

nextGen

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT BY 



2023 NextGen Public Service Award Winners

GovLoop and Young Government Leaders are proud to host the 14th annual NextGen Public Service Awards for superior public service and achievement, in conjunction with the NextGen Government Training Summit in October 2023. We are celebrating 12 amazing winners across federal, state and local government. The awards recognize deserving individuals who are selected from the public service community for their intelligence, exuberance and dedication to improving and invigorating government.

Award Categories

Advancing Tech Pioneers

This category recognizes a forward thinker who has used technology as part of their approach to transformation. This individual is innovative, trying to move their agency to tools such as artificial intelligence or machine learning that allow employees more time to do mission-critical work.

Managers/Supervisors of the Year

This category recognizes a manager or supervisor who goes above and beyond for their team and individual contributors. They care about their team, show up for them, listen to their ideas and advocate needs to upper management.

Outstanding Colleague

This category recognizes an individual who goes above and beyond day-to-day requirements. Whether they volunteer to run meetings, contribute ideas or help colleagues in need, you can always count on them to pull their weight and more.

DEIA Champions

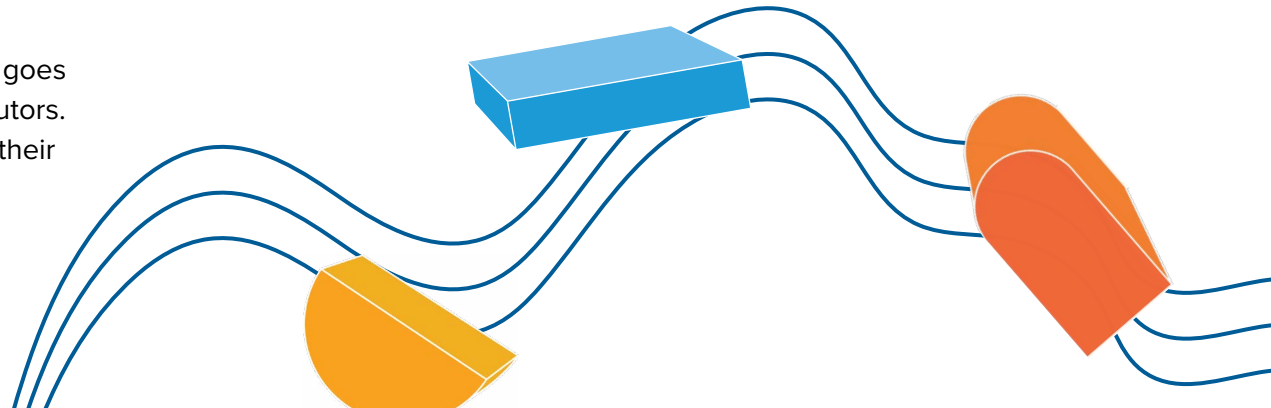
This category recognizes individuals who are passionate about diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility (DEIA) in the workplace. They have actively improved or implemented processes, initiatives, training, awareness or other efforts that promote DEIA at their agency.

Communicators of the Year

This category recognizes an individual who demonstrates strategic communication, both internally and externally at their agency. This person will push the envelope to find innovative ways to share their message while keeping employees and stakeholders engaged.

Innovators of the Year

This category recognizes an individual who has identified and improved their organization in an innovative way – whether this employee improved remote/hybrid work, brought a process up-to-date or found a way to enhance the organization’s culture.



Eli Holmes

Research Fish Biologist, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)



What the Nominator Said

A population ecologist for the Northwest Fisheries Science Center, Eli has championed open science — the movement to make science more accessible and collaborative — and made it a national-level reality at NOAA Fisheries. She knows that federal agencies need to embrace open science practices to increase transparency, reproducibility and open review of scientific research. That increases the rigor and reliability of scientific research, reduces staff time and costs, and fosters greater public trust in science-based regulatory decisions.

