Benefits.gov
Your Benefits Connection®

2006 2007 2008 2009

GovBenefits.gov: A Progress Report to Citizens

Dear Friend:

Since GovBenefits.gov launched on April 29, 2002, the Department of Labor has enjoyed the distinct honor and pleasure of serving as the Managing Partner for this critical, citizen-serving initiative. Each year has brought continued growth and success and 2008 was no exception. GovBenefits.gov has now reached the once unimaginable milestone of serving over 31 million total visitors to the site. All in all, our visitors have viewed over 23 million pages of government benefit information.

GovBenefits.gov continues to innovate and deliver value beyond its core mission. Our Customized Connection sites further narrow citizen benefit searches by directly connecting them with an individual agency's programs. The successful implementation of the Social Security Administration's Benefit Eligibility Screening Tool (BEST), in March 2008, proved that GovBenefits.gov's pre-screening technology can effectively enhance an existing site, eliminate redundancy, and save taxpayer dollars. The VA Benefit Finder site, currently in development, will focus on veterans' benefits and continue to leverage GovBenefits.gov, its tools and technology.

If our past success is any indication of our future, GovBenefits.gov will achieve its long-term objective of enabling every citizen to easily locate government benefits online – enhancing the quality of life for millions.

I'd like to personally thank each of the GovBenefits.gov contributing partners for their ongoing collaboration and support, which is critical to our continued success.

Sincerely,

Patrick Pizzella

Assistant Secretary for Administration and Management,
Chief Information Officer
U.S. Department of Labor

Biographical Notes

Patrick Pizzella has served as the Assistant Secretary for Administration and Management at the Department of Labor since being confirmed by the U.S. Senate on May 9, 2001. In this role, Mr. Pizzella serves as the principal advisor to the Secretary of Labor on the Department's administration and management programs, and as Chief Information Officer and Chief Human Capital Officer.

Introduction

GovBenefits.gov empowers people to make decisions for themselves and their families by providing a single website where they have access to information on nearly 1,000 government benefit and assistance programs. GovBenefits.gov significantly reduces the amount of time individuals spend identifying and accessing relevant information about government benefit programs matching their specific needs.

Office of Management and Budget
"Report To Congress On The Benefits
Of The President's E-Government Initiatives," 2008

In 2002, the White House began an intensive effort to build, launch and manage a diverse portfolio of government-to-citizen, government-to-business, and government-to-government websites. Operated, managed and supported by Federal agency partnerships, these initiatives provide high-quality solutions such as citizen tax filing, Federal rulemaking, electronic training, and benefit information delivery. The beneficiaries include citizens, businesses, and Federal and State government employees.

The first of these initiatives to reach the internet was GovBenefits.gov, an effort to provide citizens with a single point of entry to government benefit and assistance programs. At the time of the site's launch, it featured 55 programs, representing the ten original Federal agency partners. By May 2008, the website had grown to include over 1,000 programs representing 17 Federal partners, for a total of 411 Federal programs and 611 Federally funded, State-administered programs. GovBenefits.gov has recently added Territorial programs; a total of five Territory-based benefits are now available online.

Why GovBenefits.gov?

A majority of people today turn to the internet for information before any other resource, and they expect to find what they are looking for.

E-government is not an option;
it's a necessity.

Pew Internet & American Life Project

Prior to the launch of GovBenefits.gov, internet users had no choice but to search through a complicated and confusing maze of web pages for benefit information. No easy-to-use, single source of benefit information existed and even people familiar with a particular program could be confused about where to go. Citizens needed a better answer.

The GovBenefits.gov mission is to provide citizens with improved, personalized access to government benefit program information. The site's core function is the eligibility pre-screening questionnaire, taking 10 minutes or less for users to complete. The site will then evaluate a visitor's situation and compare it with program criteria to determine potential eligibility for more than 1,000 benefit programs. Prior to GovBenefits.gov, citizens had to know which agencies offered specific benefits, visit each agency's website independently, find the program eligibility information, and then try to determine if they qualified for the benefit programs.

