HHS’ Open Door Approach to Innovation

The department embraces the startup community and its culture to scale its workforce and harness data.
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Left to right: HHS Chief Data Officer Mona Siddiqui and HHS IDEA Lab Director Kevin McTigue with moderator Camille Tuutti.

Federal innovation doesn’t necessarily mean adopting the newest and shiniest technologies. In certain parts of the Health and Human Services Department, it means developing the IT workforce of the future and understanding the potential of data.
“Any large organization, whether it’s public sector or commercial sector, is intended to build and run like a machine,” said Kevin McTigue, director of the HHS IDEA Lab. “I am trying to attempt to build a workforce that responds to unknown unknowns, so the biggest challenges for me is to find my team of doers.”

McTigue spoke at GovernmentCIO Media’s CXO Tech Forum: Uncle Sam Meets Silicon Valley on March 15. He said he looks for people willing to “buy in” and scale the capacity of HHS’ 80,000 professional staff members across all of its divisions to execute its missions in a nimbler way, from health care delivery to public health interventions and regulatory sciences.

But when it comes to adopting emerging technologies, McTigue has more of a cautious approach. During the earlier years of HHS’ Office of the Chief Technology Officer, where the IDEA Lab lives, McTigue said there was a push to evangelize technologies for the early adopters of the workforce. Now, he said it’s important to institutionalize the way HHS either procures emerging tech, or broadly adopts them.

“We have to recognize that the echo chambers of the skinny jeans and translucent wire frame glasses [are] no longer just the audience within our workforce that we’re trying to win over,” he said. “We need to win over the audience within our own workforce that, in fact, are those decision-makers with 20, 20 plus years of experience.”

Outside the CTO office, HHS Chief Data Officer Dr. Mona Siddiqui is addressing the lack of evidence-based decision-making with innovation.

“The biggest change is really a cultural shift in how data gets viewed,” she said on a panel with McTigue, and data’s place in helping run an organization.

That’s why HHS is turning to use cases like the opioid epidemic to show how data can solve a real-life issue. The department held a code-a-thon in December that leveraged data from across HHS, other federal agencies, states and a private entity. Coders used the data to develop tools to fight the opioid epidemic, but aside from the ideas it yielded, the event helped HHS identify its internal legal, technical and cultural barriers to data sharing.
But embracing the startup and entrepreneur community and smaller private sector companies has been a means for solving both the data and workforce challenges.

The CTO office is doing this with HHS Start Up Days, which allow companies to provide “Shark Tank”-style pitches to HHS innovators.

“We recognized that there is an opportunity to best serve the American people through integrative solutions with companies that can really help us drive value,” McTigue said.

It’s difficult for startups with a commercial fit in tech hubs like Silicon Valley to find their fit in the “dot gov” landscape, so the Start Up Days look to help the companies that can in turn help citizens best engage with HHS.

“If that includes finding a way to go to market with HHS, we’d like to be your Genius Bar,” McTigue said, referring to Apple’s tech support station.

The first Start Up Day was in Washington, D.C., in February, and continues around the country to cities like Boston, Atlanta, Houston, Chicago and “wherever anybody wants to host us,” McTigue said. It’s really about yielding greater solutions by creating an “open door platform.”

And connecting with smaller companies was a priority for Siddiqui, too.

“When I was looking at our data portfolio, and looking for a company to work with us, the one thing I realized fairly quickly was a lot of the usual suspects, the bigger names, were not the companies that could really address the needs of the portfolio,” she said, largely because she was looking for a specific set of skills and experiences.

So, the company Siddiqui chose was new to government. “I think for us to have brought in a company that had not as much experience in the federal space, I think really says a lot for the department and the office,” she said.

Going forward, to keep overcoming those innovation hurdles, McTigue said he’s coming at the workforce challenge with a servant leadership approach.

“Recognizing that I can shepherd those that are excited, and build a coalition of the willing,” he said. Innovation is a path to validated learning, which requires buy in
from professionals at a variety of ranks, and incentivizing the workforce to perform in a modern, nimble way that “yields the best approach and best value for our citizens,” he said.

For Siddiqui, it’s about continuing to push data as an integral part of the operation side of HHS, not separate. This means looking at other ways to link data to priority areas, and partnering with companies to do so.

“I think that increasingly that is going to be changing, and the data piece is going to be embedded in how an organization operates on a day-to-day basis,” she said. “And we are just on the starting leg of a journey, I think, that has the possibility of really transforming the way that the department operates in the next 15-20 years.”