Category: Infrastructure

State: Utah
Department: Department of Administrative Services
Lead category: Infrastructure
Category area: Information Technology

Project Title: Utah Open Records Portal

Project Assoicates: -Patricia Smith-Mansfield, State Archivist; -Rosemary Cundiff, Government Records Ombudsman; Elizabeth Perkes, Archives Systems Administrator; -Renée Wilson, Open Records Portal Administrator; -Nova Dubovik, GRAMA Administrator; Glen Fairclough, Public

Project date: January 1, 2015: Portal available for state executive agencies; January 1, 2016: Portal available for county and municipal governments, as well as school districts / charter schools, and transit districts

Executive summary: The Open Records Portal provides a single point of access for submitting a records request, aka GRAMA (Government Records Access and Management Act) request, to any governmental entity at the following levels:

- state executive agencies
- counties
- municipalities
- school districts and charter schools
- transportation districts
- local and special districts (functionality to be added 1/1/2017)

The Portal also allows records officers to respond to requests, upload files, assign fees, and refer requesters to other agencies.

Project description: The Portal is a central point from which a person may submit a records request to a state or local governmental entity, and from which governmental entities may receive and respond to records requests.

The Open Records Portal was developed by the Utah State Archives, in conjunction with the Utah Transparency Board, in response to Senate Bill 70 (now Utah Code 63A-3-403(10)(11)) from the 2014 legislative session. This law requires the Transparency Board and the Department of Administrative Services (the Archives' parent department) to establish and maintain a website for the purpose of providing a central point of access for GRAMA (Government Records Access and Management Act) requests to governmental entities within the state of Utah.

The Portal went live January 1, 2015, as mandated by law, and has been operative since then. Continuous improvements are being made as needed. Requesters and government employees alike are encouraged to provide feedback on Portal operation and functionality; several upgrades have been planned and implemented in response to this feedback, such as notification improvements, increased file upload size, customizable form fields, and agency update capabilities.

Category: Infrastructure

Why initiated: The Portal was implemented as part of a broader movement towards greater transparency in state government. It was initiated via the 2014 Senate Bill 70, with the specific purpose to provide a single point of access for records requests for all levels of state and local government throughout the state of Utah.

Results achieved: To achieve the successful implementation of the Open Records Portal, the Archives undertook multiple projects:

1. Data. As the Portal contains listings for state and local governmental entities, all listing information needed to be gathered and verified. The Archives contacted records officers from 557 state agencies, 340 municipal agencies, 63 county agencies, 162 charter schools / school districts, and 3 transit districts, in order to ensure that all agency and records officer information was complete and up-to-date. The Archives is also in the process of contacting the 500+ local and special districts which will come online on the Portal in 2017. It will be the Archives' responsibility to maintain this information in the future.

2. Design and User Testing. The Archives designed each detail of the Portal, and worked with the software developer APPX to build the site. Several records officers volunteered to participate in user testing. Their Portal sessions were recorded and analyzed to identify points of confusion and areas for improvement. Additional testing continues as more features are added.

3. Training. Spreading the word to all governmental entities within Utah has been challenging. The Archives provided training sessions for records officers at all levels of government, including webinars and live visits throughout the state of Utah. In 2016 alone, the Archives trained 199 records officers, representing 125 different governmental agencies. Video and text tutorials are accessible online via YouTube or the Archives website.

4. Publicity. All major newspapers throughout Utah announced the kickoff of the Open Records Portal.

Project timeline:
March 27, 2014 – Senate Bill 70 signed into law
July – December, 2014 – Portal designed and tested; the bulk of the work was done during this period
January 1, 2015 – Portal live for state executive agencies
January 1, 2016 – Portal live for co

Significance to the improvement of the operation of government: Before the Portal was implemented, most state agencies did not have an established method for receiving records requests. There is not a standardized GRAMA (Government Records Access and Management Act) request form, so state employees had to spend time creating their own form, as well as looking up state statute to ensure they were including everything necessary both in the form and in their reply.

The Portal streamlines the request process so that all records officers receive the relevant information they need with each request submitted. The Portal further helps state government by intuitively guiding records officers through the records request process. As records officers respond to a request, the system does the following:

Category: Infrastructure

- shows all possible responses to a request,
- auto-populates contact and appeals information,
- automatically includes information which is legislatively mandated to be included in a denial, and
- sends notifications automatically to requesters.

These actions allow state government employees to spend more time actually responding to the request, because they can spend less time seeking clarification and answering questions about updates and progress, or looking up information about what a response should include.

The Portal provides a unified experience for requesters as well. They can easily locate the agencies and their respective records officers and do not have to search online to figure out how one agency's requirements differ from another's. This benefit, along with the ability to view the status of their request online at any time, fosters a positive, "user-first" atmosphere, which demonstrates more effective government.

The Portal contains additional tools to help with the efficiency of state and local governments:

- Records officers may send a blind courtesy copy (BCC) of request denials to their supervisor (required in some state agencies).
- Reporting tools allow records officers to export agency statistics for use in required reports.
- Requests may be assigned to other records officers within the same agency.

Benefits realized by citizens and/or state government: First and foremost, citizens benefit from having a single place on the internet where they may go to submit a request to state and local governmental agencies.

Citizens also benefit from the central location of agency and records officer contact information. Some governmental entities aren't otherwise represented online. The Portal displays agency address, agency phone numbers, agency website, and identifies records officer(s) names and email addresses. Hierarchy information for each agency is also displayed, so that both citizens and government may view how agencies are related to each other.

Citizens additionally benefit from the easy-to-use interface and convenient auto-fill of user contact information when creating a records request. Requesters can view requests online at any time, and upload files as needed, check the progress of the request, and contact the records officer, all via the Portal. Frequent requesters especially appreciate having a convenient method of tracking and viewing their requests in one place.

State government benefits from many of the same factors as the public: a central location for all records requests; a listing of state and local agencies and their contact information; and myriad tools to assist in the task of receiving, tracking, and responding to records requests.

The overall result of the Portal is a leap forward in open records requests for Utah: the Portal simplifies the records request process, making a potentially daunting task more approachable, while providing greater transparency and accountability to both citizens and state government.