MONTANA UI

Project Highlight

"Montanans are a resilient people. We work hard and it's a good thing we do because we're a small team. If we weren't as resilient and conscientious as we were, the project wouldn't have gotten done."
— Corena Benjamin, Contributions Bureau Chief

Montana—In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic brought a downturn in employment across the US, as shelter in place orders and industry-wide furloughs disrupted work. Skyrocketing unemployment rates meant state and local government agencies needed to provide more unemployment insurance (UI) services to citizens.

Staff within the Montana Department of Labor & Industry (DLI) UI Division felt the pressure. Development staff experienced in the coding language used for the 20-plus-year-old UI benefits system was in short supply. Regular system outages due to a complicated collage of supporting systems also compounded the stress. DLI leadership had long recognized the need for a new UI benefits system, but funding for one had evaded the agency.

With similar pandemic stressors facing state and local governments nationwide, the US government quickly enacted various financial relief acts to ensure continuity of public services. This federal funding provided an opportunity for DLI leadership to realize their vision for a modern UI benefits system. However, before they could address their longstanding challenges, first they needed a quick fix to distribute some immediate financial relief.

Left to right: Paul Martin, Blake Olson, Jeffrey Wolfe, Rachel Bawden, Kaci Felstet, Amanda Lay, Emmi Zheng, Jeannie Keller, Erik Macke, Brent Beardslee, Brian Clark

A Path to a New System

When the US federal government authorized payment of Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) in 2020, it expanded unemployment insurance (UI) benefits to workers who would not normally have been eligible to claim benefits. The Montana Department of Labor & Industry (DLI) UI Division was using inflexible and unstable UI benefits software, leaving them unable to quickly distribute PUA funds to Montanans. "The pandemic brought out many weaknesses in our legacy systems. It would have taken months to bring PUA in," said Deputy Administrator Rachel Bawden. DLI leadership decided to partner with Fast Enterprises (FAST) on a standalone PUA system, enabling the UI Division to quickly pivot. Rachel said the collaboration worked well. "We were able to get the system up in about a month's time, and it allowed us to pay benefits to individuals in the manner that the federal government wanted—which was rapidly," Rachel said.

Immediate PUA needs were addressed, but the UI Division still had to rectify its ailing system, MISTICS, and its patchwork of add-on systems. Outages for

> *We had looked into a new system prior to the pandemic, but it was never an affordable option. Having systems down during the pandemic makes you realize you have to do something–you have to find a solution.*
>
> *–Kim Warren*
> *Technology Services Division Administrator*

MISTICS were common and unpredictable. Rachel said, "It wasn't necessarily the core MISTICS system, but all the plug-ins around it that were taking it down." Technology Services Division Administrator Kim Warren said, "Every day, you walked into work and prayed you'd be able to even log in." In 2021, the American Relief Plan Act (ARPA) provided extra funding for state and local governments to support vital community operations, granting the UI Division an opportunity to replace MISTICS. The UI Division partnered with FAST once again to implement a new, sustainable benefits system.

In addition to replacing MISTICS, the project would enable the UI Division to upgrade its UI Tax administration system, STAARS—which they had implemented with FAST in 2014—and marry it with UI benefits in one system. "It was the wisest choice for us—to be in one cohesive system that does everything for UI," Rachel said. The new, integrated system was implemented between August 2022 and October 2023 as the Montana Unemployment Services Environment (MUSE).

Finding Fellowship

Three bureaus in the UI Division oversee UI for the state of Montana. The Contributions Bureau manages UI tax, the Claims Processing Bureau supports UI benefits, and the Program Support Bureau handles UI support functions, such as federal reporting, for the other bureaus.

For the Contributions Bureau, upgrading STAARS and incorporating it into MUSE meant learning a new version of the system. However, after implementing STAARS in 2014 and working in the system since then, they knew what to expect from the project and new system. Contributions Bureau Chief Corena Benjamin said, "Okay, we've been through this before—it's like a great big service pack." The other two bureaus did not have the same background but leveraged the experience of their Contributions Bureau counterparts. Claims Processing Frontline Supervisor George Smith said this knowledge-sharing was vital. "I think we had the right people at the very beginning. Contributions Bureau staff were a huge help," George said. Amanda Lay, Claims Processing Bureau Chief, agreed, "Since they had the system before, I learned a lot from them. It gave us an edge."

> **All of our hearts were in it, all of us wanted it to succeed.**
> —April Rose Hislop,
> Contributions Accounting and Collections Supervisor

Left to right: April Rose Hislop, Corena Benjamin

This edge empowered the Claims Processing and Program Support staff to quickly adapt to project work, enabling them to focus on the changes MUSE would bring. Contributions Accounting and Collections Supervisor April Rose Hislop said reconciling shared workflows was challenging at times. "Even though we're one division, I don't know everything Claims Processing does, Claims Processing doesn't know everything Contributions does, and some things affected both areas," April said. When issues arose, Amanda said, "Knowing each other's goals and compromising brought everyone together." April agreed, "Overall, everyone was willing to put in the time and effort to make everything work the way we wanted it to. We were all on board for this project to be successful."

