experiences of our neighbors is often an important part of ensuring that they feel welcomed in the community.”
- ▶ **Building Trust Through Empowerment:** “Solving long-term community problems requires community members willing to build long-lasting partnerships. Trust is the glue that holds these bonds together. Strong communities are built on a foundation of trust and mutual respect.”
- ▶ **Honoring Disagreement and Dissent:** “The strength of the diversity in our communities relies on our ability to accept and respect our difference.”
- ▶ **Adaptability to Community Change:** “Change is difficult for many of us. Yet our communities are constantly changing.... In order to respond to these changes, the community engagement environment must be flexible and provide space for people to work through transitions.”

Applying the principles outlined above will go a long way in honoring the activist history of Oakland. Moreover, creating a racial equity theory of change that describes how a change should happen – such as the one created through the [Aspen Institute](#) – for the City of Oakland can take these principles a step further to change specific racial disparity outcomes.

These outcomes should be the cornerstone of designing an equitable digital engagement strategy, one that should be used whether the City of Oakland is designing a community benefits agreement (CBA) for a [new baseball stadium at Howard Terminal](#) or designing a benefits eligibility website. Also, as large percentages of Black and Brown households in East and West Oakland do not own a computer or have an internet subscription, the city must design mobile-first experiences, such as text messaging and mobile-responsive websites, to help ensure that these households are not excluded from government access and benefits.

## BACKGROUND: THE EXPERIENCE WITH OAKLAND GOVERNMENT

Why should the City of Oakland take the step of adopting equity-focused digital services? Residents suggest there is a tremendous need for a new approach. Below are perspectives from several Oaklanders on their experience with city government, including attending meetings and seeking information on the City of Oakland's website:

- ▶ *“Formal city hall meetings and courthouses are intimidating and hearings can sometimes be dominated by those who are more comfortable with public speaking.”* Residents believe such hearings are not the best way to encourage comment from a wide cross-section of community residents, especially as they may not fit into residents' busy schedules. It is also extra difficult for vulnerable populations to have the money, time, and resources to come to meetings to participate in governing.
- ▶ *“The meeting format often leaves little, if any, room for reasonable discussion or dialogue.”* The City uses a traditional Council meeting process, where residents must participate in person at city hall, and are given a few minutes to speak on each agenda item. Two-way debate and dialogue among residents are not built into the agenda. Also, one must sign up ahead of time on the city website to speak at a Council meeting, which currently has no content or sign-up sheet.
- ▶ *When users go “to search for information about how to contact their councilmember, it's hard to find.”* If they do want to search for information or have the privilege of time to watch meetings, it is unclear where to find this information

A few straightforward solutions can help overcome these barriers to inclusion, participation, and information finding. First, the City Council can ensure that information is presented in a clear and useful way. Moreover, local government can conduct a strategic, thoughtful public process, and try new approaches for meeting with residents to express their opinions and for local officials to understand citizens' needs. Not only should experimentation be carried out on new ways to engage, but local governments should also look to see what has been tried before, and learn from past challenges.

The key to achieving these goals is *virtual* public participation. Moving more interactions online, with the right strategy and culture shift, can attract a wider spectrum of participants, facilitate an understanding of diverse interests, and ultimately involve residents in shaping better decisions for the communities of Oakland as a whole.

## CASE STUDIES ON VIRTUAL PARTICIPATION IN ACTION

The City of Oakland should draw from existing experiences with digital service improvement as it upgrades its systems. Here are four examples of public participation happening in local jurisdictions around the country. These examples suggest that virtual participation is not only possible with local government, but can be a key part of a digital strategy. They also show that being transparent and striving for continuous improvement while accepting feedback helps build trust with a community.

### New York City Council

The [New York City Council has a website](#) where residents can look up their district on the home page. The home page presents four main options: 1) About the City's Budget; 2) Find Your District/Member; 3) Explore the Committees; and 4) More About the Council. Visitors can use these tools to easily find their councilmembers and find out about upcoming hearings, as well as clearly marked archives with past hearings. The website curates hot topics and content in a "Featured at the Council" section. The home page links to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, and City Council meetings are streamed on each of these platforms.

