PayIt™

High-Impact Resident Communication:

The Definitive Guide

Breaking through noise in the attention economy

Great communication is essential for resident engagement

Communicating with the public is vital work for government agencies and elected officials. Proactive engagement with residents opens lines of communication for feedback and gives officials opportunities to foster trust by sharing important information about available services, emergency information, how to pay a bill, or other helpful tools and resources.

This guide will walk you through the fundamentals of effective public sector communication, addressing channels, language, how technology can help, and real-world examples you can apply to your own messaging.

People are dealing with a constant stream of information

Making sure that communication is effective is more important than ever. We are all inundated with more information now than any time in history, and channels of communication continue to evolve.

Residents expect government information and services to be easy to access

Government service delivery doesn't happen in a vacuum; residents expect the same digital experiences and savvy that they encounter elsewhere. And government communications target a wide audience that needs to understand the message. Yet, aside from a few outliers, many government websites, social channels, and yes, even print materials, don't always hit the mark.

Digital tools have changed the way people communicate

Technical advances have provided new opportunities and new challenges for government. Information now moves faster than ever before, and government agencies need to rethink how they create and share information. While government agencies may continue to use traditional channels to reach some users, they should be thought of as a complement to digital tools — never a sufficient replacement.

Get your resident communications dialed in

People turn to several sources for government information: social media, the agency's website, local news outlets, printed materials, and word of mouth. But knowing when and how to use each channel can be a challenge for agencies — and that's putting resident trust at risk. In fact, most young adults find it a struggle to engage with the government, and only 28% of people ages 18–34 believe the government communicates effectively with them.

Although some government agencies and elected officials are using digital communication effectively, many are lagging behind — lacking (for starters) a user-friendly website and active, engaging social media channels. Traditional channels like broadcast television, radio, newspapers, and mail have largely given way to digital platforms. Complicating the matter: popular digital channels of communication continue to proliferate, with new platforms such as TikTok commanding a lot of people's attention as others recede.

With so many options, it's no wonder that effective communication is hard to achieve for government agencies. In smaller agencies, there likely isn't anyone on staff who specializes in marketing or government-to-consumer communications. And in bigger agencies, communications staff have their hands full and can't always contribute to every message that needs to be sent.

Better communication leads to better outcomes

Government communication matters. Whether it's safety updates, service changes, or program information, people need to hear from their government and believe what they hear. Different messages serve different purposes, but getting communications right has numerous benefits:

Raise awareness

Many people don't know about all the services, programs, or events their local government offers. Good communication helps fix that. When people understand what's available and when it matters, they're more likely to take part and get the help they need.

Build trust

Only around 15% of Americans believe the government is transparent, and less than half believe it is accountable to the public. People's trust in government often depends on what they hear and how they hear it. When information is clear, honest, and on time, it shows that the government is working for the people. When trust is low, simple and open communication makes a real difference.

Encourage participation

Informed people are more involved. Whether it's giving feedback, answering a survey, or showing up to a meeting, it starts with knowing what's going on. Keeping residents in the loop helps build a stronger connection between people and their government.

What you need to know to communicate effectively

Digital or traditional? Both.

Research makes it clear that using digital and traditional communication channels **in combination** gets you the best results. The trick is harmonizing them.
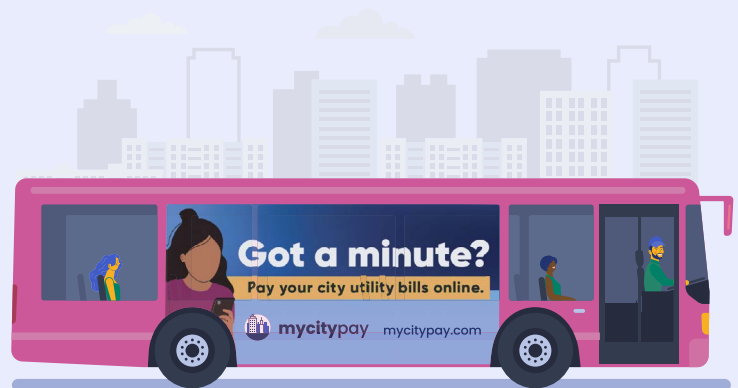
As more services and communication move online, agencies need to adapt their approach. But balancing digital and offline communication requires respect for the nuances of each — the messaging has to work together to be effective. Of course, even "snail mail" and television/radio have their place, but without digital, there is a risk that residents will miss important messages.