Holmes' Impact on Government

With a vision for modernizing the science enterprise at NMFS, Eli has been teaching colleagues — within NOAA and worldwide — how to use tools that convert data into action. “I’m in the last decade of my public service,” Holmes said. Because of climate change and its impact on species, “we’re at this all-hands-on-deck moment. And that’s affected how I’ve migrated to focusing on younger scientists and mentoring.”

How Holmes Got Started in Government

As an applied mathematician with a doctorate in zoology, Eli may seem the ideal candidate for the job she does now, but her route there was indirect. After post-graduate field work in Colorado, she wanted to return to Seattle.

“I started cold emailing,” she said. “And for some reason, I was stuck on the idea of working on Steller sea lions.” She was offered a two-year position at the Alaska Fisheries Science Center, where she saw her work reflected in lawsuits to protect the endangered marine mammals. “I just felt so connected to things really making a difference,” she said. That experience made her want a federal position, and when one became available at NOAA’s Northwest Fisheries Science Center, she went for it.

‘I’m in public service because ... ’

“I always wanted to be the person who’s out there helping with things, creating things, and I just have a lot of satisfaction when I’m in that role. So, I think I would always have been drawn to some kind of service position, and in public service I feel like I make a big difference.”

Michael Berkholtz

*Manager of Business Relations,
Federal Acquisition Service,
Office of Information Technology
Category (ITC), U.S. General
Services Administration*



What the Nominator Said

When a new technology hits the market, an agency IT executive might have great ideas for how to put it work, either to solve a long-standing challenge or to deliver services in a new way. But they also might feel stymied, unsure about the ramifications for their daily operations, finances, cybersecurity and a host of other areas. Michael is at the forefront of ITC efforts to help agencies understand the potential value, risks and pitfalls involved in technologies such as 5G and 6G wireless communications, quantum resistant cryptography, and 3D projected holograms.

Berkholtz's Impact on Government

Michael helped create ITC's Emerging Technology Working Group, which brings together leading experts in different disciplines, including technology, acquisition and finance. The group has developed an emerging technology roadmap covering dozens of technologies. It assesses each one's maturity, looks at its governmentwide adoption level and offers a deep-dive primer. Michael also helped establish the ITC Solutions Lab, an environment for proof-of-concept testing and demonstrations. "It's about educating ourselves on new technologies," Michael said, and "understanding not only the technical capabilities, but what are some of the business models that are out there? How do those technologies fit into the offerings that ITC has today?"

How Berkholtz Got Started in Government

Michael began his government career in 2000, working as a staff assistant and assistant systems administrator at the Senate Budget Committee, where he answered phones, grabbed faxes and helped set up email. Now he's helping agencies think about the potential role of quantum-resistant cryptography and 3D holograms. "Things definitely have changed," he said. "I've had a lot of very fortunate experiences, good bosses and a lot of good opportunities to do strategic planning, budgeting and finance, policy work, and now technology."

'I'm in public service because ...'

"I'm in public service because I think things can work better, and I think I can help."

Tamera Wells-Lee

Associate Director, Office of Publishing, Congressional Research Service (CRS), Library of Congress



What the Nominator Said

In the past several years, Tamera has had a hand in several high-profile initiatives that will have a lasting impact on CRS. For example, she oversaw a major reorganization that resulted in a new publishing division, which she now leads. She also helped spearhead an initiative in which CRS made thousands of reports public, facilitating access to the top-level research and analysis carried out by the office. But equally important, Tamera has demonstrated unparalleled dedication to building a diverse, inclusive workplace grounded in respect and integrity.

Wells-Lee's Impact on Government

Tamera cares deeply about each individual on her team and advocates for their needs wherever possible. She also is seen as a champion for improving diversity, equity and inclusion, not just at her agency but governmentwide. "I really know how it feels to be in a space where there may not be a lot of people who look like me, think like me, or ... [are] open to what I may have to say," she said. "This has enabled me to be a compassionate leader, caring not only about my organization's mission, but equally about the people who are doing the work."