GovBenefits.Gov: A Multi-Agency Partnership

The initiative began as a partnership of ten Federal agencies, with the Department of Labor (DOL) selected to serve as the Managing Partner for the initiative (Figure 1). Participation required an annual contribution to the program – in most cases, an expense that agencies had not planned for in existing budgets. It was understandable then that agencies resisted involvement in GovBenefits.gov despite their support for the program mission.

The purposes of E-Gov are:

- To promote the use of the Internet and emerging technologies within and across Government agencies to provide citizen-centric Government information and services.
- To promote access to high quality Government information and services across multiple channels.
- To make the Federal Government more transparent and accountable.

E-Government Act
December 2002

Figure 1: GovBenefits.gov Funding Partners

Original Federal Partners

U.S. Department of Labor (managing partner)
U.S. Department of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Education
U.S. Department of Energy
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
U.S. Department of State
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Social Security Administration

Partners Added After The Launch

U.S. Department of Commerce
U.S. Department of the Interior
U.S. Department of Justice
U.S. Department of Transportation
U.S. Department of Treasury
Office of Personnel Management
Small Business Administration

Program Governance

GovBenefits.gov uses a permanent governance structure to increase partners' involvement in decision making and strategic direction. This approach effectively leverages the insights and experiences of an expansive and diverse group of government representatives to implement the program mission.

Soon after inception, the partners developed the overall vision for the governance structure and identified the program's short-term goals and priorities. Two governing bodies were developed for the program:

- **The Change Control Board,** comprised of designated representatives from each funding partner agency, was developed to oversee support and maintenance of the site.
- **The Governance Board,** including the Chief Information Officers (CIOs) from each funding agency, provides strategic and financial guidance to the program.

A key function of the partnership is to set the program's strategic direction. Prior to each year, the partners develop a strategic plan that outlines the broad direction and goals for the upcoming year. This process provides partners with an opportunity to have specific input into the program's direction, either by adding new content or functionality to the site or by implementing other changes.

Program Funding

The GovBenefits.gov partnership also participated in developing a funding model to determine each agency's contribution. The model in use through fiscal year (FY) 2009 is based on the number of benefit programs each agency sponsors on the website, and the total dollar value of these programs. GovBenefits.gov and its partners recently finalized a new funding model that bases contributions on the number of agency programs on the site, total page views of an agency's program descriptions, traffic to an agency's site originating from GovBenefits.gov, and traffic from the partner sites to GovBenefits.gov. The partners approved the new funding model in early 2008 for implementation in FY10.

Program Reporting

As an Executive Branch initiative, GovBenefits.gov is a high-profile program with numerous reporting responsibilities. Each quarter, the program reports to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) on progress towards three types of milestones: deployment, resources, and schedule. Each category includes additional milestones, such as deploying a new version of the site by a particular date or increasing site traffic by a specific percentage. Meeting or exceeding a given milestone for the period earns a green rating from OMB, small lapses or minor delays produce a yellow rating, and a red rating indicates a serious risk such as major delays or cost overruns. Projects that consistently receive red ratings face increased scrutiny. Funding partners are also rated on their own management scorecards for fulfillment of financial and content obligations to GovBenefits.gov. Over the years, GovBenefits.gov has consistently received green ratings on its OMB Performance Scorecard.

Program Value

Communicating program value provides sponsors and other stakeholders with an understanding of the program's worth. GovBenefits.gov has both a value to the citizens it serves and to government operations.

As we know, time is money. GovBenefits.gov developed the "citizen minute" concept to express the dollar value of the time saved using GovBenefits.gov. When citizens save time, they generate value, as demonstrated in Figure 2. GovBenefits.gov estimates that users save 20 minutes finding relevant benefits on the site as opposed to an unstructured search across the internet or through alternative channels. This time savings is multiplied by the number of information transactions citizens perform on GovBenefits.gov to calculate citizen value.

Calculating operational value to the government is based on the cost of a similar information transaction in an alternative channel, a phone call to an agency call center. The average call cost is multiplied by the total number of information transactions – each time a site user views a benefit program description page on GovBenefits.gov or is referred to another agency's website (Figure 3) for more detailed information.