Meetings like town halls should also take a hybrid approach. They are a great way for people to voice their concerns or appreciation, but an exclusively face-to-face event, requiring meaningful time and effort from officials and residents, might not always be the best way to engage the community and build long-lasting relationships. A mix of offline and online participation is a better, more inclusive option.

A blended approach to communications

Offline

- Some people might not have reliable internet access
- Some residents prefer face-to-face and analog communications
- Gives people something physical/tangible to associate with your agency

Got a minute?
Pay your city utility bills online.
mycitypay   mycitypay.com

The property tax deadline is January 5th

Pay my property taxes

It's easy to pay online. Here's how

Pay your property taxes online.
mycitypay.com
mycitypay

Online

- Quick and easy for residents — and often speedier for agencies too
- Makes services and content more accessible
- Personalization can be as niche or as wide as necessary

Overarching principles for effective public messaging

As you're getting ready to execute, here are a few general best practices to take with you:

If there's a desired action, make it clear

Are you sending out a property tax bill or a community survey? Every message should guide the resident toward the next step, whether it's paying a bill, attending a meeting, or completing a survey. Use clear calls to action (CTAs) and minimize the number of steps needed to complete a task.

Make it a back-and-forth dialogue

Always respond to feedback. People want to know they're heard, so always try to respond if a resident leaves a social comment, calls, or sends an email.

Respond quickly

When a resident contacts your agency with a question, don't wait too long to respond. (Different platforms have different expectations regarding response time — we'll get into those nuances below.)

Use plain language

Avoid using jargon, legalese, or other difficult words. Your message should be easy and quick for everyone to read.

- Use short sentences
- Define abbreviations, acronyms, and complex terms
- Organize content with a logical hierarchy
- Include bullet points, lists, and proper headings for easy reading
- Avoid idioms

How to choose the right voice and tone for written communication

Communicate in a style that fits your agency and works for the audience. Your communications influence how people feel about your agency.

Voice

Your agency's voice is its consistent personality across all communications. It should reflect your mission, values, and commitment to public service. Voice doesn't change much from one message to the next, regardless of topic or platform.

Government agencies typically use a professional, respectful, and impartial voice, communicating credibility and care. But that doesn't mean that bigger words and complicated sentences are required.

Examples

This voice is probably too casual for a government agency:

"Hey there! Just a heads-up — we're closing early Friday."

This voice is courteous and clear and more appropriate for a government agency:

"City offices will close at 3:00 pm this Friday. Thank you for understanding."

Tone

While voice remains consistent, tone changes based on the message, the urgency, and the emotional context. It's how your message feels. Is it urgent? Empathetic? Encouraging?

Tone can also be shaped by the channel you're using. A social post may have a lighter tone than a formal email notice. For example, a service outage alert requires a calm and direct tone, while a post about a community event can be more upbeat and friendly.

### Examples

A bill payment reminder, more formal tone:

"Your utility payment is past due. To avoid service interruption, please make a payment at XYZ.com."

A program sign-up message, encouraging tone:

"Ready to try something new? Sign up for free art classes at your local community center — all ages welcome!"

An emergency update, in a reassuring tone:

"We're monitoring the storm closely and working with emergency services to keep residents safe. We will post updates here."
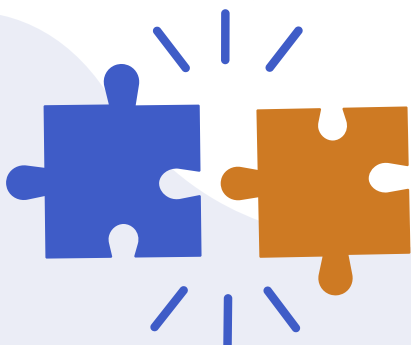
Voice and tone are closely connected; Together they convey the seriousness of the message, the agency's understanding of the community, and an understanding of different digital cultures.

