DOJ, GSA Partner to Improve Civil Rights Violations Reporting

The agencies launched a portal that streamlined the reporting process for both the public and Civil Rights Division staff.

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A Department of Justice and General Services Administration 18F collaboration led to the launch of a new portal this summer for the public to more easily report civil rights violations.
DOJ’s Civil Rights Division upholds civil rights protections throughout nine enforcement teams of legal professionals who specialize in particular areas, such as housing, voting, education and employment, Senior Counsel for Special Projects and Innovation Daniel Yi said during Wednesday’s GSA Technology Technology Services Impact Summit.

Those teams, however, had disparate and inconsistent public-facing reporting pathways, ranging from over the phone, mail, fax and email, and reporting requirements changed depending on the team that members of the public needed to report to.

For Civil Rights Division staff, the legacy system for violations reporting made intake difficult. Intake specialists who handle the front-end analysis had to handle over 100,000 complaints per year, often through the mail, making the initial filing process heavily manual.

“Everyday, they felt like they had to dig themselves out and desperately had to focus on the mechanics of report intake to avoid getting buried under, and rather than focus mental energy on actually really digging deeply into each individual report, they had to think about the other 200 reports that were going to come into their queue later that day,” Yi explained.

Both public-facing and internal inefficiencies led DOJ to request GSA 18F to partner in creating an online portal, civilrights.justice.gov, to centralize and streamline the civil rights violation reporting processes.

Yi said that in creating the portal, which began last year and ended in June with the final product, DOJ and GSA had three goals in mind, which were to:

- Improve the complainant experience for those who want to connect with the Civil Rights Division.
- Streamline the intake process so that the Civil Rights Division can reduce load and demand on internal staff.
- Leverage the intake process so that the Civil Rights Division can gain data-driven insights and eliminate data stovepiping to improve its organizational decision-making.
“We wanted to bring together talented folks who know how to build fantastic digital products, and we also wanted to pair them with the talented folks who knew civil rights inside and out,” Yi said of the partnership, emphasizing the synergy between 18F’s technical capabilities with DOJ’s civil rights’ expertise.

The year-long partnership involved an intensive user-research effort and technical exploration of which platform the Civil Rights Division wanted to use to best solve the preexisting problems with the reporting system. Yi said there were several portal design prototypes and testing cycles, leading to the unified, streamlined experience DOJ now offers through its portal.

Since the portal’s launch, the Civil Rights Division has seen positive feedback in response surveys from the public.

“It’s very clear once you read it. If you have questions, you can read the examples and definitely feel like you can pick your situation. It’s very straightforward,” one feedback result read in Yi’s presentation.

The portal also improved internal processing for staff, unifying the nine different offices, which had all run their own reporting systems previously. Not only has the portal improved report intake, but also the central nature of the website allowed for the various offices to collaborate more organically.

“Before each system section had a team maintaining their own system, and it introduced tremendous friction for when something ... received [may] actually belong to another team, and rerouting was just incredibly difficult,” Yi said. “But now we have a system that allows people to do that in a click of a button. We also have features built in that enable conversation between staff as they figure out how to collaborate and move forward any given report.”

Ultimately, Yi said that the collaboration served as a case study to showcase how partnerships across agencies like GSA can help organizations like his reflect on how to improve, especially technologically.
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