When taken together, the value generated by the GovBenefits.gov program for citizens and government operations in fiscal year 2008 is estimated at over $89 million, nearly 20 times the cost to fund it.

Figure 2: Citizen Value Calculation

Citizen Value Calculation	Average U.S. Wage
Citizen Wages (Mean National Wage 2008)*	$38,761
Citizen Minutes (261 work days x 8 hours/day x 60 minutes)	125,280
Value of "Citizen Minute" (wages/minutes)	$0.31
Total Savings to Citizen Using GovBenefits.gov (20 minutes x value of Citizen Minute)	$6.19
Total Information Transactions (program description pages shown, FY08)	6,435,720
Total FY08 Citizen Value (total savings x total transactions)	$39,823,535

Source: **Social Security Administration.*

Figure 3: Agency Value Calculation

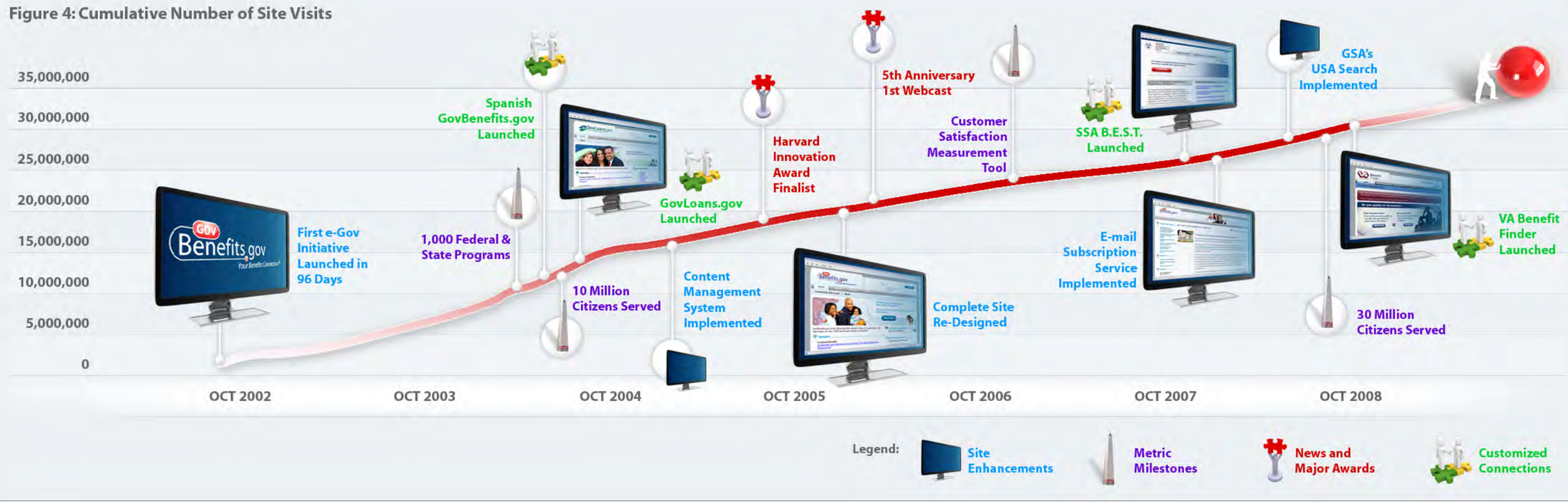
Cost of Industry Average Tier 1 Phone Call*	$6.31
Total Information Transactions (pages viewed) + (referrals to other agency websites, FY08)**	7,899,113
Government Operational Value ($6.31) x (total FY08 information transactions)	$49,843,403

Source: **U.S. General Services Administration (2005), "Improving Citizen Customer Service."*
***WebTrends Site Visit Statistics for GovBenefits.gov.*

Americans pay millions of dollars in taxes each year, and most of that money goes to fund programs designed to help those who need it. GovBenefits.gov gives you an easy way to see if there are funds, training or other benefits available for you.

USA Today
June 11, 2002

Figure 4: Cumulative Number of Site Visits



Senior citizens generally have a lifetime of work experience, so they don't know about entitlement programs they may be eligible for. A valuable website like GovBenefits will allow agencies, particularly ones without a case manager on staff, to be able to tell their clients what programs they may be eligible for, in a relatively simple way.