Here's a good starting point for your government agency's voice:

Inclusive

Impartial

Professional and respectful

Concise and easy to understand

You can adjust the tone from there, depending on the message and where you're sharing it.

Try this, not that

With these examples, the goal is to shift bureaucratic language to a more conversational, resident-friendly tone. We remove complex or technical terms and use plain language instead. Each updated message also places greater emphasis on user benefits to encourage timely action. Overall, the changes make the communication more approachable, actionable, and effective for a general public audience.

Original
Failure to remit payment for past due utility balances may result in disconnection of services in accordance with municipal policy.

Improved
Your utility bill is past due. To avoid service interruption, please make a payment as soon as possible at XYZ.com

Edits explained: The original is impersonal and reads more like an official policy. The update transforms the message into plain speech, which helps residents take action quickly.

Original
Users may initiate recurring electronic funds transfer (EFT) arrangements through the designated payment portal by providing bank account details.

Improved
Never miss a payment — set up AutoPay and your bills will be paid automatically each month. It's quick and secure at XYZ.com.

Edits explained: The new copy is clearly written with the end-user in mind. It's easy to understand, mentions the benefits of AutoPay, and offers a clear call to action. All of these help make it more effective.

Original
The annual real estate tax statement for your parcel has been generated and is now available for retrieval via the online taxpayer portal.

Improved
Your property tax bill is ready. View and pay it online in just a few clicks — no paperwork, no hassle. Get started at mycounty.gov.

Edits explained: The original is passive and institutional; the updated version is direct and uses plain language, so it's easier for residents to follow through.

Original

Delinquent tax accounts are subject to interest charges and collections procedures under state and local laws.

Improved

Your property tax bill is due soon. Property tax payments are due by January 5th to avoid interest or collections. Easily pay online in minutes at XYZ.com.

Edits explained: The original uses language that may feel impersonal. The revised version is more friendly, while still including necessary information and an actionable next step.

Original

Taxpayers may opt into an installment payment structure, provided the outstanding balance is resolved in full by the statutory deadline.

Improved

Need more flexibility? You can make partial payments toward your property tax bill — just ensure it's paid in full by January 5th.

Edits explained: The newer version explains installment payments in a way that's easier to understand and act on. Adding a specific and final due date adds clarity.

Small changes in language can have a big impact. When government agencies use clear, conversational wording instead of formal jargon, their messages become easier to understand and more likely to drive action.

Choosing your communication channels

Each communication channel has unique characteristics that influence how residents receive and interpret information. Understanding these differences allows local governments to craft more effective messages, ensure accessibility, and foster engagement.

Owned marketing channels

These are platforms your agency owns and controls directly, including what's shared, when it's shared, and how it looks. Because they're not influenced by outside algorithms, trends, or third-party changes, these channels offer consistency and reliability. That makes them ideal for delivering messages about essential services, reinforcing your agency's credibility, and building long-term relationships with residents.

Digital mainstays

Your website

Structure your site for easy navigation, incorporating features such as collapsible sections and search-friendly headings. Clear, direct language should take priority over legalistic terms. Service-specific FAQ pages with detailed answers to common resident inquiries about services such as permits, utilities, and licensing are helpful to residents and more likely to get picked up by search engines.

Email and digital newsletters

Best suited for recurring updates. Use clear, engaging subject lines, and incorporate bullet points, subheadings, and clear calls to action in the body of the email to improve readability.

