

**Portals in the U.S.  
Country Report  
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**Portals in the United States**

Note: This report is based on information provided by the Office of FirstGov and the Office of Intergovernmental Solutions, Office of Governmentwide Policy, U.S. General Services Administration.

**1. Introduction**

**FirstGov**

In 1999, the General Services Administration's Office of Governmentwide Policy began work on a visionary, comprehensive gateway to the U.S. government, then called WebGov. The WebGov effort got a quantum boost in 2000, when Internet entrepreneur Eric Brewer, who got his start with a Defense Department grant, offered to donate a powerful search engine to the federal government through a charitable foundation that he would set up.

The President accepted the gift and announced in June 2000 that a portal, renamed FirstGov ([www.FirstGov.gov](http://www.FirstGov.gov)), would be developed and launched in 90 days. GSA subsequently recruited the President's Management Council and the Chief Information Officers Council to sponsor the initiative with donations from 22 agencies and to provide members to a new cross-agency board. A small interagency team of U.S. government officials led by GSA was also assembled to develop and launch FirstGov.

As promised, FirstGov was launched on September 22, 2000, the product of an exhilarating public-private partnership rivaling the feverish work of a dot-com. FirstGov is the first and only official U.S. portal to the federal government, with links to state and local government.

FirstGov provides easy, secure access to an astonishing range of reliable government information and services never before available from a single location. Its search technology allows instant public access to more than 20,000 federal websites and 30 million federal web pages, many of which were previously not accessible to public search. Searching every word of every document, the engine can search 500 million documents in less than a quarter of a second and can handle millions of searches per day. As of June 26, it also allows searches of the 17 million state government web pages through the search engine, bringing the total number of documents in the search index to 47 million. Each state government gave FirstGov permission to search their web sites.

FirstGov has a hierarchical index, but it also has a topical directory, so citizens no longer need to know government organizational charts, the names of programs, or which agencies do what. It helps citizens discover and use online government information and services. With FirstGov as the jumping off place, Americans can find links to e-file their taxes, compare Medicare options, find and compare nursing

homes, and find good jobs. They can tap into the latest health research, change their address at the Post Office, reserve a campsite at a National Park, and follow NASA's space missions. They can buy savings bonds or coins; shop at the Smithsonian; find government property for sale; apply for retirement benefits; or register for the draft. They can also find hundreds of state, local, and federal services in their own neighborhoods. Even if the public knew these services existed online, it was very hard to find them. FirstGov makes it easy. FirstGov is creating a citizen-centric electronic government that transcends the traditional boundaries of government. Their vision is global -- connecting the world to all U.S. Government information and services

### **Cross Agency Portals and State and Local Portals**

Cross agency portals bring together on the Web government information and services from across agencies for the benefit of a specific customer or interest group. The purpose of these portals is to make information and services easier to find without having to know what agency provides them. Portals have been built for specific citizen groups (seniors, college students, workers); around specific results (food safety, nutrition, safety); and around government systems and processes (forms, laws, procurement). Through interagency collaboration, portals are increasing seamless government for the customer.

Today, there are more than 90 government portals, many the result of cross-agency collaboration. The Office of FirstGov is also encouraging new cross-agency portals to serve customer groups not yet served, such as "farmers," and topics not yet covered across agency lines, such as "disasters."

State and Local Governments in the United States also develop portals to serve their constituents. Portals at the state, local, and federal levels are developed independently. Many portals do provide links to other government services through their sites, recognizing the need to provide users with information and services outside of their jurisdictions, be they state, local, or federal. FirstGov features a state and local section that highlights state and local services and links directly to state government web portals.

## **2. Drivers of Change**

FirstGov is much more than a website. The FirstGov initiative is also fundamentally transforming and improving the way government serves Americans and the way Americans interact with their government.

By highlighting services government already offers online, it provides best practices, sets public expectations, and points out what's missing. It links to new services as agencies put them online. By providing the first gateway for public feedback through 130 links to all three branches, FirstGov is a

catalyst for all agencies to use technology to provide more avenues for public input and improve their internal systems for handling public feedback, which is often overwhelming.

