

USAGov Supports the Federal COVID-19 Response – Transcript

Please stand by for realtime captions.

[The event is on a recess. The session will reconvene at 4:45 ET. Captioner on standby.]

Hello, everyone, and just 10 minutes, we will have our presentation.

Hello, everyone. Welcome to our session on USA.com with the federal COVID response. We will get started in 5 minutes.

Welcome to the session, USAGov supports the federal COVID-19 response. I need to run over a few logistics with you. Have questions, these insert them into the chat box in the lower right-hand corner of your screen. After the presentation, we will relay the questions to the presenters. The session is being recorded, as is every session in the conference. They will be available on the event page on line. Elected a presenters for joining us today. That, please take it away.

Hello, thank you for letting us speak to you about USAGov's response to the COVID-19 pandemic today. I am Jim McGovern. And during times of national emergency, according to our emergency sport activity. I'm joined today by 1024, who is the research lead whom helps us make decisions and, Claire Loxsom, who handles the bilingual media channels. And I'm going to get us started with some background on the program. So, USAGov is housed in the General services administration, TSA, and providing government information to the public is nothing new to us. Our organization is celebrating the 50th anniversary this year. Way back in 1970, GSA was already the administrative home of a nationwide network of 26 federal information centers, which people could visit in person. The centers were generally located in the lobbies of federal buildings and the answer government questions from the public. You heard me right. Once upon a time, you could just show up to a government building and get your question answered. So, these centers gradually moved from providing in-person service locally to answering questions by telephone nationally. Bilingual service still exist today as the USAGov center. So between 1917 one and 2016, we had free or low-cost booklets with helpful consumer information and distributed 1.2 billion publications out of the distribution warehouse in Pueblo, Colorado. From 1997 until 2016, we published the wildly popular consumer action handbook and the Spanish counterpart. Both were filled with consumer education information and easy to understand instructions on how to get the wrongs righted. In 2000, we launched USA.gov, and followed in 2002 by launching the Spanish website, which was known as 1st quarter of. And now known as USA.GOV in Spanish. The names of change over the years but they content admission remains the same. I hope that we are done changing names. Today, we use the website to the contact center and the social media presence to continue to be the front door to government information and services. We work in the idea that the public experience should be easy and reliable. We clarify, we kill rumors, and we provide clear information. We think about how people search for government information and how they use it. This helps us

sympathy by Desmond Semper Fi and provide information for those who are not experts at navigating the government. We reach out to people where they are to connect them with the government information and services they need when they need it. I certainly do not need to tell this group that the public has lots of questions and in fiscal year 2020, we saw about 90 million visits to our website. Most of that traffic is driven by commercial search engines. COVID-19 really changed the traffic to our website and our contact center. Compared to FY 2019, we saw a 100% increase in traffic to our website and a 35% increase in calls and chats in our contact center in quarters 2 and 3 of the fiscal year. What happens when we know that there is confusion out there, but maybe not everyone is reaching out to us directly? A small but mighty support report on social media and email channels. And, thanks to our Eakly despicably small but capable outreach team can answer questions and direct people to the resources they need before they even come to us. So, with 1 million followers on twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, and more than 850,000 email subscribers, we are able to reach a lot of people who might not even know about government information and services that are available to them. So, who comes to you at USA.gov? The primary audience is the general public, Spanish dominant Hispanics, and government agencies use the broad reach to amplify the messaging. We work with kids work at school reports, veterans getting benefits, families who need a home loan, people with disabilities learning about their rights, or someone who is home and has just been destroyed by a hurricane and need help rebuilding their life. Should point out that the ministry messaging is not necessarily a direct translation of the English content. The English speaking audience is significantly different than our Spanish-speaking audience because most of the Spanish-speaking audience are newcomers to the U.S.. People grow up in different countries where they have different programs and processes for accessing government services. So, since the U.S. government is unfamiliar to them, we need to give them a little more context to help them find what they need. So, that is what we do day today. During a national emergency, we have a special role to play. USA.gov has played a significant role in federal emergency communications. In September 11, 2001, our response developed organically since then, we have worked closely with the federal web counsel to refine our role in federal emergency communications, so now our role is codified in the GSA mission essential functions as well as the emergency support function 50 which is also known as ESF 15 which deals with crisis communications. In a typical year, it means that we wrap up the emergency team to respond to hurricanes, but the processes are adaptable to other emergency situations as well. So, generally speaking, we are required to provide official information to the public via web and social media, and chat in English and Spanish. We participate in exercises that are organized by agencies to give us the opportunity to practice how we would respond to different emergencies. This allows this to demonstrate our strength and also identify weaknesses so we can address those issues and be ready to handle anything that could possibly come up. We support the ESF 15 function for hurricane season rainy times during national emergency like now with COVID-19. During an emergency we take our direction from DHS Amber dissipate in the national incident -- communication calls. These are calls that convene across the agency group to share information. Also, we communicate and coordinate with the rest of the federal web community. How do we do it? We have a cross Porsche functional core team that snaps into action for emergencies. Next up, Maryetta and Claire are going to talk about the work we do on the website and our outreach activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. I am going to

