



MONTANA DS-VS

Project Highlight

"If you can improve the lives of your neighbors, your friends, your citizens, your customers, it's worth the effort. Government should work for the people, and I think that's what we were able to do here."

-Will Selph, Chief of Staff, Attorney General Office



If you needed a Montana driver license in 2020, you had to be willing to wait. First, you had to schedule an appointment with the Montana Motor Vehicle Division (MVD), where the next available appointment might be up to 6 months in the future. Then, months later at the MVD office, you had to join the queue of customers waiting to be served. Upon reaching the service counter, you would wait as a frustrated agent tried to use a system that severely lagged on its best day or crashed on its worst. In either scenario, there was a chance you could be turned away and have to repeat the wait again.

Experiences like this were ubiquitous for Montanans who needed critical driver and vehicle services across the state. Challenges with MVD's appointment scheduling system and an aging system of record coincided to cause the wait times. MVD leadership knew they needed to break the cycle of waiting in order to improve the work lives of their employees and give more time back to Montanans.



Left to right: Back Row: Mike Walker, Abigail Dronen, Felisha Koch, Tyson Miller, Bree Wilmot, Jimmy Quinlivan, Peter Doig
 Front Row: Mike Henderson, Stormy Schwarz, Cameron Buck, Derek Miller, Anna Mhoon, Melissa Stonsteng, Nihan Miller, Mark Semmler

MERLIN the (not) Magical

Montana Motor Vehicle Division (MVD) staff and customers faced multiple challenges with their aging driver and vehicle services system, which was a custom-built solution called MERLIN (Montana Enhanced Registration and Licensing Information Network). System issues were a daily occurrence and often brought work to a standstill. “MERLIN would spin for what was probably 15 minutes, but seemed like hours, then it would shut down, and you would have to start all over again,” said Laurie Bakri, MVD Administrator. System roadblocks at the counter fueled discontent for customers and clerks. “MERLIN the not magical, got between the person behind the counter and the person across the counter,” said Will Selph, Attorney General Chief of Staff. Laurie agreed, “Staff morale was terrible, and customers were unhappy. We had to make a complete and total change.”

As customers and MVD staff were facing MERLIN-induced challenges, Austin Knudsen was running for Montana Attorney General. The Montana Attorney General’s Office oversees the Montana Department of Justice (DOJ), which oversees the administration of

Montana’s driver and vehicle services, and thus, MVD. Austin’s campaign platform centered on reducing crime, but he quickly realized he would need to expand his focus. “People would say, ‘Well, yeah, crime is definitely a problem, but I went to MVD yesterday and let me tell you about the awful experience that I had,’” Austin said. Upon his election to Attorney General in 2021, Austin made MVD the top priority.

“*The partnership with FAST created a permanent and profound change in how people view state government. You only come in for a license every 8 or 12 years—the first time customers do so in CARS they’re like, ‘it took me 5 minutes.’*
People are amazed.
—Laurie Bakri, MVD Administrator”

DOJ and MVD leadership partnered to turn around customer interactions with MVD, starting by adopting a customer-first motto: *Driving Customer Service*. “That summed it up—creating a positive experience for our customers and giving our employees the spark that brings pride to the great work they do,” Will said. A new mantra in tow, MVD partnered with Fast Enterprises (FAST) from July 2022 to March 2025 to replace MERLIN with CARS (Credentialing and Registration System)—a modern driver and vehicle solution that enabled MVD to put customer service in the driver seat.





Getting Customers in (and out) the Door Faster

Montanans had to schedule their appointments up to 6 months out in part because MVD's appointment scheduling system allowed redundant bookings and MVD staff had little control to manage the available appointment slots. "Customers could schedule multiple appointments for the same service, and it blocked out a bunch of time. They showed up for the appointment that worked for them and then all the other ones were left there—they didn't get canceled," said Jimmy Quinlivan, Business Solutions Supervisor.



