



Washington Resilience Group

Contact: Max Brown, max.brown@ofm.wa.gov

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This document captures actions that current and future leaders can take to improve the state customer experience without duplicating efforts.

The Washington Resilience Group (originally called the Washington Recovery Group) worked collaboratively with state agency and community partners to develop recommendations. These recommendations will improve how the state delivers services and enhance the overall state customer experience. During the pandemic, state systems were stretched to their limit. In some cases, that meant the state did not meet customer needs and expectations.

We know collaboration throughout the state will create a more just and resilient Washington. Gov. Jay Inslee depends on state agencies to work together and to plan and implement equitable actions to make this happen. These actions will create a more just recovery, stronger communities, and a more robust economy.

The WRG formed in October 2020. Its goal is to help the state strengthen its resiliency and improve how it supports Washingtonians as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Executive Summary

As agencies work to implement a more customer-centered approach to service delivery, they are at different stages of their journey. In the long-term, the goal is to have a less siloed, more flexible approach. In the short-term, agencies can and are

working to improve their internal processes to better serve clients.

Putting ourselves in the position of our customers has helped to illuminate that regardless of the agency, our customers view us as government and often do not know who they need to talk to in order to receive services. In addition, our customer service agents may not understand the entire scope of available resources, leaving customers frustrated and confused. For improvement efforts to be successful, we must continue to engage, listen to and implement feedback from our customers.

While the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted challenges we face as a state, certain issues already existed. The state cannot wait until a moment of crisis to determine how to better serve customers but should always be actively engaging them. In addition, relying solely on the experience and expertise of staff provides just one piece of the puzzle that can only be completed when working with external partners and clients.

As a state, we risk getting in our own way of serving our clients. Taking a siloed approach and assuming as agencies we perform entirely different work does a disservice to our customers. It limits our ability to provide all needed resources in an effective manner, makes it more challenging for us to be nimble in times of high demand, and can discourage customers from accessing benefits to which they are entitled.

Agencies must continue to work collaboratively, from the customer perspective, in order to achieve lasting success for customers.

What we did

The WRG held monthly meetings with key leaders from over 20 agencies to evaluate progress and set strategic direction. We conducted an initial survey in 2021 for agency leaders to share their reflections. We also facilitated a survey of customer service staff in early 2022, which yielded a wealth of information that helped us develop priorities. The survey reached over 2,100 employees (82% were front-line staff) from 15 agencies. Of those respondents, over 10% received or currently receive state benefits. We gleaned the following insights from the survey:

- 93% somewhat or strongly agree that when they could not help someone, it was because of something out of their control.
- 68% somewhat or strongly agree they do not have enough time to answer their customers' needs.
- 61% somewhat or strongly agree their customers need services their agency does not provide.
- 71% somewhat or strongly agree that they received adequate training for their position before they started.

Although as state agencies we provide benefits and services for our customers, how we accomplish this and the way we treat our clients is just as important. As one person stated:

“At that time, the experience was confusing, difficult to navigate and left a person with a feeling of ‘less than.’ While requirements, expectations and responsibilities were explained, it was overwhelming and a lot to digest all at once. Especially as it was a difficult time in my life. There was also the need to explain my situation several times to different

staff, programs and state agencies. This resulted in my needing to relive my situation over each time...”

This survey response, along with others that showed a similarly troubling narrative, influenced how the WRG thought about and considered solutions.

Based on the survey feedback, the WRG deployed work groups to help narrow the focus. It used staff with expertise in the following focus areas:

- Plain Language (Plain Talk)
- Training
- Performance management
- Workforce
- Universal access and belonging

Ultimately, the focus areas would require us to go much deeper and look at systemic shifts within agencies. Agencies were already looking at some of the components in the bulleted list above. But the WRG focused on two things to help these efforts:

- Established a Plain Language resource group (made up of various agencies).
- Developed a group made up of customer service staff (Customer Service Community of Practice) so they could share information and talk to each other about similar problems and solutions across agencies.