The Office of FirstGov worked with states to add the state websites to its search engine. We are working with a number of states and localities to use information technology to advance seamless service to citizens across intergovernmental lines. Thus the citizen does not have to know what level of government provides a specific service and does not have to go to various levels of government to get information and services. Collaboration with states will be an important driving force

More than 100 companies and organizations have signed on as certified FirstGov partners and have pledged to provide quality online products and services. According to AltaVista.com, almost 34,000 webpages already link to FirstGov. That number is growing rapidly.

Portal activities in other governments also accelerate and improve our efforts. FirstGov officials have briefed or advised representatives of more than a dozen foreign governments and have spoken at international conferences. We also benchmark our practices against state and foreign portals to learn from the best features of others.

## **2.1 User Orientation**

Unlike any previous time in history, the Internet makes it possible for government to move beyond just customer-focused. In both business and government, customers are in control, with no restraints as to where, when, or how they will get information or services and with numerous options in providing instant feedback.

FirstGov actively solicits responses from its users and has used focus groups to gather user feedback on how to improve the site. Feedback is also gathered from users through the site itself. In the "Contact Your Government" section of the site, feedback through FirstGov is split into the following categories:

- ◆ To FirstGov
- ◆ By Topic
- ◆ By Agency
- ◆ To State Governors
- ◆ To Your Congressperson

Users have responded favorably to FirstGov. Here are sample comments:

- ◆ "Thank you very much for having a web site for people like me. This is about as close as I can get to my government."
- ◆ "GREAT site. Already very useful personally and as a professor of government."
- ◆ "I am going to be able to clear out one of my 'favorites' sections on my browser and basically replace it with one item. Nicely done."

- ◆ "Who knew that USDA had a web site, much less a photo gallery of 20,000 images. Via the Internet, I can access them from my home, what a delight. Thanks again for using our tax dollars in a productive manner."
- ◆ "I discovered this site on Sunday and I haven't slept since."

FirstGov also monitors statistics and trends that measure site usage in order to improve its level of service. Weekly reports measure such indicators as:

- ◆ Number of Visits, Page Views and Visitors
- ◆ Top Pages by Views
- ◆ Top Exit Pages by Visits
- ◆ Top Paths Through Site by Visits
- ◆ Visits by Day of the Week
- ◆ Visits by Hour of the Day
- ◆ Top Referring Sites by Visits
- ◆ Top Search Phrases
- ◆ Top Search Keywords

Among the lessons learned is that citizens do not always differentiate between the levels of government (local, state, federal). Shortly after the launch of FirstGov.gov, the U.S. Department of Transportation, a federal entity, experienced a marked increase in traffic on its department web site due to users finding the site through the FirstGov portal. A majority of those new visitors were looking for information about driver's licenses, a service provided by state governments in the U.S.

## **2.2. Other Incentives and Issues**

FirstGov is supported at the highest levels of the federal government, but no one agency "owns" it. Thus FirstGov's most significant issue is the lack of one central fund to pay the costs of maintaining, improving, and marketing FirstGov and to serve as a catalyst to further accelerate electronic government.

FirstGov was funded in the year 2000 by the [Federal Chief Information Officers Council](#) and 22 other federal agencies. We also received the gift of a search engine from the [Fed-Search Foundation](#), a non-profit charity established by Dr. Eric Brewer. Dr. Brewer's early research on parallel computing was funded with a grant from the Defense Department.

There is also \$1.2 million in FY 2001 funds for cross agency portals. Funds will be used to support the Students.gov and Seniors.gov portals along with new cross agency portals and innovations to existing portals.

President Bush's proposed 2002 Budget recognizes the role of FirstGov in cross-agency electronic government. His Budget Blueprint for Government Reform

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/usbudget/blueprint/budix.html> calls for the use of the Internet to create a citizen-centric government and provides a fund that will grow to \$100 million over 3 years to support electronic government. The Blueprint calls FirstGov.gov one of the "essential building blocks" for projects that will operate across boundaries, along with the development of a Public Key infrastructure for digital signatures.

State and Local Portals are important partners to FirstGov and other federal portals. Without continued collaboration, we cannot realize our shared vision for seamless government. At this time, portals at the state, local, and federal levels are developed independently. Many portals do provide links to other government services through their sites, recognizing the need to provide users with information and services outside of their jurisdictions, be they state, local, or federal. FirstGov features a state and local section that highlights state and local services and links directly to state government web portals.

