TTS IMPACT

Making it Easier to Collect, Combine, & Exchange Data Across Government

USDA partnered with GSA's Federal Acquisition Service (FAS) Technology Transformation Services (TTS) to improve their school lunch program data collection.

USDA'S FOOD & NUTRITION SERVICE'S STORY The mission of USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) is to increase food security and reduce hunger by providing children and low-income people access to food, a healthful diet, and nutrition education in a way that supports American agriculture and inspires public confidence. The USDA's National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs help schools provide free or low-cost meals to students. Modernizing school meal program data collection is helping USDA to use automation to enable its mission of "do right and feed everyone" by addressing customers' needs to exchange data in an automated fashion and provide services in an electronic manner while improving the quality of those data.

THE CHALLENGE Once a year, National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs' rules require participating schools to verify the eligibility of a small portion of its approved and participating households. These critical data are used to answer policy questions, to provide technical assistance to Congress in the legislative process, and as a sampling frame for millions of dollars of research conducted by FNS every year. However, the standard data collection process is cumbersome and inconsistent, which may lead to errors and makes data validation difficult. States are primarily responsible for validating the data, which can result in a time consuming and burdensome process as states try to anticipate and resolve errors as the data passes through state and federal systems.

THE SOLUTION The U.S. Data Federation Project, an initiative funded by the 10x program, partnered with 18F to build ReVal—a reusable validation library tool. Then, they reached out to FNS to put a pilot into production. The FNS Data Validation Service (DVS) pilot used ReVal to streamline data validation for the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs by building upon existing state and federal data validation checks, maintaining these validation checks at the federal level, hosting them in the cloud, and allowing state systems to access them via Application Programming Interface (API).

THE IMPACT Using the ReVal tool has saved school districts, states, and the FNS time and money in the data collection and submission process. Additionally, using ReVal has led to fewer errors returned, a greater ability to plan ahead, and reduced stress. One user reported a reduction in errors from nearly 100, down to less than 5. With this approach, when school districts submit their verification data through their state's online system, the data is checked against a comprehensive set of rules maintained by FNS. Any errors are returned in real time, allowing the administrators at the school district level the opportunity to resolve the majority of errors before completing the submission process. The agency was free to increase the number of validation checks without imposing new burdens on the states because the data validation service is maintained by FNS. The result is a far more rigorous process than the one it replaces. The increased time and attention spent up front leads to a more timely and efficient process overall.

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