What changed

Since the WRG's creation, agencies have started to do the following (this is not an exhaustive list):

- Implement a renewed focus on how agencies provide an outward-facing service.
- Restructure organizational parts to explore apprenticeship pathways in consumer engagement and IT innovations (WaTech and Department of Labor and Industries).

- Work collaboratively with more agencies to solve problems that impact the same customers.
- Create a customer panel to receive direct input on strategies and initiatives.
- Sustain funding for trusted community messengers who can help provide information to historically marginalized communities.
- Use human-centered design in the work for social service benefits (Health and Human Services Coalition, Employment Security Department, Department of Licensing).
- Engage ethnic commissions to ensure we have more voices while working with the governor (Results Washington).
- Plan to connect regularly with other agencies.

What we still need to do

Identify who isn't in the room (internal)

All levels of an agency need to be engaged, invested, and supported in the WRG for successful implementation. Executive-level leaders can prioritize agency work, align budgets, and remove obstacles. Front-line staff intimately understand the problems that customers experience daily. Supervisors and midlevel managers can communicate information between frontline staff and agency leaders and align with other teams. In addition, as a project moves forward and new obstacles are uncovered, the project team may need to change.

Suggested action:

Conduct assessments early and often that show who the agency is engaging across the organization to make sure the project team is diverse. This includes diversifying responsibilities, viewpoints, and

backgrounds to ensure the best outcome. Also, be prepared to pull in additional people as resources and bring them up to speed when necessary.

Identify who isn't in the room (external)

While making decisions tends to be quicker and easier when fewer people are involved, it often means we leave out the most important voices and experiences: our customers. To gain a fuller picture of the problem and better understand the right next steps, we need to involve more than just our staff. Also, providing opportunities for broader involvement can't be just to 'check a box' because this often makes decisions for our customers without having them in the room during each phase of the decision-making or project development process.

Suggested action:

At the beginning of any project, identify a robust picture of who your customer is. From there, actively pursue bringing your customer(s) onto the project team and identify how they will be compensated for their participation. Do not start a project without the due diligence to include customers in the process.

The executive branch can't do this alone

We must engage the Legislature for buy-in and funding if we want to move most ideas forward, especially for projects not yet underway. Many of the issues this group is trying to address require systemic changes that go beyond quick, cheap, and small solutions. The obstacles may come from legal requirements that no longer work in our current system but are still out of our control.

Suggested action:

Develop a legislative plan once we've identified a project or opportunity. This plan can include working

with strategic partners to help move our funding requests forward.

Partnership and engagement don't have to be complicated, but do have to be intentional

It's crucial to listen to customers so that we can understand the challenges they face. Listening first and asking questions later helps us check the assumptions we may hold and better inform the areas we think are problems for our customers when they are actually problems for us. As we develop survey questions and tools, we need to start with a specific problem we are trying to solve and be willing to use the feedback we receive to change processes; our customers are tired of providing feedback that goes nowhere. We especially build trust when we co-create with disproportionately impacted people and groups, and they see improvement.

Suggested action:

Agencies and communities should collaborate and identify specific problems that their customers experience and design short surveys to solicit feedback from customers. To do this, agency leadership must agree to provide the time that staff need to find and implement solutions. Finally, agencies need to communicate changes to customers so they can see the impact of their partnership and build trust with government.

Engagement and partnership are not free

We ask for customers' time when they participate or provide feedback. History shows us that agencies have consistently undervalued this time. Compensating customers in the form of direct payments or gift cards helps remove barriers for the individuals we are most often interested to hear from. The WRG compensated clients with a \$25 gift card for their participation in a roughly 15-minute

survey, which helped us gather quick feedback with a high rate of participation.

Suggested action:

Enacted in 2022, [Second Substitute Senate Bill 5793](#) created rules to help agencies better compensate customers for their time and lived experience insights. Agencies should use the community compensation guidelines from [the Office of Equity's website](#) to compensate eligible community members.

Plain Language is easier to implement than it sounds

Government language is difficult to understand, even for those who work with it daily. We often make it hard for our customers to understand what we need them to do. This becomes more difficult when we need to translate our documents or explain things in a language other than English. Striking the balance between meeting the legal needs of a program and the needs of our customers is challenging, but we must do better in how we communicate.

