IMPACT CASE STUDY

Change at the Intersection of Government and Technology

The Aspen Institute's Policy Academy turns professionals into policy advocates. We offer innovative training programs to equip leaders across sectors – from tech to climate, science to social impact – with the practical policy skills to craft solutions for society's most pressing challenges. Based in the Bay Area, the Policy Academy is the first comprehensive nonpartisan and non-university training program in the United States offering a step-by-step process to learn practical strategies for policymaking. The Academy's predecessor, the Aspen Tech Policy Hub, has helped more than 500 alumni and staff gain government experience and seek policy impact.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ann Lewis came to the Aspen Policy Academy's inaugural Tech Executive Leadership Initiative (TELI) program from a career as a software engineer, technical leader, and most recently as a tech executive at a nonprofit organization, and went on to lead one of the most powerful tech agencies in the federal government. Ann arrived with 17 years of tech industry experience and a penchant for creative problem solving. During the program, she learned from instructors and peers about the challenges and opportunities of policy implementation at scale, and how tech leadership can drive better policy impact and outcomes. TELI showed Ann that technology and policy are deeply intertwined, and have a huge impact on how well government actually works for the people it serves.

BACKGROUND

Before her time with TELI, Ann spent 5 years as the Chief Technology Officer at an online advocacy organization. She found purpose in scaling the nonprofit's infrastructure and data tools, with her work culminating in a 500,000-person national protest against family separation immigration policies. However, when the protest did not change the policy at hand, Ann knew it was time to try something new.

To learn more about this project, please visit aspenpolicyacademy.org.

She wanted to deeply understand how government works and find her way into the rooms where policy is made. So, in fall 2020, Ann joined the inaugural TELI cohort.

> *"In government, I found the most difficult and rewarding leadership challenges. Every day I felt proud of the work that I and my teams were doing to try to improve the public's experience of government."*
>
> Ann Lewis

IMPACT

The TELI program – a joint initiative of the Academy's Tech Policy Hub, the Tech Talent Project, and Project Redesign – provided Ann with a direct path to making an impact in government. For example, her cohort designed measurement strategies to help the California Census Office interpret its pandemic-era data. Ann and her peers went on to present their work to the actual Census Office. As Ann participated in these hands-on experiences and grew her network, she learned a key lesson: Sometimes the path to impact is more accessible than you realize. "What I kept hearing from TELI speakers was to check your assumptions about what is impossible," Ann said. "If you want to solve a problem, you need to change the conditions of what people perceive as a possible way forward."

This changemaking ethos guided Ann to her first post-TELI position as the Senior Advisor for Technology and Delivery at the US Small Business Administration. As a day-one political appointee of the Biden-Harris administration, Ann entered a whole new world of public service. The communications skills she gained in the TELI program quickly proved essential. In her advising role, Ann reframed language to facilitate understanding between the teams writing policies and the teams harnessing technology to efficiently provide federal aid.

In 2022, the White House appointed Ann as the General Services Administration's Technology Transformation Services Director. The Technology Transformation Services is the tech team within the government agency that oversees real estate, product, and service procurement support. As director, Ann applied TELI's teachings on a daily basis, combining her tech expertise and team-building skills to improve essential government services. For two years, she steered a team of almost 700 technologists working to help the government deliver better experiences to the public. From Vote.gov to the Presidential Innovation Fellows program, her team managed a wide portfolio of projects that bridged the gaps between policy and digital implementation. The division significantly expanded during her tenure, and Ann now looks forward to continuing to grow her leadership experience in a new role. "In government, I found the most difficult and rewarding leadership challenges, " said Ann, "Every day I felt proud of the work that I and my teams were doing to try to improve the public's experience of government."