

Executive Summary

The mission of the Rhode Island Department of State is to engage and empower all Rhode Islanders by making government more accessible and transparent, encouraging civic pride, enhancing commerce and ensuring that elections are fair, fast and accurate. Since taking office in 2015, Secretary of State Nellie M. Gorbea has implemented several programs aimed at increasing transparency and making government work for all Rhode Islanders. As a key component of her efforts to improve the quality of government services for citizens, Secretary Gorbea has worked diligently to create a culture of collaboration among state agencies in designing and implementing digital projects.

The new Rhode Island Code of Regulations (RICR) is a tremendous example of this innovative approach. The project emerged from a major revision to the State's Administrative Procedures Act in 2016. This amendment prompted a dual-pronged, collaborative effort with the State's Office of Regulatory Reform to change the regulatory environment in Rhode Island by reducing regulatory volume and improving public understanding of the rulemaking process by creating a dynamic, uniform, on-line Rhode Island Code of Regulations.

Since 2001, Rhode Island has provided digital access to regulations limited to static .pdf files which are not always searchable and exist in two separate databases – one for proposed rules and one for final rules. This creates unnecessary confusion for members of the public. With the amended APA, the Department resolved to expand and improve the public's access to, and understanding of, regulations by creating a uniform digital Code to serve as the official publication of all regulations promulgated by state agencies, boards and commissions. In addition to compiling all state regulations – proposed and final – in a single place, the project was designed with an eye toward increased accessibility and ease-of-use. Relying exclusively on in-house IT staff, the Department leveraged advanced technology to increase transparency: for example, the RICR provides live, web-based rulemaking agendas and includes an on-line public comment module. Additionally, the Code captures complete version histories and supporting documentation for each rule on one, user-friendly page.

Finally, the application contains a wealth of educational materials to help make the rulemaking process easier for the public to understand. Through an emphasis on making that process more transparent, the Code seeks to increase public awareness and engagement while also reducing complexity and confusion for all users.

The concept of an online administrative code is not a new one; however, the RICR goes beyond restructuring a chaotic regulatory environment into a uniform digital Code. We designed the Rhode Island Code of Regulations to function as a conversation, not a monologue. It represents a comprehensive effort to make government – and complicated government processes – transparent, accessible, and efficient for the benefit of all Rhode Islanders.