Florida Department of Health Uses Cloud Computing to Publish Environmental Health Data

FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

Agency Size
17,000 Employees

Industry
State Government

Challenge
Florida's Division of Environmental Health had many databases of inspection reports for public facilities such as community pools and biological waste locations, but lacked the staff and budget to publish the information online. Without a readily-accessible online system, state workers had to manually compile reports in response to Freedom of Information Act (FOI) requests from citizens.

Solution
After noticing that a Tampa newspaper website was publishing the state's data online using Caspio, web manager Eric Montgomery began using the same technique to publish reports on the web easily and inexpensively. Like many web designers, programming is not his primary talent. He found working with Caspio's visual database application design tools to be more productive than PHP or JavaScript. Caspio let him create applications within hours or days, rather than weeks or months – and the division was able to launch many web applications it never would have gotten to otherwise.
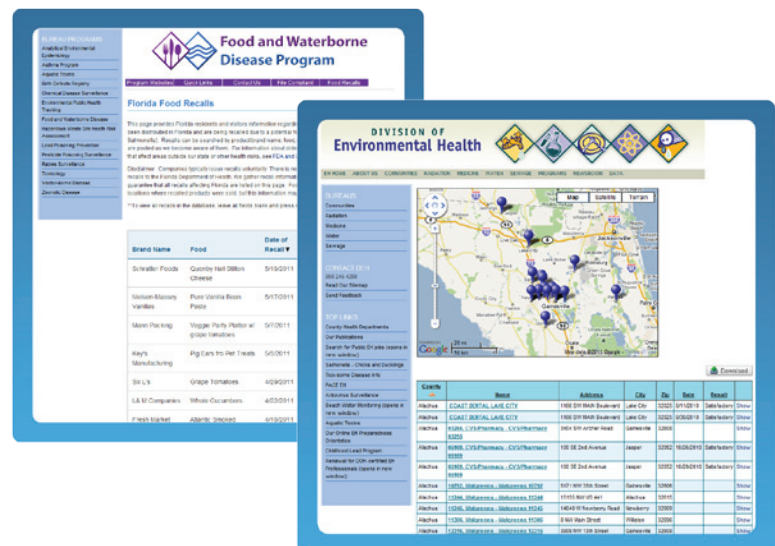
As of early 2011, the Florida Department of Health has more than a dozen Caspio apps on its website and is planning to add more.

Working with Caspio, the Florida Department of Health published a series of Government 2.0 applications, despite not having the budget to employ programmers to create web applications. Using the Caspio Bridge cloud database and its visual app-building tools, the web manager at the Division of Environmental Health created a series of inspection data reports, making information of public interest easily available online.

Increasing Public Demand with Less Budget

Eric Montgomery, web manager for the department's Division of Environmental Public Health, recalls that before he discovered Caspio, many requests to publish public records online were often backlogged. That's because, despite all the enthusiasm for government 2.0 applications that take advantage of the web, money is always a challenge.

"The state budget here has been pretty tight, and continues to get tighter every year, so there are not a lot of resources to develop interactive apps for the web," Montgomery says. "The division had been questioned in the past – why isn't

Online Reporting of Food Recalls and Biomedical Waste Inspections

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your data available easily to the public? And there was no good answer, other than that it's difficult and expensive."

That changed when a colleague asked how the Tampa Tribune's website (TBO.com) publishes a database of state swimming pool inspection records when the state itself couldn't seem to do so. Montgomery didn't know, but he made sure to find out.

Montgomery discovered that TBO.com had obtained the data under the Florida Public Records Act and imported it directly into Caspio to generate a web-based interactive report. Montgomery immediately saw that he could do the same thing, adding searchable databases to the department website more quickly than securing internal IT resources. In the process, the department could eliminate the bureaucratic FOI request process for handling common data requests from citizens and the media. "We can just point them to our page. If they ask for something, say here it is – do with it as you want," Montgomery says.

After starting a Caspio free trial account, Montgomery got a prototype working in a day or two. He showed it to the director of his division who enthusiastically approved it on the spot. "Considering the amount of data we have through our inspections and other sources, this was something we had been meaning to do for a long time but never had the resources to do," he says.

Centralized Searchable Health Data

The Florida Department of Health now publishes more than a dozen Caspio databases on its website, reporting on septic tank contractors, biomedical waste handling, food hygiene, and tanning facilities, among other things. The first Caspio application the department created was inspection reports of group homes for the disabled, which allow you to search by county, city, and inspection date. The search results include the name and address of each institution and a satisfactory or unsatisfactory ranking.

Like a lot of web gurus, Montgomery had the programming skills required to build interactive web pages with HTML, JavaScript and PHP, and knows the basics of database design. Still, for him to have created the same applications from scratch would have

> **Caspio gives you the ability to easily take data, in many different formats, and make it accessible on the web. Someone with little technical experience can take a data set, embed it in a web page, and make it available very quickly and easily.**
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> **Eric Montgomery,** Web Manager,
> Division of Environmental Public Health

been a longer, more error-prone process – in fact, he probably never would have found the time.

"It's tremendously quicker to produce a web application this way than with a PHP database design," Montgomery says. "Since I don't do that work exclusively, it would have taken me a considerable amount of time."

The Department of Health became a Caspio customer in August 2009. On the scale of enterprise technology, a Caspio account represented a minor expense – low enough that Montgomery was able to get it approved as a single source contract. That first group home inspection report went online within a couple months, and most of the time was spent on a data governance policy review rather than any technical challenge.

What else would Montgomery like to tackle? "All kinds of things, actually – we have all kinds of data that could potentially be put on the web," he says.