How Wells-Lee Got Started in Government

Tamera worked in the private sector for 17 years, climbing a career ladder in publishing. She was fortunate to work with people who taught her about the human side of leadership and the idea of the servant leader, and that opened her to new possibilities for herself. "I eventually came to a place where, although I was happy in the private sector, I thought I could make a bigger impact in the public sector as a civil servant," she said. Fortuitously, while working on a project with the Library of Congress, she saw a job posting for CRS, jumped at it and never looked back.

'I'm in public service because ...'

"I wholeheartedly prescribe to the biblical tenet that to whom much is given, much will be required... I take very seriously my role as a manager and ... a leader, where I celebrate, appreciate, and advocate for those who I have been entrusted to lead."



Eric Clark

*Business Relations Unit Manager,
Colorado Division of Vocational
Rehabilitation (DVR)*



What the Nominator Said

DVR helps individuals with disabilities find employment and live independently. Eric's group works to connect them with businesses and employers across Colorado and provides a variety of resources. Before he joined DVR, it had no official business relations unit, just a group of business outreach specialists whose work was often overlooked. Now, the team is one of DVR's top-performing units.

Clark's Impact on Government

Within Colorado, Eric seems to be everywhere at once: developing a new program that increases the number of individuals enrolled in state workforce centers, educating employers on the concept of skills-based hiring, and reorganizing his unit to strengthen staff retention and provide better customer service. He also represents Colorado on the National Employment Team, which brings together vocational rehabilitation leaders nationwide. "I get the opportunity to make sure that DVR has a seat at the table in a variety of workforce development activities," said Eric. "And I get to work with 12 amazing people every day who are doing the real work, serving businesses and jobseekers across Colorado."

How Clark Got Started in Government

Growing up, Eric didn't realize that a career in government was even a possibility. Still, he always had what he calls "a servant heart": that is, the desire to use his abilities to benefit other people. He got his first exposure to public service in college, when he worked for two years as a deputy probation officer. "In that role, I learned a little bit about government — that a core tenet of government should be service," he said. Later, a family member experienced a disabling event, and Eric saw firsthand the impact that had. He went back to school for a master's degree in rehabilitation counseling and then went to work at DVR.

'I'm in public service because ...'

"It's the best opportunity to leave a lasting impression in my community and also to help pave a positive path for my kids when they're old. When I'm working with a person or working with a business, I'm always thinking, 'Eventually, that person or business might supervise my kids. They might hire my kids.'"

Mekel Ostlund

Prevention Specialist,
Utah County Health Department



What the Nominator Said

Mekel offers exceptional training and assistance to community members and prevention workers, including teaching them how to administer naloxone, an opioid overdose antagonist. As a certified “Communities That Care” coach, she helps form prevention-focused community coalitions and works with libraries to provide naloxone kits for homeless populations. And within the department, Mekel looks for tasks that need attention and finds ways to accomplish them. That includes creating more efficient processes and helping the department better use technology. She is a “powerhouse, a leader and a true joy in our county. She’s the best example of a good public servant I’ve ever seen.”

Ostlund’s Impact on Government

Perhaps her greatest impact is teaching and providing tools to coalition members and coordinators so they can positively impact their communities. After all, she said, “community problems need community solutions.” The training Mekel offers is evidence-based; it focuses on what’s been proven to prevent youth drug use, rather than on anti-drug campaigns from years past. She’s also streamlined the public’s access to department information by implementing QR codes that allow people to electronically find what they need. That reduces paper waste and significantly lowers costs.

How Ostlund Got Started in Government

Mekel didn’t dream of becoming a government employee, but her interest in public health is long-standing: As a teenager, the suicide rate in her area increased and the adults in her life were unsure how to respond, she said. Upon entering the public sector, “I really wanted to give back ... and give my community ... more tools in their toolkit of life [to know] how to react to things like that,” she explained.

