**Synopsis**

**From paper to digital progress-a Washington, DC government agency transforms itself through customer-centric technological innovations.**

Guided by its strategic plan *Vision 2020: A Roadmap to Digital Transformation,* the District of Columbia Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs (DCRA), one of the largest agencies in the city, made a bold investment in innovation that dramatically altered its delivery of government services. In 2018, DCRA was plagued by a lack of public trust and a substandard customer experience. The agency pivoted to a data-driven culture driven by a strong vision and new operational mission. DCRA eliminated cumbersome paper processes and developed web-based platforms to create a seamless customer journey. Some of the cornerstone initiatives included a website refresh to make it easier to find information from all devices, [Access DC](https://accessdc.dcra.dc.gov/app/UserHome)- a single sign-on for improved customer experience and cybersecurity, and a more intuitive CRM system to guide customer interactions along with a pledge to resolve customer issues within three business days or less. As a result, customer satisfaction showed a dramatic jump from 31% to 87% over a two-year period. The goal of realizing easier, faster, and better services guided the agency’s development of unique online tools to shorten the time to getting permits and business licenses, resulting in a 46% faster permit issuing rate, and a 24% increase in the number of inspections completed along with over 370,000 interactions with the agency. Finally, these achievements played out during a global pandemic allowing the agency to quickly transition within 48 hours from in-person to online services.

**Who We Are**

At the heart of its mission, DCRA protects the health, safety, economic interests, and quality of life of residents, businesses and visitors in the District of Columbia by regulating construction and business activity, issuing permits, and ensuring compliance with building codes and zoning regulations. Construction activity, buildings, and rental housing establishments are inspected, and housing code is enforced. To protect consumers, DCRA issues business and professional licenses, registers corporations, inspects weighing and measuring devices used for monetary profit, and issues special events permits.

**A New Paradigm in Quality Customer Service**: As of September 2021, DCRA was on track to receive an overall satisfaction score approaching 90%, meaning customers rated interactions with the agency as either excellent or satisfactory. That’s impressive, especially given that DCRA fields more than 19,000 emails every month along with 16,000 phone calls and 1,000 live chats on our website. DCRA did it by infusing transparency, responsiveness, and accountability into its customer interactions. DCRA’s CRM system applies AI to help with the triaging of customer complaints. An initial call is logged in and then routed to the appropriate staff expert. Employees are held accountable for resolving the issue within three business days, and finally, the agency follow-up is a satisfaction survey that allows the agency to track its progress in resolution.

**Empowering Consumers**

As a regulatory and enforcement agency, DCRA provides oversight to keep consumers safe. Improving the customer journey was the impetus behind the development of three novel online systems to help consumers in three of the critical areas where DCRA provides important guidance: hiring a building professional, renting from a landlord, or undertaking a building project:

* [**The DCRA Contractor Rating System**](https://govservices.dcra.dc.gov/contractorratingsystem): The Contractor Rating System allows residents and businesses owners to pick a contractor for a particular project using a five-star rating system. The goal of the program is to arm residents and businesses with the information they need to hire licensed building professionals with proven track records, thus reducing the likelihood of having to deal with a problematic contractor. DCRA’s Contractor Rating System includes every District-licensed building professional who has completed at least one project within the last three years. Currently, there are over 4,700 licensed building professionals in the Contractor Rating System.
* **The Landlord Violations Tool**: This application proactively assists prospective tenants with valuable information before they sign a lease. Using the tool, renters can check for outstanding or unaddressed landlord housing violations and ensure that they rent from only a properly maintained property. The Landlord Violations Tool includes approximately 48,000 housing violations that DCRA has cited landlords for over the last three years. Since the launch of the tool, property owners, who can see their pending violations, have also repaired their properties nearly 2,500 times.
* [**DCRA Permit Wizard**](https://dcra.dc.gov/permitwizard): The Permit Wizard is an easy-to-use, customer-friendly application that modernizes the way DCRA customers start residential building projects. Previously, the permitting process was cumbersome, not intuitive, required customers to know what types of permits were required, and provided very little information to assist them after permits were issued. By using a wizard-based approach, the Permit Wizard guides customers through a series of questions that identifies the permits needed for the entire project – customers no longer have to know permit types in advance; advises the customer of the estimated total cost of permits; informs the customer of anticipated plan reviews by DCRA and sister agencies, required documentation, anticipated inspections; and provides useful advisories and notifications about their property – all without having to meet with DCRA staff via phone or in person. Since the launch of the Permit Wizard in March 2021, more than 7,300 projects have been created.