Timelines

STAARS
**February 1, 2013-
February 24, 2014**

UI Tax Implementation

PUA
**April 16, 2020-
May 15, 2020**

PUA Implementation

MUSE
**August 1, 2022-
October 2, 2023**

UI Benefits Implementation
UI Tax Upgrade

Improvements

"It's way easier to find and pull the information I'm looking for. I can easily get and reconcile the data that I need."
–Nikole Calnan, Program Support Accounting Technician

"Training is so much easier. The old system was antiquated and cranky so if you didn't do things in the right order, it wouldn't work. This is going to be a faster, easier, more efficient system to train on, which is the cherry on top of the sundae for me."
–Alyson McMilin, Program Support Administrative and Policy Management Specialist

"The MUSE product provides us with so much automation. Before MUSE, we were manually tracking collections. Now, things auto-stage, letters automatically go out–it's a game changer, 100 percent."
–Jeannie Keller, Fraud Prevention Manager and Collections Supervisor

"This modernization achieves the Governor's goal to eliminate technical debt and implement commercial off-the-shelf solutions, reducing the need for expensive in-house custom development. We have also implemented robust measures to ensure the highest levels of security for the citizen data entrusted to us, meeting and exceeding the privacy and protection standards Montanans deserve."
–Sarah Swanson, Commissioner

"We were living out of Excel spreadsheets. I didn't have a lot of tools to manage the work that my team was doing because Excel documents are very error prone. I felt like I could never rely on the statistics that I was able to gather before. With MUSE, I have information at my fingertips."
–Jamie Valvoda, Claims Investigation Compliance Supervisor

"It's made us more accurate. I can go to an auditor and confidently say 'this is what happened and why.'"
–Nancy Jones, Program Support Financial Specialist

Enhanced Online Customer Service

POSITIVE CUSTOMER FEEDBACK

Claimants and employers rate online transactions

4.4 OUT OF 5 ON AVERAGE

EXPANDED MOBILE CAPABILITIES

51.1%
of weekly benefit payment requests are filed from a mobile device with an average completion time of only

3.49 MINUTES

NEW ELECTRONIC FACT-FINDING

88.5%
of claimants complete fact-finding questionnaires online. Before MUSE, fact-finding was exclusively completed by phone or paper.

muse
Montana Unemployment Services Environment

🌲 MUSE-ical Harmony

Before MUSE, UI Division staff had few opportunities for regular collaboration. "Lines of work and communication were single and in one direction. You only talked with one bureau and didn't necessarily include other bureaus," said George Smith, Claims

Left to right: Paul Martin, Jeannie Keller, Amanda Lay, Rachel Bawden

Processing Frontline Supervisor. "Now, the system doesn't allow you to do that—you have to involve each other," George said.

After MUSE, UI Division staff have more insight into the work being performed across the division. Contributions Accounting and Collections Supervisor April Rose Hislop said MUSE has been a learning tool for staff. "I've been with the department 23 years doing tax, and I've learned so much in the last year about what the benefits group does. I have worked more with the folks from benefits in the last year than I have in my entire career," April said.

With this new level of awareness, Claims Investigation Compliance Supervisor Jamie Valvoda saw a drastic change in her work relationships. "We have networked more now than we ever have before. I feel the love more," Jamie said. Jamie believes that these connections also enhance their work performance. "It's not like we didn't talk before, but we didn't have a relationship. The camaraderie that we built means the world to me, and it's how you get things done," Jamie said.

> "
> *I do believe that bringing MUSE into our lives brought all of us together instead of operating in all these disparate areas. I look at it like a band or chorus–you can have solos, but they don't mean anything when you need everyone to sing along.*
>
> *–George Smith,*
> *Claims Processing Frontline Supervisor*
> "

Sarah Swanson

Paul Martin

Alyson McMilin

Amanda Lay

April Rose Hislop

Corena Benjamin

George Smith

Jamie Valvoda

Jeannie Keller

Kim Warren

Nancy Jones

Nikole Calnan

Rachel Bawden

What's Next

MUSE pushed the DLI UI Division to think differently about UI, and staff are embracing the culture of innovation the new system has fostered. Alyson McMilin, Program Support Administrative and Policy Management Specialist said, "I had become set in my ways. MUSE was a good reminder that we needed to think outside the box—it's our best way to move things forward." In this spirit, the UI Division has partnered with FAST to move MUSE to a cloud-based, hosted infrastructure and a new database system. These technical improvements will further increase efficiencies and reduce costs for the UI Division. Administrator Paul Martin said that the work doesn't end there. "There are still so many things we can do. The job is never done, we're committed to continue making it better for the customer and the end user," Paul explained.

Left to right: Rachel Bawden, Sarah Swanson, Paul Martin