Marian Peele
Food Bank Director

One of the major things that we do in the guidance profession is we help student look for colleges and find funding for college, as we all know that college is very expensive these days. With GovBenefits.gov, parents and students can go on and take an anonymous survey that can then help them find information about grants and funding and scholarships for college.

Erin O'Malley-Stewart
School Counselor

Technology

GovBenefits.gov's foundation is the technology solutions used to run the website. The following is a summary of the key technology building blocks that enable GovBenefits.gov to deliver on its mission.

"GovBenefits.gov has also undergone a homepage redesign, has a more streamlined questionnaire, features improved access for assistive devices, and includes a survey to help measure customer satisfaction and guide future improvements."

Government Technology

Programming Language

GovBenefits.gov uses the Sun Java™ 2 Enterprise Edition (J2EE) programming language, a mature language that is widely supported in the software development community. The thought behind the decision to use J2EE took into consideration the language's portability, cost-effectiveness, and robustness.

Portal Architecture

In January 2006, the site underwent an upgrade to a flexible portal-based architecture. Transitioning to a portal-based platform increased the speed of site upgrades and changes, translating to lower operating costs. Another major outcome of the upgrade was the ability to share the GovBenefits.gov portal technology with other government agencies. This created the capability to deliver Customized Connections, websites that use GovBenefits.gov technology and functionality to support specific partners.

Content Management System (CMS)

Another important aspect of GovBenefits.gov was how to keep its voluminous content current. The GovBenefits.gov team customized a standard web-based software platform to meet the program's content management requirements. An external content management system allows partners to manage their own benefit information description and provides yet another opportunity to reduce maintenance costs.

Recent Initiatives

Customized Connections

In March 2008, GovBenefits.gov successfully launched its first partner Customized Connection for the U.S. Social Security Administration (SSA). This collaborative effort replaced SSA's existing Benefit Eligibility Screening Tool (BEST) with a nearly identical website (http://best.ssa.gov) supported by GovBenefits.gov's technology and infrastructure. The SSA BEST Customized Connection screens citizens for 17 different Social Security programs and provides them with a list of the benefits they may be eligible to receive. Implementing GovBenefits.gov's powerful search capabilities, pre-screening technology, and program database eliminates redundant systems, saves SSA resources, and reduces citizen effort.

Based on the successful launch of this application, GovBenefits.gov is pursuing additional Customized Connections with other Federal and State agencies to provide the most comprehensive single-source information site to the public. The latest GovBenefits.gov Customized Connection for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs will be launched in 2009.

DisasterAssistance.gov

In 2007, GovBenefits.gov joined an interagency initiative led by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to establish an online "one-stop shop" for disaster assistance. DisasterAssistance.gov is a technical collaboration between two systems, the GovBenefits.gov system and the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) National Emergency Management Information System (NEMIS) Individual Assistance Center (IAC). These systems will guide a disaster victim seamlessly through the GovBenefits.gov pre-screening questionnaire and the NEMIS IAC disaster application, providing the user with forms of assistance they may be eligible to receive. Online application will initially be available for a subset of the benefit programs, and will be expanded in the future for additional forms of assistance.

"The GovBenefits portal combines speed and convenience with information specifically tailored for the individual citizens."

The Honorable Congressman Adam Putnam, R-Fla.
Government Computer News

Email Subscription Service

In April 2008, GovBenefits.gov implemented an email subscription service that allows citizens to receive emails when benefit programs of interest are updated online. This service contributes to GovBenefits.gov's mission by keeping citizens involved in the ever-changing, and often confusing, government information loop. Over 58,000 citizens had subscribed for updates by the end of FY08.

Customer Satisfaction Measurement Tool

In December 2006, GovBenefits.gov incorporated the ForeSee Results customer satisfaction measurement tool, an industry standard online satisfaction measurement and management tool, to better understand customer needs and desires. ForeSee Results uses the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) to quantify and evaluate online customer satisfaction over time. This information is invaluable to GovBenefits.gov's future because it helps determine how to better serve the site's visitors through the addition or modification of features or functionality.