pass it off to Marietta to get us started. Hold on. I am passing it off. Just one moment. I am having trouble passing off the presenter thing. There it is.

To take off where Joe on this make U.N. left off, so many different things were happening during COVID and so many changes were happening across the government, that people were concerned about, at the same time, from travel to health issues, of course. We have to create content that addresses all the different changes in policies and programs and operations that are happening across the federal government. As I mentioned, some agencies are closing their doors to the public. Social Security offices were closed. Some programs are close thinking about passport offices they had suspended regular operations of processing applications for passports, but other things were opening. The SBA was accepting applications for specific programs for small businesses affected by the pandemic and other benefit programs as well. So, we had to be able to triage and have to medications available across the gamut of programs and policies trying to get people directed to the offices and programs that they needed to get more detailed information for the concerns and problems. We really field a communications gap for this. We did this in a couple of days. As a JoAnn mentioned earlier, as part of the essential communications program, we are designated by DHS to be an official Lane of communications and they directed us to stand up pages on USA.gov specifically to highlight the work that was going on across the federal government in the response to COVID-19, so, it was a page of explanations, quick explanations of this agency's name and a link to the specific coronavirus page that outlines the work that they were doing to help their constituents in their area of expertise. We also wanted to make sure that our existing content reflected the COVID-19 impact on the public's ability to conduct regular business with the government. We wanted to make sure that it was clear, not that they had to go through a special coronavirus page, necessarily, but if someone was searching for information about a benefit or passport, that the information about how COVID was affecting it would also be included in that information. You will see on these snapshots that we have taken from the English and Spanish website, we use these yellow banners, the alert banners, to let people know, there is something different here. Something not normal is going on, to let people know that the process of getting or renewing a passport is being affected by the coronavirus pandemic. Then, within the text, if you look under the heading, apply for a U.S. passport, you can see that we added content there to make sure that people could know that because of the public health situation, and suggest that people can contact the state department to get more detailed information about the change in policy and maybe even wait to apply for a passport right now, because of the suspended activities. We want to make sure that people, and they're using our content, that they were met with the need to understand how COVID was affecting that particular topic or that task, versus having to do a separate search for COVID-19 and passport. COVID-19 and Social Security. Whatever they're looking for, whatever the topic was, they're going to get a brief overview of how COVID was affecting the operations of that process. Our content was informed by several inputs. As JoAnn mentioned, because of the work with DHS, that definitely played a part in what type of content at what was priority across federal government, and what messaging websites who want to make sure that people were aware of and using, and then we also want to use what was prevalent to what we were hearing from the public, so, we were looking at where people were clicking on the pages and what places pages they were going through most frequently. We

