

Rhode Island Turns to Tech to Improve State Government

August 22, 2016



(TNS) — Hunters have to obtain a state license for each species they want to pursue — deer, turkeys, beavers. Even crows and weasels.

The method of hunting — gun versus trapping, for example — needs another license.

Special permits are also required for certain areas in Rhode Island.

And some 17,000 hunters have to seek licenses every year.

The end result is 113,210 forms processed manually by a single state Department of Environmental Management worker. The paper alone costs taxpayers \$30,000.

“Taxpayers deserve better,” said Gov. Gina Raimondo.

She signed an executive order her first year in office to borrow a strategy from the manufacturing industry to fix some of the problems associated with obtaining hunting permits — and multiple other inefficient processes throughout state government.

Lean, as it is called, is responsible for multiple improvements started or coming with, as Raimondo characterized them: “things that frankly bother Rhode Islanders when they interact with state government.”

Improving efficiency

As the state treasurer, Raimondo first started to use the Lean management method to cut waste, improve workflow and deliver better services in her office.

“The whole concept is you ask the people who are doing the job on how to do it better?” she explained. “How can we make this faster and cheaper? They are the ones who have the answers.”

A big aspect of the approach is to identify a process with problems and pick it apart in meetings — mapping out each step on giant paper taped on a wall with sticky notes that, depending on the color, indicate good and bad aspects to the current method. Typical meetings take 18 hours split over six, three-hour sessions.

At some point, the meetings shift to what alternative process is better, and participants are encouraged to give suggestions. An action plan to get from Point A to Point B is then agreed upon. Some changes can be made immediately while others may need legislation, technology upgrades or more planning. Monitoring the progress, and tweaking when necessary, is also part of Lean, especially since it emphasizes “continuous improvement.”

A four-year backlog of the crime victims compensation program, more than 900 claims, were processed in months because of Lean, Raimondo said. Response time to victims, she added, is now within two weeks.

DEM Director Janet Coit was also using Lean, which she incorporated shortly after taking over in 2011. She learned about it from a senior staffer who reached out to Karl Wadensten, president of VIBCO Vibrators in Richmond (which makes industrial vibrators used in dump trucks and asphalt repair), and a member of the state’s Commerce Corporation, who has been promoting and teaching the process around the country for the past 16 years.

“I think what strikes me the most is the humility that we are all learning from one another,” Coit said. “While we need leadership, we have to be connected with the workforce to get the feedback and act on it. It’s a cycle of trust.”

In addition to the process meetings, called kaizens, which means “improvement” in Japanese, management and staff are trained and encouraged to learn from each other and see what they all do day to day.

Both she and Raimondo said with that thinking — everyone is necessary for the right solution — no one has been laid off or fired because of the Lean initiative. There is more than enough work to do.

Coit and Raimondo discussed making it a statewide effort when Raimondo transitioned to governor. She signed the executive order in April 2015. Wadensten was immediately on board to help.

“The relationships I have formed with other states, and seeing what they are doing, I said, ‘Jeez, they have 4 to 10 and sometimes 20 times the population of us,’

Wadensten said. “If they are doing all these things, there is no way we can’t do it in Rhode Island.”

The budget that year had \$100,000 to start the initiative — which included mandatory training for all staff, pairing department leaders with Lean mentors from the business sector, and designating Lean ambassadors within each department to continue the work into future years. The Rhode Island Foundation gave an additional \$111,000 to help.

The General Assembly removed \$100,000 from the budget to continue with Lean into Year 2. Raimondo is going to use remaining money from year one, and those who are trained, to continue the efforts. She plans to put a request for money in again next year.

The real “breakthroughs,” said Coit, are the kaizens. There have been 55 processes identified throughout the state, and 38 kaizens held so far for issues such as labor grievances, liquor licenses, the Department of Children, Youth and Families hotline, data collection from the health department, pothole claims and even intern selection for the public safety department.

“That flow of information,” she said, “when you get the right people in the room, it’s intensive, and we really scope out what the problem in the process is rather than blame the people.”

