

## **GOVERNMENT TECHNOLOGY**

### **Government Technology**

#### **Suggestion Box**

By Adam Stone  
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Rep. Holly Benson, R-Pensacola, wants to bring relief to the state's 3.5 million uninsured residents. To do it, she needs ideas -- lots of ideas.

"There is not just one fix to the uninsured," Benson said.

To that end, she established Florida Health Counts, a Web-based project aimed at generating buzz around those without health insurance. Florida Health Counts is an outgrowth of a larger effort by Rep. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., whose "100 Innovative Ideas for Florida's Future" called for original concepts to address the issue of residents without health insurance, among other topics.

The Health Counts [Web site](#) invites citizens to share their thoughts on the topic.

As with many such efforts, Florida Health Counts faces the possibility of taking on more data than it can handle, which is why it has engaged Naples, Fla.-based technology provider Neighborhood America to help categorize and organize the myriad suggestions flowing into the site.

"We provide a software service solution that enables government agencies -- local, state and federal -- to collect and manage public comment, and to conduct large-scale public outreach campaigns," said Kim Patrick Kobza, Neighborhood America's president and CEO.

Also marketed as an IBM-branded product, Neighborhood America offers numerous tools intended to help officials gather and sort public comments on issues facing the state or local government or particular state or local government initiatives.

On the front end, project managers, legislative bodies and others can collect and analyze public comment gleaned through traditional means, such as public hearings. The software can also collect and organize online public input. A back-end tool provides task, document and image management, discussion boards and other functionalities.

This solution can take free-form data such as e-mail comments and organize it into coherent categories. Without such capabilities, the public comment process can be daunting. "You could put up a Web form and say, 'Tell me what you think,'" Kobza said. "What will you get? You get 40,000 e-mails to read."

Software offers a more methodical approach -- one that yields more usable data. "You can segment the data by how you ask the questions: Do you agree with the choice and if so, why? Do you disagree with the choice and if so why?" Kobza said. "So you start by segmenting the responses by how you phrase the questions."

#### **Sift and Sort**

Once replies enter the system, they can be sorted manually, or an algorithm can be written to search for certain verbal patterns. These manual and algorithmic searches simplify the sorting of results. Such manual

and automatic tools are especially useful when the initial questions have been framed in such a way that the answers can be easily sorted into broad response types prior to being grouped into more specific categories.

"Rather than trying to apply the algorithmic approach entirely, you adopt an 80 percent solution," Kobza said. "If Rep. Benson had 1,000 responses, 80 percent could be categorized just by the way she asks the questions."

IBM describes a range of benefits to this kind of software-based approach. Staff can be more productive, citizen comment projects can be less expensive and project data can be shared across government.

Florida Health Counts went live in September, and ideas will be collected until early November.

Benson said the automation of comment processing helps her get a quick read on what topics seem to be generating the greatest interest. "It helps us if they sort it by category," she said, "because once you start going through ideas there are general categories that begin to emerge."

The software costs \$27,990 per year including applications, hosting and all services including security, training and analytic services. Benson said it allows her staff to more easily keep track of large documents such as white papers and position papers.

Benson said she would like to see the insights from Florida Health Counts ultimately form the basis for new legislation for the coming lawmaking session, and the Neighborhood America software could also help her with the language of the bill.

"The hope is that once we start moving into crafting legislation, then we also would post bill language online," she said, adding that the software could then also help organize citizen comment on the potential laws.

All this technology -- both the Health Counts Web site and Neighborhood America's support -- plays a crucial role in addressing a serious public policy issue, Benson said.

"When you have a policy issue as complicated and as important as dealing with the uninsured, you need to build broader consensus with solutions that have broader buy-in," she said. "So a Web site like this allows you to reach across stakeholder groups, across a very large state, to get both buy-in and great ideas."

Paired with analytic software, Benson said, the Web site is allowing her to capture ideas that she otherwise might not have found."

**Adam Stone**

Contributing Writer

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