were listening to couples definitely calls in the contact center I what people were asking us in the contact center, doing social listening and understanding what people were asking and commenting on the posts about various parts of travel ban's or health input to mutations, what have you. That we want to make sure we were helping to answer the questions that were bubbling up from the public and using those to answer the questions and inform the constant content development as well as what was happening in the news and clarify with the different news outlets might have conflicting information. Switching gears a bit, we also manage a contact center. The pandemic presented unique challenges on that side because of volume, staffing, and content needs. We saw image to the right, and you can see a comparison of the normal volume in the content center in the springtime, and you will see the normal volume between the high 30,000, so, 36,000 to 39,000. This is during the spring, but, during March, April, May, 2020, when COVID was at its peak, you can see those numbers were drastically higher, as high as 86,000 inquiries in April versus the normal 37,000. Twice as much in April that we are accustomed to. As you can imagine, the staffing and ability to respond to something so new was definitely affected. In terms of that volume surge, we were able to -- will be back up. We were able to answer calls for the State Department and during that time, when the travel ban's were happening and people were stranded in other countries or family members and loved ones connected back to the U.S., we were getting lots of calls on our regular line as well as the State Department phone number as well, because we hope to those efforts for them. A couple of things helpless on the USAGov site to help streamline things. It just so happened that we implemented an interactive voice response center when we will have the description to press 1 our press 2, implemented one to triage and help direct people to the appropriate agency for routine government inquiries. Like the status of income tax refund or how to apply for Social Security benefits, and, that freed our agents up to answer questions related to COVID or the fears and concerns of people were feeling. It also included the directive to go to coronavirus.gov because a lot of answers that we could not have answered at that time. Some people were interested to follow through and talk to an agent but this helped us divert about two thirds of the calls that came in during that time. Then, we also normally have a content link, which has our phone. At that time, we did not have the capacity to invite or promote people calling to get more detailed information. We were at capacity already and even beyond it, so we removed the messaging from our pages to make sure that we could handle the calls that we were getting as fast as possible. We were able to handle the volume surge by hiring agents. Normally, there are security requirements that have to be in place, things like a fingerprinting and things like that, but time is of the essence. Fingerprinting locations were probably not open and other requirements for the security policies, but we were able to get those relaxed and bring in new agents to help us answer the questions in the public. We were able to get funding to pay for overtime for the agents so they could be in place and answer the questions that were coming in throughout the time, and if you think about it, we work for the government and those people who work in the content center, are working. But their regular citizens like we are. Their families and things like that and they live in cities where they have shelter in place restrictions as well, so, the company that handles our contact center went to a remote distributed model where everyone was working from home and so, that was another factor in helping people stay abreast of what is going on. Each agent. Think you have the normal community of being able to ask the neighbor to the left or to the right, everyone was really

working independently more so than normal. And our content team, we were working really hard to crank out messages and information that was beneficial. But things were happening so fast. I remember one day, the applications to get help from the small business administration twice or three times in the same day, so, we wanted to make sure that agents were getting the information as active as possible keeping up with the changes that were going on. We had an easy to use FAQ documents that based on the questions that we were hearing from the agents, and finding answers as best as possible if there is a link. If there was a tweet or Facebook post that an agency had put out to answer the question even if it wasn't live on the website, to help them understand what the next thing to do is, and then, more than the accuracy, kindness and compassion was so important at that time. 's also, including some scripting to the agents to be apologetic that there was not more information available about things at this time or to remind them to check back regularly. Things that would just help them because at that moment, the agent is the government. So making sure that we have conveyed a sense of concern and at the same time, balancing it with as much accurate information as possible to help them in these times. With that said, I'm going to turn it over to Claire. This is with analytics and social media activities during this time.