Mekel eventually discovered that the risk factors for suicide are similar to those for substance abuse, and so she became invested in substance abuse prevention as well. “That’s kind of how I ended up in government work,” she said. “I found a passion there, and I went for it.”

‘I’m in public service because ... ’

“I believe that by empowering individuals, we empower our communities, and we make our communities better.”

Marisa Pedro

Program Analyst, Business Process Management Program, U.S. Census Bureau



What the Nominator Said

Marisa develops and conducts workshops and training programs regarding business process models, but a yearslong building restoration effort at the Census Bureau has prevented in-person training since March 2020. With no prior e-learning experience, she stepped forward to learn the technology needed to create online tutorials for Census employees and contractors. She develops e-learning scripts and visual aids, records and edits dozens of videos and is working to make a comprehensive course available to agency staff for official credit, among other achievements. Marisa's self-confidence and awareness of how education impacts staff goals motivated her to step up in unexpected ways.

Pedro's Impact on Government

Numerous Census Bureau staff have provided unsolicited positive feedback on Marisa's impressive battery of e-learning videos, which allow students to learn what they want, when they want and as often as they want. But in addition to developing the e-trainings, Marisa enjoys working with people directly after they've completed a tutorial, so she can see its impact. "I especially love it when I see a lightbulb go off for people during a workshop, when they learn for the first time what another area does" and the communication silos break down, she said.

How Pedro Got Started in Government

Marisa had no master plan to become a public servant. "It was luck, pure and simple," she remembered. A discussion of census data in her college marketing class piqued her interest in Census Bureau job opportunities. Eventually, she happened to apply for the right Bureau position in the right location at the right time: to be a survey clerk in the Boston office when a small-scale community survey was launching to all counties nationwide. "They were looking for people to help ... ramp up that survey," she said, "so that's how I got in."

'I'm in public service because ...'

"Government is a necessary institution that does serve the public," Marisa said. "So I'm doing my part to make sure my agency is providing the right service to all of the people."

Ethan Fechter-Leggett

*Lead Research Epidemiologist,
National Institute for Occupational
Safety and Health (NIOSH), Centers
for Disease Control and Prevention
(CDC), U.S. Department of Health
and Human Services*



What the Nominator Said

At NIOSH, Ethan studies respiratory disease, especially concerning workers' health and safety. He leads research studies and site visits to collect and analyze data and uses it to provide technical assistance. In particular, Ethan investigates the causes of mortality among dentists to determine if past occupational exposures result in lung disease. He is known to go above and beyond to foster understanding, respect and safety.

Fechter-Leggett's Impact on Government

Ethan's work helps employers create safe and healthy workplaces that are free of respiratory hazards, and he advances DEIA by studying the underlying drivers of inequity, including policies, procedures and practices that systematically burden or disadvantage some groups over others.

"I see myself having an impact at the institutional and hopefully structural level by challenging those status quos that uphold the systems, policies and procedures that reinforce and perpetuate inequities," he said.

How Fechter-Leggett Got Started in Government

As he worked toward his veterinary degree, Ethan learned about the Epidemic Intelligence Service, which provides on-the-job training in applied epidemiology at the CDC.

He spent two years there before joining NIOSH to focus on occupational health. It "has a lot of overlap with environmental health," he said.

As a vet, he addressed population health and environmental issues, gaining expertise that he brings into his current role.

"I think it's actually quite similar to looking at human health within populations...and then making recommendations and systemic changes that could optimize opportunities for health for everyone in the population," he said.

'I'm in public service because ...'

"I feel a certain sense of pride in serving my community — whether that be a very specific community like transgender folks within the LGBTQ+ community, or very broad, as in the United States. Working at the federal level in public health allows me to be a public servant working towards health equity for all people in the United States."