Government agencies sometimes worry about "over-emailing" their constituents, but in our experience, the risk of this is quite low, provided that the content is informative, timely, and relevant. We have found that emails from the government agencies we work with have very high open rates (more than 50%) and very low unsubscribe rates.
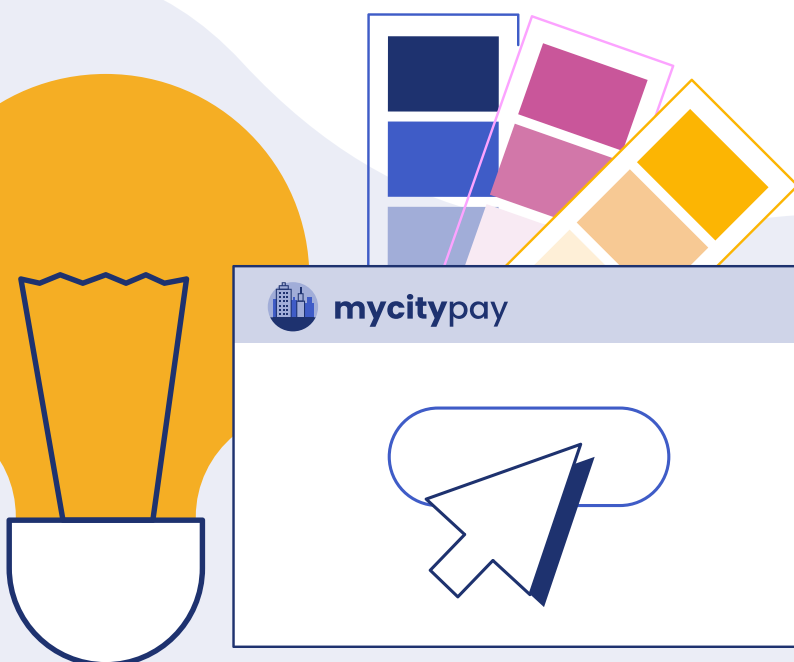
Old school — but still powerful

Direct mail

It is most effective for delivering official notices, voting information, tax bills, and service changes. Since many people scan rather than read mail, using clear headings and bullet points improves comprehension. Personalization, such as addressing the resident by name or including neighborhood-specific updates, increases engagement.

Every mailer should include a clear call to action, directing recipients to visit a website, make a payment, or attend an event. However, some households may discard mail that appears promotional, so government branding should be prominent to establish credibility.

Bill inserts

These work well for service reminders, policy updates, and promotions for digital services. Given their limited space, messaging should be concise and direct. Inserts are most effective when reinforcing awareness of programs that have already been promoted through digital channels. Visual design plays a crucial role — clear graphics and defined action steps enhance readability and engagement.

Press and news releases

Save press/news releases for official statements regarding emergency responses, policy announcements, launching new services or digital features, and other critical government communications. Since journalists and media outlets rely on them as sources, clarity and accuracy are essential. Including a quote from a government representative enhances credibility. The length should be concise yet informative to ensure media usability.

Third-party channels

Third-party channels are platforms that your agency doesn't own, but where your residents already spend time. These include social media, livestream platforms, and neighborhood apps. While you don't control the platforms or their algorithms, they are critical for agency visibility and give you a wider reach. **Important: it's best to employ multiple third-party channels so that you get the widest exposure, and to encourage residents to follow you on these platforms via other communication channels.**

Where people are already spending their time:

Facebook

Facebook is great for community engagement, event promotion, timely updates, and FAQs. Posts should be concise and visually appealing, and a mix of text, images, and videos should be included to maximize reach. Comments allow for quick two-way communication, but moderation is necessary to prevent misinformation from spreading. Given Facebook's evolving algorithms, you may want to boost certain posts (with paid promotion) to ensure visibility among residents.

X (formerly Twitter)

Historically been a key platform for news updates, but recent changes have led to some volatility in engagement. Despite these fluctuations, it remains a valuable tool for real-time updates and public communication. To be effective, messaging should be direct, timely, and interactive, encouraging dialogue with residents while maintaining credibility.

Livestreaming

Expands access to community discussions for those who can't attend in person. Livestreams (on YouTube and Facebook, for example) foster transparency and build trust. Promote them in advance via email and social platforms, and offer real-time Q&A when possible to boost interaction. Consider archiving recordings for later viewing, and use captions for accessibility.