Suggested action:

Continue to support the Plain Language Community of Practice and develop statewide Plain Talk standards to achieve better outcomes for our clients. Provide these Plain Language standards to state agencies to help them provide program information in a clear, concise, and accessible format for all customers.

Be specific with the problem you want to solve

We originally identified "access to the state and its services" as a main customer issue. When we focused deeper on that theme, we centered on 'customer experience' as the most pressing area to focus our efforts. We put ourselves in the place of our customers to better understand not just the

service they were trying to access, but why they needed it.

Suggested action:

In the future, identify a specific life event that would bring a client into contact with the state, identify all agencies that would support the client, and collaborate to streamline the customer experience.

Leadership support is crucial

Process improvement, such as improving the customer experience, doesn't always need to be created by legislation or executive order. This means agency leaders can take initiative whenever they determine there's a need. For agency initiatives to move forward, leaders must create the time and space to work together on the same issue at the same time.

Suggested action:

Develop a standard process and documentation that agency leaders may use when collaborating with other agencies. Establishing this would address problems and help remove barriers to process improvements.

Meet people where they are (the role of good facilitation)

As the state begins its Pro-Equity, Anti-Racism (PEAR) journey, it must embody the following principles to be successful:

- Customers from all backgrounds need to be at the table to help us understand the problem and identify solutions.
- We cannot expect to engage customers in only the ways we want them to engage. We must meet them where they are with a culturally responsive approach that honors where they are in their lives.

Often, state government can act as a gatekeeper instead of a partner. We often only invite those who

fit a certain mold and meet a certain expectation to work with us, and it hasn't helped us achieve the outcomes we want. We need to consider using the Equity Summit framework when we focus on social services. We also need to bring nonprofits and agencies together to co-create and plan for critical events and improve processes.

Suggested action:

Allow participants from all backgrounds to partner in identifying problems and solutions. In addition, train staff in facilitation techniques that create spaces for our customers to be themselves and be seen, heard, and respected in our processes.

Don't wait for a crisis to build the relationship

Once the realization set in that the COVID-19 pandemic would impact the state with more than a two-week shutdown, the need to work closely with community partners was clear. Often, local nonprofits maintain better relationships with the communities and populations that the state is trying to serve and have established a level of trust that government does not always have. The challenge, though, is that many nonprofits run on a minimal budget. This means it can be difficult to scale up resources and staffing in times of need.

Unfortunately, some of the nonprofits we used as resources in previous years may no longer exist due to financial reasons.

Suggested action:

Maintain relationships and communication with trusted nonprofits at all times, instead of only relying on them in times of need. Having a state advisory board that can provide input and share needs would help create a better, more lasting partnership with community organizations.

Our people are our greatest asset

Some of the solutions we considered would have required higher staffing levels to implement. The state is currently challenged in hiring front-line staff. If the state is to provide an excellent customer experience, we need to examine and update our classification and compensation standards for front-line positions to ensure they are paid fairly.

Suggested action:

Much like the IT Classification and Compensation study, State HR should partner with state agencies and higher education institutions to review and reimagine the state's classification and compensation structure. The result would be an infrastructure that effectively nurtures and amplifies our efforts toward a more equitable structure. Ongoing improvements to our structure will help foster a more effective recruitment strategy with qualified applicants, retention, and ultimately, an engaged customer experience.

Be careful not to duplicate efforts

Roughly 12 months into our efforts, we identified several specific areas of focus for improvement. After we explored further, we realized that statewide efforts on those topics were already underway. The group took a step back to align with those efforts so that we weren't addressing the same issue. Often when the state tries to solve difficult problems quickly, we ignore the fact that similar efforts are underway in other areas of government.

Suggested actions:

Regardless of the problem that the state is trying to solve, spend time as an organization or team to see if others are already working to address the need. Leverage existing information and resources and be willing to say "no" to projects that are duplicative.