98% decrease in appointment wait time at most offices:
48 days to 1 day

The first rollout for CARS, completed in just three months, included replacement scheduling functionality that required customers to meet specific criteria based on the type of

appointment they were requesting and prevented them from booking multiple appointments. Jimmy explained, "It allowed us to see accurate availability and gave us control over setting the times and types of appointments."



72% decrease in average driver services appointment length:
22 minutes to 6 minutes

With more appointments available for customers, the improvements have been drastic. Anna Mhoon, Record and Driver Control Deputy Bureau Chief, said, "I've had people say, 'It's taken me 6 months to get an appointment,' and I tell them 'not anymore.' You can go online and make your appointment, and there's pretty much no wait time. It's so much better for the customer. I really, really love this system."



Driving Customer Service

Faster Data Processing

"Counties can process customers more quickly and get through lines faster. Staff are amazed at how quickly they can find information and get things done."

—Mike Walker, Bureau Chief, Vehicle Services Bureau

Happier Staff & Customers

"The system has made it easier for staff to be better customer service representatives. The people who come in have a happier experience. A win for customers is a win for our staff."

—Laurie Bakri, MVD Administrator

Timelier Customer Service

"One of the county offices has a camera the public can look at to see how long the wait is going to be. You used to see a line out the door anytime you looked at the camera. Now, there might be one or two people waiting."

—Melissa Sonsteng, Deputy Bureau Chief, Vehicle Services Bureau

Streamlined Transactions

"We used to have a check at the end of a transaction, and there would sometimes be a huge list of things that were wrong. With CARS, it's all in real time and you know if something is wrong before you complete the transaction. That is a huge timesaver."

—Bree Wilmot, Trainer, Montana Motor Vehicle Division

Self-Service Options from Home

"We wanted to increase our online services, so when you're out in the middle of nowhere, Montana, and it's 20 below and snowing, you don't have to drive an hour to your appointment."

—Laurie Bakri, MVD Administrator

More Empowered Staff

"The system is so fast. It leaves more opportunity for the clerks to help customers better and help each other out."

—Anna Mhoon, Deputy Bureau Chief, Record and Driver Control

Scanners, Tablets, Cameras—and More!

As part of the CARS project, 700+ pieces of new hardware were successfully assembled, tested, and trained on. MVD Administrator Laurie Bakri said, “It was not just managing the deployment of a new system, it was managing getting all the hardware purchased, getting it here, inventoried, and out to people.”

Project staff identified the right peripherals, carefully testing products to determine what would meet their needs. “I can’t tell you the amount of styluses we tested to figure out what was going to give us the best signature. Not

only did they need to be legible, but they also needed to meet voter registration requirements,” said Felicia Koch, Operations Bureau Chief. Once equipment was vetted and selected, it was then distributed across the state. Tyson Miller, Driver Services Bureau Chief, explained, “It was just huge. Montana is a big state and moving that much equipment took a whole lot of planning.”

To acclimate staff, mock workstations were set up in every office. Additionally, managers were taught how to assemble the new gear so they could help equip offices at rollout.

“They would take everything out of the box, and practice plugging everything in and testing—we did that with every single manager,” said Ashley Finstad, FAST Training Manager. The success of the hardware deployment hinged on a high level of involvement from MVD project members and users in the field. FAST Architect Anthony Finstad said, “They switched out literally everything off each examiner’s desk. It went extremely smooth, and it took a lot of work and a lot of planning to do that.”



