Indiana DWD Helps Lead Nationwide Efforts in UI Modernization Initiative

As technology continuously evolves, the Indiana Department of Workforce Development (DWD) strives to remain at the forefront of software development and implementation practices that will ultimately simplify and improve the Unemployment Insurance (UI) application process for claimants.

"Indiana is consistently looked at as a leader for software development," said DWD Chief Information Officer Chris Henderson.

With the goal of strengthening the overall UI system, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) is partnering with state workforce agencies and other groups in new ways to utilize modern technology and digital practices intended to make state systems more accessible, resilient, and secure through a new program—the Open UI Initiative— enabling modular system development and software reuse across the UI network.

According to Henderson, Indiana's reputation as a leader in UI modernization efforts most likely influenced event organizers to request Henderson's involvement in a webinar discussion panel Feb. 22, 2024, during which DOL representatives outlined the organization's vision for modernization through modularity while also officially introducing the Open UI Initiative and encouraging state-to-state collaboration.

"We've long been part of the NASWA community where states are encouraged to come together," Henderson said, in reference to Indiana DWD. "There are plenty of ideas to help in UI that we've borrowed from other states. Open UI will allow us all to tap into that marketplace of solutions."

By collaborating with NASWA's UI Information Technology Support Center and Georgetown University's Beeck Center for Social Impact and Innovation, the primary goal of the Open UI Initiative is to change how states build and buy technology through the establishment of a common framework and approach for modular UI system development. There's also a strong desire for the creation of market-based incentives that will drive innovation. Additionally, states need to have a variety of options when it comes to investing in technology that will ultimately meet UI program goals.

"There are a lot of different ways to approach modernization," Henderson said. "Some use an off-the-shelf system. Some, like Indiana, go through the process of developing in-house solutions. Basically, you buy something, or you build something. We have a lot of folks who work in UI modernization. Our team has been around for a long time."

With many years of experience, DWD developers have learned the traditional approach to writing software as a single structure can lead to application complexities when changes are later introduced.

"The problem with that approach is, as you implement changes, those changes can impact many other features," Henderson said. "Imagine carving a statue out of stone. When you think you're finished but then must add or change something, it's very difficult to do so without impacting the rest of the statue."

According to Henderson, the Open UI Initiative can help states solve small software-related issues without negatively affecting things on a larger scale.

"When there's collaboration between states, you have a marketplace of ideas and solutions for ways to approach certain problems and share innovation," Henderson said.

However, he's also quick to add that the modernization process is ongoing.

"Modernization doesn't really have a clear start and stop. We're always making advancements and improvements. Legislative changes can have an impact too. Plus, there's a never-ending need to improve efficiency."