"GovBenefits.gov succeeds because it offers customized outreach to our diverse American population. Americans have never before had such a citizen-centered one-stop shop."

Steven J. Law
Deputy Secretary of Labor

Figure 5: GovBenefits.gov Recognition and Awards

Government Computer News Award ('08)
IRMCO Award—Individual ('08)
Excellence.gov Top 25 Finalist ('04, '05, '07)
Top 20 Finalist for Intergovernmental Solutions Award ('06)
Computerworld Laureate ('06)
E-Gov Pioneer Award ('03)
FOSE Showcase of Excellence Finalist ('03)
Secure E-Biz Winner, Citizen Service, Federal CIO Council ('03)
Award for Excellence in E-Government, The Performance Institute ('02)
Gracie Award for Excellence in Government ('02)

Functionality and Usability Site Enhancements

In 2007, GovBenefits.gov's user interface was redesigned to make the site more usable and customer-centric. The home page was improved to better clarify GovBenefits.gov's purpose and indicates the best way for users to find the benefits and programs they need. Enhancements to the questionnaire included error alerts that immediately notify users of answers they need to correct before they continue completing the questionnaire. Features as simple as these alerts have significantly reduced user frustration as well as the amount of time users spend searching for benefit and assistance information. Other enhancements, such as page titles and an updated navigation bar, were added to help users instantly understand the purpose of each page and help them more effectively navigate through the site.

"Our online courses get a thousand referrals a month from the GovBenefits site from people who otherwise would not have known about it."

Chip Hines
Federal Emergency Management Agency
Federal Times

While the GI bill pays for a portion of my schooling, I still found that the bills racked up. So I went to GovBenefits.gov and took their quick survey, and it gave me a list of benefits I was eligible for. I found that I was eligible for the Federal Pell Grant and the Work Study Program, which I used to pay for school.

Nick Weiss
Reservist and Student

Challenges and Lessons Learned

GovBenefits.gov has successfully managed and mitigated numerous challenges across its history. The result is a series of lessons learned that will continue to improve the website.

Lesson Learned #1:
Establish a clear value proposition.

A clear and convincing value proposition must be communicated to stakeholders to secure their involvement. Cross agency collaboration is possible, but the program has to first answer the "What's in it for me?" question. An early part of GovBenefits.gov's success was the ability to demonstrate to funding partners how they would receive something of value in return for their participation.

Lesson Learned #2:
Develop shared risk and rewards.

GovBenefits.gov created a governance model that gives partners a decision making role while accepting some of the risk associated with the program. Through their contributions, partners place a portion of their budget at risk. GovBenefits.gov mitigates this risk with monthly financial reports and regular communications about the project. Partners benefit when costs associated with screening citizens are reduced at the agency level. GovBenefits.gov became a new outlet for partner agencies to communicate with the public about their programs.

Lesson Learned #3:
Demonstrate tangible results quickly.

GovBenefits.gov was up and running in just 96 days. This quick delivery demonstrated to the partners that GovBenefits.gov was well managed and serious about meeting its mission. Additionally, GovBenefits.gov had the distinction of being the first of the 24 E-Gov initiatives to go live, earning additional attention and support for the program. GovBenefits.gov has continued to produce a quality product and meet deadlines throughout its history.

GovBenefits.gov Outreach to Citizens

Fulfilling GovBenefits.gov's mission requires effective outreach to citizens to increase site awareness and use. Since the site's launch, the Program Management Office has used a wide range of tools to reach citizens – through direct mail, eNewsletters, collateral materials, events, and partnerships. Special emphasis has been placed on influencing community advocates such as counselors and case workers to refer citizens to the site. This approach allows GovBenefits.gov to reach large numbers of citizens through targeted individuals.

Following are examples of recent activities.