Awesome. Thank you, Marietta. So, given all of the challenges that both Maryetta and Joanne were mentioning, that the public is facing and then also, lots of the elements that we were coordinating on the USAGov site in terms of COVID-19, it was especially important to use data , collect it, and see how people were engaging with all of the resources we are putting out on all of the different channels. This whole pandemic really queued up our analytics team to start tracking across the USAGov program, so a lot of our efforts started out in February, so once the pandemic first caught wind in the U.S., people were getting a lot of information fast. It was the height of confusion and frustration for a lot of the American people. This is what we started capturing information and listening in to what was going on with the public, so, as both Maryetta and Joanne mentioned, we put up the coronavirus pages in March and we were aware of the engagements there. We kept a really close eye on those in March and April, for example. The visit numbers were 2.5 million people visiting the English coronavirus page, so clearly there was an interest and lots of information to share. So, as much as it was important to track the website, this was part of our DHS functionality in standing up this page. We wanted to track a lot of information from across USAGov, as I said. We have had the page reasons we started in February, but it has been interesting to capture the other intertwined metrics, so, our calls and chats, we've had over 200,000 of them so far. We thought about not only those elements of when people come and actually asked those questions, coming into the site, but also when they are searching for information or collecting information from the constant communications, so this is where it was interesting to see how many people actually searched and added in queries to get to the website or on the website itself, but also, we kept track of the number of emails we delivered and social media messages that people engaged with and looked at across our channels to really see that whole scope of who we were reaching, how, and how effective it was. So, in 2020 alone, across the websites, the contact center and the emailed social media, we have reached 11 million users and counting. So, it was really interesting to keep track of these elements that we stood up specific to coronavirus, but looking at the next page, I wanted to highlight some of the traffic we saw on those trickle-down

pages, or some of the subtopics that really emerge from this pandemic. For example, as you can see, unemployment, food assistance, help with bills, those pages were really visited and unemployment was the number one page across USA.gov and all of fiscal year 2021. So as of October 1, 2019, that was the top paid to the people really visited. So, we saw throughout the pandemic, the some of the needs changed and really, that is where not only the quantitative data, so the specific counts of how many people were visiting and what was being engaged with was important, but also the qualitative data. The analytics team did a great job of collecting queries so the specific search terms people were searching with. The survey comments and the questions that people were asking on the website through our contact center, so the case notes really gleaned a lot of great information, and also our social media comments and questions we got directly on our different posts, so, hope you can see in the top right corner that there are couple of examples of topics that really resonated with the public and people really engaged with on our sites across the board, so, unemployment, stimulus payments, travel, we had some top topics that impacted people especially early on in the confusion of the pandemic, but also, this was helpful for the content team and updating and evaluating the website and the outreach team, some I.T. is adapting a lot of our copy and social media and email. These other subtopics, the ones closer to the bottom of the survey topics, education for kids, housing, scams and frauds, these rubble to see if we could meet the demand better with less heavy hitter type of topics that people were thinking about during the pandemic. Overall, a lot of this, I hope it has been clear that we have mentioned everything was happening really fast. Lots of information was changing. Really, this feedback loop that exists between our analytics team, the contact center, the website team, and the outreach team, really helped enhance our effort and still does to this day. Want to talk a little bit about the outreach efforts as well. So, here are some high level tactics that we focused in on and still focus in on. Like I mentioned, we do a lot of these things regularly and I know that Joanne emphasized the day today efforts. We responded well to the COVID-19 pandemic. A big part of what we do is aggregate content directly from other agencies. So USAGov is a mouthpiece for the broad scope of government information. Have been sharing a lot of information directly from other agencies. And really mirroring some of the messages in our own organic messaging. We are the mouthpiece. Have a great following. To and mentioned we had over 1 million subscribers and followers across the outreach channel so we have really powerful mouthpieces speak through, but we know these agency experts are the ones who know the information, they have the messaging down, so it is great to coordinate with them and amplify through their channels. Then another element that has helped us has been the social distancing port. Where we are looking at our channel specifically, seeing how people are engaging with tweets, replying to them, tagging us on Twitter, adding comments on the Facebook posts and Instagram posts. In addition to that piece, we not only want to know what people are thinking of our content, but also, what other people are listening in for, seeking information on, and the general social media and email space. Following hashtags is a really great element of social listening that has helped us. There been some obvious heavy hitters, but some situational ones that have come up, so it allows us to jump in and tailor our content to make sure that we are mirroring what people wanted as the message changes. I know that arch, April, May, stimulus checks were top of mind. That has died down a little bit. That is ramping up again, and it allows us to see how people are talking about topics and see if we can tailor our information and see what federal information is