The website also provides useful tools to improve user engagement. At the bottom of the page, the website contains welcoming text, asking for feedback on how to improve the visitor experience: "We want to hear from you. With your insight, the Council discovers ways to improve the City we all call home. So we're meeting New Yorkers where they are—online and in person. Keep your feedback coming! You can reach us via social media, email, paper mail, or at your district office. For issues specific to a neighborhood, it's best to contact the Council Member representing that community." Questions, comments, or feedback can be submitted right on the site, and these are directed to the right team.

Oakland should incorporate lessons from the NYC Council website around what the person coming to the site needs and wants – such as where to find their district and council member and the city budget – making it easier for residents to interact with their elected officials. Further, having many avenues to engage on social media, including streaming on Facebook, allows citizens more avenues to participate in government.

### Placer County, Ca. Board of Supervisors Meeting

Given the circumstances around coronavirus, the [Board of Supervisors in Placer County](#) decided to move their meetings online, engaged in a transparent and participatory process, and established processes for continuous learning and improvement.

On their website, the County admitted it was trying virtual participation for the first time and was learning from the process. Prior to the meeting, County leadership publicly posted the agenda on their website, and they operated the meeting as a live video feed with closed captioning. Participants could post feedback during the meeting in multiple ways:

- ▶ Comments by telephone
- ▶ Written comments submitted through a form on the website
- ▶ Comments emailed or mailed to the Clerk of the Board

After the meeting, the Board posted the meeting minutes and decided to revisit procedures and improve upon future meetings, creating a culture of continuous improvement. They have since decided to move all meetings online, and added a form for comments and created improvements to the meeting to include more to participate remotely.

The City of Oakland could take a page out of Placer County's book about allowing meetings online and provide multiple ways to engage with government leaders. Also, as in Placer County, Oakland officials can admit that they are experimenting and will improve over time, which helps build transparency and trust with residents.

### Shaping New Housing Strategy in Boulder, Colorado

In January 2015, the city government of Boulder, Colorado partnered with Code for America to engage with the community to shape a [new affordable housing strategy](#) with Housing Boulder. They aimed to “build more inclusive, transparent, collaborative, and interactive community engagement strategies.”

The team set out to develop an interactive collaboration with Boulder residents toward the goal of affordable housing, as well as to create a repeatable process that the City could reuse for other projects. They discovered that driving online engagement would help the City reach underrepresented groups, in this case renters under the age of 40.



Over six months, the team made content on the Housing Boulder site as easy to understand and actionable as possible, giving visitors immediate information they would need to know, as well as an online survey to answer questions about Boulder-related housing issues. The city then gave visitors three choices: get involved, learn about Boulder's housing story, and learn about housing tools and options. Each of these options took the visitor to another site to learn more. Moreover, Housing Boulder used new digital tools to enable residents to participate remotely through Twitter to increase conversation around affordable housing. They also deployed Periscope for live streaming, and engaged SurveyGizmo to conduct two polls. Further, the City used online survey platforms to collect data from residents on an ongoing basis.

Finally, Boulder worked with the local [Code for Boulder Brigade](#) to create an event at which residents could prototype alongside volunteers and give input about new projects focused on making the City's permitting data more accessible. Ultimately, this project gave residents tangible ways to share their opinions and help shape decision-making about housing in Boulder throughout the civic process. The team experienced a significant increase in participation among the target groups, and used multiple channels to expand dialogue among technology-savvy residents.

This story of Boulder provides an example of how the City of Oakland could use digital tools around a single topic to gather public sentiment from more tech-savvy residents. It was also effective to make resident's feedback actionable right on the website, giving residents the opportunity to learn more about the topic at hand.

### **United States Fourth Open Data National Action Plan**

The [Open Data National Action Plan](#) is an initiative launched by the Obama Administration to bring together aligned commitments from public- and private-sector executives to target specific topic areas of national importance.

The Fourth Open Data National Action Plan is the fourth installment of this Plan, and the team wanted to co-create it online with the participation of civil society and the public. Over two months, the team used [GitHub](#) to collect hundreds of [commitments and comments from government agencies and civil society](#) that were both achievable within a two-year timeframe and ambitious and measurable. During a [series of workshops](#) that included virtual participation, the team prioritized the ideas and further developed the most popular ideas into strategies for the finished [National Action Plan](#).

As the City of Oakland continues to adopt new methods of digital engagement, they could draw from the strategy used to create the National Action Plan for inspiration about how to co-create a strategy with civil society and the public. Such a method makes the work open, actionable, and transparent, and would allow the city to bring stakeholders together toward a unified strategy that residents and city staff alike can help to create.