Caroline Goon

Director of External Affairs, White House Initiative on Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)



What the Nominator Said

Caroline is leading the conversation across government about how to carry out Executive Order 14031, “Advancing Equity, Justice, and Opportunity for Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders.” In this role, she works with community groups and organizations nationwide to advance equity, justice and opportunity for Asian American (AA) and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI) communities. She also is spearheading efforts to understand the obstacles that AA and NHPI employees face within the federal government and to support their professional development.

Goon’s Impact on Government

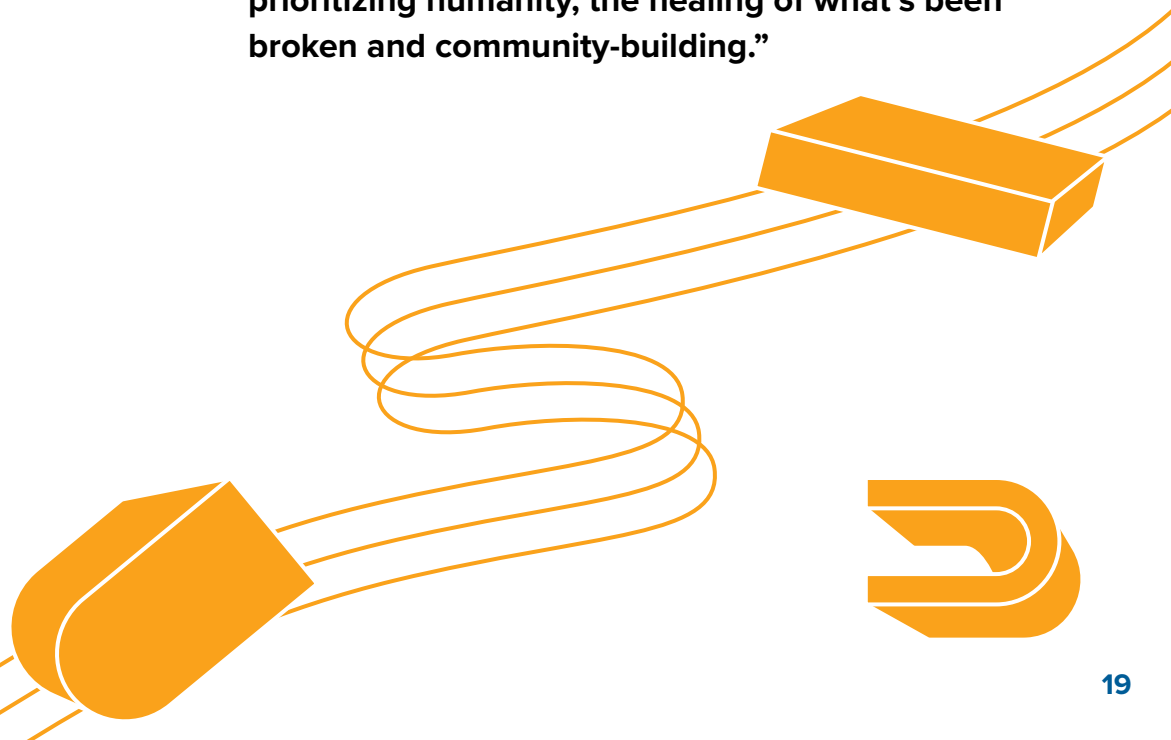
Caroline’s current role builds on the work she has done within the National Institutes of Health (NIH), where she has been a bridge and voice for the agency’s AA and NHPI workforce. Her goal, then as now, is to develop “a shared understanding around our historical and current contextual issues,” she said. In short, what are the barriers that AA and NHPI communities face, and how can they overcome them? Caroline recognizes that this work is just beginning and is bound to be bumpy. But “I’m hoping that my impact will be felt as we close the gap between good intentions and real change,” she said.

How Goon Got Started in Government

Caroline spent more than a dozen years working in higher education administration roles before joining NIH as the Principal Strategist for the Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander Employment Portfolio in the agency’s Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. She joined NIH because she saw that it, and HHS as a whole, understood the importance of DEIA. “HHS and NIH recognize that the principles of DEIA are an absolute must to achieving better health for all,” she said. “We are a people-centered organization, where the workforce development priorities and research priorities all strive to reflect the diversity of our nation.”