available to share. And I know that Maryetta mentioned this as a content team effort for the website, but following press events. Do and mentioned the NICCL calls and that creates a strategy and a very pointed untargeted in the way that we are doing our outreach messaging. Then really, we love that we have access to all these channels and engagement at a lot of different channels. But someone on Facebook might not be on Twitter. Someone who is subscribed to the email might not be aware of our Instagram. People people come to the different channels to engage in different ways. The different goals and ways of operating. We use all of our channels to try to maximize the reach. Our Facebook audiences much older, but our Spanish language audiences much more gaze on twitter and ask questions. So different types of information tailored to the audiences by making sure that we are reaching everybody where they are wherever they might want to get the information. So, I wanted to share a couple of examples of both our original and aggregated messaging, so, here are some examples of what we have done on our specific channels throughout the pandemic, so, coming to the pandemic, as John mentioned, we have had some tried-and-true topics that USAGov is known for. So scams and frauds, seeking government benefits, that is a really popular topic. We wanted to make sure to collect information in that space as a was relevant to the pandemic. But really, also making space and being sensitive , like Maryetta mentioned, think about tone and thinking about empathy. We do not want to post about national parks if people are afraid to go outside and are not sure about the health risks of that, so, really creating space to empathize and emphasize certain topics. We have reflected our mental health resources and hotlines, online safety and security, consumer safety and scams. Really created a lot of content in the space and have been able to tailor it a lot more in this COVID-19 space. Overall, wanted to share these examples, but also wanted to emphasize our tactic of posting less overall and aggregating more. So, as I mentioned, our partners across government are really the experts in these topics and our strongest role is aggregating that all into one space on our channel. So, we wanted to be strategic and really keep these official updates to the experts, especially ones that were more sensitive or more fast-moving, like Maryetta mentioned, sometimes the deadlines change really fast and we're not always up-to-date on that, but really thinking about, it is such a great opportunity for us to share directly. It is quick and easy and it is the latest information and at this from the agency of authority. Seeing that verified checkmark is really helpful. Seeing it come from the CDC, that his health. Travel.gov, that is the State Department. The VA posting about the different VA hospitals and the impact on the facilities. Singh that come directly through the channels, with that we are into with the experts and want to get any and all information through our channels. So, that is pretty much it from our end. In addition to today a posthumous presentation, wanted to give everybody the opportunity to find and directly visit our channels. We have great information on our website, social media channels, you can reach out and export interacting with our contact center with Colin, chat, as well as look at the more agency, media, and organization focus stories that are hosted through our blog. I can close up by saying, I know that we have had years of experience in emergency response and we have been able to coordinate a lot of information this year across our programs. This is still a very interesting lesson and learning more and coordinating in a different way due to the pandemic. I really hope that came through in the presentation today. I know, although we all hope that we return to normal sometime soon, some semblance of normal, USAGov is there to share out that clear information and navigate people to the resources they need and the changes that they go.

So, thank you to everyone for listening in and I think you have a little bit of time left for questions. Thank you.

Thank you, all, for the great presentation. I have a comment to share. I am the government information coordinator at Catholic University of Puerto Rico. All of my users are Spanish speakers and I use the Spanish USA.GOV site extensively to provide information to public high school and college students and many of the recent request have been for COVID, hate groups, and election info.

I was just going to respond that I think that our content and outreach director, who is also Puerto Rican, would be very excited to hear that.

Elated.

Yes. I will have to share that with her.

There was also a comment that someone noticed many topic links are broken.

I saw that in the chat, and I was wondering if that was a current comment, or if that was something that people encountered in the past, because, I can certainly assure you that we do keep track of any broken links on our site. Over the years, or overtime, our content on our site does change and sometimes we do take down resources and we put up new things, depending on the public interest in that kind of subject matter. We have definitely, more recent years, gotten better and redirects. I will say that.

Sometimes agencies are willing to might change the whole structure of their website, but we do get alerts and try to stay really on top of any links that are broken.

Yes, clarifying, were broken a few years ago. Fewer topics now.

So, apologies for that experience. Think a lot of this, these tools that we have implemented and a lot of the cross coronation between our programs and I think especially in a virtual environment, we always communicating, so I think we have done a lot better of a job and by we, I see I mean especially the content team of the analytics team taking track of that. There have been on top of that much more lately.

A question, do you prefer USAGov or USA.GOV?

