



# Modernizing in the time of COVID-19

IBM Global Business Services helps Rhode  
Island enhance its public health response

by Deirdre Puleo

6-minute read

“I remember the day I was asked to help; cases of COVID-19 were increasing. When I came down the stairs, I saw large piles of paper. They were lab results.”

For Kristine Campagna, Chief Operating Officer for COVID Operations for the State of Rhode Island, that day in March 2020 was a wake-up call. Earlier in the month, Governor Gina Raimondo had declared a state of emergency and enacted a unified, whole-of-government response to the pandemic. The National Guard had been mobilized. And leaders from across the state were called in to support the Department of Health and mitigate public health implications. Across Rhode Island, it was all hands on deck.



But for Campagna, the pandemic shone a spotlight on the state’s operational limitations and lack of modernization. “We didn’t have the data systems to respond to the cases, and our electronic systems were very limited,” she explains.

“At that point, everything was done by paper and through fax machines. So, in the midst of a pandemic, we were building a system to deal with, and manage, the number of increased cases, and it was very, very difficult.”

By August, Rhode Island reported more than 27,000 cases of COVID-19, with 120 people, on average, testing positive each day. Following Governor Raimondo's innovative thinking, the Department of Health had repurposed its existing Salesforce software to use for case investigations and contact tracing. In the department's small call center, a handful of overwhelmed employees were fielding thousands of calls from concerned residents seeking information. And the governor had just announced plans to reopen schools, from kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12), on September 14.

Courtney Hawkins, the former Director of Rhode Island's Department of Human Services, recalls the challenge of meeting the government's many public health response requirements against the backdrop of an unpredictable disease. "With COVID-19 there was tremendous



uncertainty about when cases would rise and fall," she explains. "So we needed a contact center that could scale and shrink with our public health response. We needed additional analytics and expertise in human-centered design. And we needed to

make sure that families, children and school staff were supported and able to get testing. It was an incredibly intense period of time.

"That's when we decided to bring in additional resources."

“The IBM solution allowed us to create a structure that we can scale to be larger or smaller depending on what’s happening and what we learn about COVID-19.”

**Courtney Hawkins**, former Director of the Department of Human Services, State of Rhode Island

The state stood up a specialty K-12 team and call center team in just

2

weeks

Rhode Island responds to 80% of positive test cases within

24

hours

# A united front to safeguard residents

The to-do list was long and time was short, but the priority was clear: support the governor's back-to-school plan.

Working shoulder-to-shoulder with the Rhode Island Department of Health, [IBM® Global Business Services®](#) took a human-centered approach to understanding needs and opportunities to develop a roadmap aimed at supporting children, parents and school staff. This included putting together a specialty K-12 case investigation and contact tracing team, setting up a K-12 testing call center, and adding human resources to support new business processes—all in two weeks. The call center went live on September 14,



2020 with 40 trained agents armed with documented call scripts.

“The IBM team worked around the clock with our team to stand up the call center as quickly as possible,” says Hawkins.

“The IBM solution allowed us to create a structure that we can scale to be larger or smaller depending on what’s

happening and what we learn about COVID-19. It also allows us to move resources as needed and cross-train people across functions.”

Following IBM's guidance, the state expanded the capabilities of its call center for the general public too, staffing it with trained agents and

adding a COVID-19 hotline. To expedite support for infected residents, it brought together people, process and technology, improving and automating the case investigation and contact tracing processes, supported with the Salesforce platform. “We didn’t have the phone line capability, the technology or operation experience,” says Campagna. “We needed scalability and speed, and to get to cases more quickly. IBM brought all of that technology and expertise to the table to help us with our COVID response.” Today, the COVID-19 Operations Contact Center, which also offers contact tracing services, is managed by IBM.

Residents can also get answers to their most frequently asked questions by visiting the state’s website and chatting with RHODA, an online virtual agent based on [IBM Watson® Assistant](#) software. IBM launched the project in only 12 days, integrating it with the

Salesforce platform before handing it over to live agents. Since October 2020, RHODA has had more than 100,000 conversations on topics related to test scheduling, test results, travel restrictions, vaccine eligibility and other questions.

During the first phase of K-12 testing, IBM Watson Assistant technology handled more than 18,000 phone calls about test scheduling, test cancellations and rescheduling, and test results retrieval—in only three weeks. When callers had more complex questions, additional support was provided through intelligent routing and outbound text notifications. And in the second phase of testing, IBM Watson Assistant software automatically managed 70% of all vaccination-related calls, while also providing human agent routing for complex issues, “call-backs” and bilingual support in English and Spanish.

Another key enabler of the department’s operations transformation was the use of agile, user-focused [IBM Garage™](#) methodologies. In these collaborative sessions, teams from IBM and the Rhode Island Department of Health applied their respective expertise to discuss health policy options, map processes and develop predictive models. With insight into how, where and why COVID-19 spreads, combined with improved, end-to-end operational processes, the State of Rhode Island can better predict outbreaks and, ultimately, tailor its public health response.

Hawkins adds: “IBM brought tremendous analytic tools that we use to advise the governor and the leadership team on ways to shift our response, not only related to business openings and closings but also about testing and other public health mitigations.”

# Much accomplished, more to do

“In Providence, more than 70% of the district’s roughly 22,600 students have returned to their classrooms.” So reported the *The New York Times* in a January 2021 article, where it respectfully referred to the state’s capital as “something of an outlier among American cities.”

For Rhode Island, getting kids back in school was a priority, but never at the cost of wellness. “We’ve been able to keep children and educators in school,” says Campagna. “However, safety was our top priority. Together with IBM and others, we developed processes, tools, and a team that enabled children,



parents, and families to feel supported and safe, so we could bring children and their educators back into the classroom. And we accomplished that.”

But there’s more. By transforming and automating the case investigation

and contact tracing process with improved technology, the department increased its throughput by fivefold. This translates to every school being notified within 24 hours about a positive COVID-19 test case. “Case investigation and contact tracing are



critical components of the public health response, and key to slowing the spread of COVID-19,” says Campagna. “We actually reach close to 80% of all of our positive cases within 24 hours, and we are doing that across the unit.”

Through the call center and website, Rhode Islanders get the information they need, when they need it. Since its launch in October 2020, the state’s virtual assistant, RHODA, has had more than 100,000 chat conversations with

residents about testing schedules, vaccines and test results. Satisfaction rates reflect in the state’s net promoter score (NPS), which increased several points to an 8 in 2020.

Today, IBM continues to work with the state in the areas of overall governance, operations, automation, data insights and others. When asked about the biggest game-changer in the battle against COVID-19, Campagna is quick to answer. “Modernization and

automation. I honestly don’t know where we would have been without IBM and the resources and supports they brought to the table,” she says. “Would we have seen increased cases? Increased deaths?”

“IBM was able to partner with us and implement things that allowed us to support Rhode Islanders in ways we never would have been able to do independently.”

“I honestly don’t know where we would have been without IBM and the resources and supports they brought to the table.”

**Kristine Campagna**, Chief Operating Officer for COVID Operations, State of Rhode Island



### About the State of Rhode Island

Most fittingly, “Hope” is the motto of [Rhode Island](#) (external link), home to roughly one million people. Nicknamed the “Ocean State,” it’s America’s smallest but boasts 40 miles of coastline. Rhode Island is one of the nation’s original 13 states and one of six that make up the New England region.

### Solution components

- IBM Garage™
- IBM® Global Business Services®
- IBM Watson® Assistant

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