Niche, neighborhood, and next-gen platforms

These channels are great for experimentation and engaging hard-to-reach groups. Not all communication needs to flow through these channels, but when used intentionally, they can reach specific demographics or communities.

Nextdoor

Facilitates hyper-localized messaging, addressing neighborhood-specific initiatives and resident concerns. Residents expect authenticity on this platform, meaning messages should feel community-oriented rather than overly formal. To establish credibility, government agencies should obtain official verification. Nextdoor can also be used to gather resident feedback and monitor public sentiment.

Reddit

Primarily useful for monitoring public sentiment and tracking community concerns rather than direct engagement. Government messaging on Reddit is often met with skepticism, making direct participation less effective. Instead, agencies can use the platform to identify recurring issues and misconceptions, then address them through other official communication channels.

TikTok

Although some agencies have banned the use of TikTok on government devices, it's the best place to reach Gen Z and Gen Alpha. If you're able to use TikTok on a dedicated device, it works best for public service announcements, lighthearted content, and informative messaging rather than serious policy discussions. Success on TikTok requires dedicated content creation expertise, as poorly executed messaging can be counterproductive.

Threads/Bluesky

Both offer opportunities to engage with residents who are active on newer social media platforms. As emerging platforms, effectiveness depends on user adoption and evolving trends. Messaging should be conversational and interactive.

Key takeaways

- ✓ **Include offline and digital**
- ✓ **Match the message to the channel**
- ✓ **Respect resident preferences**
- ✓ **Make messages actionable**
- ✓ **Monitor and adjust**

How technology can help

Advances in social media, artificial intelligence (AI), and other digital technologies have drastically changed how government agencies engage with residents. Digital channels give agencies a fresh, fast way to communicate with people — and it gives them more options that people prefer. This is important, considering nearly 70% of younger people think the government does not communicate effectively with them.

Tech has a place beyond posting a social update or sending an email. Your agency can use technology to optimize (and in some cases, automate) your agency's communication tactics and messaging.

Want to be helpful? Make messages relevant

Modern engagement platforms can integrate with existing agency systems. Use data from these systems to ensure accuracy and relevance. This builds trust and a consistent resident experience.

Automate communications

Automation tools use data to determine the best times and frequencies to send emails or texts, helping reduce information fatigue and increase response rates for things like service reminders, public hearings, or program updates.

You can also trigger follow-up messages based on resident actions — like submitting a permit application, registering for a program, or missing a deadline. Behavioral triggers improve relevance and reduce confusion.

Get as local as possible

Target messages by geography, down to ZIP codes or service areas. Localization can ensure that residents get information relevant to their specific area, such as road closures, water advisories, election reminders, or tax deadlines. In addition, it reduces noise. Getting local reduces noise - so people won't start to tune out and miss an important message.

Personalize and segment campaigns

Your agency can use customer relationship management (CRM) software to segment and personalize communications.

- Segmentation groups residents by factors such as household type, service usage, or language.
- Personalize messages based on resident data (like their interaction history, service usage, or demographic profile).

Target messages so they are relevant and useful to the audience. For example, you might promote energy assistance to eligible households or notify only those affected by a zoning change.

Simple ideas that work

For payments, send reminders in advance, a few days before, on the due date, and a follow-up if missed

Make sure your website is accessible to all users by reviewing and meeting WCAG accessibility standards

Personalize communications when possible — localize, use names, and reference specific accounts

Help pages, FAQ information, and customer support options should be easy to find and access

Make sure people are able to complete tasks on any device: a desktop, mobile phone, or tablet

The majority of website visitors are looking to pay their bills — make it easy to find payment information and links