There is a distinction there, it is that USAGov is referring to our program. Or hold the program, so includes the content center, include social media, includes the marketing and outreach that we do, as well as the website. Whereas, USA.GOV is just a website. So, I guess, which do we prefer? I think they're both fairly interchangeable. I don't know. What would you say, Claire? Maryetta? It depends on the context us with when I was tell people is that USAGov is a managing program and USA.GOV is the product we manage. So, we understand if you're talking

about one or the other, or need to find us or need to refer to us, we know a lot of the time, especially from external partners, both make sense, but that is the distinction we make internally.

And you can use either. We would never be offended.

Call us whatever you want.

Thank you. Another comment. This is a popular website that we recommend to users on various topics. Thanks to all of you and your colleagues for the work you have done during COVID and beyond. Keep up the great work.

Thank you.

Thank you so much!

My pleasure. I look at it and I think everybody else does, that if there is ever anything that we can do to help during an international crisis, we are pleased to do it in our own little way. So I can get really helps us stay so focused. They are real people who need information and we are hearing from the audience and releasing the comments on social media, sometimes, honestly, they're heartbreaking. We listen to our call center call sometimes and you remember, these are real people with real challenges behind each question. And I think that really is an impetus to provide the best information, most accurate information, we can, so that there are real people trying to sell their challenges and get information to make their lives better in some way.

Yes. Sometimes those calls can move us to tears. Literally.

I think, in addition to just being in tune with members of the public, I think that if any of you all see things that may need a change or that you suggest, I think we are always interested in lots of the use cases. Lot of organizations use the information that we have helps us understand more and more, being in tune about the members of the public and those organizations that use our information.

MSA, I want to put out, I know that Joanne and Maryetta and I, were very happy to do this presentation. But it definitely takes a village. There, numbers across our teams and analytics outreach, content all over the place, who has really made this possible for a lot of us in a lot of different ways. So it is worth emphasizing that. Kudos to our colleagues. We will definitely pass it down to them.

Absolutely. I think our analytics teams the public I've never seen before. And the detailed reporting that they were giving us was so valuable. They really kept us in touch with what was happening along with the external things that we were seeing. We were seeing what our visitors were looking for.

They are a team of three and half people?

I think.

Dealing with this volume of data is really impressive.

Yes.

March was an exhausting month.

October was pretty tiring , too.

We are seeing a lot more kudos in the chat box. Any other questions? We have about 4 minutes left with these ladies. I think just the one comment about sharing information about current hot topics. I think any other opportunities we have to come and share some of the insights we have collect did, maybe we could even entice some of our analytics team members to come in and chat more. We are very willing to share a lot of the lessons that we learned, and of course, learn from others to help enhance our sites and reach the right people.

Even beyond right now, what we show as the COVID response, but our blog, every year, look at the top searches across the site and that is an easy resource just to see what people are really asking. And we do the infographic to help people really just visualize what people are coming to us about. So that is just a regular way that people can see whether interacting and what they want to know on our blog.

About the analytics being visible to the public, we do have an analytics dashboard and we do have two of them set up. One is governmentwide data, which we collect from that program. The digital analytics program. It is Google. And that we have specific analytics related to USA.GOV and I'm going to drop the link in the chat right now. Then you could visit that. Honestly, if you have any specific questions about our analytics, frankly, it is basically public domain information, and we would be happy to share things that we have. If that would be helpful to you. So I guess. I think that is a good opportunity. And I put in the slides the USA marketing email address. This reaches the outreach team, so it is myself and a few other members of the outreach team, we are totally willing if you have a question about the user testing. Have a question about the analytics. Have a question about outreach, he can at least help navigate to the right people get some of those answers out. Feel free to use that as you would like to.

We are not a huge team. Claire knows where to find us.

Especially now, we are online. I know that they are allowed around.

They are in the chat bubble.

That is wonderful. Thank you so much. Again, thank you to the three of you for this great presentation. To all of the attendees, we will be emailing links to the recordings out so that you can share them with your staff members a pass along this great information. Thank you, and with that, we are wrapping up day two of the 2020 federal depository library conference. We will be back combine with you at 12:30 Eastern tomorrow. Thank you.

Thank you, everybody. [Event Concluded]