Left to right: Jimmy Quinlivan, Laurie Bakri, Dan Heisel, Felisha Koch, Mike Walker, Tyson Miller

Project Timeline

ROLLOUT 1
October 11, 2022
Appointments and Queuing

ROLLOUT 2
November 13, 2023
Driver Services

ROLLOUT 3
March 17, 2025
Vehicle Services





Cleaning Up Duplicate Records

Duplicate customer records proliferated in MERLIN due to a lack of guardrails for data entry and minimal real-time validation. Data Conversion Engineer Nihan Miller said, “There were some warnings, but MERLIN didn’t stop you.” Bogged down by millions of duplicate customer records, MERLIN



Left to right: Nihan Miller, Luke Hester, Melissa Sonsteng, Dan Heisel

processed new data slowly and made it difficult for MVD staff to know they were working with the right record. Even minor typos were problematic. Vehicle Services Bureau Chief Mike Walker said, “Every time a dealer would input a name differently, just a little variation, it would create a whole other record. There could be ten Mike Walkers in there, with vehicles under each one.”

A dedicated cleanup effort enabled MVD to leave bad data in their rearview mirror. “Our goal was to get accurate information. We brought on four extra people just to work conversion for a year and a half,” said Operations Bureau Chief Felisha Koch. With support from the project team, these additional staff members identified and cleaned up data in MERLIN before moving it to CARS. MVD Software Architect Dan Heisel said, “They would also go into CARS and verify that the data that they worked on came over correctly—that was huge. If we didn’t have a good team on that, we wouldn’t have been anywhere near as successful as we were.” Out of 5.4 million customer records in MERLIN, only 1.6 million were verified as accurate and converted to CARS. Nihan said, “It was challenging, but we did it. We got the good records and left the junk. We had a remarkable conversion with no issues.”

Project Name

*Credentialing and
Registration System
(CARS)*

Project Type

DS-VS

Agency Name

*Montana Motor Vehicle
Division (MVD)*

Agency Motto

Driving Customer Service

Population

1.1 million

Capital

Helena

Fun Fact

*Montana derives its name from the Spanish term *montaña*, which translates to “mountain” or “mountainous,” reflecting the prominence of the Rocky Mountains throughout the western region of the state.*





A Cultural Reset

Prior to the CARS project, Attorney General Austin Knudsen and Attorney General Chief of Staff Will Selph stopped by the Billings office—the busiest MVD office in Montana. “One employee looked at us and said, ‘It never gets better, it never gets fixed,’” Will said. Many staff felt resigned to working with a dysfunctional system. Austin said, “The first time I visited, it was like walking into a funeral parlor—there was a pall over the place.”

Post-CARS, there has been a shift in the atmosphere of MVD offices. “Now, it’s fun there. That is such a culture change—it’s

so wonderful to see smiling faces and high fives,” Austin said. Having a system that performs transactions seamlessly and reliably has led to more pleasant interactions between clerks and customers. Driver Services Bureau Chief Tyson Miller explained, “Our staff has the tools and resources to better take care of customers.” Now, the previously unhappy staff member in Billings is unrecognizable. Will explained, “They look the same, but they’re not frowning. There’s not a little cloud of rain, thunder, and lightning over their head. It’s like they’re walking on air now.”



Anna Mhoun



Austin Knudsen



Bree Wilmot



Dan Heisel



Felisha Koch



Jimmy Quinlivan



Laurie Bakri



Melissa Sonsteng



Mike Walker



Nihan Miller



Tyson Miller



Will Selph



The Road Forward

CARS enabled the Montana Motor Vehicle Division (MVD) to make a U-turn on their customer service processes. “The goal was to drive customer service—it was our motto before the project, and CARS gave us the ability to make it reality,” said Vehicle Services Bureau Chief Mike Walker.

The CARS project reached its destination in March 2025. Since then, MVD has been mapping the road ahead, including plans for new online functionality that would further improve the customer experience. Felisha Koch,

Operations Bureau Chief, said, “We’ve put a lot of blood, sweat, and tears into this project, and I am 100% excited about the way that it’s turned out. We’ll continue adding more features as we go—we are not stopping anytime soon.”

“We started with a great product, had the right people, and hit a home run with it. We had the vision and focus on customer service and got exactly what we were looking for.”
—Tyson Miller, Bureau Chief, Driver Services Bureau