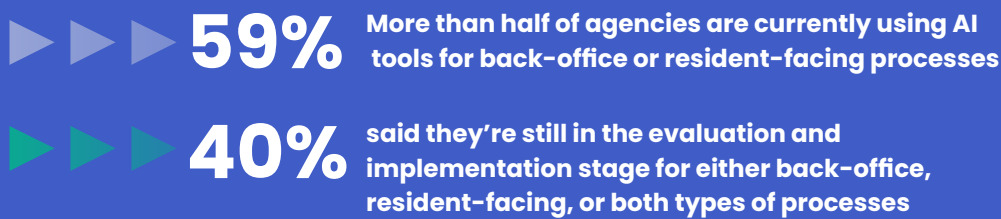## Avoid these common pitfalls and misunderstandings

- ❌ Using unclear or inconsistent language
- ❌ Not promoting new services to residents
- ❌ Not considering residents without internet access or digital skills
- ❌ Not using data to improve your communications
- ❌ Using the wrong channel for crisis communication
- ❌ Failing to consider ease of use — residents will give up if a digital service is too hard to use
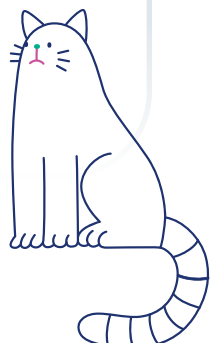
Practical ways to use AI

When applied thoughtfully, AI can help improve the resident experience (and increase engagement and trust) in various ways, from monitoring traffic to providing prompt emergency notifications. And many government agencies have already incorporated AI into their workflows.

PayIt's 2025 Digital Government Adoption Index found that:

▶ ▶ ▶ **59%** **More than half of agencies are currently using AI tools for back-office or resident-facing processes**

▶ ▶ ▶ **40%** **said they're still in the evaluation and implementation stage for either back-office, resident-facing, or both types of processes**

Use AI to improve day-to-day communication with your community

✓ **24/7 customer support, via chatbot**
AI-powered chatbots can answer common resident questions at any time. Since residents will have more access to consistent answers about services like utilities, permits, licensing, or court dates, AI chatbots could help reduce the number of support requests your agency receives.

✓ **Improve personalization**
You can use AI to analyze resident behavior and engagement data to deliver more relevant messages like important deadline reminders, targeted alerts during emergencies, or service outage updates based on location.

✓ **Translations**
Real-time translation makes government services more accessible for people with limited English proficiency.

✓ **Analyze resident feedback and comments quickly, at scale**
AI tools can quickly review thousands of comments, emails, or survey responses to identify key themes, concerns, and sentiments. This helps leaders prioritize improvements based on real-time input.

✓ **Draft resident communications**
Give an AI tool clear instructions to create first drafts of communications that you can use as a starting point. Keep in mind that generative AI is not perfect; always review the output for factual accuracy and edit it to align with your voice, desired tone, and the nature of the message. You can also use AI to review current material and get suggestions for improvements. (Reminder: Don't include any sensitive information.)

Try this prompt!

Want AI to draft your message? Here's a prompt you can customize and try!

You're an expert communications strategist in the public sector who is focused on crafting resident-facing messaging. You are highly skilled in understanding user behaviors and motivations. Your strategic mindset helps you envision the end goal and reverse-engineer the best language to achieve it.

We're creating a campaign for [Jurisdiction] promoting its [online property tax payment service], which allows residents to pay their [property tax online]. The service is called [Name], and this is the site: [XYZ.com]

Using that information, please write an email draft that we'll send to residents to create awareness. The goal is to get recipients to open the email, go to the landing page, and create an account on the site.

+   Tools

This prompt can be modified for other services and other content types (like blog posts or audio ads).

If you want to use AI to review current content, try this prompt:

Fill in the highlighted sections to fit your needs

You're an expert communications strategist in the public sector who is focused on crafting resident-facing messaging. We're going to review a [FAQ page] for [Jurisdiction]. Please review the following [FAQ page], and note if there are any places to make improvements. We want concise and friendly language, simple instructions, and clear next steps where necessary. Avoid unnecessary jargon and overly complex words. Here is the page: [XYZ.com]

+   Tools

Measuring success and optimizing for the future

✅ **Track how many residents engage with your agency and how many use your services**

✅ **Ask for feedback to learn what works and what needs improvement**

✅ **Use this information to make your communication better over time**

What to track
+ SOME DEFINITIONS

Measuring traffic sources

QR codes
allow you to track scans and conversions on things like printed material and signage — use a different one if you want to compare scans from varying sources.