We aren't so different after all

Currently, there is no standard training for customer-facing jobs across agencies or among different programs within the same agency. This leads to an inconsistent experience for customers who often feel that a good experience is essentially a luck of the draw. We need more soft skills training and consistent ways to interact with the public in our customer-facing positions. The training and support for employees depend on the program or agency in which they work.

Suggested action:

Determine which positions in the state would qualify as 'customer facing' and create a training program that lasts through the first year on the job. This would ensure a consistent standard of service for our customers.

People prefer 'one-stop' shopping

Government traditionally operates in and creates unnecessary silos despite our customers growing more accustomed to 'one-stop' shopping. In addition, our customers do not know or care which agency they receive services from – they just want their issue to be resolved. To our customers, it is all just "government." Many customers come to government primarily due to a life event, not because they need a routine service. Because of our siloed nature and our clients' needs, we may be unable to fully serve them on their first visit or we may send them to multiple places to reapply for additional benefits.

Suggested action:

Identify specific, common-life events that bring people to state offices and design a service delivery around the event — not just the program that we provide. This could involve multiple agencies training staff in programs and benefits that other agencies are responsible for and creating a common

operating platform for agencies to access data from other agencies.

Be flexible (funding)

Our budgets are created to support specific programs when our customers are looking for more than one service to address a life event. Without the flexibility to adapt as we learn and proceed, it is difficult to meet our customers' needs. It is challenging to know all the answers and solutions to the outcome of a project and is even more complicated when multiple agencies are involved. Needs arise throughout the life of multiagency projects. This means the state may need to shift funding in the middle of a project, or it may make more sense for one agency to perform a task. However, our current funding model restricts how agencies can address these needs, sometimes leading to delays, missed opportunities, or missed deadlines.

Suggested action:

OFM should create a process so it's easier for agencies to develop interagency decision packages and identify funding streams for larger, multiagency projects. This will create flexibility through the life of a project and ensure greater success.

Be nimble (workforce)

During the pandemic, the workloads of agencies that interact with customers were not equal. However, our current system does not easily lend itself to effectively distribute staff among agencies to do similar work. While the major difference in agencies and programs is the specific "product" or service being provided, the underlying customer service experience and training should be the same. The state could be nimbler and provide better service during times of high demand. It can do this by transitioning staff between programs, as needed. In addition, our current model does not account for the experience of temporary staff who may be a

good fit for needs at other agencies. The state often prioritizes hard skills and policy knowledge over soft skills and customer service. This means we lose high-quality candidates for open positions.

Suggested action:

Create agreements within the collective bargaining process that enable agencies to more seamlessly transition staff among agencies, programs, and positions during high-demand events.

Conclusion

While clients are generally happy with their experience receiving a single service from state government, they begin to lose trust in our ability to deliver when they need to access multiple programs or agencies. Taking a methodical approach to address the needs would generate better outcomes for clients, though it would take a significant time investment. The state should develop a roadmap to implement these recommendations and improve the overall customer experience for Washingtonians.

Additionally, there are several areas of crucial work that align closely with WRG's focus areas and the state should continue to fully support these items:

- **The Office of Equity and ethnic commissions** can support agencies as they rebuild trust with historically marginalized communities and establish best practices for how state government can engage and support those communities.
- **The Health and Human Services Coalition** is working to create systems that would greatly improve the customer experience through a 'master person index' and integrated eligibility and enrollment. This would let agencies share client information and reduce the burden on our customers.
- **The Subcabinet on Intergenerational Poverty** is implementing strategies and recommendations from the 10-Year Plan to

Reduce Poverty, a model blueprint to reduce poverty in Washington. Working with clients to address system needs is a model for the state to find policy solutions.

- **Washington Technology Solutions (WaTech)** is implementing a one-stop shop (WA.gov) for customers and staff to understand how the state can support them and where to receive services. Moving away from a customer service model that requires the client to understand how the state operates will greatly improve the customer experience.

The work being done in these areas could make significant positive strides for our customers in multiple ways. And there are other areas across state government where excellent work is already underway. Like a fire, these initiatives need continued oxygen from executive buy-in and support to keep them alive. Only then, will this collaborative work make a true and lasting impact.