### **3 Future Development and Challenges**

#### **3.1 Status and Development**

A combination of approaches will be used in future portal developments in the United States. FirstGov's collaboration with state and local government portals and other federal cross agency portals demonstrates the dual approach: A top-down approach that focuses on seamless navigation of a decentralized portal community, and a bottom-up approach to providing tailored content from all levels of government through state and local portals and cross agency portals. The approach is "no wrong door" to government information.

With the establishment of the eGov fund for eGovernment initiatives that cross agency boundaries, there will be a continued shift to providing integrated services to citizens. Cross agency portals will continue to integrate services according to specific usergroups and service channels, such as parks and recreation.

#### **3.2 Applying metadata criteria**

There is no widely used metadata standard in government as it applies to portals. For XML, the suggested approach is to establish a registry/repository of XML specifications, schemas and vocabularies in use by government and allow communities of interest to voluntarily form around those standards. The U.S. government will not duplicate the efforts of private standard making bodies. As XML becomes more widely used in government, it can have many positive applications for U.S. portals.

#### **3.3 Future Challenges**

In summary the following are future challenges for portals in the U.S.:

Collaboration between federal, state and local government portals is an important issue. The challenge is to provide seamless services to users while preserving the autonomy and branding of the government portals.

Feedback is also a challenge. Portals tend to centralize a formerly decentralized web environment. This means that feedback regarding a wide variety of issues begins to come to a central point. As the feedback through portals increases, manual processes will breakdown. Continued improvement of the tools used to route feedback to the appropriate place in government and respond to feedback are necessary to make government web sites truly interactive.

Other challenges include adhering to common metadata standards across government, such as XML; protecting the privacy of citizens using government portals while providing tailored content; and, the need for a truly intergovernmental governance model to support seamless electronic government.

### 3.4 Inventory of Portals in the U.S.

In addition to FirstGov, the U.S. has numerous other portals at the Federal, State and local government levels. Currently, GSA's Office of FirstGov manages a Federal Cross Agency Portal Sub-committee under the Federal CIO Council's E-Gov Committee. Representatives from each of the cross-agency Federal portals participate in the sub-committee. Cross-agency portals are funded through several means. First, a Federal agency that accepts the responsibility as an executive agency for a portal may self fund the initiative and accept assistance as the portal matures. Secondly, several agencies may pool funds to develop a portal. Lastly, funds may be acquired from sources such as the Federal CIO Council.

The existing cross-agency portals fall into four categories: gateways to the U.S. Federal government; demographic or customer portals; results Portals; and government systems portals.

The following portals are gateways to the U.S Federal Government:

1. **FirstGov** (<http://www.firstgov.gov>) is an easy, one-stop citizen access to all U.S. Federal government on-line services and information. FirstGov is managed by the General Services Administration's Office of Governmentwide Policy, Office of FirstGov. For information, call Deborah Diaz on (202) 634-0000 or e-mail at [deborah.diaz@gsa.gov](mailto:deborah.diaz@gsa.gov).
2. **GPO Access** ([http://www.access.gpo.gov/su\\_docs/](http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/)) provides the user with the ability to locate and download information from numerous federal agencies. GPO Access is managed by the U.S. Government Printing offices and includes links to web sites; core documents on regulations, laws and more; and numerous databases.
3. **FedWorld** (<http://www.fedworld.gov/>) is a central access point for locating and ordering government and business information. FedWorld offers multiple distribution channels for Federal agencies to disseminate information via a range of government databases and other means. FedWorld is managed the U.S. Department of Commerce, National Technical Information Service.
4. **Library of Congress Government Guide** (<http://lcweb.loc.gov/global/executive/fed.html>), is managed by the U.S. Library of Congress.
5. **InfoUSA**, (<http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/>), provides information on U.S. Department of State/International Information Programs. InfoUSA is a resource for foreign audiences seeking information about American society, political processes, official U.S. policies and culture.

The U.S. maintains portals that provide information or services to specific demographic groups or customer. In the business sector, the following portals exist:

6. **U.S. Business Advisor** (<http://www.business.gov>),
7. **FirstGov for Employers**, (<http://www.employers.gov>), is managed the U.S. Department of Treasury's Internal Revenue Service. FirstGov for Employers is a joint effort among the Department of Labor, Internal Revenue Service, Small Business Administration, Social Security Administration, Treasury, States, and Simplified Tax and Wage Reporting System. The site provides resources and cross-agency information for employers, as well as new and established businesses.
8. **WomenBiz.gov**, (<http://www.womenbiz.gov/>) is a gateway for women-owned businesses selling to the U.S. Federal government. Womenbiz.gov is managed by the U.S. Small Business Administration.

