CLEARLY A BETTER CLEARANCE PROCESS

Strong internal controls help ensure HUD maintains compliance with laws and regulations. Effective controls and processes work to maximize the value of every dollar the Department spends. A major component of the Department's internal controls is the HUD Office of Public and Indian Housing's (PIH) clearance process. The PIH clearance process exists to ensure published directives, notices of funding availability, and guidebooks are comprehensive, consistent, and in accordance with Federal requirements.

What was the challenge?

Prior to July 2019, the PIH internal clearance process had remained essentially the same for decades. Employees gained final approval for documents, regulations, policies, and general guidance through a paper-based review process. Reliance on paper created significant impediments to the effectiveness of clearance procedures. Examples include:

- **Internal controls:** Inconsistent clearance processes within PIH offices added time, complication, and additional work to a time-sensitive process. Multiple staff from PIH offices would provide unconsolidated comments, electronically and as hand-written edits on printouts.
- **Efficiency:** The need to physically walk documents between offices led to 1) Shortened review times for recipients; 2) Increased prevalence of human error; 3) Misplaced documents; and 4) Greater opportunities for critical input to be missed.
- **Transparency:** Real-time awareness of documents' clearance statuses was nonexistent. The piecemeal nature of the paper-based process encouraged frustration as signatures, responses, and versions were not consolidated in a central location.
- **Accountability:** The lack of transparency led to poor accountability. Difficulties tracking changes and ensuring duties were completed resulted in delayed or incomplete clearances.
- **Version Control:** Identifying the latest version of documents being routed via paper and email through PIH's ten offices was problematic. PIH faced significant risk that wrong versions of documents could be sent into HUD-wide Clearance or published.

What was the solution?

Recognizing the need for improvement, PIH developed an automated, paperless internal clearance process.

Work began with a planning stage to develop a clear understanding of the "as-is" process. Other Federal agencies were contacted to see how they handled similar processes. Through these conversations, PIH evaluated several potential platforms that could be used to build a digital clearance system. Considerable weight was given to tools that would improve internal controls, automate the process, and eliminate paper. After deep consideration, Microsoft SharePoint was selected for its accessibility, cost-effectiveness, and ability to resolve existing challenges.[1]

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[1] SharePoint's strengths stemmed from its availability on all HUD employees' work computers and it not being subject to termination due to nonrenewal of contracts. The standard inclusion of SharePoint, as part of the Microsoft Office suite of products, lends to its relevance and longevity. SharePoint's status as a standard application further ensures HUD will maintain control and access to the data contained in the system. Timely support can be provided for system modifications, enhancements, and training as HUD's needs change.

Once SharePoint was selected, the new system's design was conceptualized as part of the "design and build" phase. Specific emphasis was placed on addressing weaknesses of the preexisting manual process. The new system automated the obtainment of office responses, advancement of documents, delivery of system-generated notifications, and other key tasks. The SharePoint site features friendly site navigation, as attested by PIH employees, that allows for easy observation of clearance statuses. Additionally, site permissions were limited to only allow relevant users to provide clearance inputs. This feature effectively minimizes data integrity and process control risks.

After the completion of extensive testing and training for employees, the new PIH internal clearance system went live in July 2019.

What was the result?

The new PIH internal clearance system has completely transformed and modernized the way documents are cleared. Time-sensitive notices, funding, and rule changes are now capable of being fully processed in record time. This allows HUD to more effectively respond to urgent public concerns by further optimizing PIH service delivery.

Future Steps

The project is one of many new process improvement initiatives that have been or will be completed without contractors. From start to finish, PIH expended 1,455 hours (less than the cost of one full-time employee) to digitalize the previous paper-based process. PIH expects to build on this project's success by expanding use of resident expertise to provide in-house solutions to Departmental challenges.