



WISCONSIN LEGISLATIVE AUDIT BUREAU REPORT SUMMARY

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A Best Practices Review of Local E-Government Services

Local governments in Wisconsin increasingly use the Internet to deliver information and services electronically 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Most have already met a recommendation of the Blue-Ribbon Commission on State-Local Partnerships for the 21st Century (the Kettl Commission) that larger local governments launch Web sites by June 30, 2002. Among the 71 local governments serving populations greater than 25,000, 69 have launched Web sites, as have 54 of 77 local governments serving populations between 10,000 and 25,000.

Over 95 percent of Wisconsin's population resides in a county that operates a Web site to deliver electronic government services, while 55.7 percent resides in a city, village, or town that does so. E-government holds the potential to improve government services by making them more convenient and more accessible to the public, as well as less costly.

Available E-Government Services Are Increasing

Approximately two-thirds of 225 local government Web sites we reviewed are used primarily to publish information such as agendas and minutes of government meetings, department directories, and descriptions of services available on line. Increasingly, however, local governments are making their Web sites interactive by allowing users to make comments, ask questions, or submit applications on line. For example, 77.8 percent of the Web sites we reviewed include e-mail contact information for at least one individual, such as the chief elected officer or another official, or a general government contact. In addition, 67 Web sites make at least one application for local government permits, licenses, services, or employment available on line.

We also found that 25 local governments allow on-line payments for government services. Two cities have established services that allow parking tickets to be paid on line with a credit card, and officials in both believe the on-line collection process encourages payment. In addition, 23 local governments contract with a national firm to allow residents to pay their property taxes on line with a credit card.

Local Governments Report Efficiencies that Include Improved Levels of Service

Among 101 local governments that identified benefits related to e-government, 94 identified at least one government efficiency. The most commonly cited efficiency was improved levels of service at no additional staff cost, which was reported by 75 percent of counties responding to our survey question, and more than 80 percent of responding cities, towns, and villages. Over 60 percent of respondents reported a decrease in staff time for job functions such as responding to in-person inquiries, which allowed staff to perform other tasks. For example, staff of one city assessor's office indicated that since property assessment information had been made available on line, residents who came to the office with complaints were better informed and had fewer questions. In addition, 42 local governments reported cost savings, such as reduced printing costs, as a result of their Web sites. However, no local government reported that it had reduced staffing levels as a result of having a Web site.

Fifty-seven percent of the communities responding to our survey indicated they spent less than \$5,000 to develop and launch their Web sites, and 65 percent spend less than \$2,500 annually to maintain their sites. Six local governments reported spending \$100,000 or more on development, maintenance, upgrades, or a combination of these activities. Five of the six are major urban communities. At least two national organizations are offering low-cost tools to help small communities develop and launch Web sites, and Wisconsin's Department of Electronic Government is establishing a

program to develop and host Web sites for counties.

Security and Privacy Present Challenges for E-Government

Creating a Web site and providing large amounts of data over the Internet create a number of security risks for local governments and a number of privacy issues for users. Security risks for local governments include the potential for service interruption, data tampering, and viruses. Users' privacy concerns include the security of credit card numbers and personal data when they conduct government business on line, as well as the posting of personally identifying information in public records.

A number of communities have reported citizen concerns over the on-line posting of information such as property owners' names or police reports filed after automobile accidents, because some citizens believe that making such records readily accessible by electronic means is an invasion of their privacy even when the records are public documents that can be obtained at a government office or police station. While governments must comply with the State's open records law, they have flexibility in what they choose to post on their Web sites. Consequently, local governments will need to develop their own policies to address privacy issues, recognizing sensitivities within their communities. It is a best practice to post Web site privacy policies prominently.

[full report, PDF file \(644KB\)](#)