Department of Labor Certifications Experience:

Expediting Temporary Work Visas to support American employers

A TMF investment of $3.5M helped expedite the processing of labor certifications for agriculture and trade craft visas. As former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue stated, "By streamlining these processes, DOL is bringing labor certification into the 21st Century, allowing farmers to fill out the required forms faster and more efficiently, because no one should have to hire a lawyer to hire a farm worker."

Background

The Department of Labor (DOL), in partnership with other agencies such as the Department of State and the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), issues about 600,000 temporary work visa certifications in trade craft and agriculture every year.

Challenge

The previous system of issuing temporary work visa certifications relied on an entirely paper-based process, required specialized blue security paper that only one company in the United States currently makes, and that needed to be printed from proprietary, on-premises printers. These printers also had a maximum capacity of 230 certifications per day, leading to an artificial cap on the number of labor certifications that could be issued per day, which caused delays in printing and labor certification issuance.

Since the new DOL data hub launch:

- 176% more agriculture certifications daily
- 109% more trade craft certifications daily
- 2 days saved per application for every visa
- $1.9 million in annual cost savings
- Real-time online status for applications
- Auto-populates application forms using previous year's information, which saves time for users and reduces error rates.

Certifications also had to be physically mailed to farmers and small business owners, who then had to physically mail the certification to processing agencies like the Department of Homeland Security – which was slow and took farmers and small business owners away from their daily work – leading to an overall poor user experience.

Solution

DOL wanted to digitize the entire process and received a $3.5 million investment from the TMF starting in 2019.

Using TMF funds, DOL created the Foreign Labor Application Gateway (FLAG) inter-agency Data Hub where DOL could electronically issue labor certifications to farmers and small business owners and digitally transfer application data and documents to Department of State, USCIS, and other agencies, greatly increasing

transparency and cross-government collaboration. Additionally, DOL and its partner agencies did a joint survey of their forms and collectively reduced duplicative processes and shortened existing ones. Instead of receiving a 20-page certification printed on blue security paper in the mail, the small business owner or farmer now receives a one-page electronic certificate by email, which acts as its boarding pass with USCIS. USCIS connects to the inter-agency Data Hub in near real-time to collect the labor certification package.

Impact

FLAG allows applicants and employers to apply and view their application statuses in real-time and also enables the many farmers who submit the same applications every year to automatically populate application forms using the previous year's information.

This modernization reduced labor certification processing time by two business days per application, a major improvement for farmers and employers given the time-sensitivity of harvest seasons and the limited number of visas permitted by law.

Role of the TMF

Normally, it would be a heavy lift to shift a core business process with consistently high demand, especially during COVID-19. Through partnership with the TMF, the support of senior leadership and thoughtful user-centered design methods, the DOL's digitization effort was fully completed in April 2021 – in just two years and with $3.5 million in TMF funding.

TMF provides resources and shared services to help the Administration, Congress, and its partner agencies rapidly deploy and make a difference in the lives of the public

This DOL Labor Certifications investment shows how the TMF uses its technical expertise to help the government improve processes, streamline the experience of users, reduce errors and delays, and build on existing knowledge and resources. TMF investments and program support can help agencies collaborate and modernize to meet demand surges. The TMF can also help agencies adjust to urgent and shifting priorities, such as COVID-19 and national security events.

Shared Services

Using TMF funding, the DOL team was able to work alongside and share successes with agency partners. An important part of the modernization effort was creating a Data Hub where DOL could digitally transfer labor certification documents and application data and automatically share them with the Department of State, USCIS, and other agencies.

In addition, this modernization effort worked to significantly improve the user experience for not only employers and visa applicants, but for agency users as well. DOL, State, and USCIS jointly looked at all of their forms to streamline the application process. The Data Hub also allowed agency and public users to get more visibility into the status of each application in real time.