‘I’m in public service because ... ’

“The work surrounding DEIA is about people, and it’s about human lives. I am in public service because I feel the urgency and am committed to prioritizing humanity, the healing of what’s been broken and community-building.”



Jennifer Parisien

Policy Advisor, Office of Tribal and Native Affairs, U.S. Department of the Treasury



What the Nominator Said

Jen is an educator at the newly created Office of Tribal and Native Affairs. She develops the Treasury’s relationship with tribes, establishing frameworks for programming that affects their economies. Jen is an expert in tribal compliance and reporting on the use of federal funds. She provides tribes with equitable solutions, helping them achieve favorable outcomes despite, in many cases, a lack of infrastructure.

Parisien’s Impact on Government

Jen facilitates the distribution of equitable resources for low-capacity communities, which face many obstacles. She helped secure \$375,000 of customer experience funds by working with the Office of Management and Budget to leverage a Treasury reporting solution that all agencies and low-capacity recipients can use.

She shares her knowledge about factors that improve the success of tribal grant applications, and she provides information about financial reporting, tax credit opportunities and information access. Jen’s work improves the lives of people who previously lacked capital and basic resources, such as housing and water.

How Parisien Got Started in Government

Jen first pursued a financial career, but her experience gradually moved her toward government. That included work with government accounting software, municipal utility billing programs, grants, volunteering for OMB, and various economic development projects.

Strong examples in her family, colleagues, tribe, and other women in tribal finance, motivated Jen to keep learning about how government can help tribal communities.

“It was definitely not an easy journey from growing up on my reservation in North Dakota, which I love and I’m so proud to be from,” she said. “But I think this is really where I’m meant to be. I think we have to trust sometimes that, even if things aren’t easy, we’ll be provided with a clear and promising path. So, I didn’t intend to get into the federal government, but it’s definitely my path, where I belong.”

‘I’m in public service because ... ’

“In many native cultures, including my own, we aim to make decisions based on the seventh-generation principle: The decisions that we make today impact the seventh generation in the future.... So, in that same spirit here at Treasury, you take in that circle of knowledge and collaboration ... to learn about the experiences of people and to use that knowledge to help shape policy decisions, and then form guidance for the people.”

Justin Barnes

Department Analyst,
Calaveras County Public Health



What the Nominator Said

Justin manages the funding for the Public Health department in Calaveras County, California. He secures more than 30 grants each year and designs spending plans to increase the level of health in his community. He also improves communication with the community about health programming through the department's media unit and outreach events, such as school-based nutrition and physical fitness workshops.

Additionally, Justin spearheads the department's Workplace Wellness Committee. His holistic approach, which includes promoting well-being, exercise facilities and nutrition workshops, has raised the levels of health, fitness, work-life balance and productivity of agency employees, increasing retention and preventing burnout.

Barnes' Impact on Government

Justin maintains funding streams that support crucial health education and emergency preparedness programs in the community. Through his work with media and outreach, he keeps the community informed about health resources.

In advocating for workplace wellness, Justin considers individual employee needs in order to create a supportive and inclusive environment. His wellness program has produced tangible results, such as increased employee satisfaction, improved overall health and a decrease in absenteeism.

"We all love serving our community, but that doesn't always mean it's easy," he said. "I think internally that's the majority of my impact — to keep morale up, keep people connected to each other, enjoying their work...so that people are excited to come to their jobs, and they're eager to serve the community because their personal needs are being met at their job, so they can help people meet their needs out in the world."

How Barnes Got Started in Government

"I remember the day because it was such a wild time," he said, referring to his second day on the job as a community health assistant serving mass COVID vaccination clinics in March 2021.