**Centralized Access to Public Data**: To improve the way customers access essential information transparently, DCRA launched [**Scout**](https://scout.dcra.dc.gov/dashboard-old-8932)**,** an online consolidated database. On the platform, **Scout** centralized four previously available tools, the Property Information Verification System (PIVS), Permit Application Q-Tracker (Q-tracker), Business License Verification (BBLV), and Building Permit Application (OBPAT). Streamlining these four applications into one platform improves access to information. Users can access valuable information such as property details, physical characteristics, ownership, and status. There are now advanced maps to learn more about the district zoning, and boundaries. Customers can gather licensing information, including, category, status, and expiration date. They can also see current information on inspections and infractions. **Scout** lists civil infractions, stop work orders, property code compliance and zoning enforcement. Permit status reflects the type of permit approved, a description of the work to be performed, and the time it will take for the initial review is available to the public, along with occupancy use and third-party information. The information is also updated in near-real time.

[**Creating an Online Agency Performance Dashboard**:](https://eservices.dcra.dc.gov/DCRAAgencyDashboard/index) DCRA introduced the Agency Performance Dashboard to provide transparency around its key performance metrics. Designed to build public trust and provide accountability, customers can see for themselves if the agency is keeping its promises. Everything from how fast the agency issues building permits, to the number and types of inspections completed, to the type and amount of enforcement fines levied are available for public viewing. In fiscal year 2020, as revealed by the Dashboard, DCRA delivered the agency’s highest performance on record, surpassing all service level agreements – in every division or program area across the agency. In fiscal year 2021, our performance-to-date is even stronger.

**Leading in a Pandemic through Virtual Innovation**

By the time the District of Columbia issued its public health emergency in March 2020, DCRA was well positioned to handle virtual operations. In contrast, according to the International Code Council (ICC), other jurisdictions across the country were not able to adapt to the remote and virtual posture for inspections, permitting and construction. Forty percent did not have the capability to do electronic/remote plan reviews, thirty percent did not have the capability to do any aspect of electronic/remote permitting, and sixty-one percent did not have the capability for electronic/remote inspections.

Yet, since April 2020, in the early stages of the public health emergency to mid-September 2021, DCRA has completed over 94,000 virtual and in-person inspections:

* Construction Inspections: 38,480
* Proactive Housing Inspections: 11,476
* Complaint Based Housing Inspections: 10,938
* Rental Housing Inspections: 14,094
* Illegal Construction Inspections: 8,733
* Vacant Building Inspections: 11,197

In addition, the agency introduced the novel [Resident Inspector Program](https://dcra.dc.gov/service/resident-inspector-program), enlisting and training residents to perform the three most common inspections, and adding 200-plus jobs for the city.

**Looking Ahead and Readying for the Future**

For DCRA, transforming the way government services are delivered means being nimble in meeting the challenges ahead. By the time this award is bestowed, DCRA will have launched several more key initiatives.

* [**Tertius**](https://tertius.dcra.dc.gov/): Tertius is a new third-party inspection marketplace. Tertius easily connects customers with qualified inspectors at their convenience and within their budget. This platform was created to present more convenient options for customers, and to potentially shorten the timeline to complete inspections. Tertius brings a supply of customers directly to each inspector and provides a platform to conduct and report inspection activity – streamlining and speeding up the process. This platform will also allow independent and smaller inspection agencies to compete with larger inspections agencies.
* **Dispatch**: Dispatch is a new online scheduling and inspection tracking system that accommodates the most common inspection requests: housing and property maintenance, illegal construction, vacant building, and basic business license rental inspections. Designed with customers in mind, Dispatch allows automatic scheduling, and provides real-time updates on inspection requests, including arrival times and rescheduling. Commonly used in the private sector, similar to Uber Eats and Lyft, once an [Inspection Request Form](https://dcra.kustomer.help/contact/request-for-inspection-form-SkHyBRJBv) is completed on dcra.dc.gov, Dispatch will: send a confirmation of the request directly to the customer, confirm the date and timeframe when the inspection will occur and provide the name of the inspector, provide a link tracking the status of the inspection, and automatically update a customer when an attempt to inspect is unsuccessful, needs to be rescheduled, or is completed. In our pilot launch of illegal construction inspection requests, it took customers only 5 minutes to get an inspection scheduled, whereas in the past the wait time to hear back with an inspection date was around 1.5 days.
* **Pre-Approved Plans Platform**: The Pre-Approved Plans Platform allows customers to choose from a selection of plans that are pre-approved for code compliance by DCRA. In order to properly assess zoning requirements, DCRA created a checklist for use by design professionals enabling customers to dramatically shorten the customer timeline. Customers can choose from a library of plans, connect with a design professional, and begin expedited plan review. Pre-Approved Plans make it easy to get support needed to complete projects and stay on budget.
* **Quick Response**: As part of the agency’s efforts to improve access to records, DCRA will integrate Quick Response (QR) code technology in its public-facing product offerings— including permits and certificates. As a result, customers will be able to easily and quickly view DCRA records by scanning the QR code with a smart phone.

**Emboldened by Progress**

DCRA now builds on the momentum of the last two years with its “Future Ready” five-year strategic plan. With the core values of Safety, Perpetual Improvement, and Transparency, DCRA is poised to become even more responsive to the needs of its customers and a true innovative partner in the economic recovery of Washington, DC.