Hunting license issues

A kaizen to streamline hunting licenses in November 2015 discovered no one in DEM knew the entire process from start to finish — even though several thought they knew it, said Michaela K. Brockmann, its programming services officer and a designated Lean team member.

Its chart had 89 sticky notes — only 20 of which had good remarks on them. The remaining notes talked about the problems, or as Wadensten called it, “the ugly.”

“No multiyear licenses,” one said. “No email address collected.” “One-third of vendors are late.” “Delay in state receiving funds.”

And “all paper.” Rhode Island is the only state that doesn’t allow hunters to apply online for licenses.

The group ultimately agreed to five things it must do, including having a paperless process; creating a database for the hunters and making sure vendors sell the full complement of licenses.

The General Assembly approved legislation to allow hunters to apply online, which could be in place in a year. That change and others, DEM said, will result in improvements, such as a 75-percent reduction in the steps used in the current process; a decrease in printing and postage costs by 80 percent; and speedier money going to the state with online payments.

But Rose Amoros Jones, chief public affairs officer at DEM, said that has not changed the fact that hunters need a license for nearly every animal, every season, every weapon, every trap, every year. They’ll need to get a bill passed for that.

Lean Facts

WHAT: A management philosophy that uses a collaborative team effort to improve performance and remove waste. A key element is to bring everyone together to scrutinize every stage and aspect of a process, and then come up with a more efficient, streamlined strategy.

WHO: Although there are many thoughts of its roots, many say lean — as it's used today — started with the Toyota Motor Corporation in the 1930s when founder Kiichiro Toyoda hoped to repair poor, manufacturing quality by having an intense study of each stage of the process. He eventually developed "Kaizen" improvement teams.

HOW: Have employee training and meetings called "kaizens" to sort out problems within a process. Corrective action steps are key to Lean. The elimination of waste is the goal, and there are different types of waste identified such as "muri" — all the unreasonable work that management imposes on workers and machines because of poor organization

Raimondo's Lean Initiative

The governor and other state officials believe the Lean philosophy has resulted in many improvements for residents and others who do business with state government as well as boosted morale among state employees. Here are some examples:

45 minutes to 9 minutes: The reduction in call wait times to the unemployment insurance center at the Department of Labor & Training during a peak day. "Embracing the Peak" training, staff adjustments and standardizing the work also reduced calls by up to 1,000 calls per month.

8.6 days to 2.3 days: The reduction in the time it takes the Department of Motor Vehicles to make new titles. It was done by reducing the number of people required in the process and prioritizing "title runs," as they are called, to be processed in the morning.

65 days to 33 days: Creation of a standard electronic application for agency licensing at the Department of Children, Youth and Families is projected to reduce incomplete applications and cut decision time in half.

6 to 9 months to 3 months: Legislation was passed to allow the state to more efficiently reimburse gas station owners when they complete cleanup actions on their properties. The turnaround time for payment dropped to 3 months by eliminating the need for approval from the Underground Storage Tank Fund board that had difficulty achieving quorums to meet.

A 4-year backlog of more than 900 claims with the crime victims compensation program in the state treasurer's office was eliminated, and response time is now within two weeks by putting some aspects of the program online, volunteers initially working evening and weekends to tackle the backlog and a department-wide commitment to putting the victims first.

The Office of Customer & Technical Assistance at the Department of Environmental Management, in Providence, was created - a "one-stop" resource for people needing

information and assistance with applying for permits - to eliminate the need for people to go to multiple locations, particularly when a project needs multiple permits, and the unnecessary step of an administration review.

SOURCE: Rhode Island Department of Administration, Department of Environmental Management, Department of Revenue and Governor Raimondo's Office

©2016 *The Providence Journal (Providence, R.I.)* Distributed by [Tribune Content Agency, LLC](#).

<http://www.govtech.com/computing/Rhode-Island-Turns-to-Tech-to-Improve-State-Government.html>