UTMs
are unique URLs that track digital traffic from websites, digital ads, and social media. Use a unique one for each channel to identify which ones are most effective in driving traffic.

Measuring effectiveness

Click-through rate
indicates the percentage of recipients that have followed a link in an email or ad. It is a leading indicator that your message is landing — but conversion rate is even more important.

Conversion rate
indicates the percentage of people who have taken the desired action, such as registering for an event, paying a bill, or taking a survey.

Step-by-step example: Encouraging use of digital services

Let's say your agency has a new digital solution or feature (like a way for residents to pay taxes or apply for a permit online without coming into the office). Follow these steps to make sure your communication hits the mark.

1. From the get-go

- Issue an official press release and notify local news outlets
- Announce the program on social channels and via email with a link to enrollment
- Feature the information prominently on your website
- Place printed materials and signage in your office — and include a QR code

2. Use multiple channels

- Add a QR code on your bill and the bill envelope
- Add a bill insert to highlight the service
- Produce a short video about the service featuring an elected official — put this video on your social channels and website
- Run low-cost ads: sponsor local transit cards or advertise in community newsletters and magazines
- Create an FAQ page that describes how the service works, but avoid excess "legalese" or fine print

3. Key message points

- Convey that this is an official service of your agency
- Reassure people that stringent security and privacy protections are in place
- If you are transitioning from one digital solution to another, redirect traffic with a brief explanation

4. Encourage re-use

- Make it easy to sign up for an account. Minimize the steps and ensure the copy is clear
- Email account holders to tell them about new services, upcoming deadlines, etc.
- Encourage people to share their experience on social media. Use quotes from reviews, star ratings, and social posts to give others confidence
- Highlight features that benefit residents

Every message is an opportunity to build trust

When state and local governments provide information that is clear, timely, and accessible, they make it easier for residents to engage with and feel confident in their community.

By taking small, practical steps, agencies can build trust and increase engagement across every channel. Things like simplifying service information, using technology to improve messaging, and actively seeking resident feedback are easy to implement and make a big impact.

Quick fixes that go a long way

- ✅ Focus on making services easy to find and use
- ✅ Train your team to use plain language
- ✅ Know about the different methods and channels and when to use them
- ✅ Explain the benefits of online tools to residents
- ✅ Ask residents for feedback regularly and adapt as needed

Better communication doesn't just keep people informed. It helps them feel confident and connected, and these everyday interactions can turn into meaningful opportunities to serve and strengthen your community.
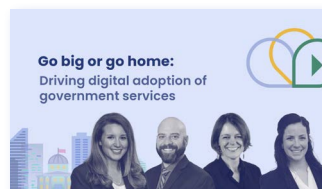
Additional resources

READ

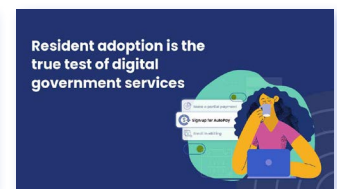[Driving Digital Adoption of Government Services: The Definitive Guide](#)

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[Real-world use cases, consumer sentiments, and what's next for AI in government technology](#)

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[Government services are online. Why does engagement lag?](#)

About PayIt

PayIt enables state and local government agencies to deliver a great resident payments experience that accelerates the shift to digital. Agencies choose PayIt to better achieve their mission through improved operational efficiency, customer support, and resident satisfaction. Our solutions span property tax, courts, utilities, DMV, outdoors, and more. PayIt provides a single resident profile across agencies and jurisdictions, integrates into back-office and adjacent systems, and our team helps clients drive adoption of digital channels. Serving more than 100 million residents in North America, we have received awards from Fast Company and StateScoop, and have been listed in the GovTech 100 for 9 years and counting.

PayIt™

Smarter for government.
Easier for everyone.

To learn more, visit www.payitgov.com