Portals that exist for consumers include:

9. **FirstGov for Consumers**, (<http://www.consumer.gov>), is managed by the Federal Trade Commission. It provides information to consumers on food, product safety, health, home and community, money, transportation, children, careers and education, and technology.
10. **Federal Consumer Information Center**, (<http://www.pueblo.gsa.gov/>), is managed by the U.S. General Services Administration.
11. **Disabilities** (Access America for People with Disabilities), (<http://www.disabilities.gov/CSS/Default.asp>), is managed by the U.S. Department of Labor and provides information and services to people with disabilities.
12. **Educators** (Federal Resources for Educational Excellence), (<http://www.ed.gov/free/>)

The following portals provide information and services to exporters: Discussions are underway to combine the best features of exports.gov and tradenet.gov into one portal for exporters.

13. **Exports.gov**, (<http://www.exports.gov>), provides information to individuals and businesses on exporting products out of the U.S. Examples include expanding an international business, trade events and statistics, information of tariffs and taxes, NAFTA Rules and export documentation.
14. **TradeNet** (Access America for Exporters), (<http://www.tradenet.gov>), also provides information on exporting products outside the U.S.
15. **Kids** (FirstGov for Kids), (<http://www.info.gov/kids>), is managed by GSA and provides information for kids.
16. **Native Americans** (<http://www.codetalk.fed.us/>) provides information to Native Americans on key subjects such as Indian housing, health, the arts, the environment, and children's issues.



- 17. Non-Profits** (Non-Profit Gateway) (<http://www.nonprofit.gov/>) provides links to sources of information that may be of importance to non-profit organizations.
- 18. Seniors Citizens** (FirstGov For Seniors) (<http://www.seniors.gov>) is managed by the U.S. Social Security Administration. FirstGov for Seniors provides information on health, travel and leisure, education, money matters, relevant legislation and others.
- 19. State and Local Government Employees** (State and Local Gateway), (<http://www.statelocal.gov>) provides information and links to relevant information at the U.S. Federal level that may be of use to State and local officials. The information is organized by functional area.
- 20. Statisticians and Data Users** (FedStats), (<http://www.fedstats.gov>), provides information
- 21. Students** (FirstGov for Students), (<http://www.students.gov/index2.html>) provides information for college students
- 22. Travelers and Tourists** (<http://www.recreation.gov>) is managed by the U.S. Department of Interior and provides information to travelers and tourists on Federal Parks.
- 23. Workers** (FirstGov for Workers) (<http://www.workers.gov>) is managed by the U.S. Department of Labor and provides information to American workers on jobs, learning, family and health, transportation and housing, money management, rights and protections, citizenship and recreation and travel.

The U.S. Federal Government also maintains portals for specific purposes such as to educate the citizenry on programs available for youth afterschool, for nutrition information and for health information. The following provides information on each of these portals:

- 24. Afterschool** (<http://www.afterschool.gov>)
- 25. Food Safety** (<http://www.foodsafety.gov>)
- 26. Health** (<http://www.healthfinder.gov>)
- 27. Nutrition** (<http://www.nutrition.gov>)
- 28. Partnership Against Violence Network (PAVNET)** (<http://www.pavnet.org>)
- 29. Safe USA** (<http://www.cdc.gov/safeusa>)

The U.S. Federal Government also maintains portals to facilitate doing business with the government in a one-stop fashion for such functions as buying excess government property or identifying business opportunities with the Federal government. The following portals provide this functionality:

- 30. Federal Asset Sales** (Buying from the U.S. Federal Government)  
(<http://fedsales.gov/>)

31. **Federal Business Opportunities** (Selling to the Government/Procurement)

<http://www.fedbizopps.gov>

32. **Forms for Top 500 Government Services** (<http://www.fedforms.gov>)

33. **Federal Geographic Information** (<http://www.fgdc.gov>)

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FirstGov has received four major awards and has been featured by dozens of media and other organizations as site of the day, week, or month.