Before that, he'd studied exercise science and planned for a career teaching children about nutrition and physical activity. His interest in that led him to public health and public service,

but what kept him there was something else. "It was the realization that it's a beautiful thing, where you get to come to work and just figure out how you're going help your community," he said.

'I'm in public service because ...'

"I want to make a difference ... without asking the community for anything in return — just improving their health and wellbeing, making people's lives better. Because that's what government should do."

Wendy Bowerman

*Quality Assurance Specialist,
U.S. Department of Health and
Human Services*



What the Nominator Said

Wendy is a member of the Division of Quality Control for the Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response’s Strategic National Stockpile (SNS), which oversees distribution of pharmaceuticals and other medical countermeasures during public health emergencies. In the past several years, Wendy has pioneered several innovative initiatives that have enhanced the division’s daily operations. For example, during the pandemic, she created an extensive dashboard that tracked the largest distribution of personal protective equipment in U.S. history, involving 335 distribution sites and 20 vendors.

Bowerman’s Impact on Government

During a public health emergency, such as an outbreak or a natural disaster, quality control is essential to ensuring that SNS’ response is swift and effective. Wendy is always looking for new ways to help the division meet the challenge — even if it means raising her own bar. For example, after training herself on the Visual Basic coding language, she developed, tested and deployed a system that tracks and documents compliance and quality management training for the division’s 184 employees. As she sees it, she serves the nation by serving her SNS colleagues. “I work with them every day, but they’re still the American people and they’re taxpayers, so they deserve service from me,” she said.

How Bowerman Got Started in Government

Wendy initially landed a job with a large systems integrator that was supporting quality assurance/control efforts at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. For five years, she saw the vital role that her government coworkers played in helping the nation prepare for and respond to public health emergencies. She recognized how quality control made that possible, and she wanted to be part of it. “It became a little selfish, because I wanted to make sure that [those medical assets] were always available, and always high-quality, for my own family and other people I know.”

‘I’m in public service because ... ’

“When I was very young ... I dedicated my life to God. At that point, I wanted to serve Him. And I do believe that the public service I’m doing is in service to God and people.”

Prakhar Bajpai

Senior Data Scientist, Office of Innovation, City of Austin, Texas



What the Nominator Said

Prakhar greatly helps teams through his innovative use of data and technology to improve government operations, facilitate effective decision-making and enhance service delivery. He is a natural leader, strongly committed to continuous improvement, who makes positive, meaningful, and lasting change for government. He is unafraid to experiment with new strategies and technical solutions and clearly articulates his ideas to both technical and non-technical audiences. And Prakhar is a great mentor, always finding a way to bring people together with a positive spirit to achieve successful outcomes. His servant-leader approach is impressive.

Bajpai's Impact on Government

He leads the city's first data learning cohort, which is helping more than 140 city leaders and staff develop data-literacy skills, improve data-based decision-making, enhance collaboration and increase diversity of thought and practice. Prakhar has curated learning paths for the cohort and created an online community where members can hear guest speakers and share best practices, among other activities.

He also has developed the city's Neighborhood Prosperity Dashboard (NPD), which uses real-time, neighborhood-specific data to gauge how residents are faring. The dashboard tracks more than 80 measures across five categories: economic, health, education, civic engagement, and social justice. Various lines of business use NPD to make policy decisions and allocate resources, and it's becoming a model for other cities. Prakhar contributes to other city projects as well. "I'm seeing," he said, "the work that I'm doing making an actual impact on people."

How Bajpai Got Started in Government

In 2019, Prakhar was an intern at Austin's publicly owned utility company, and that attracted him to public service, local government in particular. He began working for the city's Office of Innovation in 2020 at the height of the pandemic. The job "has been a great experience for me overall," he said.

'I'm in public service because ...'

"The kind of work that I do, I am able to help the most vulnerable populations [in] the city. I want to make sure that whatever ... technologies we are using here in the City of Austin, they help the people who need [them] the most."



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