- **Distribution of collateral materials:**

  Over 450,000 brochures and posters *distributed in FY08.*

- **Distribution of program updates** to e-mail update subscribers:

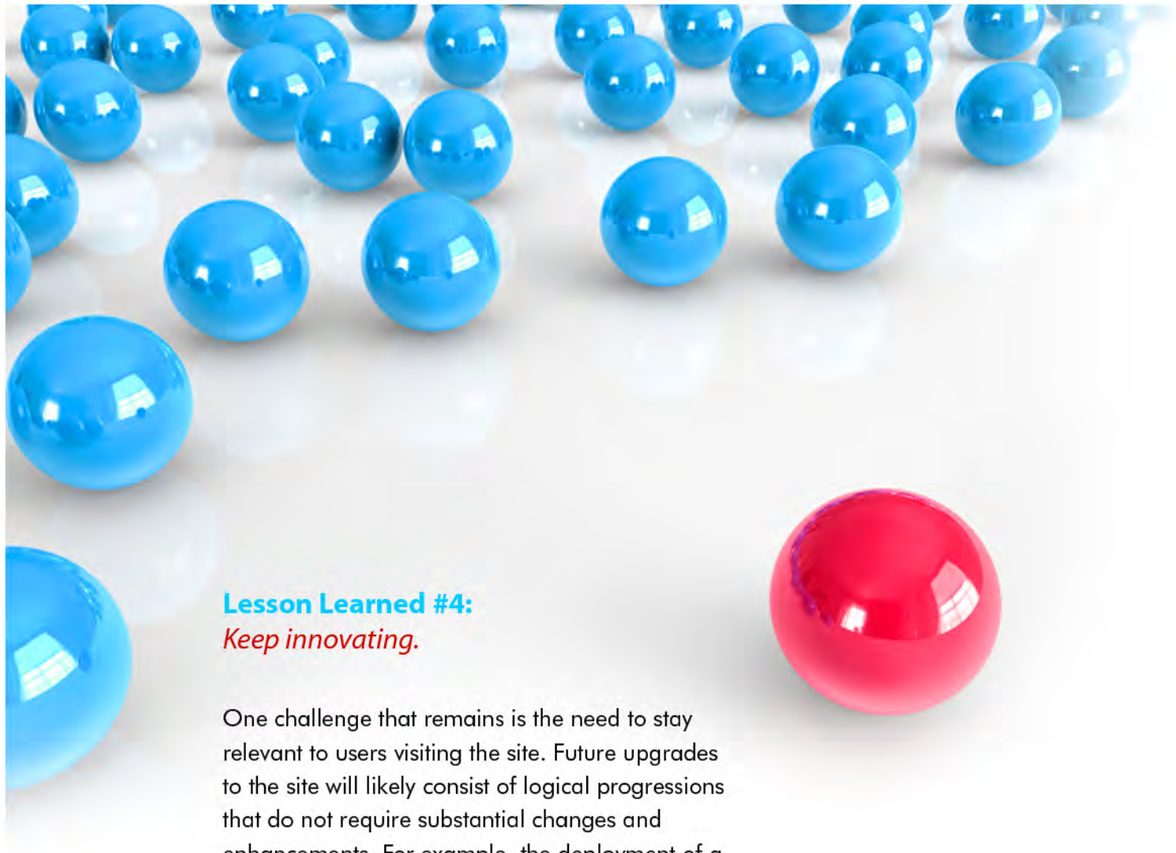
  Over 600,000 e-mails *distributed since May 2008.*

- **Distribution ofGovBenefits.gov-branded grocery bags** distributed through Feeding America, the nation's leading charitable hunger-relief organization:

  200,000 bags *distributed through food banks nationwide.*

- **Distribution of materials** through a partnership with the U.S. Postal Service:

  650,000 informational brochures *distributed to USPS employees.*



Lesson Learned #4:
Keep innovating.

One challenge that remains is the need to stay relevant to users visiting the site. Future upgrades to the site will likely consist of logical progressions that do not require substantial changes and enhancements. For example, the deployment of a portal architecture in January 2006 enabled the program office to offer Customized Connections to other government entities. Could the next step be a one-stop location for users to actually apply online for benefit programs? DisasterAssistance.gov will test the program's ability to effectively escort a visitor from the beginning of a benefit information search through to actual application. Once proven successful, GovBenefits.gov may be able to build a business case for adding online application features and evolving the site to the next level of citizen service.

December 2008

www.GovBenefits.gov